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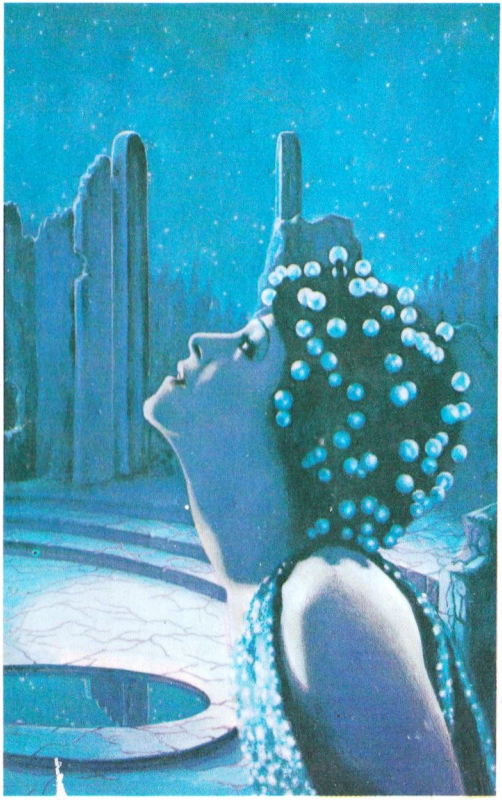
MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Change the Sky and Other Stories



Silently the tribesmen seated themselves in a semicircle outside the shrine's only entrance. Brian, peering from within the opening, was relieved. Apparently they were going to respect the shrine's sanctity and try to wait him out.

He meant to stay awake, on guard, but his fatigue was overpowering. Inside ten minutes he was fast asleep.

As soon as his smoother breathing gave the signal, the scanning rays went to work on him. His pulse was taken, his respiration timed, his oxygen consumption checked. When he was quite thoroughly asleep, a minute needle drew a drop of blood from his flaccid earlobe.

The night was well advanced when the scanners completed their diagnosis. In many ways, Brian puzzled them. But he lay, though just barely, within the range of permissible variation. After an almost human pause, the conditioning installations in the shrine went to work on him.

The Hrothy waited outside in wolfish silence. They knew that their grudge against Brian would be more than satisfied. It was not the sacred character of the shrine they were respecting . . . it was its competence as a factory.

—From THIRSTY GOD, only one of the many exciting and different stories in this collection by Margaret St. Clair.

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Change the Sky and Other Stories

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CHANGE THE SKY

"It would be an expensive world to make," said the artist. He rolled a lump of play putty into a rope, coiled it up on itself, and whacked it down on his drawing board. "From what you say, you'd want lots of flowers. . . . and women. That would come high."

"It isn't women I want," Pendleton said stiffly and a little wearily. "I've been to many worlds with beautiful, willing women. I'm not asking you make me some sort of lustful paradise. What I'm hunting is a place that's so beautiful, or so winning, or so *right,* that I'll feel, 'This is the place in the whole universe that I love best. This is home.' "

"Um." The artist bounced his putty on the floor a couple of times. "Tell me about yourself," he said without looking up. "I don't get many clients like you, you know. Most of them are people who aren't physically able to go starside and visit the worlds in person. It's unusual for somebody to come in here who's done much traveling."

A shadow crossed Pendleton's face. There was no use in telling the artist, but he himself wouldn't be physically able to go from world to world much longer, hunting the one right place. He'd had deceleration sickness badly in his last berth, when he was purser on the *Tycho.* Two more trips, and he'd be done for. If he hadn't found what he was looking for by then. . . . It was that

knowledge that had brought him into the artist's atelier.

"I've spent most of my life in space," he said unwillingly. "There isn't really much to tell."

The artist raised one eyebrow. "I doubt that. For example, I gather you're a traveled person. Which one, of the various worlds you've visited, has seemed to you the most beautiful? Or the most appealing? Or interesting? And so on."

"Genlis is the most beautiful, by far," Pendleton answered. "It's a water world, with deep green, swelling, foam-laden seas, and a sky so intensely blue that it's almost purple. On the islands—there are a few islands—tall graceful trees like palms lean into the wind, and the perfume of the flowers is so sweet it makes you dizzy. There are flowers everywhere. They say that no matter how far you get from land on Genlis, you can always smell the flowers. The air is soft and yet fresh, and when the wind blows against your face or body, you feel your skin tingle with delight.

"Nothing could be more beautiful than Genlis. But there aren't many people on that world, and after I'd been there a few days I felt lonely. I was glad to get back to the ship."

"So perhaps it wasn't *your* kind of beauty," said the artist. He was punching crescents with his thumbnail in his putty lump. "Which of the worlds you visited seemed to you the most interesting?"

"Oh—Kruor, I think. It's a long way from its primary, and there's nothing on its surface but snow and ice. The snow is very soft, for some reason, and when the wind blows—there's a great deal of wind—it carves the snow into caves and grottoes and long pointed arches that collapse if you stamp your foot.

"The nights on Kruor are very bright. There's an ionizing layer in the atmosphere that gives the sky a constant glow like a night with a full moon on earth. When the snow arches and caves sparkle in the glow, like a million diamonds, it's a fine sight. Then the green sun comes up, and the surface of the snow caves melts a little and turns to ice. You should see the sparkle then! It almost blinds you. Usually it snows again before night. Kruor is a most interesting place."

"You say it was interesting, but you seem to have thought it was beautiful," the artist commented. He had shaped his lump of play putty into the torso of a tiny woman—round breasts, dimpled belly, long full thighs. "Now, which of the worlds you've visited seemed to you the most appealing? I mean, gave you most nearly the sensation that I gather you're looking for?"

There was a long pause. The body of the miniature woman the artist had shaped sank slowly back into the play putty as the resilient stuff resumed its natural globular shape. "I've liked a lot of places," Pendleton said at last. "There was a world called Phlegra that was nothing but volcanoes and geysers. The planet's magnetic field was funny, and sometimes an eruption from one of the geysers would just go on up. Hours later you might be hit in the back of the neck by an icy spray . . . but I suppose that's not what you meant."

"No," the artist said. His eyes swept Pendleton's face.

The older man's gray cheeks colored faintly. He rubbed his forehead with one hand. "Well, there was Asterope," he said. "I don't know what I liked about it, actually. It was quite an ordinary world. But there was a great deal of electrical activity on the planet,

and there'd be a dozen thunder storms in twenty-four hours. Once I was out in one of them at night. I took cover in a sort of hollow in a cliff, and watched the lightning. There'd be a great flash, and the sky would turn blue-black—the sky on Asterope was very dark, with almost no stars—and the leaves of a funny little tree with white leaves would blaze out in the flash like the stars that were missing in the sky. Then it would be dark again until the next flash of light.

"Asterope wasn't an appealing world, like Genlis. But during that storm I liked it. I almost felt at home there."

"Um-*hum*," said the artist. He had put down his lump of play putty and was drawing something on a piece of paper with a brush. When Pendleton tried to see what the picture was, the artist covered it quickly with one hand. "You said something about Earth. Have you spent much time here?"

"No, I was nearly thirty when I came here for the first time."

"That's unusual. Were you born on one of the colonial planets?"

"No, I was born in a space ship. And I'd never set foot on anything larger than an asteroid until I was nineteen."

"Go on, please. This is the sort of background stuff I've got to have."

"Um—well—my mother died when I was two. Of course I don't remember her. I suppose she must have been the sort of person my father was. I don't imagine she wanted a child very much."

The artist crumpled up the sketch he had made. "Go *on*, Mr. Pendleton. What was your father like?"

"He—well—I haven't thought about him in years—he was a sort of a fanatic. He wasn't unkind to me, actually, but he was a strict disciplinarian, and reserved and remote."

"What was he a fanatic about?"

Pendleton laughed. "As I said, IV hadn't thought of him in years. Why, he had a theory that the culture of the whole solar system was derived from Xeres, the planet of Aldebaran, originally, and he went from asteroid to asteroid looking for evidence to prove it. I understand that historians consider the theory quite preposterous. But father had a private income large enough to let him indulge his whims. As I said, he spent his time searching asteroids."

"How did he die?" the artist asked softly.

Pendleton gave a sort of start. He glanced sharply at the artist, but the younger man was looking down at another sketch he had begun.

"I can't imagine why you want to know that," he observed. "It was on an asteroid. Father thought that the Xerian colonists had landed originally on the planet that later broke up to form the asteroid belt, and that by the time they got around to settling on Earth and Mars, their home culture had become too diluted to look much like that of Xeres any more. What he was hunting for on the asteroids was an artifact of unmistakable Xerian origin.

"This asteroid was less than a kilo across, and only very roughly round. I don't suppose it even has a number in the asteroid catalogue. Most of its surface was rough and irregular, but in the middle of all the bumps there was a very smooth, shallow pit—made, I suppose, by a fusing meteor impact.

"Father was looking over this pit with one of the hand lights, and I was inside the ship working an astrogational problem he'd set me. I was just seventeen.

"Suddenly, through the ship's speaker, I heard him give a great cry. 'Son! Son!' he called. 'I've found it! Come and see!' He only called me 'son' when he was pleased.

"I climbed into my suit and ran out. He was almost too excited to be able to talk. " 'I've found it,' he kept saying over and over, while the hand light shook in his hand. I've found it. The proof. An adahn.' "

"What's an adahn?" asked the artist.

"It's an ellipse with a cross in the middle. But the long arm of the cross is another, very flattened, ellipse. It looks something like a drawing of a toy gyroscope. It's a characteristically Xerian element of design.

"I looked down where the hand light was bobbing. At first glance there did seem to be an ellipse in one side of the pit. But when you looked closer you saw that it was just a bunch of fortuitous cracks. The inner ellipse, in particular, was missing. There was nothing there but a collection of feathery lines. It was unmistakable once you noticed it.

"I hesitated. I didn't know how he'd take my doubting his discovery. 'Father, look again,' I said. 'Check it. You want to be absolutely sure.'

" 'I *am* sure,' he answered. 'An adahn! Real proof! See, there's the outer ellipse—and there's the inner. . . .' The confidence in his voice died away as he tried to trace out the shape.

" 'I—' he said, 'I can't stand it—it's been so long—' He gave me a terrible look. The light fell out of his hand. Then he clutched at his chest and keeled over. He'd had a heart attack.

"I got him back in the ship and did what I could for him. I couldn't think of much to do. I had ammonia under his nose, and so on. But he died. He was dead within ten minutes after he keeled over outside. He was still glaring at me when he died."

"What happened after that?" asked the artist.

"I had a public guardian appointed for me. Most of father's income stopped with his death. I went to school for a year. Then I got a berth as third officer on a tramp freighter. Father had insisted that I learn astrogation thoroughly, and I didn't have any trouble getting it. I've been in space pretty much ever since.

"When father was alive and I was with him, I used to think that when I was grown up I'd go straight to the most beautiful spot in the universe and stay there—the place that was home. I hated the ship and the asteroids. I never thought I'd have trouble finding the place."

"No, you haven't found it," the artist agreed. He folded the sketch he had made and put it in the breast pocket of his tunic. "I've got an idea for a world for you," he said. "I'm not going to tell you what it is, because I'm pretty sure you'll say it won't work, and I'd like to try whether it will. One thing, it won't be an expensive world to make. Do you want me to try?"

"How much?" asked Pendleton.

The artist named a sum. It wasn't, Pendleton supposed, much according to his standards.

Pendleton hesitated. But after all, what else could he do? He wasn't a young man any more, and the world—the *real* world—he was hunting for might not exist. "All right," he said. "When will it be done?"

"Oh . . . today's Monday. Um—let's say a week from today, at about the same time? Right."

"It looks like an out-size egg," Pendleton said.

The artist laughed. "That's only the sheathing. And an ovoid is the most economical solid for it. After you're in you'll lose all sense of the shape. Have you ever been in an artificial world before?"

"No."

"Well, for it to be fully successful there has to be some cooperation from you. After you enter—pierce the shell of the egg—there's a period of preparation and acclimatization that's partly physical and partly psychological. There's a gas in the air, for example—but I don't want to give away trade secrets.

"Abandon yourself. Don't resist. And don't try to hurry things. It takes a little time. The preparation will come to an end eventually. And then you'll be in your world."

"Suppose I don't like it, or, after I've been in it a while, decide I've had enough. How do I get out? The same way I got in?"

"No." The artist handed him a metal circlet. "Put this on your wrist. After you've had enough of the world I've set up for you, press the stud in the middle of the wrist band. That will initiate the reverse acclimatization—a sort of decompression period. It's nothing abrupt . . . it's like going through a door."

"If I like the world, can I visit it again?"

"Of course. Sometimes I leave worlds set up for months, even for years. All you have to do is to pay me a small rental fee."

"Do people ever—live in them?"

The artist frowned. "Now you're getting into something—" He fished the lump of play putty out of his tunic pocket and began squeezing it. "You see, what we artists make are worlds that seem absolutely real. And

yet, of course, they're artificial. They're artistic creations. Like other artistic creations, they seem at times to have a life of their own.

"In this trade of mine, you hear stories. Stories about people who've got into worlds and stayed there, somehow, after the power sources were cut and the world was dismantled. Permanent worlds, some people call them.

"They're just stories. I don't believe them myself, I don't know anyone who does believe them. And yet . . . it might be possible. I just don't know."

Pendleton had withdrawn his attention when he heard the note of negation in the artist's voice. He studied the enormous bulging golden bulk—the big end of the egg—that lay before him. "I hadn't realized it would be so big," he said. "Your worlds must take a great deal of room."

The artist laughed. "They do. That's why I have my workshop out here, miles and miles from anywhere. But, Mr. Pendleton, I think you're stalling. You're hopeful, but you're nervous about your world, too. Go ahead and enter it."

"How?"

"Just walk up and push on the sheathing. It's made to give at any accessible place. And remember what I said about not trying to hurry the acclimatization period."

Pendleton swallowed. He was more excited than he had thought he would be. His knees felt uncertain and weak. His mouth was very dry; he swallowed again. Then he walked resolutely toward the golden sheathing of his world.

It gave on a minimum of pressure. A puff of air—salty, and yet somehow smelling disagreeably of violets

—went past his face. Pendleton had time to wonder irritably why the artist hadn't simply provided his world with a door, instead of electing this fantastic sort of ingress. Then he stepped inside.

It wasn't as absolutely dark as he had thought it would be, though he couldn't see any trace of the break in the sheathing through which he had come. There was a mist—salt and violet smelling but quite dry—around him, a dirty sepia mist that moved in eddies of black and charcoal, and he had the dim impression that somewhere to the right was a little hill.

He took a step forward uncertainly. There was a blaze of orange-colored light behind his eyeballs, and the tincture of light died away entirely, leaving him in a blackness that was hard to breathe. Ahead—behind?—a bell rang with a high, mocking note.

A train of rhomboids bobbled past him in the darkness at eye level. They were brightly colored, reds and yellows, and lit like paper lanterns from within. Pendleton was suddenly furiously angry. He put up one hand to stop the swimming rhomboids, and received a paralyzing shock in the palm of his hand for his pains.

He put his hand down, swearing. What was it the artist had told him?—to relax, to take it easy, to cooperate. But perhaps his getting angry had been a part of the cooperation. It was difficult to say.

Something hard, long, and thin slipped into his still tingling hand and was withdrawn again. He looked down. The rest of his body was invisible, but his two feet—such big feet—were to be seen dimly glowing with their own blue light.

He wanted to laugh. He wanted to sit down; he was

tired. But his body was too stiff to bend, and besides his dim blue feet were too far off for him ever to be able to reach them.

A string of luminous blue and purple circles, much paler than the rhomboids had been, came down at him from above. He regarded them passively, and after a moment or two they hauled themselves up again. The darkness seemed blacker than ever after they had gone, and when he looked down at his feet they had disappeared into the general night.

An irritable impatience invaded him. How much longer was this foolishness going to continue? Nobody named Pendleton—and there was a man named that—ought to have to put up with it. Cooperation . . . relaxation . . . would mean sitting down and letting himself rest.

And all the time he wasn't walking, but his legs were carrying him on.

The darkness was withdrawn gradually, as if someone were pulling a curtain to one side. Pendleton drew a deep breath and rubbed one hand over his face. His sense of personal identity had come back to him, and with it the stirrings of curiosity. Where would he be? Would it be in his own world?

He stood in a plain—wide, bleak, sulphur-smelling—before a cliff with a dark opening. Far off to his left there was a liquid quaking, a dark stirring against the drab plain, and he knew the flicker of motion must be from a lava pool. It did not interest him greatly, but the dark opening drew him. He wanted to go in.

He had no light. Or—why, yes, there was a hand torch strapped to his belt. He hadn't noticed it before. He drew the torch from its fastening, flicked the switch, and for a

moment sent the beam of light up and down the dun-colored surface of the low cliff. Nothing. He stepped inside the dark hole.

He almost cried out in surprise. He didn't know what he had expected, exactly—some grand cavern, perhaps, with sheeted stalactites and answering stalagmites, cascades of intricate frozen stone tracery in translucent amber and mauve, rivers, vaulted ceilings, and in the end an underground sea. What it actually was was that he was standing inside a hollow, perfectly polished and absolutely spherical, of black basalt. The jet surface reflected the light of his torch dizzingly.

At the side of the bubble of stone was another opening. He went through it and stood in another basalt sphere, a little smaller than the one before. Down low in its side there was another hole.

The third bubble was larger, so large that the beam of the torch was remote over his head. The next bubble was smaller, and so was the one after that. Pendleton went from bubble to bubble, not bored, not unhappy, not thinking, in a relaxed mindlessness that was not quite a trance. Sometimes the exits were so low and narrow he had to crawl to get through them, sometimes they were ample and commodious. There was always another bubble to succeed the one in which he stood.

It came to him that the artist had spoken truly when he called this a world. It would be possible for Pendleton to go on from sphere to sphere throughout the rest of his life, and he would never come to the end of them. The artist had made him a world. Pendleton neither liked nor disliked the fact that the bubbles were alike. Large or small, they were alike. Polished and black and perfect and pierced by two openings. But in the sixtieth

bubble, or it might have been the two hundredth, or the thousandth, the beam of his torch picked up an irregularity on the black, lens-smooth surface. He leaned forward to look, wholly incredulous. And it was, it was. There had been incised, in grayish lines against the polished blackness, an adahn.

An adahn. For a moment a deep emotion stirred in him. He drew back from it, afraid, unable to name it. It was as if a great depth of water parted, and showed him something undreamed of. He stood transfixed, leaning against the curving basalt, unable to move. The torch shook in his hand.

Then the emotion was gone, and though he sent the light of the torch over the symbol again and again, it didn't come back. After a little he sighed and went into the next sphere.

Its surface was unmarked, mirror-smooth, as that of all the others but one had been.

Pendelton couldn't have told how many bubbles later it was that he stopped, admitting finally that the coldness in his heart had grown into despair. He could, of course, go back through the bubbles to the one with the adahn, and beyond it to the hold in the dun-colored cliff where he had come in. He could walk over the plain to the lava pool. There might be other things on the plain, interesting things, besides the lava pool. He didn't want to. There was nothing here for him.

His fingers had already pressed the stud.

The decompression period was quite different from what that of acclimatization had been. The basalt bubble around him seemed to fracture into a thousand jagged pieces, each glinting with the reflection of the torch he held in his hand. The pieces began to recede from

each other with increasing velocity, faster and faster, as if blown outward by some explosion of which he was the center. He felt that filaments of himself were being blown out with them.

When the pieces were very far away, they softened and melted into a grayish haze. Pendleton stood motionless in the haze for what seemed a very long time. Doubt as to who the man called Pendleton was assailed him. He did not recognize his thoughts.

The haze brightened to a silvery pearl gray, as if a light were shining behind it. Pendleton felt an instant of desperate giddiness. Then it passed and he was himself again. He was standing outside the egg.

The shell was intact. How he had got in—and out—without breaking it was no odder than anything else had been. But—Pendleton's mouth drew into angry lines as he realized what had happened but what had made the artist shape such a world for him? How could he possibly have thought that an endless series of black basalt bubbles was what Pendleton was looking for?

He glanced around him. The artist was nowhere to be seen. Pendleton must have been in a world for a long time, for the sky over it had grown quite dark, and floodlights had been turned on down at the end.

No, the world had been a ridiculous failure. All that money . . . all that time . . . all that hope . . . wasted. A ridiculous fiasco. He'd find the artist and have it out with him.

With long, angry strides he started toward the shack where the studio was. The surface of his mind was seething with anger. But there was bitter, almost unendurable, disappointment in his heart.

The studio was empty. On one of the big drawing

tables an envelope was propped up. Pendleton's name had been brushed in large flowing characters on it.

He tore the envelope open. The note read: "Dear Mr. Pendleton—You have been in your world for so long that I am beginning to hope that I have succeeded in making what you want. (The cave element, of course, came from what you told me about the snow caves on Kruor, and the adahn and the polished sides of the bubbles from the pit on the asteroid where your father met his death. I deliberately disregarded what you said about Asterope, except for the glitter in the lava pools. It seemed to me that it was too conscious to be of much help in constructing a suitable world for you. I hope my choice of construction elements was wise.)

"If you read this before midnight, won't you please call me at ZEN dorf 0329? I am anxious to know how you came out. Sincerely, Byrd."

Pendleton grimaced. It was an explanation; the artist had, he supposed, done his best. He was still angry. He called the number Byrd had given him.

A party was going on; he got Byrd after a little delay. The artist peered at him sharply in the viewing plate. He whistled. "It wasn't an unqualified success," he observed. "Judging from your face—"

"It wasn't a success at all," Pendleton replied grimly.

"What kept you so long, then?" Byrd asked. "People usually come out right away when a world's not right."

Pendleton had been placed on the defensive. He didn't like it. "The succession of bubbles had a . . . a hypnotic effect," he answered. "But it wasn't at all what I was looking for."

"No part of it?" the artist asked. He sounded rather deflated. "Not even the adahn, for example?"

Pendleton's lips set in a thin line. "None of it," he said.

"Oh." Byrd was frowning. "I'd thought I might be able to develop . . . but I guess not." He cleared his throat.

"Well, Mr. Pendleton, I don't think there's any point in our wasting anymore of each other's time," he said. I'd like you, though, to get in touch with another artist, a man named Selim Zweig. He doesn't do much constructing, and he's difficult to work with. But I think he can make what you want if anybody can. Have you got the name? Selim Zweig."

"Yes," answered Pendleton. He started to hang up.

Something in his face seemed to alarm Byrd. "Wait!" he cried. "Don't do anything foolish! Let me come and talk to you. I—" But Pendleton had already broken the connection.

No, he wasn't going to do anything foolish, he thought as he walked down the grassy lane toward his copter. He wasn't, for instance, going to get in touch with the Selim Zweig Byrd had suggested to him. There was a disgust that was as bitter as gall in his mouth. He was done with fantastic artificial worlds and the men who created them. Tomorrow he'd make arrangements to leave Earth. There were still plenty of real worlds, starside, that he hadn't visited. Tomorrow he was going to ship out.

They took his application at the hiring hall next day. His references, his experience, were splendid, they assured him. They sent him in to the doctor for the usual physical examination. And Pendleton didn't pass.

He was stunned. For half a day he couldn't believe it. Starside was gone, he'd never ship out again, he was

stuck on earth. He'd never find the world he had been hunting for so long. It was too late.

He passed two days in misery so acute that it made him want to groan aloud. Then—it was inevitable—he called Selim Zweig.

Zweig was a little man, as ugly and restless as a monkey, and Pendleton disliked him on sight. Nevertheless, it was easier to talk to him than it had been to Byrd. He didn't like Zweig but he trusted him.

He told him much the same things he had told Byrd. The details were a little fuller, that was all. Zweig listened, cracking his knuckles and nodding peremptorily from time to time. When Pendleton had finished, Zweig scratched his head and grinned.

"Sure, I can make you a world," he said. "Won't cost much, won't take long to make. Sure."

Pendleton felt a thrill that was not all hope, though he didn't know what the second emotion in it was. "But—will it be right?" he asked anxiously. "Will it be what I've been looking for? A place where I'll feel at home?"

"Um-hum. You bet. Sure will."

Pendleton gave him a searching look, but the artist kept on grinning. There wasn't anything else Pendleton could do. "Go ahead and make it," he said.

Zweig called on the third day to say that the world was ready. His workshop was even more remote than Byrd's, and yet it seemed to Pendleton that he got there almost before he wanted to. He walked across the field to the workshop with long steps that were eager and yet a little hesitant. Now that the realization of his dream was so near, he was unsure.

"That's it," Zweig said, pointing. He indicated a big grayish sheet of something that looked like wrapping paper and was stretched across an arch in the area behind his studio.

"There's nothing behind it," Pendleton objected after a moment.

"Oh, yes there is."

". . . . Byrd used an egg."

"Well, I don't," Zweig answered. He grimaced and scratched himself on the chest. "An egg's a purely mechanical limitation, and besides—that's it."

Still Pendleton hung back. "Oh, for God's sake," Zweig said irritably, "go on in. The acclimatization's all been taken care of. Go on in!"

Pendleton walked forward and pushed against the sheet.

He fell through. That was the only way he could have described it—he fell through. He fell for a short time, and ended with a cushioned thump on what seemed to be a rubber pad.

The impact of his fall seemed, momentarily, to have shaken the wits out of him. He didn't know who he was —no, that was all right; he was Bruce Pendleton—or where, or why. He felt around on the rubber pad with his fingers blankly, as if he expected contact with it to resolve his difficulties. Then he got to his feet.

He was at one end of a long, tall, metal-lined corridor. It was lit at intervals by inset golden fluors, and the air in it seemed to vibrate to a low, constant hum, almost too deep to be heard.

The locale was hauntingly familiar, and after a second Pendleton realized what it was. He was on a ship,

and the ship must be in space, since the low constant hum could come only from its anti-grav.

A ship, certainly, but a ship for giants. The proportions of the corridor—length, height, even the size of the fluors—were quite unlike what Pendleton was used to. Only people of enormous stature could pilot such a ship.

He pressed his hands over his eyes and tried to think. There was something about a man . . . . a little, ugly man, like a monkey . . . who'd made something. . . .

He couldn't capture the thought, and after a second he didn't think it mattered. But he understood about the ship. It wasn't that it was unusually large, it was just that he himself, Bruce, wasn't very tall.

Halfway down the corridor there was a direct-contact viewing plate set in the ship's wall. Bruce Pendleton stopped in front of it. He did that whenever he went along the corridor, because he loved to look out at the stars. It was like looking out of a cave into paradise.

How beautiful they were! Against the intense velvety darkness of space they burned, they seemed to glitter and flash with a blinding sparkle, more bravely than a billion diamonds would have done. He knew *that* was illusion, stars in space don't glitter, they burn with a steady light. But they did seem to blaze out at him.

And each one was a sun, an unimaginable furnace, and around each sun were its unimaginable worlds. One of them, Pendleton knew, was more beautiful than all the others, and that one was his own world. It would take time; he had to wait. But sooner or later he was going there.

At the end of the corridor a door was set flush in the metal sheathing. Bruce hesitated in front of it. His

right hand ran over his left wrist uneasily. It seemed to him there ought to be something on his wrist . . . not the little chronometer, but something else . . . a metal circlet with a . . . with a . . . But he couldn't think what it was, and he'd better not spend any more time puzzling over it. He'd dawdled enough in the corridor.

He rapped on the door, as he'd been taught, and waited until he heard the deep voice saying, "Come in." Then he opened it.

The desk was piled high with books and papers, but the big man's face lay in shadow. There was a pool of shadow around him on the floor.

"Well, son," he said without turning, "have you memorized your astrogation tables thoroughly? I've just finished a most interesting book about the adahn in Mayan culture, and I can spare you a few minutes. Do you want to recite the tables to me now, or would you rather wait until tomorrow morning? I don't want to hear them unless you know them thoroughly."

The lines of anger and unhappiness had faded from around Pendleton's mouth. His face had become young and timid and hopeful, a forward-looking, eager face.

"Well, sir," he said doubtfully to the man who was his father, "I thought I knew them pretty well. But maybe I'd better wait until tomorrow before I try to say them for you, sir. Yes. I'll wait until tomorrow."

BEAULIEU

The color of her hair, Denton thought, could only be described as indignant—an indignant gold. The gold at her throat and wrists, too, had an indignant gleam as she leaned across to open the door of the green sports car for him.

"Get in," she said. She wasn't smiling at all.

Denton obeyed. Was this to be the start of that favorite male fantasy, the hot blonde in the green convertible? Despite the fact that his doctor had scheduled the exploratory operation for Monday, Denton was, he knew, young and good looking enough. The signs of his illness —a certain waxiness and yellowing of the skin—would only have been perceptible to a physcian's eye. The hikes he had been taking through the valley and its foothills, all summer long, had kept him healthily brown. So it *could* be the start of the fantasy.

Once he was in the car, she did not look at him. She kept her eyes on the road, and the car—an Austin-Healey, he thought—unrolled highway 29 smoothly behind it as it slid up the Napa valley toward St. Helena. This wasn't much like the fantasy. She should have been saying something.

He studied her obliquely. Her gold hair was caught back from her face by a kerchief of very heavy dark green silk shot with threads of metallic gold. Her dress, close-fitting, made of the same heavy stuff, was cut low at the

neck to show a full breast and a dazzlingly white skin. He had already noticed the pair of gold bracelets and the heavy twisted gold necklace she wore. It didn't look like costume jewelry. It was odd, though, that the overall impression she made on him was not so much one of wealth, or even of beauty, as it was of power. The green stuff of her bodice glinted in the sun like armor. It seemed to speak of aggression and strength.

She began to hum. That was better, more like the fantasy. But the music was no popular tune. When she began to sing the words, he recognized it. Wagner. *Die Walküre,* in act two, where Brünnhilde appears to the doomed Siegmund to take him to Valhall. She had a good voice, though a little low for Brünnhilde's part. Was that what the girl had got herself up for? A Valkyr, a chooser of men? A chooser of men for what?

At any rate, he had been picked up by an extraordinary woman. When she halted in her singing, Denton, who had a fair tenor, sang Siegmund's next line.

For the first time, the girl took her eyes from the road and looked at him. She was smiling. "You know it!" she said, pleased.

"Uh-huh. I used to have it on records. Old beat-up seventy-eights. Next you sing about how you only appear on the field of battle to doomed heroes, to the ones you've chosen to go with you. And Siegmund asks where you take the ones you've chosen. And you say—"

"And I say—" the girl threw back her head a little and sang, full-throatedly, " 'Zur Walvater, der dich gewählt, führ ich dich. Nach Walhall folgst du mir!"

She really had a good voice, with an exultant, thrilling quality that was highly suitable to the music. "In other words," Denton translated, "You take heroes to

Walfather—Wotan. Valhall is the place where you're taking Siegmund."

"Yes. Or in *other* words—" she was laughing, "to Beaulieu. That's where we're going now."

Denton felt the hair stir on the back of his neck. He stared at her averted profile. Did she—how could she—it was impossible.

Carefully and slowly he said, "Beaulieu is back the other way. In Rutherford."

"Oh, I don't mean Beaulieu *vineyard*! I'm talking about the other Beaulieu, your Beaulieu, the one you've been hunting all summer. It's an old fantasy of yours.

"You go along the road, and suddenly the road is just a little bit different. You know that at the end of it you'll find Beaulieu. It's a big house with shady verandas, and people are waiting for you. They know your name, they say, 'Welcome home.'

"Beaulieu is the place where everything goes right, where there's never anything to be afraid of. It's like James' Great Good Place. And you've been hunting it all summer in the valley and the hills."

"How on earth can you know about that?" Denton demanded. "It's true, yes. But how do you know?"

For a moment the girl's air of self-confidence seemed to desert her. The car slowed a little. "Why . . . I've always been able to tell what people were thinking," she said in a flat, thin voice. "I mean, I've always been able to tell sometimes. I knew about Beaulieu when I picked you up." She touched her forehead with the back of her hand.

"But isn't there some particular reason why you're hunting Beaulieu?" she went on more confidently. "More than just looking for a place you don't quite believe

in, even if you have had dreams and fantasies about it. There's some urgent reason why you want to find it."

"Yes. There is." Denton told her about the operation that was scheduled for Monday, avoiding the word he had found people so much disliked, avoiding even the expression "malignant disease," but making clear to her that the operation on Monday would probably be the first of many operations. If he were lucky. "They weren't sure about the diagnosis until yesterday," he said.

"So you've got to get to Beaulieu today." She nodded. "All right."

The car shot ahead. They passed through St. Helena, pleasant and quiet in the midst of its vineyards, turned left, and began to climb.

Denton, lulled by the warmth of the sun and the motion, thought, why not? If this girl knew about Beaulieu before she ever spoke to him, she might know where to find it. She might know just where the road gave the little twist and the shake that made everything different. If one were possible, why not the other? Why not?

Dust began to settle on the green gloss of the Austin-Healey. They turned, climbed, went into second, went into low. Then they were on top of the hill, and Denton had an instant's wide view of the valley before they began to go down.

She drove always with an air of perfect self-confidence. Time and again Denton was convinced, as the afternoon wore on and the soft air of the hills blew about them, that the road had given—was just about to give—its little shake, and that around the next curve he would see the broad verandas of Beaulieu.

How many hills did they climb, how many times did

they start down again? The needle on the gas gauge sank from full to three-quarters to half. Once or twice his valkyr turned to him and gave him a little smile. She never spoke.

At last they turned left from the winding graveled or unpaved roads they had been following and were back on highway 29 again. There was a fair amount of traffic, with a big blue Chrysler four or five hundred feet in front of them.

Denton, looking about him, saw that they had come back almost to the very spot where the girl in the green convertible had picked him up hours ago. They had made a wide ranging circuit of the Napa valley through its hills. This was how the afternoon had ended, with her bringing him back almost to the very spot where she had picked him up.

Well. He hadn't really thought it could happen, had he? For the last hour or so he had been increasingly sure. And certainly this had been a more pleasant way of passing the time than thinking about Monday by himself would have been.

The Austin-Healey had slowed a little, as if the girl recognized the spot too. "Thank you very much for the ride," Denton said politely. "I guess you'd better stop and let me out here." Monday was something he'd have to deal with by himself.

The girl's hands shook on the wheel. She turned to him, her face crisscrossed with distress. "No, wait!" she said urgently. "There are short cuts! I'll show you—watch!"

The Austin-Healey was only a few feet behind the big Chrysler now. The other lane of the narrow highway was occupied by an approaching Ford.

The girl jerked the green convertible out almost into

the path of the on-coming car, missed it by a hair, swung wildly around the Chrysler, and was almost into the ditch. The sports car swayed dementedly. Denton was sure they were going over. The horns of both other cars honked furiously. At the last instant the car's low center of gravity saved it, and the Austin-Healey stayed upright.

The girl turned toward him, laughing. "You see!" she said in her exultant voice. "I told you I would take you! We were almost there that time!"

Denton's tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. "Where?" he asked finally. "where were we almost?"

"Why, at Beaulieu!"

Hadn't he known it all along? Why, of course; she was too extraordinary, and the fact that she'd been able to read his mind was only another proof of abnormality. Yes, he knew.

For a moment he was silent. He could still ask her to let him out; she wasn't so far gone that he couldn't if he spoke to her softly and plainly, get her to obey him. She would be distressed, she might weep. But she would let him out. And the operation that was scheduled for Monday would take place.

He was silent a little longer, weighing in his mind the operation—the operations—and the few years of life they might buy for him, against the certain wreck. She would certainly wreck the car, she was certainly mad. And Beaulieu? She would keep her promise honorably. She would kill them both to take him there.

He had to swallow. His throat was dry. "Go ahead," he said at last. "Go ahead, my darling. Take me to Beaulieu."

The look she turned on him was so radiant that he felt his heart shake with a sort of anguished delight. Her eyes, her whole face, seemed to dazzle him. "Yes!" she cried in her exultant voice.

She stepped down hard on the gas.

MARRIAGE MANUAL

"Yes, I have the copy of the marriage manual," the dorff said. It twitched its fat body to indicate the carrying pouch growing on its back between its furry shoulders. "Right here."

George frowned. "Why don't you give it to me then?" he demanded. "And where's Bill? Did he send you to meet me? What's happened to Bill?"

The dorff swallowed air noisily. Dorff have no vocal chords, and they talk by regurgitating the air they have taken into their stomachs. "A gift must be given," it said in a suety rumble. "As to Bill—he's all right. I will tell you all about him if you like. But you had better sit down on the bench and make yourself comfortable. It is rather a long story."

George looked around the dark little trading hut suspiciously. "I don't like this," he said. "Where's Bill? He was supposed to meet me here today. If anything's happened to him. . . ." He glared at the dorff threateningly. Nonetheless, he sat down on the wooden bench with his long legs stretched out in front of him.

The dorff sat down also. "As you of course know," it rumbled, "Bill came to Bydea in the guise of a trader for zenlin leaves. Afterward it occurred to him that it might have been better if he had simply gone to one of the dorff elders and asked him for a copy of the marriage manual. *Dortha-Na's Golden Hours*, explaining

frankly why he wanted it. He could have told the dorff that he hoped the manual would indicate a new source of power to Earth's hard-pressed technology. Who knows? The approach might have worked, if it had been coupled with sufficient flattery.

"But Bill had been in the army for a couple of years, and he had absorbed some of the passionate belief in the salutary effect of secrecy that characterizes the military mind. He arrived on Bydea in disguise.

"Almost from the first Bill hated the dorff. Earth people generally do dislike them. Bill found their fattish, hairy bodies repulsive, and their alternate swallowing and eructating in conversation sickened him. They smelled like tadpoles. But most of all he disliked their bland assumption that, as far as erotic possibilities went, he belonged to an inherently inferior race."

"I know," George put in with feeling. "Within five minutes after you've met a dorff, he's got you backed up in a corner while he brags about how wonderful his sex life is. 'Dortha-Na has favored us above all others. We dorff make an art of love.' Bah! Pah! It makes you sick."

"That's exactly the way Bill felt about it," the dorff agreed. "But he forced himself to put up with it. He listened to their coy bragging for hours on end. He even encouraged them in their contemptuous pity for him as a being of low-quality electro-sexual organization, whose circuits were inferior to theirs both in quality and quantity. His idea, you see, was that if they felt sorry enough for him they might give him a copy of the manual in an attempt to alleviate his unhappy lot.

One afternoon Bill looked out of the window of the hut and saw a dorff trundling up the path toward him.

It held a few zenlin fronds in its hands. It is hard to trade with dorff because there are so few things they want. Their response to a new gadget is, 'I suppose beings to whom Dortha-Na has been so grudging have to employ their time some way.' But dorff do like Christmas tree ornaments. Bill got out the chest of ornaments and waited.

"The dorff traded its zenlin fronds for a striped blue, old rose and silver ellipsoid. Then it began to stand on one foot and vibrate in the way that Bill knew, from experience, meant it wanted to brag a bit.

"Today he felt too annoyed to encourage it. So, after a while, the dorff belched coyly and said, 'You know Trunp? He was here trading for zenlin fronds the day before yesterday.'

" 'I guess so,' Bill replied without interest. All dorff looked alike to him.

"The dorff was undeterred. 'Well, he won't be around for a while,' it said brightly. 'He's in the hospital now. Been mating. No serious damage, though. He'll be out in a couple of weeks.'

"Bill gritted his teeth. He should have realized that the dorff was leading up to the same old subject. 'I'm sorry he's sick,' he said sourly and reluctantly.

" 'Oh, it's all right.' The dorff rotated dizzily. Its nose turned pink. 'Wonderfully, wonderfully all right, in a way that no Earthman can understand. With us the release of tension is so much more intense . . .' Bill's dorff halted, struck by what seemed a genuine compunction.

" 'I'm sorry,' it rumbled. 'I always forget how inferior you Earth people feel about your deficiencies. We dorff make such a radiant art of love that we fail to ap-

preciate how sensitive those to whom Dortha-Na has been ungenerous are. Forgive me. Please do forgive me.'

"Bill had listened to so much guff like this already that he didn't feel he could stand any more. He was tired of being pitied. Besides, now might be as good a time as any for a frontal attack. He said, 'Well, if you're so sorry for me because of my erotic deficiencies, why don't you give me a copy of the marriage manual, *Dortha-Na's Golden Hours*? Reading that might help me to remove a bit of my inferiority.' He waited breathlessly for the dorff to reply.

"The dorff was silent. It was silent for so long that Bill's hopes rose. Then it drew its eyelids up over its oystery eyes and nodded upward, the dorff gesture of negation.

"'No,' it said regretfully, 'I simply couldn't. Even if the book were of a less, hmmm, sacred character, I couldn't. I feel sorry for you, but it is a question of your psychic health. Reading the *Golden Hours* would only make you feel worse because it would increase your sense of inferiority. Any dorff would say the same.' It turned and trundled down the path.

Furiously Bill stared at its retreating back. He was shaking with emotion. To have listened to so much odious dorff bragging, and then to be refused like this!

"For a moment he felt a passionate wish to *show* the dorff. They had small minds and few morals, but he wanted to put them in their place. But that wasn't what he was here for, and anyhow, how could it be accomplished? He had a feeling that any description of human erotics, no matter how lusciously done, would impress a dorff about as much as a description of paramoecia

conjugating would affect a man. Just not interesting. They were too smug."

"I know what he meant," George interrupted. "And I don't think it could be done. They *are* smug. But I wish you'd get to the point of your story. What's happened to Bill?"

"Many things happen that are unlikely," the dorff replied mysteriously ". . . Bill went on with his thoughts. *Was* he jealous? That was what dorff who were in contact with human beings always implied, and of course it was a possibility. But was he really envious of a bodily process that, from the accounts, began with the flashing of red and yellow lights, went on to jets of hot and cold body fluids and the discharge of quantities of quasi-electrical energy, and ended with the appearance of comet-shaped brown spots in front of the eyes? No doubt the dorff enjoyed it. But to him it didn't sound so much like *l'amour* as it did a street carnival.

"No, it wasn't envy that was bothering him. Intellectual curiosity has always been one of Bill's outstanding traits, and he had been trying for nearly three months to get a copy of the marriage manual. By now he felt that he would explode, or turn into a dorff, if he didn't get to see one. He wanted to sit down with a copy of the *Golden Hours,* turn over the pages slowly, study the wiring diagrams, and find out for himself whether the theory he had been working on, that the dorff in their mating tapped a source of magnetic energy similar to but below the familiar electro-magnetic spectrum, was justifiable.

"It was partly altruism, of course. Earth technology is slowly stifling for lack of adequate power, and Bill knew how much it would help if he could indicate a

new and virtually untapped energy source to it. But mainly he wanted to find out if his theory was correct."

"The idea about the marriage manual is just as much mine as it is Bill's," George put in rather stiffly. "We both were responsible for developing the theory. You seem to know a lot about these things."

The dorff swallowed a great deal of air. "Bill went over to the window," it said imperturbably, "and looked out. Fog was coming in. The weather in this part of Bydea is abominable—either wind or fog. Bill, looking out into the drifting sheets of whitish mist, found himself wondering how the lights of a street carnival would look shining through it. It was then that he had his great idea.

"He didn't know where he could get one, but he could find out. Once he had the thing set up, he might be able to get a copy of the marriage manual out of the dorff, on the ground that Earth people were quite as sophisticated erotically as *they* were. And even if it didn't work out that way, it would be worth a good deal to evoke some emotion besides pity from the dorff. Bill began hunting through the catalogues of trading goods in his desk."

"What are you talking about?" George demanded. "What was the great idea about? What was he going to order from the catalogues?"

"A merry-go-round," responded the dorff.

"Bill had to wait nearly a month for it, and when it came the express charges were positively fantastic. He paid them without a murmur. He was wholly focused on the contents of the three big crates.

"The carousel went together easily. It was about twelve feet across, with six beautiful dappled horses with spun glass manes. There was a striped canopy with multi-colored flags; purple and gold lights hung in festoons about the edges; the turning mechanism was housed in a mirroed hexagon, each mirror of which was a different color. And as the merry-go-round rotated, it gave out an assortment of seven wonderful brassy tunes.

"When Bill got it set up, he was enchanted with it. It looked so good to him that it was all he could do to keep from taking a turn on it himself. He was still staring at it fascinatedly when he heard a gobbling belch at his side.

"He spun around. A dorff was standing by him. Its eyes were fixed on the merry-go-round, and it was pawing rapidly with its feet. It acted like a modest, but exceedingly ticklish girl confronted by an exceptionally interesting dirty postcard.

"For a moment there was silence. Then the dorff said, in an offhand but peremptory way, 'How much to ride on it?'

"Bill's eyes widened. Somehow, he had never thought of this possibility. His response was quick enough, though. 'A page out of the marriage manual,' he said.

"The dorff turned and trundled off at top speed. He was afraid he'd offended it. But it came back in less than twenty minutes, and it brought four other dorff with it. Each of them had a marriage manual page in its hand.

"Bill could hardly believe in his good fortune. At this rate, in a few days he'd have the whole book. He collected the pages, watched the dorff get on their horses

—they giggled and rumbled a lot over the selection—and then retired to his office to examine his loot.

His enthusiasm was a little dashed by the inspection. All five of the dorff had picked the same page out of the manual, page one of the introduction, to give him. But as he translated the difficult syllabary, he became convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that his thesis was right; dorff mating tapped a source of energy hitherto unknown to terrestrial science. And that energy might be made available for Earth's industrial use.

"He got up from his chair and began to pace about. He was too excited to sit still. The dorff were still rotating and tittering. It occurred to him that if he wanted to get the rest of the manual he'd better see that they didn't get too long a ride.

"He went out and pressed the shut-off switch. The carousel came to a stop. The dorff slid down off their horses. Their grayish skin had turned a faint blue, and their eyes were more than usually oyster-like.

" 'If you want to ride any more, you'll have to bring another page from the manual. A different page,' he told them.

"One of the dorff nodded, but the others did not seem to have heard him. They went trundling off through the fog, falling down occasionally. As Bill looked after them anxiously, it occurred to him that if they had been human beings he would have thought they were dead drunk.

"Nonetheless, more dorff came the next day. Bill was greatly relieved. Each of them had a page from the marriage manual introduction in its hands. Bill got up to page three of the introduction that day."

"I know," George interrupted. "He sent the pages back to me. They were a—a revelation. And he told me to meet him here today. He was sure he'd have the rest of the book by then. Why doesn't he show up? What's happened to him?"

"On the next day, though," the dorff continued, "Bill had a rude shock. No dorff at all came to the carousel in the morning. In the afternoon an elder of the dorff came up. It said it wanted to have a serious talk with him.

"It swallowed air for quite a long time before it began. Then it said, 'This business with the whirl machine has got to stop. It's making my people unhappy. It's breaking up too many dorff homes,' The elder's pink mouth whiskers were trembling with emotional intensity.

"Bill beamed. Before he came to Bydea he would never have thought that he'd hear words like that with pleasure, or enjoy being labelled a wrecker of homes. Now that it had happened he was delighted with it. 'Good,' he said cordially, 'fine. Splendid. I'm delighted to hear it.'

"The elder looked at him wistfully and reproachfully. 'You don't care that your strange undorffian perversions are ruining our wholesome love relationships? You don't have any feeling of responsibility? I suppose I might have been prepared for it. Those to whom Dortha-Na has been ungracious invent whirl machines and the atomic drive.'

The dorff elder was silent for a moment. Then it continued, 'They ride on the whirl machine. They go home tired, with headaches, irritable. They drink a lot of water. Then they go to sleep. No wonder their poor husbands are ired.'

"Bill was surprised. He said, 'You mean female dorff have been riding on the merry-go-round?'

" 'Almost exclusively,' responded the dorff elder. 'Why, can't you tell? It isn't that I object to normal, wholesome enjoyment. Quite the contrary. But this thing! Decency is decency. It's got to stop.'

"Bill thought the time had come. 'Look here, sir,' he said, 'I'll be glad to dismantle the machine. I don't think there's any doubt that by now I've shown you our race is quite the equal of yours when it comes to erotic enjoyment. But in return for dismantling the machine, I want a copy of *Dortha-Na's Golden Hours,* the marriage book.'

"There was a pause. The elder's whiskers kept quivering. Then it said, 'What do you want the book for?'"

"Bill told him, honestly and frankly. The elder listened. Then it shook its head. 'I don't believe you,' it answered. 'I simply don't believe you. You want our sacred book to use in some perverse, indecent way. People who would invent a thing like the whirl machine! It's nothing so innocent as power you want the manual for.'

"Bill held on to his temper. 'I don't want to coerce you, sir,' he said. 'But if I don't get a copy of the marriage manual, naturally I'll feel at liberty to continue operating the whirl machine.'

"The elder dorff stood up. Its pink whiskers had folded in like the tentacles on a sea anemone. It swallowed an enormous quantity of air. Then it said, Very well. I can't stop you. But I can tell you one thing. From now on, not one dorff brings you one page out of the marriage manual. I may be getting old, but I still have some authority. I'll lock up the books. If a dorff rides on your machine henceforward, he rides for free."

"It stood choking with emotion. Then it lumbered heavily off down the path.

"Bill looked after it. The fog was coming in dismally. He sat down on the bench with his head between his hands. He could, of course, keep running the whirl machine. He could break up a lot more dorff homes. But no matter what he did, he wasn't going to get any more pages out of the marriage manual. The situation was a stalemate, an impasse. It was, as Bill expressed it, a fair cow."

"I never heard anybody except Bill say 'fair cow'," George cut in. "You must know him intimately."

"Yes," said the dorff. "As I was saying, Bill sat there with his head between his hands. Time passed. After a while he heard a soft scratching at the door. It kept on, and he went to see what it was.

It was a dorff. Not the elder who had just left; it had no pink whiskers. Outside of that, Bill had no idea which dorff it was. It was, as a matter of fact, a female dorff, and one of a rather unstable constitution. She was known to her neighbors as not being 'properly wired', which is about the same as saying, in Earth parlance, that she didn't have all her marbles.

"Bill had no idea of this. All dorff looked alike to him. This inability to distinguish was to cost him dear. Or, of course, you could say it was very much to his benefit. It all depends on the point of view.

"The female dorff said, 'I heard you talking. You want a copy of the marriage book. I can get you a copy of the marriage book.'

" 'How?' Bill demanded. And she told him how.

"Now, you must try to understand Bill's psychic

state. By now the need to examine a copy of the marriage manual had become an overriding passion with him. He felt he would do anything, suffer anything, attempt anything, if only he could end up with a copy of *Dortha-Na's Golden Hours* in his hand. And at bottom he didn't understand the magnitude of what the female dorff was proposing. If he had understood, he would have said it wouldn't work."

"What was she proposing?" George asked.

"That he become a dorff."

"I don't believe it," George declared. "No human being could become a dorff. And I don't believe he could be disguised as one, either. The natures are utterly different. We're protoplasmic. Dorff are only partly flesh. At least, half their constitution is, well, you could call it electrical, though it's located along a different electro-magnetic spectrum from ours. The transformation would be impossible.

"I think you're lying. You've killed Bill, or you've got him in hiding someplace."

"He's not exactly in hiding," responded the dorff. "No, what I have told you is true, though the transformation is certainly very difficult.

"The female dorff took Bill to a somewhat quack dorff physician of whom she had long been a patient. The physician became interested in the case. Though a quack, he was a talented man. Bill was 'rewired'. The rewiring generated a passable dorff body for him; as Freud said, the human psyche is basically electrical, and relocating Bill's personality in the new electro-magnetic-spectrum did prove to be feasible.

"You will be interested to know that the process did not hurt him, though he found it intensely ticklish. And

his human body provided the basis for his new dorff physique."

There was a slight pause. Then George said, "So you're Bill."

"Yes," replied the dorff. "The news will hardly come as a surprise to you. I believe you have surmised it all along.

"I became a dorff. The dorff elder did not want to accept me in my new role, but there was nothing he could do about it. For the last three months I have been living as a dorff. For the last two months I have been married to a dorff. The elder could not deny me a copy of *Dortha-Na's Golden Hours* when I was married. And that is why there is now in my carrying pouch a copy of the marriage manual."

"Did you marry the female dorff? The one who had you rewired?" asked George.

"No." The dorff who had been Bill sounded embarrassed. "She—ah—well, as I told you, she didn't have all her marbles. She didn't realize that there was only one direction in which the transformation could proceed, and her doctor never thought to mention it to me. I—ah—well, I became a female dorff. Though not a fully functioning one. I am a happy wife, but I can never be a mother. But when I look at young dorff, I find I don't regret it much."

There was a long, long silence. At last George shook himself like a dog emerging from water. "Well, there goes our last chance of getting to see the marriage manual," he observed. "Now that you've become a dorff, I suppose you'll feel about it the way a dorff would. Are you going to back me up in a corner and start telling me

about your sex life? Or do female dorff ever talk about such things?"

"They can, and do," the dorff declared. "It is almost their sole topic of conversation. Sometimes their talk can be most illuminating.

"But you asked about the marriage manual. Here. It's yours." It reached into its carrying pouch, pulled out the little green book, and put it in George's astonished hand.

George riffled through it rapidly. It seemed to be all in order, every page there. "Why—why—this is wonderful!" he exclaimed. He was almost panting with excitement. "This will revolutionize . . . it's the most fascinating . . . Earth industry will . . . I—I can't thank you enough! But why are you doing this?"

"Well, of course I used to be human," the dorff who had been Bill answered. "I still retain some sympathy. But the chief reason is that, from now on, the old marriage manual is obsolete.

"You see, I'm the only entity in all history that has had the privilege of living both as a male human being and as a female dorff. I've learned a good deal in both roles. In fact, I've become something of an authority . . .

"Take the marriage manual, and welcome. A new marriage manual, *Goldener Hours,* will soon be off the press. It's *really* hot stuff. I wrote it myself."

AGE OF PROPHECY

"Look harder," the old man said sternly. "You're not trying. Over on the road to Whittier. Now then. What do you see?"

The boy squirmed. "I get so tired, grand-daddy," he complained. "When I look the way you tell me to, it makes my eyes hurt and gives me a pain in my head. Can't I go play?"

"No," the old man answered unsympathetically. "Close your eyes, then, if looking makes them hurt. You always see more with your eyes closed anyway. Look out through the top of your head. Is there anybody on the road?"

There was a pause. The boy's face grew tense and a little pale. His hands had clenched. "I see five people. walking along together," he said at last.

"Good!—Are they human beings, or mutants?"

"Human beings."

"Is there anyone with them—a prophet, or a lord—or are they by themselves?"

"They're by themselves. Two of them are women, and one of them is wearing shoes. I—I think they must be going over to Whittier to trade, because the woman with shoes is carrying a couple of chickens, and the others have vegetables and stuff. The big man has money in his pocket."

"That's fine. That's more than you usually see. You're getting better all the time, Benjamin. Can you see what's in the people's minds?"

"Minds?" The boy opened his eyes and gave Tobit a puzzled glance. "I don't know what you mean, grand-daddy."

The old man sighed. "You never can do that," he said softly, as if to himself. "It's too bad. There's no ability it's more useful for a prophet to have. Still—" his face brightened—"there's no doubt that you have powers, real powers. More than I'd hoped. You're going to be a famous prophet some day, Benjamin."

"Can I go play now?" the boy asked, unimpressed.

"A famous prophet," Tobit repeated, ignoring him. "People will crowd forward to honor you and bring good things to you. They'll do whatever you tell them. You can have whatever you want without asking for it." He seemed to hug himself with delight at the prospect. "When that happens you won't forget your old grand-daddy, will you, Benjamin? Your old grand-daddy who's always been so good to you?"

"You gave me an awful whipping last week for letting the birds go," the boy said. He did not seem so much resentful as confused.

Tobit's hand went up quickly as if to strike. Then he lowered it and smiled. "Poor boy, you're not old enough to know that it was for your own good. I've always done the best I could for you, Benjamin, the very best I could. When your poor mother died I took care of you and fed you and brought you up. It was a hard job for a sickly old man. You won't forget it when you're rich and famous, Benjamin? You'll remember all I've done for you?"

"Oh, yes," the boy said, wriggling. He seemed embarrassed. "Oh, yes, grand-daddy, yes."

When Benjamin was ten, he located a well of abundant water for Garretson, Tobit's nearest neighbor, after three dowsers had ingloriously failed. When he was thirteen, he told Mrs. Mathias who had stolen her grandmother's aluminum cooking pan, and where the thief had hidden it. By his fifteenth birthday, his clairvoyance was as well-established as his open-eye vision, and he was on the way to adding clairaudience to it. A little before he was eighteen, Tobit decided that Benjamin was ready for the miracle trials.

The city had been the most diffuse of any on the American continent. Those who loved it had praised it as vital and full of paradox; those who hated it had spoken of its sprawling, strident vulgarity. The falling bombs had blasted its center into nothingness; but, as with some huge animal which, though mortally wounded, takes long to die, life persisted through its complex periphery. All over the continent—more, all over the world—cults had risen, prophets had sprung up, in the room left by the failure of established religion and civil authority. But in the ruins of the city, with the Pacific on one hand and the vast rampart of the Rockies on the other, the new religions throve furiously. Prophets, lamas, adepts, visionaries, seers jostled one another in the streets, and each had his little knot of almost fanatic followers.

Tobit had outfitted himself and Benjamin for the journey with sandals of hand-plaited grass. He did not consider bare feet dignified; besides there was enough asphalt left on the road for it to be a trying footing

when the weather was hot. Tobit wore his usual, much-patched denim coveralls; but for Benjamin he had contrived to get, by dint of unheard-of scrimping and contrivance, a long robe of coarse brown cloth. It was the one indispensible necessity for a man who aspired to prophethood.

"What's it like, grandfather?" Benjamin asked as they walked along. He had grown into a tall, broad-shouldered blond young man. His forehead was high, his blue eyes intelligent; but his face had an odd, in-drawn look and his lips were oversensitive.

"Stupid question!" the old Tobit snapped, "You saw it all last year yourself with your eyes shut!" He was tired already, and fatigue always made him irritable. And then, relenting, "Why, I told you. About this time of year all the prophets meet in General Square and show what they can do. It's a sort of a contest. Some of them just preach, but most of them do things, too—heal the sick, answer questions, work miracles."

Benjamin sighed. His fingers twisted together. "I—I don't know . . ." he said.

"Nonsense! I tell you, Benjamin, you're a better prophet than any of them. I've heard that some of them are nothing but fakes. You've really got powers, Benjamin. You've got *powers*."

The doubtful expression faded from the young man's face. "Yes, I know," he said, nodding. "I've got powers."

As the day wore on and the wayfaring continued, Tobit leaned more heavily on the young man's arm. They stopped at sundown for their second meal—goat's milk cheese and thin, sour home-made wine—and slept in the open air in a field beside the road. It was no hardship

for Benjamin, but Tobit made much wistful mention of the aching of his old bones. The two rose early, well before dawn, and by the time the sun was well up in the heavens were walking through the rubbly outskirts of the city. Between ten and eleven they got to General Square.

Nothing in Benjamin's closed-eye vision had prepared him for the sight. It was not so much that his clairvoyance confounded perspective and omitted color entirely, as it was that the crowd in the square was altogether outside his experience. He had never imagined that there could be so many people gathered in one place; later, thinking over the day, he decided that there must have been over a thousand of them. And, since the material side of civilization dies slowly, many of the women were clothed in dresses of bright cloth, wore heeled shoes, had unnaturally colored lips. There was not a mutant to be seen.

Around the sides of the square the long-robed prophets stood. Some had erected crude tents amid the rubble or stood beside creaking booths decorated with pennants and small flags. The crowd had clotted around the prophets in little knots, and people drifted slowly from one group to the next.

Benjamin tugged at the old man's arm. "Grandfather . . ." he said. He licked his lips. "Can't we walk about and listen to them? Before I show what I can do?"

Tobit stole a shrewd glance at the young man's face. "Oh, all right," he said ungraciously. "If you want to. But you mustn't be afraid, Benjamin; let me do the talking when the time comes."

They moved into the dusty square. One of the

prophets was preaching in a loud, angry voice, and Benjamin halted in front of him.

"Sin! Sin!" the man bellowed furiously. He tossed his long hair back and clenched his fists. "Fine clothes, powder and paint! Sin! It's sin! That's what brought the bombs down on us. We must get rid of sin!" It was curious, Benjamin thought, that the prophet's audience was composed almost exclusively of women with gay frocks and painted lips. They nodded agreement from time to time as they listened to the prophet with obvious enjoyment.

The next prophet was a healer. The crowd had formed a respectful ring about him and a little girl with a twisted leg who stood balancing on home-made crutches in front of him. A middle-aged woman who must have been the girl's mother waited tensely at the side.

The healer bent and tilted the child's chin toward him with his smooth white hand. He was looking directly into her eyes. "You can walk . . . You can walk . . ." he intoned. "You must have faith. My child, all things are possible to me. You can walk."

The child nodded trancedly. Her eyes were almost closed. Suddenly the healer pulled the crutches away from her. "Walk!" he commanded. "You can walk!" He backed away from her and held out his hand.

The crowd held its breath. Slowly the child moved toward him, a step, a step, and then another wobbling step. The healer snatched her up on his shoulder, turned to the audience. "She can walk!" he announced triumphantly. There was a roar of confirmation and applause.

"That was pretty good," Tobit said, nodding. "That

fellow's pretty slick. You can see he's got some real powers."

Benjamin made no answer. He was looking confused. It seemed to him that just as the healer had picked up the little girl her eyes had come open and she had moaned, "My leg! Oooh, how it hurts in my leg!"

"I've heard of this fellow," Tobit said as they moved on to the next of the seers. He seemed to have forgotten his irritation at Benjamin's recreancy and to be enjoying himself. "His name's Ramakrisna, and he's one of the smartest prophets there is. He can do all sorts of things."

Ramakrisna was a stout man, wearing a very long, very heavy robe. It was made of dull yellow cloth. He was standing with closed eyes. As Tobit and Benjamin pushed through the crowd around him he slowly opened his lids. His eyes were strange, large-pupilled ones, with a glassy, compelling luster. "Your people sowed the wind," he said out of a silence to his listeners. "It was the whirlwind they reaped."

The woman standing beside Benjamin nodded. "It was the scientists," she breathed, "the wicked scientists."

"You reaped the whirlwind," Ramakrisna went on impressively. "Your erring world lies in ruins about you. Where are you to go, to what are you to turn? But there is wisdom in the East."

There was a sort of moan from his audience. The woman beside Benjamin was leaning forward eagerly, "Show us, lord," she whispered, as if to herself.

"You are like lost and frightened children," Ramakrisna said. Each syllable came out weighted and slow. "You are lost in darkness. But for the sincere seeker there is always light. The light of Asia. Do you seek that light?"

There was a sibilance of assent from the crowd.

Several of the women were swaying back and forth with their eyes shut. "It is written, the spirit has eternal dominion over the flesh," Ramakrisna chanted. "The spirit has power over matter such as your material western science never knew." He halted and seemed to be gathering himself for an effort. "If there are unbelievers among you, behold! Behold, I bring you a sign!"

He seemed to stop breathing. Then, very slowly, he rose into the air. While Benjamin watched incredulously he moved upward until he was some four or five feet off the ground.

Benjamin tugged at Tobit's sleeve. "Grandfather, he—"

"Be quiet!" Tobit said in an acid whisper without turning to look at him. "Don't bother me. I want to watch this fellow; he's wonderful."

"Grandfather, grandfather, listen. He hasn't got any powers. I can see he hasn't. He's got something under his clothes that's doing it."

Tobit tried to pull away from his protege, but Benjamin hung on. "I can see the thing when I close my eyes," he said in a rapid whisper. "It's a kind of harness around his shoulders, and some kind of force comes out of it and pushes him off the ground. I think he's one of those false prophets you told me about.

Tobit's attention was won. He gave Benjamin a keen glance. "You mean he's wearing something, some sort of machine?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"You're sure of it?"

"Oh, yes. I can see it perfectly plainly when I close my eyes."

Tobit bit his lips. He seemed to be considering. He

looked at Benjamin again. Then he made up his mind. "Pick me up and set me on your shoulder," he commanded. "I don't weigh much, and you're young. Don't ask questions, Benjamin; do as I say."

From his new seat Tobit surveyed the crowd around Ramakrisna for an instant. He clutched the shoulder of Benjamin's robe with one hand for support. "Ramakrisna lies!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

Slowly faces turned toward them. There was a resentful murmur from the crowd. "Blasphemer!" a woman screamed. Other voices took the word up. The murmur grew angrier.

"Ramakrisna lies!" Tobit yelled again. "He is a secret scientist. Under his robe he wears one of the wickedest of the old science machines. He is wearing an anti-grav. He lies to you. He is a secret scientist." He waved his arms. "A secret scientist!"

The crowd's voice was changing its note. It was angry still, but growing questioning. Its anger could change direction easily.

Ramakrisna had descended to the ground. His oily face was a little pale. His hands were fumbling hastily inside his robe.

"Stop him!" Tobit screamed. "He's getting rid of it. Don't let him fool you any more! Tear off his robe!"

The crowd moved uneasily. "Hurry! Hurry!" Tobit yelled. "He's a false prophet! Tear off his robe!"

The crowd surged forward. A dozen hands stripped Ramakrisna bare. His yellow robe fluttered to the rubbly ground in long strips. He clasped his hands over his plump chest and tried to hide the betraying straps of the harness, but everyone saw. A long, wrathful note like a growl left the crowd's throat.

"Benjamin knew!" Tobit shrieked. "Benjamin saw!" His thin voice had great carrying power. "Ramakrisna's a false prophet; Benjamin saw straight through his robes to his lying heart!"

"He lied to us," a woman shouted. Her face was distorted with hysteria. Benjamin thought she was the same woman who had called Tobit a blasphemer at first. "A false prophet deserves to die!"

She picked up a rock. In a moment the air was full of flying stones. Ramakrisna cowered back and tried to shield his face from them with his arms. Bloody blotches leaped into being on his flanks and sides.

He cried out and turned to run. The hail of stones pursued him. Before he had gone three paces he stumbled and fell to his knees. His forehead was streaming blood.

Tobit hopped nimbly down from his perch on Benjamin's shoulder. "Kill him!" he urged shrilly. "More rocks!" He set the example by hurling stone after stone.

The crowd had gone mad. People were running up from all over the square with stones in their hands. The thud of rocks against Ramakrisna's unprotected body was like the sound of monstrous hail. While Benjamin watched with horrified eyes the prophet tried weakly to rise to his feet again. Both his arms were plainly broken. He fell back, rolled over on his side.

The rocks covered him. They fell on the mound of Ramakrisna's body with a ceaseless spiteful spat, spat, spat. For a time the mound heaved feebly. Then it grew quiet. Only when it had long ceased to move did the crowd stop throwing stones.

Benjamin covered his face with his hands. He was feeling sick.

"Got what was coming to him, didn't he?" Tobit said

cheerfully. "That's the kind of robe all false prophets ought to wear, a robe of stone. They fixed him up right."

"I didn't mean this to happen," Benjamin said.

"Oh, don't be silly," Tobit snapped. "He was a scientist; he deserved to die. Take your hands down from your face, boy, and stand up straight. You'll never have a better chance than this to get followers. But you'll have to get a grip on yourself."

Benjamin attempted to obey. "That's better," Tobit said, looking at him critically. "We'll have to hurry. People are beginning to go home."

He walked in front of Benjamin. "Ramakrisna is dead," he announced solemnly. "But the true prophet lives—Benjamin, who saved you from following after a hidden scientist. Benjamin has far-seeing and through-seeing and far-hearing. Benjamin is a true prophet who follows truth. Benjamin will tell you what to do to be saved."

The crowd, which had begun to move away, hesitated. In twos and threes people began to straggle back. Tobit stood on tiptoe to reach Benjamin's ear. "Look into them, boy," he said anxiously. "I know you can't reach into minds, but you can see what their bodies are feeling, and that's almost as good."

Benjamin obeyed "Most of them are feeling sick," he said after a moment. "I think they wish they hadn't killed him, grandfather. That woman with the yellow hair has a terrible headache, so bad she can hardly see, and the rest are just about ready to cry. The insides of their heads look different around the eyes when they're making tears."

Tobit nodded. "You are sick at heart," he said impressively to the people standing near him. "Sick at

heart. You fear you have done wrong to kill the prophet who lied to you. But Benjamin approves the act. He says that for every stone you cast at a deceiver, a hundred blessings will come to you. A hundred? No, a thousand. The world is full of blessings for the followers of Benjamin."

It was as if the crowd exhaled a corporate sigh. People who had been standing with bowed heads and drooping bodies straightened up again. Here and there appeared a vague, fugitive smile.

"Already Benjamin has saved you from following the false prophet whose lies would have cost you your salvation," Tobit said. "And that is only the beginning. Whatever you desire can be yours. Blessings such as you never dreamed of will fill your hands. Benjamin knows. Benjamin will show you the way."

The sun was westering. From its low rays light flooded across Benjamin's head and made of his blond hair an aureole. One of the women had been staring up eagerly into his face. Now slowly she sank down on her knees and looked up at him.

"I believe, lord," she said. "Lord, I believe. Give me your blessing, lord."

Benjamin hesitated. Tobit prodded him sharply in the side. "Put your hand out over her head," he whispered, "and say, 'Bless you, my child.' "

Benjamin extended his hand palm down over the kneeling woman's bowed head. "Bless you. Bless you, my child."

2

"You're doing fine, Benjamin," Tobit said two months later. His tone was cheery, his expression self-satisfied. "Just fine, better almost than I had hoped you would. We have a fine place to sleep, the best of everything to eat, and you're getting more followers every day. You seem to have a real talent for that sort of thing. I'm proud of you."

Benjamin raised his eyebrows very slightly and looked at him. In the short time that had passed his face had taken on a surprising maturity. His gaze was level and self-confident. Only at the edges of his lips there still lurked a hint of nervousness.

"My powers are greater than I had realized," he answered simply. "It's a great thing to have powers like mine. Yes, and a great responsibility."

Tobit shot a keen glance at him from under his eyelids but said nothing. There was a knock at the door. After a moment a girl entered the room. She held a steaming dish in either hand. "Your supper, lord," she said in a low voice. She put the dishes on the table, bowed humbly to Benjamin and Tobit, and withdrew. Benjamin's eyes followed her.

"A pretty girl, isn't she?" Tobit said, smiling. "So plump, like a little bird, and soft and brown. It's a pity that a prophet can't have anything to do with women without losing his powers."

Benjamin bit his lower lip. After a moment he nodded. "Yes, one has to pay for powers like mine; it is one of the sacrifices one must make."

They drew chairs up to the table and seated themselves. Tobit ate with good appetite. Benjamin seemed abstracted. "I'm meeting Pandiji and Ardadine outside of Alhambra tonight," he said, pushing the still half-full plate from him. "It's rather a lengthy walk, but you're welcome, if you'd like to come."

Tobit inhaled as if he were about to speak, but said nothing. Perhaps he was remembering that he had been working for the last three weeks to bring this meeting about. "Thank you. Benjamin." he said politely. "I'd be glad to come."

"Good. Ardadine tells me that woman, Gloroire Mundi, may be there too. I'm not so sure about making an agreement with her. She has a great many followers, of course, but they say she admits mutants to her congregation as well as humans."

The moon was only half-full; the meeting took place under the smoky light of tar-dipped torches. They sat on the pallid grass in a stubbly field on the outskirts of Alhambra, three men and the woman who called herself Gloroire Mundi, each with a trusted few of his most faithful followers. And though none of them realized it, a government was being born.

"So far, so good," the woman said briskly. "We've agreed to mutual action on matters that concern us mutually, and we've arrived at a minimum code for our followers." She pushed back the mass of dark crisp auburn hair from her forehead. The white fabric of her robe leaped into prominence as the torch flared up and

then sank back into obscurity again. "Now let's come to an agreement about raiding each other's followers."

"I don't know what you mean," Benjamin said.

"Oh, don't you?" Pandiji breathed softly. He was a little man who had a habit of cracking the knuckles of his left hand while he talked. "I've heard, Benjamin, that you told your followers not less than a week ago that they would endanger their salvation if they dabbled in mysteries from the east."

"Who told you that?" Benjamin asked, stiffening.

"I know everything you know," Pandiji said.

Benjamin closed his eyes. Pandiji, he saw after a moment, was not telling the truth. A little area of his brain had lighted up in a way the young man had learned meant lies. No doubt he had a spy among Benjamin's people; it would be necessary to be more careful about them than Benjamin had been.

"Let's not quarrel," Ardadine said hastily. "Gloroire is right in principle. We've got to make some sort of truce about raiding. What about making it geographical?"

The discussion went on. Gloroire Mundi presented a number of other ideas. Some of them were discarded; more were approved.

"That's about everything, isn't it?" she said at last. "It's a long walk back for me, and it's getting late. The moon has almost set."

"What about mutants?" Pandiji asked innocently.

"Well, what about them?" Gloroire's answer was quick.

"The others of us won't admit them among our followers."

"That's silly of you. Mutants can be very helpful sometimes. Besides, if we reject them, where are they to go?

It's not their fault they've mutated. I approve of mutants, if they're not too changed."

"What do you think, Benjamin?" Pandiji asked, turning to the young man.

"I hate them; they make my flesh creep."

"There's your answer," Ardadine said.

"I'm sorry, I can't see any use in discussing it further," Gloroire replied. "Perhaps some other time. But I can't stay here all night. Good night."

"Good night." The others watched her as she got up from the grass.

"It's time we started back ourselves," Benjamin said after a moment. He turned and walked toward the road.

Tobit lingered behind. "A remarkable woman," he said, gesturing in the direction Gloroire Mundi had gone. "Remarkable, though her views on mutants are a little strange. She lives near your territory, doesn't she, Pandiji? Out by Brea? That's a dangerous place to live, they say. So many gangs of thugs thereabouts. I hope she'll take care of herself. It would be highly unfortunate if anything should happen to her."

A glance of understanding passed between the two men's eyes. Pandiji nodded. "Yes, indeed," he replied smoothly, "we must trust that nothing happens to Gloroire. We should miss her advice very much."

It was some eight days later that the news came that Gloroire Mundi had been set upon by thugs and killed. "Robbed and her throat cut," Tobit said lingeringly. He clicked his tongue against his teeth. "What a terrible thing. Dreadful, dreadful. You'll miss her at your meetings. I suppose you and the others will divide up her followers?"

"I imagine so," Benjamin said without much interest. He poured himself another cup of hot water—he and Tobit were at breakfast—before he went on. "Yes, it's a dreadful thing. It's hard for me to grasp. I suppose the best way of looking at it is to think her death is a punishment for her tolerating mutants. Our sins are noticed. Things like that don't happen by accident." He was a little pale.

"You liked her, didn't you?" Tobit said shrewdly.

A faint flush rose in Benjamin's cheeks, but he made no direct reply. Maida, the little brown girl who was in charge of Benjamin's housekeeping, came in to remove the dishes.

"There's something I want to talk to you about, Tobit," the young man said when she had gone.

"Well?"

"Maida tells me she found a self-powered hot in your room yesterday."

Tobit's eyes flickered. "It's a lie!" he said violently; "the girl's only try to make trouble."

"No, she isn't. I saw the hot myself."

The old man changed his tactics. "It does my rheumatism so much good," he said piteously. "When my bones ache and ache at night I turn the hot on them and the pains go away. You wouldn't grudge your grandfather his little comforts, would you, boy?"

"It's not a question of grudging you anything, randfather. But the self-powered hot is one of the things of the old science, and we all know science is dangerous and bad. We musn't have anything to do with it.

"I've heard rumors lately that there's a nest of secret scientists still active in Pasadena, the PAS, near where the college used to be. I'm going to bring the matter up

at the group meeting next week and demand that we get rid of them. But how can I have the face to refer to secret science if some one in my own household is using science secretly? My hands wouldn't be clean. You must et rid of the thing today, no matter how much it helps your rheumatism."

Tobit gave him a burning glance but made no answer.

"We'd better take no chances," Benjamin said, getting up from the table. "I'll go smash the motor on the hot myself."

"I've listened to all your arguments," Benjamin said wearily. The other prophets had been discussing his proposal for hours, and he was tired. "I've heard Pandiji say that the scientists are dying out anyhow, since they're getting no new recruits. I've heard Ardadine say that we can't attack them since they still have science weapons, stun guns, gas and grenades, and all we have is knives, spears and clubs. Pandiji argues that the number of sick people they 'heal' is so small as to be insignificant—though I should think he would realize that for every person they help, one soul is lost to the light of prophecy. I've listened to all sorts of things this evening. I have one answer to make to them all.

"Science is wrong.

"If we know anything in the world today, we know that. Who knows what those scientists in Pasadena are doing, shut up in their laboratories?" Benjamin lingered with fascinated horror over the last word. "They may be breeding new strains of disease germs to kill the rest of us. I've heard that they have the most horrible mutants in their laboratories helping them. We must not let people like that live."

"Um." Ardadine pressed together the tips of his long slender hands.

"Even assuming they're not plotting against us—and being scientists, they're capable of anything—don't you realize how dangerous they are? Their poison will spread. Take my grandfather, for example. Nobody is more opposed to the old science than he is. But I left him at home tonight because in this matter I don't consider him reliable. He's perfectly capable of sneaking off to the scientists' clinic, or whatever they call it, if he thought they had something that would help his rheumatism. Our followers are simple people. Their minds work like that."

"I shouldn't call Benjamin's grandfather exactly simple," Pandiji said. "But there's some truth in what Benjamin argues. The scientists are, I admit, a certain danger to us." He cracked his knuckles thoughtfully. "The difficulty is in finding a practical way of getting rid of them."

"I've thought about that a lot," Benjamin replied. Despite his fatigue, he leaned forward eagerly. "Since they have better weapons than we, we'd have to attack them by surprise to have any chance of success. And by the time we got our followers aroused to the point of attacking them, the attack would no longer be a surprise. You can't urge hundreds of people to do something, day after day, without the news getting out.

"But there's another way of handling it. Each of us has a few followers, say ten or fifteen, who don't need to be urged to be ready to attack the scientists. You know the people I mean—young, full of the spirit of prophecy, ready to fight. Very well, suppose we pool them. It would make a very respectable little force."

There was a wary silence. "And who would be at the head of this force?" Ardadine asked at last.

"All three of us, I suppose," Benjamin replied. "Or we might delegate leadership to one of us. I'd suggest you, Ardadine, since you seem to have a good grasp of military things."

There was an even longer silence. It lasted so long that Benjamin, growing restless, turned to his closed-eye vision for distraction. Thoughtfully he examined Pandiji and Ardadine. Region after region of their brains was lit up in a way that he had learned meant intense thought.

"I move we put Benjamin in charge," Pandiji said abruptly. "With his far-seeing and through-seeing he's better equipped than either of us for command."

"Second the motion," Ardadine said. He leaned back and smiled.

"But I—I—" Benjamin pushed the hair back from his forehead. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

3

"You ask about mutants," Benjamin said to the eager faces in front of him. He was addressing the group picked from his and the other prophets' followers. "Kill them. Kill them without question. It is a sin to let mutants live."

"What about the scientists themselves, lord?" one of the young men asked.

"If they have arms or make any resistance, they must be killed, of course. After we take the building that houses their clinic and main laboratory—" Benjamin tapped the sketch map on the table in front of him—"we'll have a house-to-house search in the Pasadena area and see how many more secret scientists we can root out. Most of them will have to be put out of the way too. But I don't want to tell you to kill scientists indiscriminately. It may be possible to spare a few if they sincerely repent."

His answer seemed to have satisfied them. There was a drop in the tension in the air. Somebody made a joke. A few people laughed. Benjamin's voice cut across the rising noise.

"Keep always in your minds that you are a dedicated group," he said impressively. "Your conduct tomorrow will make a turning point in your own and many other lives. Until tomorrow—good night." He held out his hands toward them in blessing.

They were awed and humbled. "Good night, lord," one

or two mumbled back at him. They passed out slowly, looking sideways at him and whispering.

Benjamin watched them go. When the room was empty he stood for a moment thinking and then started across the field to the house he and Tobit slept in. It was a splendid house, with only one leak in the roof.

Tobit was waiting for him. "Where have you been, boy?" he asked petulantly as soon as he appeared. "You never tell me anything nowadays. Don't you trust me any more?"

"Of course I do, grandfather," Benjamin said in a conciliatory tone. He was tired; he hoped there wouldn't be a quarrel with the old man.

"Well, then, where do you go every night? What are you doing? You ought to confide in me, Benjamin. I've given you lots of good advice."

The young man went over to where Tobit was standing and patted him kindly on the arm. "Let's go to bed, Tobit. Were both tired."

"I want to know what you're up to!"

"And I can't tell you. You've got to realize, Tobit, that I'm the prophet here. I'm grateful to you for what you've done for me, and I'll take care of you as long as you live. But that's all. Keep your curiosity, and your advice, to yourself. Good night." He turned and left the room.

Tobit stood looking after him, leaning with one hand against the table. His eyes held tears, the easy, weak tears of age, but his face was thoughtful and shrewd.

The grenade which had killed the boy with the blue eyes had spattered Benjamin from head to foot with his follower's blood. When he looked at the splotches he felt

a distant nausea which seemed to have no connection with his body. The pain in his head was so bad that he could hardly believe his skull had not be fractured though he knew it was no more than the natural consequence of a near miss by a stun gun.

For the tenth time Benjamin closed his eyes and tried to see into the building. What had gone wrong? They had attacked at dawn, expected at worst a slight and hasty resistance, and had been greeted with stun guns, gas, and later a shower of grenades. At least ten of his followers had died. More had been wounded. The scientists must have been forewarned.

If only he could see what was going on inside! But his closed-eye vision, usually so reliable, had dimmed and failed. Try as he might he could make out only monstrous blurs inside the building, and shapes moving them which might have been men.

The young follower crouched on the ground beside him pulled at the sleeve of Benjamin's robe. Fatigue and pain had etched harsh lines over the pallor of his young face. He kept one hand pressed to the still-oozing gash a bit of grenade shell had cut in his upper arm. But his eyes held unquestioning, dog-like fidelity. "What shall we do now, lord?" he said.

Cautiously the prophet raised his head above the pile of rubble and looked. A momentary hush had come over the battle ground. The man with the stomach wound who had been crying for water for hours was silent. The paneless windows of the white laboratory building were quite blank. Nothing moved. Benjamin had time to notice that the sky was blue and cloudless, that the air was gentle and warm. Then a stun gun hissed mal-

iciously from the topmost row of windows, and Benjamin ducked down again.

The young man beside him tugged once more at his sleeve. "Have you made up your mind, lord?" he asked.

The sensible thing was to order a retreat. Most of them, even the wounded, would get through. If it cost him prestige with his followers, a sermon or two against sin and the scientists would restore it again. Attack could be deferred to another day. But . . . Science was wrong. It was wrong to make even a temporary truce with it.

Desperately Benjamin pressed his hands together over his eyes. Before, he had tried to see into the building and guess the actions of its defenders; now he strained frantically to make out the construction of the building itself. Images swam slowly across the gray field of his vision and faded out again. He had a ghostly awareness of the writhing red veins at the back of his eyes. The pain in his skull was like an axe.

He took his hands down. Blood was dropping slowly from where he had bitten his lower lip. "I'm going to try to get through the back," he announced to the follower whose trustful eyes were fixed on him. "I think there's a small opening there with nobody watching it. I'll try to draw their fire from inside and give you a chance to attack. Pass the word along."

"Yes, lord." The boy hesitated. "Good fortune, lord."

Automatically Benjamin stretched out his hand toward him and mumbled a blessing. Then he crawled off dragging his spear after him. There was plenty of cover, but the jagged rubble was a torture to crawl over. The part of Benjamin's mind that was not watching the windows from which stun charges and grenades would

come was speculating as to whether the cuts he was getting from the stone would infect. Infection, in a world where the bodies of millions rotted unburied, and even the disease germs had mutated, was a terribly easy thing.

He had crawled nearly thirty yards when someone in the building saw him moving and threw a grenade at him. Benjamin hugged a pile of rubble and waited for the burst. It came, and then two, three, four more. The explosions stopped. From an upper window someone bellowed through a megaphone, "Surrender and you will not be hurt! Surrender, and you will not be hurt!" There was a pause, and then more grenades.

Benjamin permitted himself the luxury of a bitter smile. The scientists must think them very simple indeed. Not be hurt? When everyone knew what the scientists did to helpless people in their laboratories? Neither he nor his men were such fools.

The dust settled slowly.

After a suitable interval he crawled on. This time he was more successful in avoiding notice. At a distance he rounded the corner of the building, skirted a body, came to the back.

No wonder the scientists were not guarding it. Windows and doors were heavily boarded, and the low opening he had seen with his closed-eye vision—probably once a ventilator—had been overlooked because it was so small. Getting into it would be difficult, though he thought it could be done.

Benjamin shut his eyes and looked. For some reason shut-eye seeing was better here than in front, though still dim and streaked, and he made out the shape of the

ventilator going inside the wall for a foot or two before it broke.

Was there anyone about? Not in the basement, but on the first floor a girl sat at the head of the stairs. She was reading a thin book with paper covers, and a stun gun stood by her hand. He would have to figure on disabling her before she gave the alarm. He mustn't be noticed before he was ready to create his diversion.

He began to creep forward. It occurred to him, with a touch of unreality, that he probably would not get out of the laboratory building alive. The ventilator opening seemed a long way off.

He was nearly to it when a faint sound behind him alarmed him. He started to turn. Before he could complete the motion there came a stunning, obliterating pain in his head.

And Tobit, some seventy yards in the rear, lay down his stun gun with a satisfied smile.

"Why didn't you confide in me, boy?" Tobit complained. "If I'd only known what was going on, I'd have warned you against the others. You're too trusting. They're a bunch of snakes."

Benjamin groaned. He opened his eyes. The room—small, white painted, without visible openings—began to rotate giddily. He closed them again.

After a moment he held on to the iron rail of the cot on which he was lying and sat up. The room, though still moving of its own accord, was beginning to slow down. "I'm thirsty," Benjamin said. "Where am I? What are you doing here? I wish I had a drink."

Tobit trotted over to a table which stood by the wall and held a glass carafe. He poured water into a plas-

tic cup. "Here," he said, "here's some water for you. —Why, you're inside the laboratory building. We've been captured. We're hostages."

Thirstily Benjamin drank. He put down the empty glass. "Hostages?" he repeated. "Tobit, what are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd stay at home while you were in danger, did you, Benjamin? This morning I got out of Maida what she thought you were up to, and I followed you. Oh, if you'd only told me before! Pandiji and Ardadine set a trap for you, and like a baby you walked into it."

"You mean they warned the scientists?" Benjamin asked.

"Of course they did," Tobit replied eagerly. "They were afraid you'd have too much prestige if you defeated the scientists. You've been doing so well in the prophet line they were jealous of you. So they tipped off the people in the laboratory, figuring that even if you weren't killed you'd be set back quite a bit. They're smart, and it was a smart idea."

Benjamin nodded slowly. He was remembering the smile Ardadine had worn at the meeting that night. From Ardadine's and Pandiji's viewpoint, a conflict in which both Benjamin and the scientists would suffer was ideal.

"Next time you'll tell your old grandfather things," Tobit went on with a touch of severity. "Why, you might have been killed it I hadn't been here to save your life. A fine business! After this you'll realize that you're just a boy and still need my advice."

Benjamin got weakly to his feet and stood leaning against the wall. There was an almost unbearable pain

over and behind his eyes. "Saved my life. How?" he asked. "The last thing I remember is that somebody hit me with a charge from a stun gun."

"One of the scientists hit you from around the corner of the building," Tobit answered with alacrity. "Then they started throwing grenades at you, but they all fell short. I knew they'd get you sooner or later if you stayed there, so I crawled up to you and managed to drag you back behind a pile of rubble where I knew you'd be safe. You're a mighty heavy load when you're unconscious, boy. You owe me a great deal."

"Thank you," Benjamin said awkwardly. "I suppose I do. The way my head feels now, I'd almost rather you'd left me lying there. What happened after that?"

"After that?"

"How did we get to be hostages?"

"Oh. Well, I stayed there for a while with you, wondering what to do. I couldn't drag you any further and I didn't know how much longer you'd be unconscious. I decided to crawl back to where your followers were and see if I could get some of them to help me move you. I hadn't gone more than a couple of feet when three scientists came around the corner. They were carrying stun guns, and each of them had a little thing attached to his head that gave out a sort of waterfall of sparks. Your followers were throwing spears and stones at them, and shooting at them with their bows, but nothing got through. I suppose the things on their heads were portable force-field projectors—they were one of the science things people had, Benjamin, before your time.

"When they got up to where we were they turned the guns on me and told me to surrender or be stunned. And then they picked you up and carried you inside and

made me come along behind. After we were inside the building they called through the megaphone and told your followers they were holding you as hostage for their good behavior. There's been no more fighting, but your followers are still there."

Benjamin gave Tobit a bitter look. "I wish you'd let them kill me, grandfather," he said.

"Oh, come now, it's not so bad. You've lost some prestige by being captured, of course, but you can escape. And when your followers see you coming out of the science building safe and sound and free as air, they'll respect you more than ever before. They'll really appreciate your powers."

"Get out? How? My powers don't include getting through a solid wall."

"Of course not. But you can *see* through the wall and figure how to get out that way. There's nobody on guard outside this room, and there's a keyhole in the door panel on this side. Look into the lock and see how it works."

"I can't. Something's happened to my closed-eye vision. Most of the time I can't see anything."

For the first time Tobit seemed jarred. "But—but" he stammered. "Why, boy, you've got to get out of here! You've got to! They'll do all sorts of horrible things to us if we stay."

"I know. That's why I said it would have been better if they'd killed me with the grenades. It's a clean, quick, death. When a true prophet falls into these devils' hands . . ."

There was a protracted fumbling at the door. Then the lock gave a click and a woman came in. It was the same

girl Benjamin had seen in the hall; he recognized the way her fine dark hair curled around her face, and the vivid tilt of her head. In one hand she carried a stun gun, the barrel at "discharge", and in the other a tray of food. She pushed the tray into Benjamin's hands (Tobit, he noticed, had walked into a corner and stood facing the wall), looked at him unsmilingly for a moment, and then backed out, her gun still trained on him.

Tobit turned around, sniffing the steam from the tray. "Well, my boy," he said cheerfully, "they're not going to starve us to death, at any rate. What's that? Bread? Yes, I believe it is. Well, well! I hate to think how long it's been since I had any bread."

He pulled chairs up to the table and they sat down. "So that's bread," Benjamin said, examining it. "Being scientists, I suppose they can have all sorts of luxuries. I don't care much for it myself, though. It looks gritty and full of burrs."

Tobit picked up a slab of the grayish stuff and bit into it. "Maybe so," he said with his mouth full. "but it tastes good to me. If you don't want your share, my boy . . ."

Between them they finished the food on the tray. Benjamin had been hungrier than he had thought, and eating had somewhat blunted the pain in his head. A drawing sensation in his leg made him pull his robe up and look at it. The worst of his cuts had been bandaged, and the skin around the others had been painted with some greenish stuff.

"It's an antiseptic," Tobit explained. "People used to put it on wounds to see they didn't infect. Now, Benjamin, how about trying to get out of here? You never can tell until you try."

Docilely the young man closed his eyes. "I can see

better than I could," he reported after an instant. "Maybe it was being shot with the stun gun that made me lose my through-seeing, and now the effect's wearing off."

"Good! Good! Look at the lock."

Benjamin went over and squatted in front of it. "There's a thing like this," he said frowning and sketching a shape with his finger on the surface of the door, "and it comes out and hooks into a bunch of little knobs. Then there's another thing at the top with ridges. I think it's supposed to move when you push against the little knobs. If I had a piece of stiff wire I could try to bend it into the right shape."

He looked around the room. After a second he found what he wanted in the plastic-coated wire someone had used to mend the handle of a spoon. He stripped it off and began to work.

Shaping the key itself was not so difficult, but it took him a good deal of experiment to discover that the key must be turned first to the right, then half around to the left, and then back to the right again. Once or twice he had to stop work when someone went by in the hall. His hands were trembling with strain when he got the door open at last.

Beside him, Tobit exhaled a great sigh of relief. "Wonderfull" he whispered. "Let's go!"

"Wait a minute." Benjamin went over to the cot and unscrewed one of the iron slats. He came back with the bar in his hand. "For a weapon," he explained.

They stole out into the hall. Benjamin kept shutting his eyes and looking to see whether anyone was coming. After they had gone about thirty feet he pulled Tobit

abruptly against the wall. "Somebody in the cross corridor," he whispered into the old man's ear. "I can't quite see. If they come this way . . ." He hefted the cot leg in his hand.

Light footfalls moved toward them. Benjamin was holding his breath. As the passer came abreast of them he leaned out with the bar and swung.

Something made him deflect part of the force of the blow. The bar hit the top of the girl's head and glanced down to her shoulder. She collapsed without a sound.

"Kill her!" Tobit whispered fiercely to him. "It's the girl who brought the tray. She's dangerous. Hit her again!"

Benjamin faltered. Then he leaned down and tore a strip from the hem of his robe. "We'll gag her and tie her up," he whispered back. "I don't like to kill a woman even if she is a scientist."

The girl came to while she was being tied. She fought them weakly, struggling against the gag. Her eyes were full of pain and wrath.

When she was bound to Benjamin's satisfaction, Tobit opened a closet and they pushed her in. "We've got to hurry, boy," Tobit muttered. "Keep shutting your eyes and looking. If they catch us after this . . ."

The stairs creaked alarmingly, but the two negotiated them in safety. In the lower hall Benjamin stood pondering, trying to guess which way to go. His closed-eye vision was flickering again, but he knew there were people very near.

"This way, I think," he said at last. They moved to the right. In the next hall he halted again, frowning intently. The walls and floors were vibrating to a distant

hum. "Which way now?" Tobit asked, looking up anxiously into his face.

"I—I—Tobit, I don't know, There's nothing but blackness. I've lost my vision." Benjamin's face was a mask of misery. "I've gone blind."

4

This time the scientists mounted a guard over them. An elderly woman and a much younger man, both armed with stun guns, stood before the door. There could be no question of escape this time.

Tobit paced up and down the little room restlessly, gnawing at his nails, wringing his hands. Benjamin had never seen him so agitated. His nerves seemed to be strung on wires.

"What's the matter?" he asked at last. "No matter what they do to us, Tobit, we must be brave. Even if it takes a long time to die."

"Oh, be quiet," Tobit snapped. "You don't know what you're talking about. Don't believe anything the scientists say, Benjamin. They're liars, cheats, connivers, all of them." He resumed his restless pacing of the floor.

It grew dark. Lights in the ceiling came on. Benjamin, who had never seen anything except torches after dark, stared at them. "Where do the lights come from?" he asked Tobit at last.

"Fluors," the old man jerked out. "Building has its own power supply. Can't you be quiet? I want to think. —Listen, do you hear somebody in the hall?"

The door opened and the girl with the gun appeared. "You're to go down to see Hess," she told them soberly. "If you try to escape, you'll be shot." Benjamin noticed with a curious throb of emotion that there was a bandage around her head.

They started down the hall, the girl behind them, the other guards falling in on either side. Benjamin walked firmly, his head up, but Tobit bounced and teetered and hopped along at his side in a perfect convulsion of nerves. Benjamin was glad when they came to Hess' door.

Hess was a stocky man with a bristling reddish moustache. He sat at a table in a big, white-painted room with blackboards on the walls. It might have been a schoolroom once. The night air came in through the glassless window openings. On either side of Hess was a mutated man.

The one on the right had boneless, bubbery tentacles in place of human arms, but otherwise he seemed normal enough. The one on the left . . . Benjamin licked his lips and swallowed to keep down his gorge. The creature's head was set between its shoulders, with a red-rimmed disk for mouth, and the skin that covered its distorted body was spotted and rough like a toad's, a snake's. Benjamin had once killed a snake that was marked just so. It was horrible to see human fingers covered with a snake's skin.

"Otto has ophidian pigmentation," Hess said, following the direction of Benjamin's gaze. He put down his pencil and looked up at the young man. "I wish we could let you go," he said wistfully. "We really can't afford to feed two extra mouths, and keeping you under guard all the time is going to make us short-handed in the lab. On the other hand, if we turn you loose you're sure to stir up those people outside and attack us, and we can't have that. We dislike killing them, and you have no idea what a nuisance an attack like the one this morning is." He sighed.

"By the way," he said, his eyes brightening, "would you

mind telling me how you got out of that room? We've been wondering."

Tobit twitched in a spasm of excitement. "I have through-seeing," Benjamin answered. His head was proudly erect. The scientists and their mutants should learn what real powers were. "I looked into the lock and saw how it was made. It wasn't so hard to unlock it after that."

"You did?" Hess said, cocking his head on one side. "You know, that's very interesting. You mean you can see through walls and so on?"

"Yes, I have far-seeing, too, and far-hearing part of the time." Benjamin frowned. "Something in this place spoils my seeing, though," he went on, making up his mind to continue. "It must be some of the science machines. I can't see anything but black. It's worst outside that room with the hum."

"Oh, really?" Hess said. "I suppose you mean the room with the cosmic ray apparatus. How very odd! It almost looks as if . . . H'um. If you stay with us, we must try some experiments with you, a lot of them."

Hess made a note on the paper in front of him. Benjamin felt his hands growing cold. "Experiments"—he knew what that meant.

Hess put his pencil down again. "As for you, Tobit," he said with sudden severity, "I must ask you to explain yourself. You undertook to deliver this young man to us as a hostage—heavens knows where you got the gun you shot him with—I don't—and you did so. As far as that goes, we're grateful. But today you joined him actively in attacking Miriam. In fact, she says that you several times urged what's his name, Benjamin, to kill

her and have done with her. What's your game? Which side are you on? We don't much care for traitors here."

Tobit was wringing his hands. "Benjamin, boy," he said desperately, "don't believe—"

Benjamin looked at him like a sleepwalker. The pupils of his eyes had grown small. "So you stunned me after all," he said tonelessly. 'Yes. I *thought* that shot came from behind."

"I—they're lying, Benjamin! Don't let them hurt me, boy!"

Hess got to his feet. "I told you to explain yourself," he said peremptorily. His easy, cultured voice had grown hard.

Tobit looked frantically around the circle of cold faces which regarded him. His feverish eyes were darting about like a trapped animal's. "I—I—I—" he chattered. For a moment he stood dancing in indecision, beating his old hands together. Then he sucked in his breath and ran.

"Stop him!" Hess shouted to the guards. Tobit was running toward the window. "Don't let him get out!"

The dry, malicious hiss of the stun guns responded instantly. Tobit ran two steps further and then spun round. The stun guns hissed again. He pitched abruptly forward on his face. Everyone ran toward him. Hess got there first.

"Blast it, did you all have to stun him at once?" he said angrily to the three with the guns. "The human brain isn't meant to receive . . ."

He got down on his knees beside the little man and felt for his pulse. "Yes, he's done for," he said in a moment. "He was dead before he stopped running. Three guns, even at half power, were too much." He made a

regretful, dismissing gesture, and looked up at Benjamin. "He's really done for. His brain's burned out."

"Don't you understand about Tobit yet, Benjamin?" Miriam asked. Since the PAS (he had learned that the initials stood for Pasedena Association of Scientists) was not willing to release him, Benjamin had been a prisoner for several days. He and the girl had begun to talk to each other a little, though with bad grace and warily. "Don't you know what he was trying to do?"

"Oh, it isn't that," Benjamin answered. "I know, now, that he was only using me. In a sense, I've known it all along." He looked down at his sandals and his bare toes. "He wanted me to get power—power and material comforts, for him; and when he thought I was getting out from under his thumb he took pains to see I got back there again. That's why he shot me and turned me over to you. He thought he'd make me grateful to him by claiming to have saved my life, and he could argue that all my difficulties came from not confiding in him. He was only using me. It's unpleasant knowing it, though. By the way, I suppose he told you we were going to attack?"

Miriam shook her dark head. "No, it was Ardadine and Pandiji who warned us. Tobit wouldn't have; there was too much danger you'd be killed, and he wanted you alive."

She sat down on the edge of the table and began swinging her smooth brown legs. "Did you know he wasn't really your grandfather?" she asked abruptly.

Benjamin stared at her. "Yes, he was," he replied after a pause.

"No, he wasn't," Miriam contradicted. "Hess was talking about it last night. I didn't follow the details of

the argument, but it seems he couldn't have been your grandfather and had eyes the color they were—something about genetics. Hess says he thinks, from what you've told him, that your father was the son of a Dr. Roberts who used to be on the campus here before the first bombs came."

There was a sharp rap at the door. "Hess wants to know when you're going to bring the young man down," an acidulous feminine voice said through the panel.

Miriam jumped to her feet. "Oh, dear," she said to Benjamin, "I was supposed to take you down to talk to him about the experiments." And then, through the door, "We're coming, Emily."

The word "experiments" diverted Benjamin's mind from what he had just heard about Tobit. As he walked down the stair between his guards his mouth was dry. So far, the scientists had done nothing to him except testing his closed-eye vision and his far-hearing. But for all their seeming friendliness they were scientists. They had mutants working beside them in their laboratories. It might be that now the *real* experiments were about to begin.

"Hello, Benjamin," Hess said, looking up at him. "Won't you sit down? . . . You know, I think we've found out what makes you tick."

Benjamin sat down stiffly on the edge of the chair. "You mean you admit that I really do have powers?" he asked.

"Oh, certainly. There never was any doubt about that. What we wanted was to find out just what your powers were, and how they worked.

"We're not sure about your far-hearing just yet. But

we've all been over the results we got with your closed-eye vision, and we think there's only one conclusion possible. The retina of your eyes is sensitive to cosmic rays."

"Cosmic rays?" Benjamin asked.

"Yes. They're a high-frequency type of radiation which originates outside—well, there's no use in bothering you with that until you've learned more about radiation generally. The important thing to remember is that cosmic rays penetrate matter quite freely. Of course there are differences in permeability. I imagine what you get is a good deal like the way ordinary light goes through panes of glass. It penetrates it, but it's quite possible to tell whether glass is thin or thick."

Hess fidgeted with his pencil a moment and then laid it down. He cleared his throat. "I'm going to make you a proposition, Benjamin," he said. "You haven't had much education, but you're intelligent. I believe we have only scratched the surface with that closed-eye vision of yours. A person with your qualifications could be extremely useful to us. Benjamin, how would you like to join the PAS?"

". . . Be a *scientist?*"

"Eventually, yes."

Benjamin goggled at him. His mind was whirling. He grasped at idea after idea; it was like a man, bare-handed, trying to catch fish. Even speech was slippery and eluded him. "You have mutants working with you," he said at last.

"Oh, that." Hess gave a rather sad smile. He went over to the window and looked out. "I think all your followers have gone home by now," he said. "There were only one or two left last night.

"—About the mutants. Most people have the idea that you have, Benjamin, that mutants are people like Otto and Bardway, people with tentacles or ophidian skin.

"Those are only the extreme cases. There's a very sizeable number of humans who look normal enough but have mutated either in small ways or in ways that don't show. Miriam, for example." He motioned toward the girl, who was standing with head bowed, fingering her gun. "She hasn't any vermiform appendix. Most mutations aren't even suspected by the people who have them. Your far-seeing is a case in point. You're a mutant yourself, Benjamin."

Benjamin stood up. He had grown quite white. "No," he said. "No. *No.*"

Hess looked at him quietly. "Yes," he said. "What else could it be? It's a rare mutation, but you're not unique, Benjamin. I've seen one other person with it. Unfortunately, he was an idiot."

Benjamin made a stiff gesture. For a second his eyes closed. Then he turned and began walking blankly toward the door. He planted each foot slowly and mechanically. Miriam and Emily, guns ready, sprang to bar his way.

"It's all right," Hess said to the two women. "Let him through."

Unopposed Benjamin passed out into the hall. Miriam looked after him ruefully. "Do you really mean to let him go, Hess?" she asked. "He could be so useful to us, and now we'll never see him again."

"Yes, we will." Hess went up to Miriam and patted her affectionately on the shoulder. "Don't worry about him, my dear. There's good stuff in him, but he's had a terrific shock. His world has broken into pieces, the heavens are falling on his head.

"But there's good stuff in him. He's old Dr. Roberts' grandson, remember. He's intelligent. some day soon, it might be tomorrow or the next day or the next, he'll come back to join us. Don't worry, Miriam. He'll be back.'

THEN FLY OUR GREETINGS

I. THE BEGINNING

Kyle sat in a pool of light. The rest of the dim room glittered with gold braid. He felt a little hysterical. He said, "I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I don't see the bearing of your questions. I don't believe it could possibly be used as a weapon."

"Never mind that," the cool voice said. Kyle could not see any of their faces distinctly. "That is our problem, not yours. But can we take it that the description here —" he tapped the copy of the March issue of *Scientia Nova* which lay before him on the long table"—is substantially correct?"

"Yes, sir. As far as it goes."

"I must say I'm disappointed, gentlemen," an older voice broke in. "I had understood the effect was to make them fight. They don't fight?"

Kyle was not sure who had spoken. He turned to face the direction from which he thought the voice had come. "No, sir. I don't think it would be possible to make the animals fight. You see, in order to fight they'd have to come into contact, and that's just what they don't want to do. The effect is not to cause hostility, but a strong, a really very strong, mutual repulsion. They behave like . . . like bodies with the same electrical charge."

"A moment ago you said the account in the magazine

was correct as far as it went," said the cool voice. "Do you mean that you have made attitional experiments since? Have you tried your invention on the higher animals?"

"It's not an invention—I beg your pardon, sir. But I myself have as yet no clear idea how the effects are produced. Yes, I have made a number of experiments with mammals, including three rhesus monkeys."

A ripple of excitement ran along the shadowy table. "And what was the result?" the cool voice asked.

"I got no result at all with the lower frequencies, the frequencies to which the lizards had responded. Higher frequencies had the usual effect. I don't want to generalize without more data, but it looks as if there might be a relationship between the frequencies to which an animal would respond and the degree of its cortical development."

Somebody cleared his throat. The elderly voice said, "You mean you got the monkeys to fight?"

"No, sir, they didn't fight. What they did was break open the cage. I still don't know how they managed it —it was reinforced steel mesh. One of the monkeys stayed in the cage. I found another at the end of the laboratory, as far from the cage as she could get. The third monkey, the one we called Rita, got out of the lab somehow. She must have hurt herself doing it—there was considerable bleeding. I don't know where she went. I haven't been able to locate her yet."

A low-pitched hum of talk broke out. Kyle, shutting his eyes against the flood of light that fell around his chair—the only bright light in the big room—thought he could make out a word now and then. "The public . . . opinion . . . no opposition . . . humane." He thought he heard the last word over and over again.

A voice Kyle had not heard before, a voice with great authority, said, "Can Mr. Kyle tell us whether this mutual repulsion is permanent?"

Kyle opened his eyes, blinking. "Until two days ago, sir," he said, "I should not have been able to answer the question. But on Thursday I observed that the phase of repulsion had been succeeded in the guinea pigs by an anti-phase in which the social instincts were considerably exaggerated. When one of them was taken away from the group it showed marked distress, and attempted to bite."

"Most interesting," said the authoritative voice. "That removes the last objections, to my mind."

"Of course," said Kyle, forgetting his instructions, which had been to speak only when he was addressed, "I can't say how long this anti-phase may last, or what might succeed to it."

Several people cleared their throats. The cool voice said, "You may go now, Mr. Kyle."

Kyle got to his feet. He was stiff from nervous tension and fatigue. As he approached the door the agents who had brought him to the Nonagon fell in on either side of him.

When they were outside the door the taller agent said, "You're to go with us, Kyle. We'll take you to your new lab."

II. The First Results

She loved them, Vinnie thought, she just loved all of them. How right Father Glorious had been! Love was the golden key that unlocked the heart of each and every one of God's creatures. What had the white lady on the second floor in millinery said this morning? Something about how Vinnie was the little girl with the big friendly smile. That was a nice thing to think about. If you loved people, they'd never hurt you. It just went to show.

"Watch your step, please watch your step," Vinnie said, opening the elevator door with her thin brown hand. She tried to put the love abounding Father Glorious was always talking about into her voice. Her back did hurt, but you oughtn't to let material things bother you—Father said so. Besides, it was closing time for the store. She'd only have to make one or two more trips today. "Watch your step," Vinnie sang, "please watch your step!"

She closed the door and started back to the third floor for more passengers. Nobody was going up, but plenty were coming down. They crowded into the elevator, pushing, talking, laughing, complaining. One of the little girls began to cry. Vinnie tried to radiate love abounding out of her.

She opened the cage on second to take on two more passengers. "Please step back in the car," Vinnie said.

As the cage moved slowly downward from second to mezzanine, Vinnie felt a sudden stab of pain in the back of her head. For a moment it sickened her. Her hands shook on the car's controls. She looked around her, hoping nobody had noticed it. She'd get fired if she took sick.

How white everybody was, a bleached, fish-belly white! They looked like they were scared. And quiet—there wasn't a whisper in the car. Even the children were still. They all seemed to have pushed back against the walls of the car, as far from each other as they could get. Was something going to happen, something terrible—an earthquake, a hurricane?

The elevator reached the mezzanine. Vinnie opened the door. "Watch your step, please," she said, her voice coming out higher than she had intended it. "Please wa—" her voice broke off.

She felt a sensation so strong that it was translated into an emotion instantly. It was more intense than anything she had experienced yet in her eighteen years. For a moment she was a jelly of confusion and bewilderment. Who was . . . what . . . what . . . Her mind swayed like a balancing toy. Then it righted itself.

"Get out," she said to her passengers, "get out, all of you. You just get right on out." She made wide gestures with her hands.

They had begun to move, seeing the open door, before she spoke to them. They poured over the elevator sill, rubbing against the edge of the door in their reciprocal aversion, and scattered through the mezzanine. As their distance from each other increased, they began to run.

Vinnie watched them incredulously. What was the

matter with them, with her? Why had she spoken to them like that? She couldn't help but be fired, when she'd talked to white folks like that.

She sank back against the side of the elevator car, weeping. It was hard to get a job these days. She must be crazy. What had happened? Her head ached so.

She pressed her hands against her face and cried harder. Yes, crazy. It was terrible, terrible. What had come over her? But underneath her confusion and distress there was an indestructible kernel of another emo-- tion. It was wonderful, it was like the peace of God Fatheer Glorious was always talking about, not to hate anybody near her. It was wonderful to be *alone* in the elevator car.

The baby had begun to cry. Tanya listened for a moment and then decided that it must be time to feed him. Where had she left the mask the nurse had given her?

She found it in a cupboard add looked at it doubtfully. It was dirty. Perhaps she ought to wash it. But the baby had a cold anyhow. What was the use of wearing it?

She approached the crib, unbuttoning her blouse. She picked the baby up. His crying hushed.

"Little apple," she said to him, smiling. "Mama's little man."

Tanya had no warning, as Vinnie had had. She felt no premonitory stab of pain in the head, nothing. The confusion burst upon her unheralded.

For an instant she stood rooted beside the cradle. The child had begun to scream at the top of his lungs, arching his small body away from her desperately.

"Hush," she tried to say, "hush, little blossom." but her lips refused to shape the words.

She wanted to scream, she wanted to jump through the window, she wanted to take a knife and kill herself. Still she remained beside the cradle, holding the shrieking child. Instinct, education, physiology, were warring with the new force in her. Her face was beaded with sweat.

Abruptly she dropped the child. He fell back on the pillows of the crib with a thump that made him stop crying for a second. Tanya looked down at him, moaning and wringing her hands. Then she began to back away from him. When she reached the door of the flat, she turned and ran through it.

He kissed the tip of each finger, he put a cluster of kisses in the soft flesh of the palm. He encircled the ring finger, wearing the new gold wedding ring, with a chain of tiny kisses. He said, "Tu m'aimes?"

Her eyes were shining. She laid her right hand softly against his cheek. "François . . . tu le sais. . . ."

Their lips met. Presently he said, "Take off your jacket, cherie. I find it an embarrassment."

She laughed. She began to unbutton the high-collared, closely-fitting jacket of dove-colored cloth, smiling at him teasingly. She had not reached the fourth button before he took her once more in his arms.

Abruptly they drew away from each other. Her jaw dropped. She put out her hand toward him and then let it fall. He said, "I . . . what . . . Mariel"

She licked her lips. He had turned very pale. With a convulsive effort he touched her shoulder with one fin-

gertip. She jerked away from the contact as if his hand had been red hot.

They stood staring at each other. Her hands pressed against her temples desperately. He said, in a croak, "I don't understand. You are still so beautiful."

She made no answer. For a moment longer they faced each other. Then she turned and ran into the bathroom. He heard the door click as she locked it behind her. Then he too ran.

The new recruits were a very promising lot, Sergeant Ma thought. They had the short, stocky, well-set-up build he liked to see, and they were willing. Eager for education, too—they'd beamed all over their faces when he told them about the plan for the new learning. They'd soon master the thousand signs.

"Number off!" he barked at them as they formed up in a wavering line. They counted to twenty, but the next man didn't know what came after it. Ma had expected the difficulty; he supplied the ensuing numbers himself. They'd soon learn; yesterday they had only got to seventeen.

"Right dress!" he said. Haltingly they obeyed. Yes, they were a sharp lot.

The drill continued. "At ease," Ma said finally. Gratefully they relaxed. Ma began to lecture them.

"The first duty of a soldier," he said powerfully, "is obedience. The sage tells us that 'the excellence of things is their undoing,' but in a people's army excellence. . . ."

He finished his talk by saying, "That is why drill is so important. From it we learn obedience. . . . Shoulder arms! Form fours!"

With a good deal of jerky trotting, the recruits moved into place. Their faces were intent and serious. His talk had done them good. They were trying harder than yesterday. "Forward march!" Ma shouted at them.

Last week the drill ground had been a sea of mud. It would be a sea of mud again with the next rain. It was dry now. Each time the recruits' feet came down on the dry earth dust arose. Ma began to sneeze.

He pressed his finger to his upper lip to stop the sneezing. Narrowing his eyes, he peered through the dust fog at the men. The bones of his face ached.

"Column right!" Ma yelled at the soldiers. The column hesitated, made the turn. Then, to Ma's stupefaction, the men began to run.

They spread out from each other in a fan-shape. They dropped their guns in the dust as they ran. One man stumbled and fell, and then another one. Those behind swerved away from them automatically, without touching them. Even in the midst of Ma's general astonishment, this blind avoidance appeared to him a remarkable thing.

The last of the fugitives was disappearing. "Dismissed!" Ma shouted after him, in a desperate attempt to regularize an unregularizable situation. There was no sign that he had been heard.

The dust was beginning to settle. Ma looked up wildly at the sky, as if he expected to find some clue in it to what had happened. The blue, serene depths were empty. There was not even a plane.

Had he dreamed it? No, there were discarded rifles all over the drill ground. It had happened. Recruits in the people's army had run like rabbits, run from nothing.

Ma shuddered. What would happen next? Anything—*anything* could happen now.

The military mind, Kyle thought as he tried to stop his nervous shivering, the military mind tended to be an incompatible mixture of hidebound conservatism and Buck Rogers foolishness. It was like hitching a jet plane to an ox cart. And you never knew which side would predominate.

The basic aim behind the research task they had set him had been laudable. To produce a truly humane weapon—yes, indeed. It was for this that he had submitted to the questioning, at the end of each day's work, which had made him feel like an aphid being milked by ants. He'd tried hard, and besides, the problem had been interesting. So it was partly his fault.

He looked around the laboratory. The animals in the cages slept, ate, or bickered unconcernedly. The rats in the corner were mating. It wasn't affecting them, that was clear.

If only the people over Kyle had waited, waited until he'd had time to test and check. But they'd been in a hurry, and they hadn't had imagination enough—no one could have—to foresee what would happen. They'd come up with *this*.

Once more Kyle tried to turn on the radio. It was no use. His phsiological aversion to getting near an electrical device was still too strong to be controlled. He couldn't make himself turn the switch. It probably wouldn't have been any use, anyhow. If other people were affected by electrical devices as he was, nothing could be coming over the radio.

He couldn't stop shaking. A drink might help him. He got a flask of absolute alcohol from a cupboard, poured two tablespoons into a glass, and filled the glass with water to the brim. When he took the glass from his lips, it was empty. His body had wanted that drink.

The physiological craving for alcohol, the aversion to electricity, might be significant. There was something of more immediate consequence, though—the weak water pressure he'd noticed when he was filling the glass. He got all the empty carboys he could find, and filled them. By the time the last was corked, no more water was coming from the tap.

Kyle felt better. He had almost stopped shaking. He looked at his watch, frowned, and listened to it. No; it was still going. It was really only three hours since Merilee, one of his assistants, had pressed her hands to her head and then run out of the lab. The other two assistants had been gone on errands. They'd not come back.

"Hadn't come back" was too melodramatic. No doubt they were still reasonably safe and sound, provided the guard in the corridor with the BAR hadn't shot them. But it had been a long time since Kyle had heard a shot.

Meantime, the question was, could he sit this one out? He had a good deal of water, and though the only conventional food in the laboratory was half of the box of Ritz crackers Merilee had been chewing on at noon, there were the cages of lab animals. One could, Kyle supposed, eat white rats in a pinch. If he sat tight, he might be able to get along until the anti-phase set in. The rhesus monkeys had exhibited a strongly marked anti-phase; human beings could be expected to do so too.

But while he was engaged in sitting tight, what would be happening to everyone?

The extent of the catastrophe was extraordinarily hard to realize. Always before, in the worst of human plights, little nodes of cooperation and unity had continued to exist. Kyle found that while he could visualize the disjunction which was taking place immediately around him well enough, as soon as he tried to apply the principle on a wide scale his mind slipped back into its habitual expectation of organization and mutual action.

And yet it was in the highest degree unlikely, it was surely impossible, that what was happening in Washington was an isolated case. The military had been aiming at a particular target area; the projector had been overpowered (Kyle had tried to point out this danger the last time he had been up before the Staff); the back lash from the projector had enveloped Washington. Probably most of the rest of the globe had suffered first.

It *had* sounded like a humane weapon. Military opposition could not exist, when human beings were unable to tolerate one another's proximity. But—Kyle mixed himself another drink of stockroom alcohol and downed it avidly—the effects of the new weapon would probably turn out to be more dreadful than those of the plagues of the Middle Ages had been. The plague fear had sent human beings fleeing wildly from one another, but even in their panic they had acted by twos and threes. Affection, fidelity, self-interest, had bound them to each other. Now every man fled from every other man.

Instinctive self-preservation motivated their repulsion. Kyle had made the experiment of forcibly approaching lab animals to each other after he had used his small

projector on them. They had, in every case, died. And when he had dissected them he had found that gross changes had taken place in the brain itself, lesions that had been caused by this proximity.

No, he couldn't sit this one out. It was too much his fault. Though the thought of approaching one of his fellow men filled him with sickening apprehension, Kyle found his social instinct was as strong as ever. Curious . . . It was unlikely he could help very much. But he was under an obligation to try what he could do.

Cautiously he opened the lab door. There was an immediate rattle of bullets against it. Kyle slammed the door sweating. The BAR man was still out in the hall.

Kyle felt no animus against him. If he himself had had a gun, he'd certainly have shot at anything who tried to come near him. But the presence of the BAR man meant that Kyle would have to get out through the window, and he'd always had a poor head for heights. Fortunately, he was only on the fourth floor.

He started toward the opening, and hesitated. On impulse he went to one of the cabinets and got a case of dissecting scalpels and lancets from it. It was getting too dark for him to read the labels on bottles, but he sniffed at several until he found what he wanted, a flask with the pleasant odor of chloroform. He put the scalpels and the bottle in opposite pockets. Carefully he let himself down over the window sill.

The Nonagon building was generally admitted to be a first-class eyesore. But now Kyle blessed the anonymous architect who had covered its surface with knops, festoons, ribbons, gargoyles, and acanthus leaves cast in concrete. There were plenty of hand and foot holds, and if he kept his mind strictly on descending, his acropho-

bia could be controlled. Once or twice he felt the terrible constriction and sense of heat in his skull that told him other human beings were near.

When he was about twenty feet from the ground the concrete festooning gave out. Feel about below him as he would, his feet met nothing but a perpendicular granite surface. He'd have to drop.

He made himself relax for the fall. But when he picked himself up he found that his left ankle had been badly wrenched. When he tried to stand on it the pain was so intense it made him faint. He got out a scalpel and cut his vest into strips with it. Then he bandaged his ankle with the cloth. When he was done he could stand on the foot without too much pain.

The moon was coming up. Kyle wasn't supposed to know where the projector building was, but secrets do leak out. It was a long way to walk, but he couldn't bring himself to try to start a car. Shaking and sweating, he began to hobble along.

He had walked for perhaps a quarter of a mile, detouring when he sensed someone near him, when he heard the nasty pock-pock of bullets up ahead.

It was a man with a tommy gun. There were two bodies on the pavement in front of him. His gun was in shadow, but he seemed to be shooting in through an open window. No doubt there was somebody inside, somebody whose mere existence was an intolerable affliction for the man with the gun.

Kyle bit his lip. He could detour, but the man with the gun would probably start shooting at him anyway. Also, a gun would be very useful to Kyle. Was it possible that the gunner was so occupied for the nonce with extermination that Kyle could get reasonably close

without being noticed? If he moved quickly? He would try.

The gunner spun about, still spurting bullets, just as Kyle threw the bottle with the chloroform.

The bottle broke on the pavement. Kyle pressed back against the side wall as tightly as he could. The gunner could not see him, of course, but he would have a very accurate notion of where he was. Bullets began to pock and jar against the stone cornice.

The burst flagged, renewed itself, flagged again. Kyle stuck his head around the corner. The gunner was sinking drunkenly on one knee. He fired a last burst and collapsed. Kyle could smell the fumes of the chloroform from where he stood.

The pain in Kyle's skull was terrible. Apparently even an unconscious man was still a potential source of brain damage. While Kyle was stripping the gunner of gun and ammunition, he wondered whether he would ever be able to think normally again. When he had carried his booty to a safe distance he had to rest for what seemed a long time. He collected himself at last and started hobbling toward the projector building once more.

The projector was housed in a small two-story building that had once been a local sub-station power house in a residential district. In various devious ways the department of defense had acquired title to the sub station and the buildings which stood near it. These buildings had been boarding houses before they changed ownership, and they continued to pass as boarding houses after the department of defense acquired them. But a rather strictly selected group of "boarders" lived in them.

If Kyle had got to the projector building three hours, even two hours, earlier, he would have found himself in the midst of a bitter, small-scale version of modern warfare. The men on whom the task of guarding the projector had devolved had managed, since they were specially selected personnel, to endure each other's proximity for almost forty seconds before they began shooting. In their frenzy of extermination they had also used their grenades and flame throwers. But by now everything was quiet and nothing moved in the street. Kyle found that the bodies bothered him very little, even in a sentimental way.

He stood before the darkened building, while a wind whipped lightly at his trouser legs, and tried to think. He had been told that the projector had its own power source and was in no way dependent on city installation. The projector was certainly not functioning now, or he would never have been able to get so near to it. That was natural enough—he had found with his small projector that a twenty second exposure had quite as much effect as one of several minutes.

No doubt the big installation had been switched off immediately when the minimum period was over.

What was it he had wanted to do? Oh, yes. This week—last week—sometime recently, at any rate—there seemed to be a permanent confusion inside his skull—he had found that a certain sequence of frequencies from the projector tended to undo the "polarization" effect on the nerve cells. At least, he had observed such a reversion to normality in one of the rhesus monkeys, and microscopic examination of the animal's brain had confirmed the observation. It wasn't much to go on, cer-

tainly. Kyle would have liked to make many more tests. But there wasn't time to make careful tests now. He'd have to try to see what he could do.

He went up to the door. To his surprise, it opened easily. He stood blinking for a moment, trying to accustom himself to the sudden darkness after the moonlight of the street outside. Presently he saw that the interior was not quite dark—there was a very dim blue glow up ahead. Almost simultaneously with his preception of the light, he realized that there was a man in the building.

A bullet spat past his cheek. Kyle felt a certain surprise at the inaccuracy of the shooting. Then he saw the man's faint silhouette against the light, and understood. The man had been wounded in the right shoulder. He was shooting with his left hand.

Kyle was thinking as clearly as he could. He himself didn't want to shoot, if it could be avoided. He might miss and damage the projector. He yelled, "Come out! I won't hurt you! I want to . . . try to . . . fix things up! I'm going to . . . stop . . . this mess!"

There was a second's silence, and then a new rattle of bullets from his opponent's gun. Above the noise Kyle heard the man screaming something that sounded like, "You spy! You God-damned spy!"

It couldn't be avoided, Kyle perceived. Now that he had to act, he felt a vast, remote calm, like that which comes at certain stages of drunkenness. With a sensation of almost godlike detachment, he took careful aim. He would hit the man in the heart.

He fired six shots. His opponent was screaming in a scratchy, high-pitched voice. The bullets went into his body with what seemed a petulant thud. There was a sudden bursting silence as the man went backward

with the impact. Kyle lowered his gun and waited frozenly.

The man by the projector clawed himself into a kneeling position. He fired one last shot, not at Kyle. The slug went into the projector with a jangling crash of glass.

There was a noiseless flash of light, not very intense. Then even the dim blue glow went out.

Kyle groped his way through the choking darkness to the projector. He lit matches and examined it. The damage was serious. Two of the big tubes were glinting bits of glass on the pavement, and the wiring had shorted in three places at least.

Was it hopeless? Not under ordinary conditions. The big tubes were special jobs, but more could have been made in a week or two. The technicians who had installed the wiring could have repaired it. But the man whom Kyle had just shot was perhaps the last of the technicians, and the cooperative labor which had shaped the tubes was now unthinkable.

Unthinkable. Hopeless. Irreparable. The words seemed to flit about in the darkness of the building endlessly, like pairs of leathery wings. Kyle lit match after match hoping to find something he could do for the projector, some repair, however useless, that he could make. There was nothing, he could not find anything.

Oh, hopeless. The last match burned to his fingers. Hopeless. Irreparable. Unthinkable. Standing there in the darkness, weary, spent and dazed, Kyle began to weep.

III. The Antiphase.

The water in the carboy was foul, had been foul for days. It would hardly go through the filter paper any longer. There was only about an inch of it left.

He wasn't hungry. That was odd. He hadn't been hungry since the first repulsion phase. Perhaps the alcohol he had drunk—it was all gone now—had helped. Whatever the reason, Kyle had no desire for food, though he'd lost a good deal of weight. But he wanted a bath, he wanted to be immersed to the chin in water, generous, ungrudging water, and let it soak in through his pores. He wanted gallons and gallons of water to drink.

He'd go down to the river tonight with the carboys, he decided. As the phases alternated, human beings found that the distance at which they could tolerate each other continually increased. But he still had his gun and two clips of bullets for it. He would try.

He poured the water that had seeped through the filter paper into a glass and sipped at it. It took all his self-control to keep from gulping it. He tipped the glass vertically to get the last precious drop. When he put the glass down reluctantly, he felt the tightness and peculiar empty feeling in his brain that told him a new anti-phase was setting in.

Oh, God, he hoped not. How many anti-phases would this be now, the third or fourth? He tried to count, though the events of the last month, months, whatever it was,

were a meaningless jumble. It was the fourth, no, no this must be anti-phase three.

He remembered the first anti-phase pretty well. He'd been sitting in the lab sipping what was nearly the last of the alcohol when he'd become aware of a peace, almost a harmony, in his brain. It made him feel good. He thought for a moment that the treatment he'd managed to give himself with the small projector, battery powered, had been a success.

The feeling had got stronger, turned into a hunger, a necessity. He hadn't tried to fight it, when he realized it was the anti-phase. He had been glad, because he had hoped the new phase might mean the beginning of a return to normality.

As if driven by some instinct, they had met in the clear area where the Nonagon had parked its cars. Most of the cars were still there now, dust-filmed, rain-spotted, here and theere a little touched with rust. There had been perhaps five hundred of the survivors. How they had clung together in their newfound amity, their aching need!

Kyle remembered most vividly from that antiphase the woman with the silver fox stole and how she had clung to the fat Negro woman next to her. "I love you!" she had cried, her face shining, "Oh, I love you! You're wonderful." And the Negro, beaming with reciprocal affection, had answered, "Me too! Yessum, me too!"

That phase had ended.

After it there had come the new repulsion—more severe—the new anti-phase, the new repulsion . . . and now the new anti-phase. How he hated it!

Kyle could not resist it. He ran past the swollen bodies

in the hall, down the stair, jumping over the things on the landings. He plunged down the last flight two, three steps at a time. Hurry, hurry, hurry, his brain said, hurry, you love them so.

They were clustered together like bats in a cavern, like bees in the wintertime. If it were possible to use this phase somehow, he thought as he plastered himself wildly against the quivering mass, use it to rebuild all that has been destroyed, to put a stop—at least—to what is still going on. . . . Use it! But how?

They ached to get closer to each other, to be interpenetrated with each other's being. They were straining and grunting in their communal embrace. Those at the center of the mass, Kyle thought, must be half crushed and stifled. But there were fewer than there had been in the last anti-phase. In the shaking cluster last time there must have been at least two hundred people. Now there might be eighty left.

The face of the man on Kyle's left was familiar. He might have known him once. Kyle said—not really wanting to speak, feeling as if the words had been extracted with forceps from his brain—"Isn't it wonderful being all together again? Now we're more than we were separately. We're the group."

The man opened his eyes and looked at Kyle. He had a sad, lined, middle-aged face. He said, "You know, this isn't like the other phases. Something new is happening. Don't you feel it? We're really going to become just one person this time, all of us, just one. . . . Maybe if we try hard, that one new person can fix things. He'd be wiser than any of us separately, wouldn't he? I can't stand much more of this."

The words filled Kyle with desperate energy. He said, "Yes, yes, let's try. I'm sure you're right. We'll try. Tell the person next to you!"

The news went buzzing around the cluster, struck inward. They all heard it, they all agreed. The moments lingered, the strain increased. The man next to Kyle said at last, "Do you feel it? At the back of your skull—a new type of consciousness?"

Kyle licked his lips. He wanted to reply. It had seemed to him, as the straining moments passed, that new regions, new dimensions, were opening strangely in his brain. Or was it space itself that divided in a panorama of planes which echoed one another to infinity? It was as if explorers touched the dark continents within his skull and established cities there. And from the blank headlands now touched with light, from the tributary cities, something was flowing out toward the others and uniting with them.

Kyle had a sudden vision of a creature vaster than one of the Anakim. It stood on earth, laughing, and stretched its fingers out toward Saturn. The thin winds of heaven rustled through the flames of its hair. It was wiser, stronger, more joyous, than humanity.

Was this new entity what the sad man had meant? Oh, it must be so. Surely this creation, so much greater than the sum of its creators, would yet obey them, could be impressed to do their will. The minds of those in the group were flowing together to make something unheard of, their wills had coalesced. And what they were making would be able to solve, with almost godlike ease, what they had in their miserable isolation found insoluble.

The sad man's question no longer needed answering. Kyle felt his identity leaving him, and for a moment he was terrified. Who was he, what would be become? He struggled. Then he was caught up into a blazing unity. His last conscious awareness was of a prospect of gigantic delight.

IV. The End

Who was Kyle? As member after member of the group fell away, dying of exhaustion, hunger, exposure, thirst, the question could be asked. Who was Kyle?

He looked about him numbly. The air was thin and cold. His body seemed strange to him.

At the back of his dim, half burned-out brain there was a recollection of titanic splendors, of inhuman experience. He seemed to remember exertions beyond the scope of imagination, an urge which had shaken someone vaster than himself, a great, an incredible enterprise. Who was Kyle?

He was standing in the midst of a huge plain, at the foot of a towering monolith. Without comprehension his eyes followed the shaft up, up, up, to where it seemed to split the sky. Who could have reared such a shaft? Far off on the flat horizon another towered into the heavens, and at the very limit of visibility he saw another one.

It was cold, so cold. Kyle shivered uncontrollably. There was no warmth in the dim yellow sun.

Once more his eyes went up the shaft of the monolith.

He looked at it blankly, slack-lipped. And slowly, little by little, that part of his brain which had not been destroyed began to understand. The monoliths. . . .

There had been an anti-phase. But this time humanity had been welded together indissolubly. They could not flee from each other. They had not even wanted to. The repulsion had taken a new direction, been transferred. Group after group, over the face of the globe, their minds had flowed into each other to make up a supermind. And that mind, compelled by the wills that composed it, had built.

The human beings who composed it had been the cells of its tangile body. It had used them mercilessly. Sleepless, tireless, mindless, they had labored; they were expendable, they had been expended. It was they who had reared the monoliths.

But to what purpose? Kyle found that he was very tired. He was so tired that the cold no longer seemed bitter to him. Sighing with fatigue, he stretched out on the ground beside the momolith. How dim the sun was! He could look up at it open-eyed.

That, he supposed, was why they had built the monoliths. So they could leave the sun. The sun was dim because they were far from it. That must have been the effect of the last anti-phase, the last repulsion—an impulse to build the energy towers that would drive the earth away from the other planets and its home star, the sun. Now—he was so tired that it didn't matter—now earth was flying outward from its place in the solar system. On and on, in that last gigantic repulsion, into the empty interstellar dark.

It would get colder on earth, everything was finished.

The seas would freeze and then, at last, the air. It was all over. It wasn't important. He sighed and shivered. What mattered, the vital thing, was the answer to the enigma that still vexed him: Who . . . who was Kyle?

AN OLD-FASHIONED BIRD CHRISTMAS

The Reverend Clem Adelburg had come out to cut some mistletoe. He tucked the hatchet tightly in the band of his trousers and shinned up the knobby trunk of the apple tree. When he got high enough, he saw that two ravens were seated on the apple tree branches, eating the mistletoe berries. There were always ravens around the cabin nowadays; he chased them away indignantly, with many loud whooshes. Then he felt a twinge of remorse.

"O Lord," he prayed among the branches, his face upturned toward the dramatic cloudscape of an Arizona winter, "O Lord, bless this little experiment of thy servant. O Lord, grant that I wasn't wrong to chase away those darned ravens. Yes, Lord."

He sighted up at the berries. He chopped with the hatchet. Three branches of mistletoe fell down on the sheets of newspaper he had previously placed at the foot of the tree. He climbed down.

It was beginning to get dark. Mazda would have supper ready. There was a premonitory rumble and then the sound of *Silent Night,* played on an electric xylophone, filled the sky.

The Reverend Adelbrug frowned. The noise must be coming from Parker; the municipal Christmas tree there would be thirty-five feet tall this year, and already he could see the red glow of Parker's municipal Christmas

street decoration project in the southern sky. Well, If the Lord continued to bless him, and if his next few sermons had the effect he hoped they'd have, he might be able to change the character of Parker's Christmas celebration. The Forthright Temple, in Los Angeles, was a long way from Parker, but this FM broadcasts were receivable here, too.

He went in the kitchen. Mazda was cooking something on the oil stove, an oil lamp burning dimly on the table beside her. The kitchen smelled good.

"Hello, Clem," she said, turning to face him. She smiled at him. "Did you get the berries for the tea?"

"Yes, dear." He handed her the three branches of mistletoe. "Make it good and strong this time, dear. I just want to see if there's anything in my little idea."

"About mistletoe being the common element in all religions? Sure."

He watched her as she went to fill the teakettle at the sink. She was a tall woman, with masses of puffy ginger hair and a very fair skin. Her figure was excellent, though rangy, and he always enjoyed watching her.

Most of the time Mazda's being in the cabin seemed so ordinary, so fitting (she was remarkably domestic, when you got to know her), that he simply didn't think about it. But there were moments, like the present, when her physical immediacy seemed to catch him in the solar plexus. Then he could only stand and look at her and draw deep, surprised breaths.

It wasn't so much his living with her, in the technical sense, that troubled him. He hadn't even tried to feel guilty about that. It seemed at once so extraordinary, and so perfectly natural, that it wasn't something his

conscience could get a grip on. No, it was Mazda's being in the cabin at all that was the surprising thing.

Where had she come from, anyhow? He'd gone outside one morning early in September, meaning to walk up and down in the sand while he put the finishing touches on his sermon for next week, and there she had been, sitting quietly under a Joshua tree.

She couldn't have been there for more than ten minutes: her skin, as he had come to know later, was extraordinarily sensitive to sunlight, and she was wearing the skimpiest Bikini imaginable. She'd have been sunburned all over if she'd been there for any length of time. And how had she got there? There'd been no sign of a car in any direction, and he hadn't even heard the noise of a plane or a copter in the sky. Had she walked over from Parker? In a Bikini? Five miles?

He knew so little about her—no more now, really, than he had known on that first day when she had said, "Hi," and gone in the house. It wasn't that she was close-mouthed or sullen—she just didn't talk about herself. Once only, when he had been elaborating his idea that the use of mistletoe might be the common element behind all religion, had she come out with anything that might be a personal remark. He'd spoken of the use of mistletoe in classical paganism, in druidism, in Christian festival, in the old Norse religion, in Zoroastrianism—

Her lower lip had begun to protrude defiantly. "There's no mistletoe in Zoroastrianism," she had cut in sharply. "I know."

Well? It wasn't much for the fruit of more than three months.

He couldn't help wondering about Mazda sometimes, though he didn't want to fail in Christian charity. But he

knew he had his enemies. Could she possibly be a Retail Merchants Association spy?

The teakettle was beginning to hum. Mazda gave the pot of string beans on the stove a stir with a wooden spoon. "How did you come out with your sermon, Clem?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, splendidly. The ending, I really think, will have an effect. There are some striking passages. The ravens were quite impressed." He smiled at his little joke.

"Ravens?" She turned to face him. "Were there ravens outside when you were rehearsing your speech?"

"Yes, indeed. We have ravens all the time here now. There were even ravens in the apple tree when I was cutting the mistletoe."

Her eyes widened. "Oh. . . . " she said thoughtfully.

"I fear I chased them away a little too vehemently," he said, becoming serious. "Ravens, after all, are the Lord's creatures too."

"Not *those* ravens," Mazda said.

There was a very brief pause. Mazda fingered the bracelet on her left wrist. Then she said, "Listen, Clem, I know you've talked about it, but I guess I'm just dumb. Why are you so down on modern Christmases, anyway?"

"My dear, if you'd ever attend the Temple services. . . ." the Reverend Adelburg said in gentle reproof. "But I'll try to make my point of view, which I humbly trust is also the Lord's point of view, clear to you." He began to talk.

He was an excellent talker. Phrases like "star in the darkness", "the silent night of Bethlehem," "pagan glitter," "corruption," "perversion," "truer values," "an old-

time America," "Myrrh, frankincense," and "1776," seemed to shimmer in the air between them. Mazda listened, nodding from time to time or prodding the potatoes in the saucepan with a two-tined kitchen fork.

At last he appeared to have finished. Mazda nodded for the last time. "Um-hum," she said. "But you know what I think, Clem? I think you just don't like lights. When it's dark, you want it to *be* dark. It's reasonable enough—you're a different guy once the sun goes down."

"I don't like the false lights of modernity," the Reverend said with a touch of stiffness. "As I intend to make abundantly clear in my sermon tomorrow."

"Um-hum. You're a wonderful talker. . . . I never thought I'd get fond of somebody who didn't like light."

"I like some kinds of light," said the Reverend Adelburg. "I like fires."

Mazda drew a deep breath. "You'd better wash up before supper, Clem," she said. "You've got rosin on you from the apple tree."

"All right, dear." He kissed her on the cheek and then—she had seductive shoulders, despite her ranginess—on the upper arm.

"Mmmmmmmm," Mazda said.

When he had gone into the pantry to wash, she looked after him slantingly. Her caramel-colored eyebrows drew together in a frown. She had already scalded out the teapot. Now she reached into the drawer of the kitchen table and drew out a handful of what looked like small mushrooms. They were, as a matter of fact, mescal buttons, and she had gathered them last week from the top of a plant of *Lophophora Williamsii* herself.

She cut them up neatly with a paring knife and dropped them into the teapot. She put the mistletoe berries in

on top of the mescal buttons. Then she filled the teapot with boiling water. When the Reverend got back from his washing, the teapot was steaming domestically on the table beside the string beans.

He said grace and poured himself a cup of the tea.

"Goodness, but it's bitter," he observed, sipping. "Not at all like it was the first time. What a difference putting in more mistletoe has made!"

Mazda looked down. She passed him the sugar bowl. He sweetened the tea lavishly. "You haven't set a cup for yourself, dear," he said, suddenly solicitous.

". . . There isn't much tea. You said to make it strong."

"Yes, honey, but if there's any good in the tea, I want you to share it. Get another cup."

He looked across the table at her, brightly and affectionately. There was a faint flush in Mazda's cheeks as she obeyed.

Supper was over and Mazda was washing the dishes when the Reverend Clem said suddenly, "How fast you're moving, Mazda! I never saw anything like the way you're getting through those dishes. I can hardly see your hands, they're moving so fast."

"Fast?" Mazda echoed. She sounded bewildered. She held up a spoon and polished its bowl languidly in the light of the oil lamp. "Why, I'm not moving fast. I've been standing here by the sink for hours and hours, washing one dish. I don't know what's the matter with me. I wish I *could* move fast."

There was a silence. Mazda had finished the dishes. She took off her apron and sat down on the floor, her feet out straight in front of her. Almost immediately the Reverend Adelburg slid off the chair where he had

been sitting, and flopped down on the floor parallel to her. Both their legs were stretched out.

"What lovely hands you have, Mazda," he said. He picked up one of those members from her lap, where it was languidly lying, and turned it about admiringly. "Your fingers remind me of the verse in the Canticles—'Fair are my love's palms as an eel that feedeth among lilies. And the coals thereof hath a most vehement flame.' They're even colored like eels, purple and gold and silver. Your nails are little dark rainbows.

"The Lord bless you, Mazda. I love you very much."

He put his arm around her. She let her head decline on his shoulder, and they both leaned back against the wall. "Are you happy, dear?" he asked her anxiously. "As happy as I am? Do you have a dim sweet sense of blessings hovering over you?"

"Um-hum," Mazda answered. It was obviously difficult for her to talk. "Never felt better." A grin zig-zagged across her face. "Mus' be the mistletoe."

The effects of peyote—mescal button—intoxication are predictable. They run a definite course. None the less, the response to a drug is always somewhat idiosyncratic. Thus it was that the Reverend Clem Adelburg, who had drunk enough peyote infusion to keep a cart horse seeing beatific visions for twenty-four hours, reached, about six o'clock in the morning, the state of intense wakefulness that succeeds to the drug trance. By the time the copter came from Los Angeles to take him to the Temple, a little after eight, he had bathed, shaved, and dressed, and was reading over his sermon notes.

He went into the bedroom where Mazda was lying to bid her good-bye. Sometime during the night they had

managed to get to bed. He bent over and kissed her tenderly on her loosened mouth. "Good-bye, dear. Our little experiment certainly had results, didn't it? But I feel no ill after-effect, and I trust that you will not, either. I'll be back about eleven tonight."

Once more he kissed her. Mazda made a desperate effort to rouse herself from the rose and opal-hued heaven she was currently floating in. She licked her lips. "Clem . . ." she said.

"Yes, dear?"

"*Be careful.*"

"Certainly, dear. I always am. Yes."

He patted her on the shoulder. He went out. Even in her paradise, which was at the moment blue and silver, she could hear the noise of the copter as it bore him away.

Mazda's drug dreams came to an end with a bump about twelve o'clock. She sprang out of bed and ran to the window. The Reverend Adelburg was gone, of course. And there wasn't a raven in sight.

Over in Los Angeles, the Reverend's sermon was going swimmingly. From his first words, which had been the arresting sentence, "The lights are going out again all over the world," he had riveted the attention of his listeners as if with stainless steel rivets. Even the two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in the front rows, who, with their scoutmaster Joe Buell, were today's Honor Guests, had been so fascinated that they had stopped twanging their bowstrings. The Reverend had swung thunderously from climax to climax; by now at least half his audience had resolved to disconnect its radio when it got home, and throw away the electric lights on its Christmas tree. Now the Reverend was approaching the climax of climaxes.

"In the sweet night of the spirit—bless us, O Lord! Yes, Lord, it's good to be dark—in the sweet silence of the stable let the little flame of—bless us, Lord!—let the little flame—My *Gosh*! Good Lord!"

Forthright Temple is ventilated, and partly lighted, by a clerestory in the middle part of the building. Through this clerestory eight large black birds flew rapidly.

Two of them headed straight for the Reverend Adelburg's eyes. Four of them attacked the Temple's not very bright electric lights. The other two made dive after dive on the helpless congregation's head.

Woman were screaming. Handkerchiefs waved. Hymnbooks rocked and fluttered through the air. The organist burst into a Bach chorale. The bewildered choir began singing two different songs.

When the ravens had first swooped down upon him, the Reverend Adelburg had dived under the lectern. From thence—he was a man who was used to authority —he began shouting orders to the troops of Archer Eagle Scouts in a clarion, stentorian voice.

"Young men! Listen! Shoot at the birds! Shoot . . . at . . . the . . . birds!"

There was a very slight hiatus. Then bowstrings began to twang and arrows to thud.

Eight pagan ravens are no match at all for the legitimate weapons of two troops of Archer Eagle Scouts. The ravens dived valiantly, they cawed and shrieked. In vain. Inside five minutes after the shooting started, there remained no trace of the birds' incursus except a black tail feather floating in an updraft, eight or ten hymnbooks with ruffled pages, and some arrows on the floor.

For a few moments the scouts scurried about collecting arrows. Then the Reverend Adelburg summoned them up to the lectern, where he was standing. He finished his sermon with a troop of Archer Scouts drawn up on either side of him, like a body guard.

"That was a wonderful sermon, wasn't it," said the lady from Iowa as she and her husband walked toward their parked car. "I never heard anything like it before. He really spoke better after the birds came in than he did earlier. . . . I think tomorrow I'll go down town and see if I can get some little oil lamps to burn in the patio."

"Wonder what sort of birds those were," her husband said idly. "They were mighty big for crows."

"Crows! Why, they were ravens; haven't you ever seen pictures of ravens? I wonder what made them go in the Temple. Ravens always seem such *old-fashioned* birds."

"I betrayed my Company for you," Mazda said. She hiccoughed with emotion. "I'm a rat. As far as that goes, you're a rat too. We're *both* rats."

"What company is that?" the Reverend asked with innocent curiosity. He yawned. They had been sitting in the tiny living room, arguing, for hours, ever since he got back from the Temple, and by now it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

"The PE&G. Why? Did you ever suspect?"

"I thought perhaps the Retail Merchants Association sent you. I never understood how you happened to be sitting under that Joshua tree."

Mazda laughed scornfully. "The Retail Merchants?

Those boffs? Why, I don't suppose they have more than three secret agents in the whole Los Angeles metropolitan area. They couldn't stop a baby from crossing a street on a kiddy car. Their idea of hot tactics is to hire a big newspaper ad.

"No, I'm a PE&G girl. I've been one of their top people for years. That's why I know what you're up against."

She took an earnest step toward him. "Clem, I don't think you have any idea of how serious this is," she said. "But they'll stop at nothing. They can't possibly let you get away with it. Why, last December after your old-fashioned Christmas sermons, power consumption was off 27% all along the whole Pacific slope, and it didn't get back to normal until late February. People just didn't use much electricity. The Company didn't pay any dividends at all on its common stock, and if the same thing happens this year, they'll have to skip payments on the preferred. That's why I was sent to stop you at all costs."

"How were you supposed to stop me?" the Reverend inquired. He put the tips of his outstretched fingers together thoughtfully.

"I was supposed to seduce you, and then call the broadcasters in. You know, moral turpitude. But I convinced them that it wouldn't work. Congregations aren't so touchy about things like that nowadays. It wouldn't have worked."

"Mazda, how *could* you?"

"I don't know how I could," Mazda replied with spirit. "I could have had a nice clean-cut electronics engineer. . . . or one of those cute linemen up on a pole . . . and then I had to fall for a Reverend with

his collar on backwards. Somebody ought to examine my head."

The Reverend Adelburg let this pass without comment. "What was the alternate plan?" he asked.

"I promised them I'd keep you from delivering any more old-fashioned Christmas sermons. That's what the peyote was for."

"Peyote? When?"

She told him.

"Oh. Then it wasn't the mistletoe," he said when she had finished. He sounded rather annoyed.

"No, it wasn't the mistletoe. But I guess I didn't give you enough peyote. You delivered the sermon anyway.

"Clem, you think that because the ravens made that silly attack on you in the Temple, that that's the sort of thing the Company has up its sleeve. It's not. The ravens were acting on their own responsibility, and they're not awfully bright birds. The Company can do lots better than that."

"What do you think they'll try next?" the Reverend inquired. His jaw had begun to jut out.

"Well, they might try to get you for moral turpitude after all, or stick an income tax evasion charge on you or accuse you of dope smuggling. I don't think they will. They don't want to give you any more publicity. I think they'll just quietly try to wipe you out."

For a moment Mazda's self command deserted her. She wrung her hands. "What'm I to *do*?" she whimpered. "I've got to save you, and you're as stubborn as a mule. I don't know any magic—or at least not nearly enough magic. The whole Company will be against me as soon as the ravens are sure I ratted on them. And there's just

no place in the world today for anybody who's in conflict with the PE&G.

"I wish I hadn't been such a dope as to fall in love with you."

The Reverend Clem Adelburg got up from the chair where he had been sitting and put his arm around her. "Cheer up, my dear," he told her solemnly. "We will defeat the company. Right is on our side."

Mazda gave a heroic smile. She smiled at him mistily, "It's not just the PE&G, of course," she said. "Sometimes I think *they* have agents everywhere."

"The PE&G?" the Reverend cried. He let his arm fall from around her. He had a sudden nightmare vision of a whole world united against him—a world in which the clouds semaphored secrets about him to the dolphins in the Pacific waves. "What is it, then?"

"Why, it's *Nous*."

"I never heard of it."

"Very few people have. But *Nous, Infinite* is the company from which the PE&G gets its power.

"*Nous* is a very strange outfit. It operates on the far side of 3,000 A.D., and selling power is only one of the things it does. When you're a top agent for the Company, like I was, you hear all sorts of stories about it—for instance, that it's responsible for maintaining the difference in potential between the earth and the ionosphere, or that the weather on Venus is a minor *Nous* project—stuff like that. I've even heard agents say that *Nous* is G—but I don't believe *that*. I know about Mithras, myself."

"I thought the PE&G made its own power," said the Reverend. He was still struggling with the first part of Mazda's remarks.

Mazda laughed. "I don't mean any disrespect to the Company, but what makes you think that? The Company's a bad opponent, but outside of that, witchcraft, or sorcery, or ravens, is all they're capable of.

"All the really hot developments in power, the electronic stuff, comes from after 3,000 A.D. Nobody in the present has brains enough to work out a germanium transistor, for example. *Nous* helps them. People nowadays are dopes. They can't work buttons on pants, or open a package of chewing gum unless there's a paper ribbon to help them.

"That's beside the point, really. The thing I'm trying to make clear, Clem, is that *Nous* is a bad outfit to come up against.

"I was supposed to go outside at one-thirty this morning and have the ravens pick me up under the Joshua tree. They were going to take me back to headquarters by air raft. If it—"

"Is that how you got here in the first place?" the Reverend inquired. "By air raft?"

"Yes. As I was saying, if I'd done that, the Company would have accepted that my failure with the peyote was just a mistake. But I didn't do it. I couldn't bear to leave a chump like you all alone to face the Company, and by now they must be beginning to realize that I've ratted on them. It won't be very long before the real trouble begins.

"Now, listen. There are two things you can do. The best one would be for you to go outside and talk to the ravens. If you promise them on your word of honor as a Christian gentleman that you won't deliver any more anti-light sermons—I can't see why you don't like light,

anyhow; light's wonderful—if you promise them that, they'll let you go." She paused hopefully.

The Reverend gave her a look.

"Then we'll have to make a break for it.

"While you were in the washroom, I called the Temple copter." She indicated the short wave radio on the other side of the little stone fireplace. "It'll be here any minute. I think—well, we'll try to get through."

The Reverend looked at her in silence for a moment. Fatigue had made shadows under her eyes, but they only made her look glamorous and desirable. She had never been more beautiful. She had betrayed her company for him; he loved her more than ever. He gave her a hug.

"Nix, my dear," he said. "Nix."

"N-n-n-n-"

"Nix. Never." His voice rang out, booming and resonant. "Run away from those devils and their ravens? Flee from those pagan night-lighters? Never! I *will* not." He advanced toward the radio.

"What are you going to do?" Mazda squeaked.

"I'm going to contact the TVA," he said without turning. "You have to fight fire with fire."

"*Public power*?" Mazda breathed. Her face was white.

"Public power! Their line will be open all night."

He turned his face toward the rafters. "O Lord," he boomed reverently, "bless this radio message. Please, Lord, grant that in contacting a radical outfit like the TVA I'm doing alright."

The noise of prayer died away in the ceiling. He pressed a key and turned a switch. For a moment the room was utterly quiet. Then there was a soft flurry and

plop at the window. The ravens, after all, were not deaf. They too had heard the Reverend's prayers.

Mazda spun round toward the sound. Before she could decide what to do, there was a series of tinkles from the chimney. It ended in a glassy crash. Something had broken on the stone hearth.

Mazda screamed.

"Keep back!" she yelled at the Reverend, who had turned from the radio and was leaning forward interestedly. "Keep back! Don't breathe! Damn those birds!" She was fumbling wildly with the wooden bracelet on her left wrist.

"What is it?" he asked. He advanced a step toward the shards of glass on the hearth.

"Get *back*. It's a germ culture bomb. Parrot fever. I'm going to purify it. Stand back!"

The Reverend Adelburg discounted most of this warning as due to feminine hysteria. He drew back a fraction of an inch, but still remained leaning forward, his eyes fixed on the glass.

Mazda gave a moan of desperation. "I've got to do it!" she yelled. She slid her bracelet toward her elbow and gave it a violent twist.

A strictly vertical flash of lightning appeared between the ceiling and the hearth. It was very bright, and accompanied by a sizzling noise. A second later a sharp chlorine-like smell filled the air.

Mazda's artificial lightning died away. The room returned to its normal dim illumination. A faint curl of smoke floated above the pieces of broken glass on the hearth of the fireplace. There was no doubt that Mazda had purified the germ culture effectively. But the Rev-

erend Clem Adelburg was stretched out on the floor flat on his back.

Mazda ran to him. She tore open his white shirt front and laid her head on his chest. His heart was still beating, and his hands and feet were warm. But he was completely out—out than any of the neon lights he had been trying to put out.

Mazda got up, rubbing her hands. She couldn't move him, and she didn't know what she ought to do for him. She hoped he'd be all right. She knew he had a strong constitution. She went into the kitchen and got a towel.

She came back with it and tied it to the poker. Carrying this homemade flag of truce in front of her, she opened the door and went out into the night.

It was a dark night. From under the Joshua tree a darker shadow detached itself. "'Llo, Mazda," a harsh voice said.

"Hello," she replied. There was a glitter of beady eyes in the darkness around her. "Listen here, you birds," Mazda said slowly, "we've always been on good terms, haven't we? We've always got on together well. Are you really trying to do me and my boy friend in?"

A bird cleared its throat. There was a noise of talons being shifted uneasily. "Well . . . no, Mazda. We like you too," somebody said.

"Oh, yes? Is that why you dropped the parrot fever bomb? Were you going to drop a dead parrot down the chimney and make it look as if we'd died a natural death? I wouldn't call that bomb exactly a friendly thing."

"The bomb was just a warning," said the harsh voice that had spoken first. "We knew you'd purify it. We have

confidence in you. We don't want to do you any harm personally. You can always get another boy friend."

"I want this one."

"You've had better ones."

"Yes, I know. But this is the one I want."

There was a silence. Then a bird said, "We're sorry, Mazda. We only do what we're sent out to do."

Mazda drew a sharp breath. "Hell's canyon," she said deliberately. "Rural electrification cooperatives. *Public power.*"

There was a sound as of somebody's tail feathers being plucked distractedly. "Mazda, I do wish you wouldn't," said the chief raven in a wincing voice.

"I will, though. I'll get in touch with the public power people. I don't care about the ethics of it. I'm in love."

"Haw!" the raven jeered harshly. It seemed to have regained its aplomb. "That lightning flash of yours burned out every tube in the radio. You couldn't send a message to Parker to ask for a stick of chewing gum. You're through.

"We'll give you half an hour. During any of that time you can come out unhurt. But after that you're in for it too. This time we're serious."

"What are you going to do?" Mazda cried.

"Youll find out."

Mazda went back to the house.

The clock on the mantlepiece read twenty minutes to three. The ravens would probably give her a few minutes' grace, so she had until ten or twelve minutes after the hour. Mazda knelt down by her consort and began to chafe his hands. When that didn't help, she ran to the kitchen, got a handful of red feathers from the chicken

they had had for lunch yesterday, and began burning them under the Reverend's nose.

At seven minutes to three the Reverend's eyelids fluttered and the noise of a copter was heard in the sky. Mazda listened with strained attention, her eyes fixed on her consort. She longed to run to the window, but she was afraid of alerting the ravens. She could only wait.

The copter appeared to be having difficulties. The whoosh of its helix changed pitch, the motor stuttered and coughed. Once the noise seemed to recede; Mazda was afraid the plane was going away entirely. She fingered her wooden blast bracelet nervously. But the copter returned. It landed with a thump that was almost a crash.

The copter door opened and somebody jumped out. There was a sound of squawks, caws, and rapid fluttering. A vigorous male voice said, "Ouch! *Ouch*! What the bloody hell!" More fluttering. then sandalled feet thudded rapidly along the path. Somebody pounded at the door.

Mazda ran to open it. The man who stumbled across the threshold was a dark, stocky Indian who wore white duck pants and red glasses, and carried a three foot bow slung across his back. He was bleeding freely from half a dozen peck marks on his shoulders and breast. "Lord Mithras," Mazda said prayerfully, "it's Joe Buell! Joe!"

"Mazda! Why didn't you show a light? What are you doing here? What *is* all this?"

Mazda told him. Joe listened intently, frowning more and more. "My word, what a mess," he said when she had finished. He pushed his red glasses up on his nose. "Has the Reverend come to yet?"

They turned around. Clem's eyes were open, but he was still lying on the floor. As they watched, he slowly closed his eyes again. "I guess he's not ready yet," Mazda said.

She looked at the clock. It showed two minutes to three. "Let's get him up and walk him," she said harriedly. "It might help him to get back to normal. Oh, Mithras, how late it is!"

The Reverend Adelburg was limp and slippery, but they managed to get him to his feet. As they guided his rubbery footsteps about the room, Mazda said, "I haven't seen you since you were in Canada, Joe. Those nights in Saskatchewan! I didn't know you were one of the Reverend's men."

"Since 1955," Joe answered briefly.

"How come? I thought you danced Shalako at the pueblo one year."

"I did. But you should see Halonawa now. There's a red and purple neon sign twenty feet high over the plaza. It reads, 'Welcome to Halonawa, Home of the Shalako.' After that I joined up with the Rev. A nice dark Christmas seems a wizard idea."

He plainly didn't want to pursue the subject further. Mazda said, "If the Reverend revives in time, what'll we do?"

"Can you pilot a copter?"

"I can drive a car."

"A copter's really easier." He gave her directions. "The motor's missing a little, but I don't think you'll have any trouble. Orient yourself by Parker and the dam. The dam's just north of us.

"If the Rev comes to in time, make a break for it with him in the plane. I'll create a diversion by climbing out

the window and shooting at those bloody birds. I owe them some arrows, at that."

"I wish I knew what they had in mind," Mazda said.

At five minutes after three the Reverend's withy body stiffened. His eyes opened. He raised his head and looked about him. "What a lovely day," he said in a pleasant, conversational voice.

Mazda's face puckered. For a moment she seemed about to burst into wild tears. Then she blinked her eyes and shook her head defiantly. "He hurt his head when he fell, that's all. He'll be all right later. He's got to be all right. And he may really be easier to handle this way than if he wasn't goofed. He's a stubborn man."

Joe had gone over to the table and was putting out the lamp. He handed his red glasses to Mazda. "Makes piloting easier," he said. Then he opened the window on the left and swung himself out of it. He gave a high, passionate battle cry. There was a rush of feathers and some frenzied squawking. Joe's bow began to twang.

Mazda grabbed the Reverend by the hand. "Nice Christmas," she hissed. "Come along." Bent forward, one arm raised to shield her eyes, she pulled him after her at a run toward the door.

The night had grown darker. The sky was heavily overcast. None the less, she could make out the improbable shape of the copter. "Hurry!" she said to Clem Adelburg. "Run!"

Wings buffeted around her. Claws struck at her face, her cheeks, her hair. The Reverend Adelburg gave a cry of pain; Mazda had to use her free arm to wipe her own blood from her eyes. Then they were in the copter and the door was slammed.

She turned the switch. The motor gave a cough

and started. Mazda was trembling with excitement, but she followed Joe's instructions. Slowly the copter rose.

She had put on the red glasses before they left the house. As her eyes grew used to the darkness, she made out the glimmer of the river in front of her and the flat surface of Parker dam. She wanted to go west, toward Los Angeles. The copter climbed a little. She tried to turn.

Wings whizzed by her. Mazda grinned. She twisted the blast bracelet on her wrist. The tiny receptor within it vibrated. There was a flash of light, and the bird plummeted to the ground.

When it hit the sand there was a faint concussion. The floor of the copter shuddered. After a second the smell of almond extract tinged the air.

The bird had been carrying a cyanide bomb. Mazda sent the copter a little higher. Her mind was a kaleidoscope of tumbling fears. The possibility of more bombs, of explosive bombs, of a kamikazi attack on the copter's propeller, played leap-frog in her brain. And what about Joe? Dear Joe, he'd been wonderful in Saskatchewan. Had they got him yet?

She looked back anxiously at the cabin. Joe had vaulted up on the roof and was standing with one foot planted on either side of the ridge pole, like a Zuñi Heracles. The thick clouds behind him had begun to be tinged with light from the rising moon; she could see that though his bow was ready and he had an arrow drawn nearly back to his ear he wasn't shooting. His eyes were fixed intently on the sky.

She followed the direction of his gaze. Very high up, so high that they looked no bigger than crows, seven of

the big black birds were flapping rapidly northward in single file.

For the next five minutes or so nothing at all happened. The copter plodded steadily westward toward Los Angeles, down low, along the line of the aqueduct. This apparent quiescence on the part of her opponents unnerved Mazda more than a direct attack would have done. She couldn't believe that the PE&G would let her and Clem escape so easily.

Suddenly along the sky in front of her there passed a vast flash of light. For an instant the desert was as bright and white as day. Then the darkness closed down again and thunder crashed.

Mazda's hands shook on the controls. The storm that was coming up might, of course, be merely a storm. Or it might have been sent by the Company. But if *Nous* . . . but if *Nous*, that enormous and somehow enigmatic power that operated from the far side of 3,000 A.D. . . . if *Nous* had decided to stretch out its arm against her and Clem, there wasn't a chance in the world that she and the Reverend would continue to live.

There was another prodigious lightning flash. The desert, the aqueduct, a line of power poles, a small square building, burned themselves on Mazda's eyes. When darkness came back the Reverend, who had been sitting quite calmly and quietly beside Mazda all this time, stirred. "Wonderful fireworks," he said approvingly.

Mazda's eyes rolled. "Clem, baby," she said despairingly, "what'll I *do*?" She looked around as if hunting an answer. Then the bottom of the heavens dropped out.

The heaviest precipitation recorded to date in a

cloudburst is two and a half inches in three minutes. What fell on the copter now was heavier. Inside of two seconds after the avalanche of water had begun to pour from the sky the copter was down flat on the ground, as if it had been pushed into the sand by a giant hand.

The noise inside the cabin was deafening. It was like being a dried pea shaken within a drum. It beat along the body like hammers. Mazda, looking up open-mouthed, saw that the copter ceiling was beginning to bulge.

The downpour—the cataract—stopped as suddenly as it had begun. There was a minute of dazed silence in the cabin. Then Mazda, pushing hard against the door in the warped copter body, got it open and scrambled out.

The copter was deep in the sand. One blade of the propeller had been broken off entirely. The other hung limply parallel to the shaft.

Mazda stood shivering. She took off her red glasses absently and dropped them on the sand. The sky had cleared. The moon was almost up. She reached inside the cabin and caught Clem Adelburg by the wrist. "C'mon," she said. She had seen a building, just before the cloudburst. They might be able to take cover in that.

She struggled over the sand with the Reverend following docilely at her heels. The building, once reached, turned out to be a Company sub-station, and Mazda felt a touch of hope. She could get in, despite the *Danger* and *No Admittance* signs, and the ravens might be deterred, even if only slightly, by their respect for Company property.

The sub-station door would open to a verbal signal. Mazda twisted her blast bracelet twice on her arm, in-

haled, and swallowed. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte," she said carefully.

Nothing happened. She cleared her throat and began again, a couple of notes lower. "Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte." There was a faint click. "Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, Fresno—"

The door swung wide. Mazda's enumeration of the counties of California had worked. She took the Reverend by the hand and led him through the opening. "Stanislaus, Sutter, Tulare, Tuolomne, Ventura, Yuba, Yolo," she said. The door closed.

It was much darker inside the sub-station than it had been outside on the white desert, and the air was filled with a high humming that sounded, and actually was exceedingly dangerous. Mazda put her arm around Clem's shoulders. "Don't move, baby," she said pleadingly. "Don't touch anything. Stay close to Mazda and be quiet."

The Reverend coughed. "Certainly, my dear," he said in quite a normal voice, "but would you mind telling me where we are? And what has been happening?"

Mazda went as limp as if she had been skoshed on the head. She clung to him and babbled with relief, while the Reverend stroked her soothingly on the hair and tried to make sense out of her babbling.

"Yes, my dear," he said when she had finally finished, "but are you sure you aren't exaggerating a little? After all, we aren't much worse off than we were in the cabin."

Mazda drew away from him slightly. "Oh, sure, everything's fine," she said with a touch of bitterness. "We're in a place where if we move fast we'll be electrocuted, the copter is down in the desert with a busted propeller, we

haven't anything to eat or drink, and Joe and I have killed so many ravens that when the Company *does* catch me they'll do something special to make me pay for it. Outside of a few little bitty details like that, everything is real real george."

The Reverend had not listened with much attention. Now he said, "Do you hear a noise outside?"

"What sort of a noise?"

"A sort of whoosh."

Mazda drew in her breath. "Shin up to the window and look out," she ordered. "Look out especially for birds."

He was at the high, narrow window only an instant before he let himself down. "There was only one raven," he reported, "but there were a number of birds like hawks, with short wings. There seemed to be humps on their backs."

Even in the poor light of the sub-station Mazda visibly turned green. "Goshawks!" she gasped. She staggered against the wall. Then she began taking off her clothes.

Dress, slip, panties went on the floor. She stood on one foot and removed her sandals alternately. She began going through her hair and pulling out bobby pins. She took off her blast bracelet and added it to the heap.

"What are you doing that for?" the Reverend inquired. It seemed to him a singularly ill-chosen time for sex.

"I'm trying to set up a counter-charm, and I have to be naked to do it." Her voice was wobbling badly. "Those birds—those birds are goshawks. I've never known the Company to send them out but once before. Those lumps on their backs are portable nous projectors. They're trying to teleport us."

"Teleport us? Where to?"

"To . . . to the Company's cellars. Where . . . they attend to people who believe in public power. They . . . oh . . . I can't talk about it, Clem."

She crouched down at his feet and picked up a bobby pin. "Don't move," she said without looking up. "Try not to think about anything."

She began to scratch a diagram around him on the floor with the pin. He coughed. "Don't cough," she cautioned him. "It might be better to hold your breath."

The Reverend's lungs were aching before she got the diagram done. She eyed it a moment and then spat carefully at four points within the hexagram. A faint bluish glow sprang up along the lines she had traced on the floor.

Mazda rose to her feet. "It'll hold them for a few minutes," she said. "After that. . . ."

The Reverend raised his eyes to the rafters. "I'm going to pray," he announced. He filled his lungs.

"O Lord," he boomed powerfully, "we beg thy blessing to preserve me and Mazda from the power of the ravens. We beg thy blessing to help us stay here and not be transported to the PEG's cellars. Bless us, O Lord. Preserve us. And help us to make thine old-fashioned Christmas a living reality. Amen, O Lord. Amen!"

Mazda, too, was praying. Hands clasped over her diaphragm, head bowed, lips moving silently, she besought her bright divinity. "Mithras, lord of the morning, slayer of the bull of darkness, preserve my love and me. Mithras, lord of the morning, slayer of the bull of darkness, preserve my love and me. Mithras, the counter charm on the floor is fading. Preserve us! Mithras . . . Mithras, Savior, Lord!"

Prayer is a force. So is magic. So is the energy from nous projectors. These varying forces met and collided in mid air.

The collision made a sort of vortex, a small but uncomfortable knot in the vast, conscious field potential that is the Infinite part of *Nous*. There was momentarily an intense, horrible sense of pressure and tension in the very air. The sub-station hummed ominously. Then, with a burst of energy that blew out every generator from Tacoma to San Diego, the roof came off. All along the Pacific slope, and as far inland as Provo, Utah, it was as dark a Christmas as even the Reverend would have wished.

There was a pause. The noise of breaking timbers died away. The Reverend Adelburg and Mazda were looking upward frozenly, mouths open, necks outstretched. Then a gigantic hand reached in through the hole in the roof. A gigantic voice, even bigger than the hand, said in enormous and somehow Oxonian accents, "Very well. *Take* your old-fashioned Christmas, then."

It was just before sunrise on December 21st. The Christians, who would be strangled at dawn the next day and then burned in honor of the solstice, were gibbering away in their wicker cages. There were three cages full of them. Great progress was being made in stamping out the new heresy. The Christians would make a fine bright blaze.

The druid looked up at the cages, which were hanging from the boughs of three enormous oak trees, and nodded with satisfaction. His consort, Mahurzda, would find it a hard job strangling so many people. He'd have to help her. It would be a pleasant task.

Once more he nodded. He tested the edge of the sickle he was carrying. Then the druid who had been—would be—would have been—the Reverend Clem Adelburg hoisted up his long white robe and clambered up in the nearest of the oak trees to cut the sacred mistletoe.

STAWDUST

"Are you doing it?" Miss Abernathy demanded.

"Are you?" he countered. His neat, prettily arched eyebrows had gone up.

"Certainly not."

"Don't be too sure. You might not be conscious of it. And it's exactly the sort of thing a woman *would* do." He looked at her with such concentrated disgust that Miss Abernathy thought: he's real all right. Not like the others. But he's not exactly a man.

She turned her gaze from him toward the flat blue water of the swimming pool. She had liked the swimming pool the best of anything on board the S.S. *Vindemiatrix*, but today there was neither inspiration nor solace in it. "But what are we going to do?" she asked, looking at Mr. Faxon again.

"Wait and find out, I suppose," he answered. "It's about all we *can* do. Whichever of us doesn't change—"

"Is the one who's been doing it," she finished.

"Exactly." He turned his back on her and began to walk away, threading his way lissomely through the dummies that crowded around the pool. Mr. Pooley, Miss Davis, Mr. Elginbrod, Mr. Harris, Miss Raylor—what a lot of them there were! Not to mention the captain and the first mate in the dining salon and all the others who, transformed privately, were sitting or standing woodenly within the confines of their cabins. Twenty-five or thirty

people, all dummies, all neatly stuffed with sawdust, all with sleek kidskin skins.

Miss Abernathy's mind moved back to her fourth day on board the *Vindemiatrix* and the first of the transformations. She had been standing by the side of the plunge, talking to Mr. Pooley. "This is a nice pool," she had said.

"Yes, nice," he had answered.

"And the color of the water—that's nice, too."

"Yes. It's nice." Had a spark of something autonomous flickered behind Mr. Pooley's beautiful eyes? At any rate, he had gone on to add an original observation. "The color of the light from above—I like that too. It's nice."

"Oh, do you?" An imp of the perverse had moved in Miss Abernathy. "Don't you think it would be prettier if it were a brighter yellow? A little more like sunshine?" It was true, the diffused lighting over the pool had a sullen, smoky tinge, like the sandy glare of a dust storm. The robot who had designed it had slipped up.

Mr. Pooley seemed not to have heard her. "It's nice," he had repeated blandly, as if she had never spoken at all.

Miss Abernathy had turned from him with a throb of disgust. What a dummy he was! They were all dummies, every one of them. All they could do, men and women alike, was to repeat "nice" or "interesting", and think they'd said something. And speaking of dummies —what a fool she'd been, to think that the passengers on a space ship would be an improvement over the people in her office. Romantic space travellers, indeed. They were worse, if anything.

Where were the men who did things and made things?

All gone? Surely the men who designed the machines. . . . But the machines designed themselves now. They were better at it than any human being could have been.

She had turned from Mr. Pooley and slipped into the turquoise water of the plunge. She swam its length twice. Then she had clambered out of the water and come back to Mr. Pooley.

He was standing exactly where he had been when she had left him. When she got up close to him, she saw why he hadn't moved. He'd never move again. He was . . . he was. . . .

Oh, no. Miss Abernathy's jaw had dropped. There must be some mistake. They'd introduced her to him, only a couple of days ago. They wouldn't have introduced her to a dummy, would they?

She had looked around herself almost distractedly. Nobody had been looking toward them, nobody had been paying any attention. Delicately she had put out her fingers and touched Mr. Pooley on the arm. He felt cool and smooth and creamy, like a good grade of kid.

The bell for tea had rung. People had begun to get out of the water. Miss Abernathy had gone with the others. At the door of the plunge she had looked back. Mr. Pooley was still standing there.

The second transformation had occured at the dinner hour. The captain—they all sat at the captain's table—had been talking in his nice, interesting voice. Miss Abernathy had found herself listening with pleasure. The captain was more the sort of man she had been hoping to meet. He knew things. He did things. He had ideas. No doubt he was married already. But—well—she didn't care. Anything would be better than being married to one

of the usual dummies, like Mr. Pooley. She didn't care if he was married. She could be his concubine.

"We are going through an unusually interesting region of space just now," the captain had said. "We are skirting the fringes of an enormous cloud of hydrogen gas and tiny particles of dust. Though by earthly standards the cloud of gas is thin indeed—it contains about ten hydrogen atoms per cubic centimeter—its density is ten or a hundred times that at its center. The cloud is highly magnetized. Actually, it is considerably elongated in the direction of the interstellar lines of magnetic force. Sometimes interesting phenomena occur."

"Is it dangerous?" Miss Abernathy had wanted to know, leaning forward hopefully.

"Not at all. Merely interesting. We are skirting the fringes of an enormous cloud of hydrogen gas and tiny particles of dust. Though by earthly standards the cloud of gas is thin indeed—it contains about ten hydrogen atoms per cubic centimeter—its density. . . ."

He was, Miss Abernathy had perceived, repeating himself all over again. He didn't know anything more, or have any more ideas, than the others. He'd probably memorized the whole speech from a printed tape one of the news machines had given him.

Concubine, indeed. She felt a pang of self-disgust. What had been the matter with her?

". . . elongated in the direction of the interstellar lines of magnetic force," the captain was finishing. "Sometimes extremely interest——"

He had stopped in mid-word. Miss Abernathy had bent toward him in a sort of guilty prescience. While she watched, a dribble of sawdust had trickled down from the side of his nose.

Surely the others had drawn away a little. Hadn't there been a movement, a voiceless rustle, away from the captain and her? Hadn't there been the slightest of pauses in the conversation at the table, if only for a fraction of a second? But they had gone on again almost immediately, talking, saying that things were nice, interesting, good. When dinner was over they had all got up and left the captain sitting there.

He had been sitting there in his place at the next meal, breakfast. Miss Abernathy, slipping back to the dining salon later, had found one of the robot servitors dusting him.

There had been a lot of transformations after that. It was after the sixth, or pehaps it was the seventh, that the committee had been formed.

Mr. Elginbrod had been the chairman. He had, he said, been in space a dozen times before, and nothing like this had ever happened. There must be something wrong with the servo-mechanisms. They ought to complain.

"Yes," echoed Miss Davis. "We ought to complain to the captain."

Miss Abernathy had raised her eyebrows a little. "To the *captain*?"

"Well, then, to the first mate. To someone in authority. There's no telling where this will stop. Any of us might be next."

"Absolutely," boomed Mr. Elginbrod. His expression was just as fatuous as ever, but his eyes had a wild, glassy glare. "Miss Davis is right. Something must be done. I ag—"

He stopped. Miss Abernathy, peering at him in the

yellowish light, saw that his eyes had become, literally, glass.

The others had looked at him. They began to back away. When they were a reasonable distance off, they turned and ran. A little later, Miss Abernathy had heard a series of slams from their cabin doors.

That had been the end of the committee. Miss Davis hadn't been able to get back to her cabin before she had succumbed. And Miss Abernathy, making the rounds of the cabins a couple of days later with a master key she had taken from the robot chambermaid, had found that the rest of them had succumbed too. Their taking refuge in their cabins hadn't done them any good. Now they all had kidskin bodies, sawdust stuffing, and glass eyes.

Was being turned into a dummy painful? Apparently not, since none of them had cried out in the moment of transformation. Still, it was a nasty idea. And who was doing it? Was it she? Was it Mr. Faxon? Or was it just something that happened in the part of space where the *Vindemiatrix* now was? There was nobody to ask, no way of finding out. She and Mr. Faxon were the only human beings left on the ship.

Miss Abernathy sighed. She looked toward the door through which Mr. Faxon had vanished. Where had he gone? To the snack bar, for something to eat? He was fond of eating. Or to the gym, to have one of the robots massage him? He spent most of his time eating or trying to work off the results of eating. Still, he wasn't so bad. There was more to him, in a way, than there had been to the other men.

The next few days were less difficult than Miss Abernathy had feared they would be. The dummies around

the swimming pool and in the dining salon were a surprising amount of company. She went swimming several times, and enjoyed it. At meals she and Mr. Faxon sat at opposite ends of the dining table, with the dummies in between, and the robots waited on them punctiliously. It wasn't very different, really, from what it had been before the other passengers were transformed.

All the same, she was sleeping badly. She went to the iatric robot and got a box of sleeping pills. They helped, but she wakened feeling depressed. Was it the thought of all the dummies waiting woodenly in the cabins around her, or was she personally frightened? It didn't seem to be either of these. Suddenly she knew what it was. She was lonesome.

Yes, lonesome. She and Mr. Faxon were the only living people left on the ship, and yet they never exchanged a word, not even good morning. He kept his nose stuck in a book most of the time they were at table. Something ought to be done. Perhaps she'd misjudged him. His mannerisms were peculiar, certainly. But. . . .

She dressed for dinner that evening with unusual care: her washed-gold lame dress with the bouffant waist and the little gold lame panties, three layers of color in her hair, the appropriate perfumes, and shimmer wristlets and anklets.

It took her a long time to be satisfied. She kept making the robot maid do her hair over again. When she entered the dining salon, the second gong for dinner had already been rung.

Mr. Faxon didn't look up from his book. Well, she hadn't thought he would. It was not until the robots were serving coffee with the dessert that she got up courage enough to speak to him.

"Could I trouble you for the sugar?" she asked. Her voice sounded unnatural in her ears.

Without looking up, he gave the sugar bowl a shove that sent it flying along the cloth to her place. "And the cream, please?" she said.

This time he did look up. He gave her a scathing glance. "The cream jug's right by your elbow," he said ungraciously.

"Oh . . . thanks." She swallowed. "Are you . . . I thought . . . if . . . perhaps we might dance a little this evening. If you're not too busy, that is. The orchestra would be glad to play."

"Sorry, no. When I was a dancing instructor, I got enough of women walking on my feet to last me the rest of my life."

Once more Miss Abernathy swallowed. "Or . . . we might play some bezarique. Or we could see what records there are in the library for the stereo."

"No, thanks. Frankly, Miss Abernathy, I don't want to do anything at all in company with you."

It was almost with relief that she laid the weapons of allurement aside. "Why not?" she demanded.

"Two reasons. In the first place, I think you're dangerous. Darned dangerous, though you probably don't know it. In the second place, I just don't like you very well."

For a moment he twisted the bangles on his wrist thoughtfully. He seemed about to say something more. He didn't. He shut his book with a bang, pushed his chair back, and walked out.

Miss Abernathy stared after him. Her eyes felt hot. So. If that was the way it was . . . Why, he sounded as if he thought it was either him or her! As if they

were enemies. She hadn't known he disliked her so. But perhaps he was right. Yes, perhaps he was.

She had to take three sleeping pills that night. When she woke, though, she felt alert and rested, not at all depressed.

She dressed slowly and thoughtfully, stopping often to examine her fingernails, or arrange her toilet things. She might just as well wear that quiet little brown dress and put plain, instead of shimmer, gold dust on her hair. When you were going to war (Was she? Her hands were awfully cold), there was no point in getting all dressed up.

She entered the dining salon with her head held high. Mr. Faxon was already eating—porridge with butter and sugar and cream. Through the transparent cover of the platter beside him, she could see the next course he had selected: three plump hot cakes, garnished with bacon, sausage, ham, and eggs. No wonder he was getting a double chin.

She drank her fruit juice. Really, she felt terrible. She didn't know whether she could go through with it. But she couldn't go on like this either. If Mr. Faxon was wrong, it didn't much matter. If he was right, she might as well find out.

"Mr. Faxon," she said loudly and deliberately, "after breakfast, you and I are going to play a nice game of bezarique."

He looked up sharply from his dish of porridge. His face was savage with annoyance. (If he thinks I'm so darned dangerous, Miss Abernathy thought, he's an awful fool to antagonize me.) "What? Play bezairque with you? You're crazy. Of course not. I told you so before."

Their glances met. Miss Abernathy had a sense of profoundly exerting herself. She was trembling all over. She had to . . . if she didn't . . . he . . . oh . . . he. . . .

Suddenly it happened. There was a sort of plop in the air between them, and Mr. Faxon's eyes grew glazed. His body took on the familiar slickness and rigidity. He was a dummy too. She'd done it again.

He didn't look quite like the other ones. Miss Abernathy got up from her place and walked around the dummies to where he was sitting. She examined him closely. The stitches in the kidskin of his right forearm seemed a little loose. She worked at them with her fingernail until she got a hole started.

Um-hum. It was just as she had thought. He *wasn't* like the others. He was stuffed with fluffy pink cotton. It smelled of violets.

She was shaking all over. She got back to her chair somehow and sat down in it. It was awful, terrible; she supposed she was responsible, but she hadn't really meant it to happen. Not exactly. And now she was the only living thing left on the ship.

What should she do now? She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. It was like wanting to sneeze and hiccough at the same time. And no matter what she did, it wouldn't make any difference. She was the only living thing left—No. No, she wasn't. There *was* another person left alive. The astrogator. He must still be carrying on his duties; his lonely, high-minded, all-important duties. The astrogator! Of course, of course!

Miss Abernathy's trembling had stopped. It wasn't too odd, really, that she hadn't thought of the astrogator. Out of sight, out of mind; and everybody knew that astro-

gators were too absorbed by their weighty duties to appear in public. Did that mean she oughtn't to go call on him?

She hesitated. But she did so want to see him—and she'd be careful. After all, Mr. Faxon might have been wrong. The captain had said that odd things happened in this part of space.

Almost running, she started toward the part of the ship where the astrogator's quarters must be. At the end of the recreation area there was a bolted door and a sign saying, "No Admittance." She pulled the bolt back and went through.

It was noisier here. The corridor was not so well carpeted, and the hum of machinery filled the air. Nervously, still eagerly, Miss Abernathy hurried on.

There were more doors, more signs reading, variously, "No Admittance," "Entrance Forbidden," "Keep Out." Miss Abernathy, brows puckered, disregarded them all.

At last she came to the door of doors. The sign on it read, "ASTROGATOR. ENTRANCE EXPRESSLY DENIED. KEEP OUT."

She tried the door. It was unlocked. She faltered. Then she rapped softly on it.

"C'me on in," said a husky male voice.

Miss Abernathy stepped inside. She could not repress a gasp.

Throughout the rest of the *Vindemiatrix,* every attempt had been made to fence out awareness of the vastness of space. The idea had been to make the passengers feel that they were spending two pleasant months in a superior luxury hotel. Only in the main lounge, inconspicuously placed, were there two small indirect viewers through which passengers could look out at what sur-

rounded them. Nobody had ever used the viewers much. But here, in the astrogator's cubicle, one realized abruptly where the *Vindemiatrix* was.

The whole foreward end of the room was a huge indirect viewing plate. It was flanked by a curving double tier of enigmatic instruments and gauges. And all around the room, from ceiling to floor and back to ceiling again, there ran a broad, broad belt, a zodiac, of direct viewers. The reddish light of the ionized hydrogen shone through it. The cubicle seemed to be girdled with misty fire.

Except for the red glow of the gas, the only light in the room came from a small green-shaded lamp over the astrogator's lonely seat.

It was an awesome room. The astrogator himself lay face downward in his bunk, while a robot servant gave him a body massage.

Miss Abernathy advanced timidly. Almost under her feet, in the direct viewers, an enormous blue star burned through the reddish haze with a steady, baleful glare. "Are you the astrogator?" she asked.

"Yessum," he answered languidly. He turned his head toward her. "Sit down, ma'am, and I'll have the robot bring you a drink."

"Thank you." She seated herself on the edge of a chair. "I'm not thirsty now. She paused for a moment. "So you're the astrogator. It must be an awfully responsible job."

"Oh, it's not so bad." He yawned. "Robbie, here, does most of the work." He indicated a tall, vaguely humanoid mechanism that stood to the left of the tier of instruments.

"Oh. I thought you astrogators had to do a lot of figuring." She relaxed a bit.

"Used to be that way. Not any more. I just punch a button at the beginning of the trip, and the machines bring us on in. It's up to them to do the work."

Once more he yawned. "Wouldn't you like a drink, ma'am?" he asked a little wistfully. "They make nice drinks."

"No, thank you." Miss Abernathy groped after her illusions. "But . . . supposing you wanted to take the ship somewhere besides to Sirius? Wouldn't you have a lot to do then? A new course to compute, all sorts of calculations?"

"Naw. See that wheel?" He pointed. "It's got a list of all the major stars on it. You just set the wheel for the right star. It's duck soup."

"I think . . . I will have a drink now," said Miss Abernathy. While the drink was being brought, she asked, "Don't you get lonesome, though? I'd think you would."

"Nope." He rolled over on his back, exposing his beautifully muscled chest and half his handsome face. "I sleep a lot. I don't mind it."

"Then you mean you don't really do any work at all?"

Some of the indignation she felt must have shown in her voice. The astrogator giggled. "Aw, ma'am," he said soothingly, "you don't want to take it so hard. It's just one of those things."

One of those things. . . . Miss Abernathy felt a flood of uncontrollable disgust. He was worse than any of them —worse than the captain, worse than Mr. Elginbrod, worse than Mr. Faxon. He was worse than the dumbest of the passengers. He lay in his bed, and the machines

steered the *Vindemiatrix*, and it was just one of those things. What a fool he was!

She was not in the least surprised, she was, rather, gratified, when the one of his eyes she could see took on a glassy stare.

She finished her drink and then went over to his bunk. His skin was kid, like that of the others, but he looked much lumpier, and slackly stuffed. She squeezed him. There was a crunkle. Was he filled with straw? No, it was probably excelsior.

She set the empty glass down on the floor beside him. Through the band of viewers the cloud of gas still burned redly. There was no use in letting the ship go on to Sirius: everyone said that Sirius' planet, which had been colonized by Earthmen, was just like being on Earth. She wouldn't find what she was looking for there.

Well, then. . . . She walked over to the wheel the astrogator had indicated. She studied the list of stars for a moment. Aldebaran. The list said it had a planet, and the name had a lucky sound. It would take a long time to get there, but she had plenty of food. She could wait. Aldebaran.

She moved the pointer on the wheel from Sirius to the new name. Then she began to turn the wheel so the notch in it would correspond.

The wheel turned easily. Eagerly she watched the star fields in the indirect viewer. In a moment they would begin to swing and shift as the ship set on its new course.

The moments passed. The star fields in the viewer continued rock steady. Slowly Miss Abernathy began to feel frightened. Still no change in course, only the steady movement ahead.

She turned on the overhead lights in the room. Now she could see the wheel better. Its connections seemed to be a little loose. She knelt down and followed the cord back with her fingers.

No. It wasn't connected on to anything. It never had been. It just came to an end. The star wheel . . . was a dummy wheel.

She got back to the passengers' quarters somehow. For a while she wandered among her dummies, touching their kidskin bodies and shivering. On impulse she pitched Mr. Elginbrod into the swimming pool, and then shivered worse than ever.

The ship would arrive at Sirius' planet on schedule. (If there was some way of making the machines take the *Vindemiatrix* to Aldebaran, she'd never be able to find it.) The landing would be made just as competently, just as purposefully, as if she weren't the only living thing left on board.

There wouldn't be any trouble about the transformations. People would look the other way and ignore the whole subject. Even if she'd killed everybody on board with arsenic, instead of transforming them accidentally while the ship was going through a cloud of magnetized hydrogen, there wouldn't have been any trouble. People were too dumb to care. It would just be considered one of those things.

She began to cry. Dimly, far forward in the ship, she could hear the usual happy, impersonal hum of the machinery, inexorably carrying the ship toward Sirius. It made her cry harder than ever. A robot servant glided up and gently put a fresh white handkerchief in her hand.

THIRSTY GOD

Brian was riding hard when he reached the sanctuary at twilight. He had foundered two mounts under him since yesterday, and for all his haste the Hrothy, howling like a pack of dervishes, were close behind him. He rose in the stirrups and looked back anxiously.

Yes, in 40 seconds or so Megath's relatives would be within bowshot. When they caught him they would, he knew, hang him up by the heels and shoot at him with blunted arrows for two or three days before letting him die. He shuddered. The opening of the shrine was dark and uninviting, but he was almost certain that the Hrothy would respect its sacred character; and the sanctuary looked, to his inexperience, like any other of the shrines that dotted the surface of the second planet. It was a piece of extreme luck that he had found it. He jumped from the back of his rox and plunged into it.

The Hrothy got up to the winded rox about 50 seconds later. It was plain enough where Brian was. They looked at each other in silence. Megath's uncle, who had been the hottest in pursuit of any of the Hrothy, gave a short laugh. Man after man began to dismount without speaking.

The Hrothy considered that Brian, in first violating and then deserting Megath, had committed an unforgivable sin. (It was not so much his taking her violently as his subsequent tiring of her that they objected to. They

objected to it profoundly. It went against all their mores. They liked their violations to stick.) But they thought, from stories they had heard and from experience, that if Brian stayed inside the square stone shrine for the next twelve hours, their grudge against him would be satisfied. Megath would be avenged. Silently the tribesmen seated themselves in a semicircle outside the entrance of the shrine.

Brian, peering from within the opening, was both puzzled and relieved. He had been afraid they would light some of the damp blue river grass and try to smoke him out. All that fuss over a woman whose skin was definitely, if faintly, purple! But apparently they were counting on starvation. He patted the bottles of food-tablets in his pockets and grinned. He had a flask, too. They'd have a long wait, a good long wait.

Their continued silence—the Hrothy were usually noisily emotional—bothered him. He peeked at them doubtfully once more. But apparently they were going to respect the shrine's sanctity; there was nothing to worry about.

He stumbled back a few paces into the shrine's interior. It was quite dark. The floor seemed to be made of slick mud. (Actually, it was an exceedingly durable moisture-resistant plastic, but Brian couldn't know that.) He hesitated, and then lay down on it. He'd had an exhausting day.

He meant to stay awake, on guard, but his fatigue was overpowering. Inside ten minutes he was fast asleep.

As soon as his smoother breathing gave the signal, the scanning rays went to work on him. His pulse was taken, his respiration timed, his oxygen consumption checked.

A tiny pad slipped into his damp armpit and came out with perspiration to be analyzed. When he began to snore another tiny pad slipped momentarily into his open mouth. And when he was quite, quite thoroughly asleep, a minute needle drew a drop of blood from his flaccid earlobe. A highly refined technique of zone electrophoresis was exercised on the sample.

The night was well advanced when the scanners completed their diagnosis. In many ways, Brian puzzled them. Physiologically, he was far from what they were used to. But he lay, though just barely, within the range of permissible variation. The mechanism of the scanners had become a little worn. After an almost human pause, the conditioning installations in the shrine went to work on him.

The Hrothy, outside in the cloudy night, waited in wolfish silence. It was not the sacred character of the shrine they were respecting, it was its competence as a factory.

Brian woke at last. He had an impression that much time had passed, and while this was not true chronologically, it was quite accurate physiologically: a lot had happened to him while he was alseep.

The idea of much elapsed time alarmed him. What had the Hrothy been doing while he was unconscious? Still dazed with sleep, he hurried to the opening of the shrine and peered out.

The tribesmen were seated as he had last seen them, squatting in a semicircle in the light drizzle outside the shrine, with their brightly colored cloaks wrapped tightly around them. They must be intending to wait until hunger drove him out. Brian gave a derisive snort and

turned back to the interior of the sanctuary. As he pivoted about he struck his head painfully and unexpectedly on the stone lintel of the shrine opening.

For a moment physical distress obscured the meaning of what had happened. He stood blinking tears of pain from his eyes and cursing softly to himself. Then the significance of the incident came to him suddenly. He had bumped his head on the door lintel. But last night the lintel had been two or three feet *above* the top of his head.

He looked up. His thick black oily hair was brushing against the ceiling. What the hell—what had happened to him? Had the building somehow shrunk? Or had he grown, was he somehow bigger than he had been last night?

For a moment he wondered whether he had caught some fever. Venus abounded in them, and hallucinatory ideas about bodily size characterized one or two of them. And he was thirsty, he felt oddly hot.

He looked down at his hands. His cuffs were only an inch or two below his elbows. Unless he was having a remarkably consistent hallucination . . . It couldn't be a fever; he didn't feel feverish at all, only thirsty and hot. Anyhow, he'd had shots for all the endemic Venusian diseases before he'd left Dindymene. He'd gotten bigger during the night, that was all.

Oddly, the idea did not alarm him. He was rather pleased with it. For a moment he thought of stepping boldly out of the shrine and spreading some havoc among the squatting Hrothy. He'd teach them to annoy a man who was eight—no more nearly nine feet tall. But there were twenty of them, and they had lots of arrows. He'd better not.

Besides, he was feeling somnolent and lethargic, not at all combative. He couldn't imagine what had happened to him, but it didn't seem to matter. He decided to sit down on the floor and have a drink of water from his flask.

The silvery container was dwarfed in his big new hands. He tipped the flask up to get the last drops, and then tossed it from him petulantly. It was water, all right, but he didn't want water. What he wanted was something more dense.

He crossed his legs under him and leaned back against the slick wall. He closed his eyes; he thought it would help him to think better. In a little while he was asleep.

This time it was late afternoon when he awoke. It was raining hard. Without moving from his sitting position, he peered out of the sanctuary, noting absently as he did so that this back seemed somewhat stiff.

The Hrothy were gone. There wasn't a sign of them in the damp landscape, not even a used beetla stick or a clot of rox dung. It was probably a trap; they must be lurking in the neighborhood. Or they might have gone back to the village for reinforcements. Brian grinned. He didn't think he'd be fooled easily. He decided to get up.

He tried to move: nothing happened. Well, he had been in a cramped position for a long time. His legs must have gone to sleep.

Once more he gave his body the order. Once more nothing happened. Brian licked his lips nervously. Was he paralyzed? What was the matter with him? He began to be really frightened. It was at this point that a plunp came in.

Now, the plunp are the oddest of the native peoples of Venus. Some workers who have studied them insist that their material backwardness hides a singularly rich and varied spiritual life. Other ethnologists deny this passionately and say that their pointless, rambling creation legends and inept totem poles show that their spiritual life is just about what you'd expect.

Be that as it may, the plunp are not prepossessing. They have exceedingly slick grayish skins, long shallow jaws with ferocious teeth, and fierce yellow eyes. They wear no clothing, not even a pubic leaf. They smell a little like frogs.

This one came into the sanctuary and stopped in front of Brian. He made a sketchy gesture with one hand; it might have been meant as a respectful salutation or, more informally, been simply his way of saying "Hi!" He looked at Brian calculatingly and then nodded. He opened the hollowed-out areda nut that depended from a length of vine around his neck.

Brian watched. There wasn't much else he could do, and the plunp's coming seemed somehow significant. He watched the creature with fascinated repulsion (the plunp are *not* prepossessing) while it took a hunk of yellowish ointment out of the nut and smeared the stuff over itself. Then the plunp began to rotate slowly in front of Brian, its twiggy, slick-skinned arms outstretched expectantly.

Almost as soon as the yellow goo touched the plunp's glabrous skin, Brian felt an extraordinary excitement in himself. It had the intensity of a sexual urge, but there was emphatically nothing sexual in its fleshless, cold imperative. It was as if all the myriad cells of his body were thirsty, thirsty as individuals, for the yellow oint-

ment and the moisture in the plunp's slick skin under it. The water in Brian's flask hadn't been dense enough to satisfy his thirst; this moisture would.

He felt a kind of aura, a projection of himself, reach out. It was not a matter of conscious will; even as he made the immaterial contact with the plunp, he resented it. He was thirsty, yes, but it seemed to him that in dehydrating the plunp he was performing an intimate service, submitting to an odious familiarity, with a creature that revolted him unspeakably. A close contact, no matter how impalpable, with a *plunp* . . . ! It made him hate himself. But he couldn't help it.

(The parallelism between this compulsion and that which he had inflicted on Megrath escaped him. Even if he had thought of it, he would not have been edified. He was not a man who edified easily.)

The plunp continued to revolve in front of him, turning first one side and then the other toward the intoxicating dryness it felt emanating from him. It came to Brian that its attitude was that of a worshiper toward a good, serviceable god. It's yellow eyes were closed; its slick skin seemed to be becoming more wrinkled and slack from moment to moment as the dehydration of its tissues continued. Its narrow face wore an expression of repulsive bliss. If he could have moved, Brian felt sure he would have vomited.

Oh, odious. An odious service performed for an odious being. And it felt, somehow, self-destructive, for all Brian's need of moisture. It felt as if Brian, in his new body, had not been quite designed for it. In the contact with the plunp, he was like a plant which, in default of sulphur in its soil, must perforce absorb selenium. He felt almost as if he were poisoning himself.

In this supposition Brian was quite right. The shrine was not really a shrine; in the first instance, it had been a factory. It had been originally designed by biologists of the fourth planet to help their colonists on the second planet adjust to the (for them) overwhelmingly damp environment of Venus.

There are two possible ways of dealing with dampness. One is to be water-*proof,* as are a duck's well-oiled feathers. The Martians tried this and disliked it. They sweltered miserably in the damp heat of their own impervious bodies. So they adopted the second course, which is to enjoy water, to be water *craving,* as is a frog. This solution meant far greater physiological adaptions than had the first one, but the Martians were more satisfied with it.

After they were adapted, they were continually sucking in water through their pores from their damp surroundings, using it in their metabolism, and exhaling dry air out again. There was some degree of selectivity in the process. They could choose which of several objects they wanted to draw water from. It worked fine for the Martians, though in the dry season they were uncomfortable, and when they went home for vacations they were miserable. But Brian hadn't been a Martian to begin with, and the scanners had become a little deranged in the long eons that had passed since there had last been Martians on Venus. It was different with him.

To the plunp, he was a delightfully hygroscopic god. To himself, he was a man afflicted with a peculiarly horrid curse.

The plunp went away at last, its skin hanging in lank folds. It staggered a little as it went over the threshold, as if it were drunk. It had left the empty areda nut behind

it. Brian watched it weaving away through the pouring sheets of rain.

He couldn't move; he couldn't even wriggle. His back had grown completely stiff. He wasn't sure how he was breathing. But he was sure of one thing: he wasn't going to draw water from a plunp again.

If he got thirsty again, how could he help it? He didn't know, but ignorance had no effect on his determination. As he sat immobile, watching the rain turning to chilly darkness, he felt a tiny surge of hope. What had happened to him was impossible. It just couldn't be. So it couldn't go on forever. Sooner or later, somebody would find him. A plant collector, a man doing a government survey—somebody. All he had to do was to stay alive until then.

It rained pouringly all next day. Brian remembered having heard that in this part of Venus the rainfall could, during the rainy season, exceed 30 inches in twenty-four hours.

About noon on the day after that four plunp came. Brian had been able to satisfy a little of his tormenting thirst from the moisture in the air, and he had laid his plans. As the plunp, anointed with yellow ointment, pirouetted in front of him, he drew into himself. It was like being deaf to a barrage of thunder, like refusing to see a blinding light. He didn't know how he was doing it. But he was.

The punp slithered to a stop. They looked at each other wordlessly and began to wave their twiggy hands. Brian felt a flash of triumph; he'd beaten the hated, wretched creatures. He felt even more triumphant when, after another silent round robin, they went out.

They came back in a moment, carrying a sharp cor-

nered wooden chest. (The plunp were not clever enough to make such a thing themselves—they had traded for it with the more civilized Orths.) They opened it. Inside there was a drippy, clinging, gelatinous reddish paste. The plunp had had some prior experience with recalcitrant gods.

The plunp whose skin was grayest wound a gob of the paste on the end of a stick. Rather cautiously he held it out toward Brian. He waved it back and forth across his chest and under the end of his nose.

The result, for Brian, was catastrophic. He felt as if he were being turned inside out. With wild, forced, hateful speed he began to dehydrate the plunp with the grayest skin. It was like falling endlessly down the black face of a vertical cliff, and getting sicker all the time.

The plunp left at last, when it was nearly dark. They were doing little dance steps and making histrionic gestures with their stick-like arms. They waved their hands in salutation to Brian as they went.

He watched them frozenly. He could not even tremble. The moisture he had taken perforce from them had bloated him by a third; he was distended too with rage and helplessness. This time it had been ten—a hundred times worse than at first. After this he'd accept his degradation docilely. Anything was better than having them force him as they had today.

He sat through the night in a trance of glassy horror. At times he was no longer sure who Brian was. He only knew that Brian had endured something he should not have endured. Someone had learned a dreadful secret about Brian. Numbly he waited for day.

That day it rained less, and only one plunp came. The

god who had been Brian thought, "I can stand it if it's only one of them. Yesterday was much worse."

But the day after there were five and then two and then three. It went on day after day, with more plunp as the season advanced and the rain grew heavier. Day after day. The Hrothy would have been more than satisfied.

Brian hated his glassy-eyed worshipers with a fury that was at first murderous and then became turned inward. If he could have moved, could have done anything at all except loathsomely dehydrate the plunp, he would have killed himself. He would dwell with black self-hatred on the intricate details of his self-destruction. Whether it should be by knives, or fire, or corrosive poisons, he could not decide. He wanted the one that would hurt most.

From one point of view, his ingenious preoccupation with the minutiae of his destruction was a blessing. It kept him from suffering anxiety or apprehension as his advancing physical degeneration became evident. His masochism was genuine; each new evidence of failure —patchy vision, auditory failure, permanent bloat—he greeted with delight. He might even have come to welcome the moisture-drawing service the plunp required of him, since it was the primary cause of his breaking up. That, however, remained beyond him.

Time passed. Rain rained. Sometimes as many as twenty plunp stood in the shrine before him, revolving drunkenly, their faces blank. Then, as the days grew longer, the rain began to abate. There was one clear day and then another and then two in a row. The dry summer was setting in.

Worshipers began to come less frequently. When they did, they did not stay long. The gradual drying out of the plunp's slick tissues by the heat of summer did not intoxicate them; it made them sleepy. They were no longer interested in gods and hygroscopy and yellow goo. They were, in fact, beginning to estivate.

Brian at first did not dare to believe in it. But when nearly a week had passed without a single plunp presenting itself for him to dehydrate, he let himself be invaded by a most passionate relief. There were no more demands. The days grew longer and brighter. And there were no more plunp.

Then, as the air grew progressively dryer, Brian found that he was beginning to shrink.

He was not alarmed, he was puzzled. He still sat immobile in his corner, his legs crossed under him, but each day he was smaller, lighter, dryer, than he had been the day before. He passed the point of normal physical size where he had been before the mechanism of the shrine had changed him, and receded from it. His bloated skin was shriveling dustily on him. Still he shrank.

He was not alarmed. His puzzlement was a vague and not alarming emotion. And as time passed there were long blank spaces, stretches of faintly voluptuous blackness, in his thoughts.

It came to him slowly that this creeping blackness, this increasingly welcome annihilation of mentality, meant death. Death? Not the agonizing destructions he had pantingly planned for himself, but something better. He rejoiced in it. But—he still had faint curiosities—but why?

Well, he supposed, even gods don't live forever,

and he had done an incredible amount of dehydration for the plunp. He had worn himself out with it, and the dry season had finished him. Next year the plunp—for the first time since his agony had begun he felt like laughing—next year the plunp would have to find another god.

At last he sat in his corner shrunken no bigger than a doll. He no longer heard or saw or felt. His mind had stopped. He had shriveled up to nothing; his arms and legs were as small as darning balls. There was no more Brian. If he had had a spark of ego left to make the statement, he would have said that he was dead.

But the plunp were in no immediate danger of losing their deity. When the rainy season came, Brian would wake up again. Once more he would resume his loathesome service for them.

Like worshiper, like god. Brian had years more of hygroscopic action for the plunp before him. But now it was summer. Synchronous with the cycle of his worshipers, the god of the plunp was estivating too.

THE ALTRUISTS

In an attempt to convey the maximum of information in the minimum of space, the *Guide to High Galactic Latitude Planetary Systems* is printed on preemtex as thin as gossamer, and its letter-press consists almost exclusively of conventional symbols. Even so, it occupies three huge volumes. The planet Skōs receives half a line in the second of these.

Malcom Knight was reading the item about Skōs for the tenth time, frowning with the effort of translating the difficult symbology "Skōs," he read, "sole satellite of long-period eclipsing binary, components red and blue-white. (For primaries' details see appropriate list-in Volume III.) Mass 9/10 earth normal, radius 11/10. Breathable air, drinkable water. Climate mild, uniform, equable. Three land masses. Inhabited by native non-humanoid race, slurb, extremely friendly and hospitable. Restricted planet, landing only by permit. Coordinates . . ."

Malcom shut the book softly. He showed his long white teeth. The "restricted planet" entry meant only that the authorities felt that the "extremely friendly and hospitable" slurb might get the short end of the stick in casual contacts with human beings. Restrictions never applied to emergency landings, like his was going to be.

He had learned about Skōs by accident two years ago. A messmate of his, Charley Crane, had gone there

with a landing party from the old *Euphrosyne,* and been much impressed with the place. He had praised not so much the physical beauty of the planet—though, to hear Charley tell it, it was an earthly paradise—as he had the character of the slurb.

"They're the kindest, most obliging, most hospitable creatures you ever saw in your life," he had said. "They seem to get a genuine kick out of doing anything at all they can for you. Why, if they'd had women we wanted—they didn't, of course, and nobody knows how they reproduce—we could have had them, and welcome."

"Um," Malcom had said.

"But outside of that . . . They brought us fruits and nuts and meat. The fruit was delicious. They waited on us hand and foot. They washed and mended our clothes as well as they could. They cleaned our shoes. They heated water for us to bathe in, and they'd have bathed us too, if we'd let them. Anything we wanted, they did."

"How did you let them know what you wanted?" Malcom had asked.

"Oh, telepathy. You spoke in English, rather slowly, and they got the idea. By the end of our visit, they were talking a little English themselves."

"It sounds pretty good," Malcom had said cautiously.

"It was, for the first week. Even now I like to remember the first week. After that—I dunno. But you got sick of it."

"Why?" Malcom had wanted to know.

"It's hard to explain. But knowing that somebody would lie down and die if he thought it would give you any pleasure makes you end up hating him. It's

not a natural thing. It makes you want to tear him up into little bits.

"Can't you understand that, Mal? Maybe you can't. I always thought you had more the Dictator and Slave complex than anybody I ever knew."

"Never mind about that," Malcom had said.

And now here he was, roughly about a thousand miles above the upper atmosphere of Skōs, getting ready to land. Crane's words had roused a hankering in him, or made a hankering conscious of which he had been only dimly aware. It seemed to him that the slurb could give him something he'd been looking for all his life.

Altruism. Because, when you came down to it, nobody was altruistic. Parents, teachers, employers, officers, messmates—they all wanted something from you. If anybody did anything nice for you, he wanted to be paid for it.

Even girls. Girls said they loved you, but they wanted something for it. If it wasn't presents and good times—and it almost always was—they still wanted fun for themselves. In a situation where a decent woman should have been satisfied if you were happy, they wanted to be happy too. Sometimes they complained. It was disgusting. No wonder he didn't care much for girls.

But if Charley had been telling the truth, with the slurb it would be different. For the two weeks or so before the rescue ship came for him, he'd have a complete vacation. A vacation from human selfishness.

The little monocraft was spiraling down lightly. Malcom took a universal coordinate grid and began to jimmy it about over the emerging land masses of Skōs. He didn't think there'd be any trouble about his land-

ing; he was almost sure there would not. He had the reputation aboard his ship, the *Tyche*, of being a steady and reliable element, a little rigid and overdisciplined. More than that, the monocraft wasn't expensive. Everyone knew its meteor shielding was far from thorough. For both those reasons his story of a quick, unexpected meteor which had pierced the imperviskin, endangering his air supply and making a planetary landing imperative, would be easily believed. The investigation about the wreck would be a formality.

Yes, he could get away with it. His task in the monocraft—plotting asteroid orbits around Skōs' double primary—made the story inherently probable. The asteroid project had been undertaken more for disciplinary reasons—to give the ratings something to do—than because it was of immediate vital interest. His messmates would congratulate him on not having been killed when the meteor broke the imperviskin. He'd enjoy a delightful little two weeks' vacation at the taxpayers' expense.

He glanced at the battery of gauges, and saw that the one that indicated air pressure within the cabin was falling rapidly. He'd better hurry. He didn't want to get into any real danger in carrying out his plan. He sent the monocraft into a faster whirl.

When Malcom reached the slurb village he was winded and irritable. He had sighted the village from the air, but had not dared set his craft down close to it. He was afraid that such convenient proximity might tend to belie his story of emergency and haste. So he had set up the automatic signaller—the rescue ship should come, he calculated, in not less than twelve or more than fourteen days—and then struck out across country

toward the village. The country, though open and park-like, was dotted with thickets of some spiny-leaved sharp-thorned shrub. Malcom had his choice of clawing his way through the thickets, or of making unending detours. He had detoured; but to travel a distance of five miles, he had had to walk fifteen. The double red and white sun was high in the sky.

He stood looking at the village in silence. It was not impressive—a cluster of mud-plastered huts, in the shape of a segmented circle, around a slowly oozing spring. The spring ran out across a bed of clay that gave place to a swampy expanse of mud. There were humps that looked like submerged boulders in the mud. Around the village there was a fence, with an opening in one side, of the same spiny shrub he had already encountered.

Still Malcom was silent. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that an earth-type planet usually had a surprisingly close resemblance to earth. Except for the double sun in the sky, he might have been at home in the temperate zone on a pleasant day in early fall.

He put his hands to his lips and drew a deep breath. "Hey in there!" he bellowed. "Hurry up! Come on out!"

There was a stir within one of the huts. Then a slurb emerged.

Malcom's first reaction was of surprise that the *Guide* had called the slurb "nonhumanoid." His second was a nauseated recognition of what "nonhumanoid" meant.

The slurb had two arms, two legs, and a head; so has a lizard, and a lizard isn't human. It stood upright; so does a woodchuck, on occasion. It had two eyes in the front of its face, so its vision was probably binocular. But the slurb wasn't human, it wasn't even humanoid.

Perhaps it was the slurb's girth, which was enormous.

The creature was literally as wide as it was tall. Perhaps it was the fact that it had a series of extra joints along the shoulder girdle and down the upper arm, so that its arms moved with the seemingly boneless flexibility of snakes. Perhaps it was the color of its sleek integument, which was a dirty off-white. Perhaps . . . Anyhow, the slurb was nonhumanoid.

Malcom inhaled shudderingly. He felt a disgust that had a moralistic tone. His anger fixed for a moment on Charley Crane—Charley, who had said that the slurb were funny but you soon got used to them—and then fastened firmly on the slurb. He drew his blaster from its holder. Was it for this he'd wrecked the monocraft, risked an investigation and possible prison? But wait—he might get into trouble if he blasted. Skōs was a restricted planet, after all. He'd give the slurb a chance.

"Get me something to eat," he said in loud, slow tones. "Be quick. And then heat water for a bath."

The slurb stood motionless. Malcom fingered his blaster. For a moment the slurb's fate—though not in the sense Malcom would have meant the phrase—hung in the balance. Then the slurb clasped its hands together behind its shoulder blades. It arched backward; the gesture seemed to be meant as a bow. It turned with surprising rapidity and went into the hut. It came back almost immediately with its hands full of purplish fruit.

Malcom enjoyed the next few days. Charley had been right, you soon got used to the funny looks of the slurb. They were no more disturbing than a lot of peculiar looking robots would have been. But the pleasure, the satisfaction, he got from their constant solicitous attention was unlike anything any conceivable robot could

have afforded. It was—he could think of no other word for it—it was wonderful.

They made him a hut, bigger and better than any of theirs. They laid a bed for him of plushy sweet-scented forest boughs. They brought him delicious fruit and strange but savory meats. (Their cuisine was excellent.) They bathed him, they even shaved him with delicate care. But it wasn't their attentions, pleasant though these were in themselves; it was the spirit in which the slurb offered their services. They seemed to live only to please Malcom Knight.

Malcom felt like a man who, dying of thirst, has filled his belly with the precious stuff and now lies blissfully plunged in the cool sweet liquid.

So it went for four days. On the fifth something deeper in him awoke.

Charley Crane had got sick of the slurb's attentions; what Malcom felt was not disgust but a sadistic curiosity.

How far would they go? Would they still like it, still sacrifice themselves to you, when what you asked them to do hurt? Something made him refrain from the worst outrages. Perhaps it was the fear of putting an end to a very good thing, perhaps it was the knowledge that if the slurb were obviously marked and damaged when the rescue ship arrived, he might have to answer for it. But on the sixth day he invented The Game.

It began innocently enough. He had the slurb line up —there were twenty-one of them, all, to his eyes, identical—while he threw gobs of mud at them. By the end of an hour he was throwing rocks at them with all his strength.

He made up a little score card. If he hit the slurb in the face, it counted ten. If he hit it in the chest, it counted three. If he hit the slurb on the knee—for some reason they were very sensitive about their knees—it counted fifteen. If he missed the slurb entirely, it had to go without its dinner. He was always trying to better his scores.

They did not dodge or protest. Sometimes when he got a whanger in on a knee they winced a little. He discovered that if you propel a rock toward a slurb by a blaster at minimum discharge, they wince much more.

He began to have ideas. Weren't there people, people with money, who would get a great deal of pleasure out of the slurb? He thought there were. He was due for discharge from the patrol next year; if he could arrange to get a private ship . . . And it wasn't as if the slurb would mind being sold to such people. They would enjoy it.

He slept late on the morning of the tenth day. The sky seemed gloomy and overcast, not much light was coming in through the door of his hut.

He yawned and stretched, turning luxuriously on his plushy couch. His plans in regard to the slurb had crystallized; in a year or two, at the most, he'd be back in a private ship and take a cargo of them off. There would be difficulties, of course. The whole thing would be ticklish. But the notion of having a cargo of slurb to sell had developed an unexpected business acumen in him. He was sure he could surmount the difficulties. It was just a question of knowing whom to bribe.

He rolled over on his side, wondering whether to try to sleep a little more. No, he was slept out. It was too bad

that he'd have only a few more days with the slurb. But he could think of a lot of interesting variations of The Game in those days.

Meantime, he was getting hungry. He'd have breakfast. Without moving from his bed, he bellowed, "Breakfast! Bath water! Hurry up!"

The seconds passed. There was no response.

Surprise made Malcom sit up. Once more he bellowed. "Breakfast! Damn it, hurry up!"

Still there was no response. Snorting with fury—he'd *fix* them, when they played The Game—he pulled on his pants, stuck his feet in his shoes, and went out.

The first thing that struck him was that the day was remarkably dark. Involuntarily he glanced toward the sky. The suns were well up, but only about half the disk of the white one was visible. The bigger dull red luminary was occluding it.

An eclipse, he supposed. Well, he'd think about it later. Meantime, where were those stinking goddamned slurb?

He looked in a hut and a hut and another hut. No slurb. He finally caught sight of them squatting in a symmetrical double square around the spring. They had plastered themselves with mud until they were nearly invisible. One slurb was sitting in the middle, almost on top of the spring.

Were they trying to hide from him? And in that limp-brain way? "Get up!" he shouted furiously. "Get to work!"

The slurb in the middle raised its head and looked at him. Its eyes were glassy and blank, and he could not tell whether it actually perceived him or not. Then its head dropped forward on its breast.

Malcom aimed a hard kick at the nearest slurb. He heard the whack as his foot connected with its ribs. It rolled with the impact and then crawled back an inch or two. It gave no other sign.

Malcom fingered his blaster. Would a jolt or two at medium discharge liven them up? But there was only a little juice left in the weapon by now, and it frightened him to think what he'd do it if didn't work.

In the end, he went back to his hut. He was hungry, angry, and a little afraid. The slurb's sudden inertia seemed contrary to the course of nature. And the day was getting darker and darker.

He sat on his bed for a while, swearing and cracking his knuckles. Then he went through the huts. He managed to get together a passable breakfast of somewhat overripe fruit. He had no idea where the slurb got the fruit from. How long would they be like this?

About noon he heard a noise outside. He went to the door opening and looked out hopefully. The whole twenty-one slurb were coming toward him, so mud-plastered as to be almost invisible. In both their hands they were carrying—Malcom squinted, to make sure in the heavy twilight—in both hands they were carrying big branches of the spiny shrub.

They stopped in front of his hut. There was a second's pause. Then the slurb in front said, in an oddly human voice, "Come on out."

For a moment Malcom was so surprised at the thing's having spoken English—they had never done anything except twitter and whoop at each other before—that he ignored the meaning of the words. Then he showed his teeth in a grin. Come out? When they were carrying

those nasty branches? What kind of a fool did they take him for?

"Come out," the slurb repeated. To Malcom's ears the words were heavy with menace. Without any hesitation he twisted the dial on his blaster to full discharge and fired at the leading slurb. It was self-defense; they were obviously in a treacherous mood. Perhaps The Game yesterday had been a little too rough.

The slurb fell over. It kicked and writhed for an instant, and then lay still. It was probably dead.

That would show them. They had no way of knowing there was only the tiniest bit of juice left in his blaster. They'd think twice before they'd tell him to come out again.

He drew back within the hut. He was not as frightened as he might have been; the episode had a dream-like, unreal quality. He even felt hopeful. Perhaps, now that he had shown the slurb who was boss, they'd go back to being their normal selves.

He was roused from his optimism by a crackling noise in his rear. He looked round in sudden instinctive fright. My God! Those devils! They'd set the hut on fire!

Whatever they were going to do to him, it couldn't be any worse than fire. In the thick dusk he saw that they had withdrawn from around the door opening. The hut was full of smoke and heat. The roof was beginning to burn. In sudden undignified haste Malcom plunged out of the hut.

The slurb closed in around him. In the glare of the burning shelter, their faces were impassive and glassy-eyed. They began to prod and lash at him with the spiny branches. Malcom was still wearing nothing but his trou-

sers and his shoes. "Move," one of the slurb said. Malcom moved.

They prodded him toward the opening in the fence around the village. Was that all they had in mind, to get rid of him? Malcom, despite the painful lacerations his flanks and back were receiving, could have laughed in his relief. When they got him to gap and all jabbed at him simultaneously with their branches, he went through almost with alacrity.

They did not pursue him. When he was ten feet or so from the hole in the fence, he looked back. The slurb were plainly visible, silhouetted against the glare of the burning hut. They were busily filling in the gap in the spiny fence with thorny branches, and binding it together with vines.

He could, he supposed, do something. He toyed with the idea of setting their damned fence on fire. But then they would come after him again, and this time . . . No, he was lucky all they had done was push him out.

All the same, he was in an unpleasant fix. He couldn't stun anything larger than a weasel with the residual charge in his blaster. he had no shelter, and no immediate prospect of food. He wasn't even wearing a shirt. He felt a sudden passionate anger against Charley Crane, who had misled him so about the nature of the slurb. When the rescue ship came, he'd see what he could do about getting a punitive expedition organized against them. He would only have to tamper a little with the truth.

When the rescue ship . . . Oh. *Oh.* He suddenly perceived that he was in something considerably worse than an unpleasant fix. He had left a message in the automatic signaller, saying that he was taking shelter in the nearest

slurb village. The resucers would look for him there first. And when they found he wasn't there—

There was only one thing to do. He must get to the signaller. And wait there patiently until rescue came.

It was the only thing. He had to do it. But how in hell was he going to find the signaller in the dark?

For a moment Malcolm felt despair. Then he brightened. Finding the signaller wasn't, after all, the only thing he could do. If he went a little farther into the parkland—he didn't want to stay too near the village, for fear the slurb would decide to attack him more decisively this time—if he went a little further, he could build a signal fire. There wasn't any immediate hurry about it, since the ship wasn't due for a couple of days. The slurb might change their minds before then. And if they didn't, his fire would be plainly visible from the air.

His self-confidence had come back. He even whistled softly as he walked away from the village. If only it weren't so damned dark. The light of the dim red sun did not illuminate; it made objects swim in a thick, depressing haze.

He'd make a camp. Sometimes it rained at night, and there was no sense in getting wet unnecessarily. He'd make a small fire, for comfort and warmth. And he ought to be able to find enough fruit, of one or another of the sorts the slurb had brought him, to get by.

He settled on a spot about a mile from the slurb village, an open space in front of a group of large-leaved trees. The country here was wooded, almost a forest in spots, and he had no difficulty in getting together a large pile of dry branches for his fire. He was less successful with his lean-to shelter, but it would, he supposed, keep off the worst of a heavy downpour. Oh, well. The rescue

ship would be here at the latest in four days. *Damn* the slurb.

Now, food. He'd better make a small fire so he could find his way back to his camp. He stumbled about in the murk for an hour or so, his stomach growling, but in the bad light all the trees looked alike. He was just about to give up and return empty to his shelter when he found a lone tree covered with big mushy globes.

He picked all he could carry and took them back to his fire. In the ruddy light he saw that they were, as he had hoped, an orange fruit, rather like a persimmon, the slurb had given him once or twice. He wouldn't starve, anyway.

Now he could begin to wait. The red sun was almost on the horizon. In a little while it would be quite dark.

He piled branches on his fire. Slowly, to make it last, he peeled and ate two of the orange fruit. They were rather tasteless, but remarkably filling. He yawned. His belly was full, he'd had a hard day, and the warmth of the fire was making him sleepy. The *Guide* had not mentioned any dangerous animals on Siōs. He had time to kill. He slept.

He was wakened by a sudden intense stab of visceral pain. The sensation was so urgent and unexpected that it brought him bolt upright even before his eyes opened, in automatic defense.

He looked about him, sweating, his hand on his blaster. The slurb—an attack—he'd been wounded—those devils—they—But his fire was burning calmly and brightly, his body was intact, and nothing moved in the forest. No, wait. Wasn't there a shimmer of . . . something . . . just at the edge of the circle of light made by his fire? Under the branches?

He leaned forward, peering urgently. No, it must have been his imagination. There was nothing visible except the light of his fire.

But in that case, what had happened? Had the orange fruit he had eaten griped him? But it hadn't been a pain like that, it had been like something from the outside and yet subjective. It had been as if his body had suffered without a visible wound or lesion, and yet from the outside.

In the end, he decided that he must have had a nightmare. He piled the fire high with branches, and sat down with his back against a tree trunk. But it was a long time before he went back to sleep.

Next day the white sun was still in eclipse. What ailed the thing, anyhow? He'd never heard of an eclipse lasting that long. Malcom spent the morning assembling an enormous pile of branches, the afternoon stripping the tree of all its ripe fruit. It was a long, dull day. There was no sign of the slurb.

When the final darkness came on, he felt restless and uneasy. He told himself that it was because he was hungry; the orange fruit made him feel stuffed, but left him unsatisfied. He built a big fire, much larger than the one last night, and sat as close to it as he could get, finding, in its searing warmth, a certain relief of his nervousness.

Four or five hours after sundown, at what would have been 10 or 11 o'clock, he felt a second stab of the pain.

Malcom's eyes darted uncertainly from side to side. His hand moved to his belly, to his head. Where had he been attacked? He was wide awake, his fire was blazing brightly, nothing had come near him. Had his brain re-

ceived a message of pain, and given it to his body to feel?

He was drenched with sweat. Oh, he must have caught some fever, be coming down with a serious disease. It would have been a relief for him to think so. No, this was an infliction from without. And there was something oddly, inexplicably familiar in it. Not in the pain itself, whose intensity was altogether outside of his experience. But it was as if the impulses, the motives behind the pain had somehow had their origin with him.

A shimmer in the air between the firelight and the trees caught his eye. He stared at it with frightened apprehension. He was imagining—yes, no, he wasn't. Something impalpable was in motion in the air under the trees.

The moments passed. The shimmer was unmistakable now. The forest began to shiver and dance.

Its contours shifted and wavered while the branches softly dripped pale gold. They came back to solidity and then were gone once more in shimmering motion. Even the firelight began to quiver. As the dance continued, Malcom had the sudden wild idea that the forest was alive with mental force.

Mental force? Were the trees mental trees? He was seized by an abrupt stabbing paroxysm of pain in his chest. It hurt too much for him to be able to shriek. When he came out of it, the air was momentarily still. In his brief freedom he wondered: whose mental force?

The next attack was in the pit of his stomach, the one after that in his bladder and bowels. He vomited, he soiled himself. He lay in his own mess, filthy and miserable. This time, under the pain—and it made him sicker

than the pain had—he sensed a thin edge of pleasure. It was not his pleasure, not even pleasure in his suffering. But it was there. Someone was enjoying himself very much.

The night wore on. The attacks, always more agonizing, came in long jets of pain and seemed to involve every part of his body indifferently. He thought it rained toward morning. He thought his fire went out.

The day came. It was brighter than yesterday, as the red sun withdrew slowly from the white primary. But it was not until late afternoon that Malcom could rouse himself to eat a little and try to clean himself. He was too weak to collect branches or try to kindle a fire. He looked forward to the coming night with sickening dread.

The torment began early, almost as soon as the sun had gone down. But except at first, it was not as bad as last night. That was not because the paroxysms of pain were less, but because they were so intense that Malcom was very soon delirious. Somebody was suffering, writhing and convulsed. Somebody shrieked, time after time. Somebody wondered how he could stand so much. It was not he.

A little before daybreak he fell into a coma. And then, instead of the nightmare glimpses of himself as he screamed and babbled and raved there was only a dark pit. Just before it closed over him he thought he saw an arc of light in the sky.

They came for him at last. It was a little before noon. He was conscious, but too exhausted to do anything more than open his eyes. Tenderly they lifted him in their boneless arms and carried him back to the village. They had built a new hut for him. They laid him

on the plushy, fragrant bed and bathed his dirty body expertly.

On the second day Malcolm had them carry him out of the hut. He was tormented by worry about the rescue ship. It ought to have been here by now. When the slurb were not quite as quick in obeying his command to carry him out as he thought they should be, he cursed at them—weakly, but in quite the old style.

When he was outside, he scanned the sky anxiously. No, there was nothing. He hadn't really expected to see anything—even if he had known where to look for the ship, he couldn't have picked it up without a scope.

He sighed. "Take me back," he said to his slurb. "No, wait. What's that, over on the other side of the spring? Take me there."

He had seen a flash of white. Eagerly and gently they obeyed him. When he got to the spot he saw that the white thing was a cross, made of two pieces of wood. On it somebody had painted his name, Malcom Knight, and his age, 29, in black paint.

For a moment he didn't understand. The rescue ship —had—that arc in the sky he remembered—had the ship —Then he turned on the slurb, raging. "You filth! You stinking, stinking filth! Damn you, damn you. Why did you lie to them?"

There was a second's silence. Then one of the slurb stepped forward. "They didn't like you, master. They wanted to hear you had died. We wanted them to be happy. We told them what would please."

Rage and despair fought against his weakness. He picked up a rock and threw it at them. He hit a knee. He threw again and again. In the end he fainted, and they had to carry him back to the hut.

It was nearly dark when he recovered consciousness. A slurb came in as soon as he called, with a bowl of delicious-smelling soup. Malcom pushed it aside. He had to know.

"Tell me," he said to the slurb, "why you brought me back from the forest. Why did you drive me out in the first place? Why didn't you take the men from the rescue ship to me? I want to know."

"Yes, master," said the slurb obediently. It was silent, as if arranging its thoughts. "You see, master, we lay eggs."

"Eggs?" Malcom felt anger rising in him again.

"Yes, master. Whenever the red sun hides the white one, we lay eggs. That is what the lumps are, out in the mud."

"Well? What has your laying eggs got to do with your driving me out?"

"When we lay eggs, we want to be by ourselves. Oh, it was a good egg-laying, master. There were never so many eggs before, so much wonderful pleasure in it. We drove you out to be by ourselves. We didn't tell the men where you were because we knew they didn't want to find you. And we brought you back because we knew we owed that lovely egg-laying to *you*.

"You are so strong, so ordering. When men order us about, it makes us lay more eggs. We would always lay them, of course, but not so many. That is why we like visitors. We soak up their pleasure when they order us or hurt us, as you did with the rocks. And we give their pleasure out again when we lay eggs."

Malcom sank back on his bed. He felt too sick for rage. Those paroxysms of pain in the forest the horrid familiarity of what he had experienced—the feeling of

pleasure underneath—oh, God. Charley Crane had said the slurb were telepathic. This was telepathy carried to its final limits. Their hospitality, their altruism—the slurb were psychic cannibals.

The slurb bent over him anxiously. "Are you well, master? Give me an order, or throw a rock at me. Enjoy yourself. It will make the next egg-laying better."

Malcom shook his head feebly. *Next* egg-laying? He couldn't survive even the first night of another one. He'd be through.

Slurb began to enter the hut. They lined up around his bed. Anxiously and tenderly they regarded him, their boneless arms clasped behind their backs. "We only want you to be happy," chorused the slurb.

SHORE LEAVE

Sex is sex. Pretty much, with a good many exceptions. But sailors are universally sailors. Certainly.

There was a lot of good-natured jostling at the gangplank. Good-natured, because after all they hadn't been in space long enough for the tension in the ship to have built up to a lack of group harmony, let alone any actual diversity; jostling, because nine parzoors in space *is* a long time, and those who had shore leave were eager to land, make their ipsisses, and copulate. It was Xylen's private opinion that they hadn't picked up the blue planet in the viewing plate an eem too soon. Much longer in space, and there might have been a group change of mind.

By an amusing little coincidence, Xylen, who was the ship's third officer, was the third to touch the blue planet's soil. He landed on the springy turf with a slight bounce, and went rolling along in the form of a miniscule doughnut. It was a form he had always particularly liked. And today was a good day to take a form he liked.

He rolled along sedately enough, with the others from the ship fanning out behind him, but he was on fire with eagerness and curiosity. This planet they'd come to—could life on it really be as easy as it seemed? In their preliminary survey from the air they'd been impressed not only with the planet's amazing physical diver-

sity—there was water, land, trees, sand, and ice—but with the fact that even in the two polar zones life here must be easier than at the best on Xylen's home planet. The blue planet did seem to be an easy, easy place, with incredibly easy conditions of life. And easy living conditions were all too often associated with an objectionable degree of biological diversity.

Xylen hoped that wouldn't turn out to be the case. Too much diversity, and the planet would have to be infected. That, after all, was what his ship had taken to space for in the first place—to make sure that sameness, the moral law of life, was enforced. And he liked the blue planet. He liked it a lot. He did hope. . . .

Oh, to difference with such thoughts! He'd cross that bridge when he got to it. For the present, happy, homologous, shared sexual experience lay in front of him. After nine parzoors in space, love. The warm sun shone, the shadow of long grass fell upon him He rolled.

Abruptly his rolling slackened. There was a living creature up ahead.

What was it the captain had said when he'd been dealing out the sidearms? "Be careful, there's always more or less danger on a strange planet." And he'd gone on to warn them that on a planet as diverse as this there might be some outsize life forms. They must be careful not to pick something too big for them to make adequate ipsisses of it.

This creature had eight long legs, but Xylen thought he had plasm enough to manage an adequate duplicate of it. Its legs were slender and wouldn't take much bulk. And it was male; Xylen picked up strong thoughts of mating from its mind. There were other elements there too, but mating predominated. Was it enough?

Perhaps he ought to wait, to see if there were other life forms on the planet he'd like better. But there couldn't be more than two or three other sorts, despite the planet's physical diversity, and this one was certainly thinking strongly of mating. If he duplicated it, he could mate just as it was going to. An ipsiss was an exact duplicate —instincts, desires, everything.

For a moment longer Xylen hesitated, probing the eight-legger's minute, elaborately organized brain. Yes, it was enough. He scanned.

The captain had told them to be back on the ship by eight bandooles. The first thought that Xylen had when he was back in his favorite doughnut shape again, and his amorous adventure was over, was anxiety as to how much time had passed. All that pre-copulatory dancing in front of the female must have taken a long time. His second thought was sheer astonishment.

It couldn't really have happened; he must have imagined it. Had he really woven a sperm mat . . . . and charged his palps from it . . . . and gone dancing in front of a hungry female . . . and . . . and. . . . ? Why, he couldn't have imagined such a mode of mating in his wildest moments of diversity! What he had been expecting had been some slight variation on a familiar, if pleasant, theme. What he had got—not that it hadn't been a lot of fun—but. . . He must have imagined it!

He leaned back against a blade of grass, forming optic lenses and protruding plasm over them. No, he hadn't imagined it, it had really happened, that was the way creatures on the plue planet did it. He couldn't get over it. He was *amazed.*

At length he recovered himself sufficiently to start

back to the ship. Experience like that was going to be hard to share. His doughnut kept wobbling all the way.

Seven bandooles struck as he trundled up the gangplank. As soon as he opened the outer port a noise of confused, angry thinking struck his mind.

"I tell you, that's the way it was," Roybal, the second officer, said passionately. "I made a little packet, a spermatophore, for her, and put it down in front of her. She stuck it on herself, in the right place. Then she turned her head around and ate it. And it was wonderful, it was just the right thing. I can't tell you what a thrill it was for me to see her eating my little packet of sperms."

"I don't see how she'd ever get to be a mother that way," Tentor, who was a big, serious, slow-moving fellow, put in. His favorite shape was a rhomboid. "Now with me——"

"Yah!" the explosive comment came from Dleet. He hadn't had any shore leave yet, and the diversive tendencies Xylen had always suspected him of having seemed to be well to the fore. "What's the matter with you guys? I never heard such stories as the ones you tell. And every one of you has a different yarn. What the difference is the matter with you?"

The thoughts grew angrier. Tentor got up from his bunk and began to protrude around the room. "I don't know how it was with the others," he rumbled, "I only know how it was with me. I made my ipsiss like an enormous animal. I'm the biggest of the crew, you know, and I was just barely able to make it.

"The mating was a little like what happened to Roybal, but entirely different. Because I made a thing, a jelly-tipped pyramid, that I guess you could call a

spermatophore. Only she didn't eat it, she *sat down* on it."

There was an instant's pause. Then Dleet said deliberately, "I never heard such lies. Creatures don't mate like that. It's impossible. They ought to call this the lie planet in the log, instead of identifying it as the third from its sun. It must be something in the air that makes you all tell lies like that. Hah! Do you realize that not one of you has said a syllable about a copulatory bridge?"

A silence fell, as silence full of astonishment, as the men who had had shore leave assimilated the incredible fact: not only had there been no copulatory bridges; none of them, at any tiime, had exchanged nuclei.

"It did happen, though," rumbled Tentor at last. He was getting more rhomboidic than usual. "And I'm not going to have anybody calling me a liar. Does Dleet want to repeat that?"

Dleet turned his upper end from side to side as though considering. "All right," he said finally, "I'll stand by what I said. To the diverse with group harmony! Tentor is a liar. And so are all the rest of you."

"Oh, indeed!" replied Tentor. He paused, flexing his plasm. Then battle was joined.

Roybal, Jenst, Dyax, Snigm, Fraad, sprang in with the original combatants. The cabin rocked. It was dreadful, it was incredible, it was the very negation of group harmony.

Xylen hovered on the outskirts of the melee with horror in his heart. The blue planet had seemed like the home of love, but now he saw it for what it was, the very lair of the primeval Diverse. With an unvoiced wail he sprang into the combat. He had nothing to lose, and

Dleet, after all, had called him a liar too by implication. He might as well *be* diverse.

Bits of plasm began to fly out from the storm center. They turned momentarily into a spider's palp, a bristletail's pincer, a bit of termite's wing, a shred of newt's tail, the striped yellow and brown thorax of a wasp.

It got worse. If the cabin had seemed to rock before, by now the whole ship must be shaking under the combatants' ferocious blows. Xylen wondered numbly whether the tubes of panischyric virus in the ship's laboratory would be upset. Panischyric virus was what the ship used for infecting any planet it wanted to wipe clean of life. The tubes were well padded, but they weren't meant to stand strains like this; if the virus got into the ship's ventilators, they'd all be dead inside of ten eems. It didn't seem to matter much. He began twisting somebody's pseudopod again.

At the height of the melée there came an abrupt pause. Xylen, who had landed on the bottom of the heap of fighters, probably because he wasn't hitting quite so hard as everybody else, felt the others picking themselves up and getting off of him. At last he was able to raise himself. He looked around.

The Captain was standing in the middle of the cabin. His digits were on his guns, he was shaped like a perfect square. He had never looked more imposing, more same. Xylen felt a deep relief that he was there.

The captain's gaze swept around the cabin—over the maimed, the bleeding, the merely bruised. "What's all the discharge about?" he asked.

Babbling, shrieking, cursing, explaining, they enlightened him. He cut the racket short after a couple of eems

with a gesture. "Mister Roybal, prepare course data. We're jetting immediately," he said.

"But Sir!" Dleet shrieked. "But sir! Don't you think we ought to——"

"The next crewman who makes a comment," the Old Man said deliberately, "will be exposed at the jets as soon as we hit deep. You are all to take on double cone forms until further notice. Mister Roybal, I expect you to jet inside of fifteen eems."

The little ship jetted on the fourteenth eem.

It didn't help matters very much. Even after the blue planet was far astern, discussions and arguments, if not actual physical combat, continued. Those who had had shore leave jangled among themselves over the meaning and variety of their sexual experience; those who hadn't were bitter, incredulous, and envious. It got so bad that Xylen began to wonder whether a rumor he'd heard on the home planet before they left could possibly be true: that sailors on ships with infective missions, like the ship he was on, were always people with diversive tendencies. Otherwise they'd have been content to stay home and not think so much about diversity. It was a dreadful idea. On top of it an even more dreadful one came to plague him.

What if the reason his people insisted that Sameness was the moral law of life was that they themselves were by nature fundamentally un-Same? The way they were always changing shape. . . .

No, no. He wouldn't let himself think it. Primordial Difference had sent such thoughts to try him. His people were the only life-form on their home planet; nothing could be more Same than identity. Yet what form were

they? They were forever making ipsisses of things. Xylen could make himself like any animal he had enough plasm for. What was his real shape? Did he have any real shape? What was anybody's real shape?

Sameness help him from such blasphemous thoughts! It must be the diversity-ridden atmosphere of the ship that was fostering them. He could stop having such ghastly ideas if they could get back into a state of group harmony.

One night when he and Roybal were in their cabin, playing turr, he said abruptly, "We ought to go back. We'll never be a happy ship again until we do."

"Back to the blue planet?" Roybal answered so promptly that Xylen knew he had been thinking about it too. "To infect it, you mean?"

"Probably," Xylen replied judicially, though it gave him a tiny pang to say the word. "It's my belief, Roybal, that there are depths of diversity on that planet that have never been probed. For example, there might be animal forms so enormous that if we noticed them at all we'd think they were vegetable, like trees. Life's awfully easy there. Or those huge stone concretions we noticed from the air—we thought they were natural, but what if they were artificial, something in the way of cities? You get my idea."

Roybal pushed the game board aside so quickly that one of the pieces fell off. "If that's the case," he said excitedly, "we ought to infect it, and at once. In the interests of morality."

"Probably," Xylen answered again. "But it's not so much abstract right and wrong that I'm thinking of as the effect on us ourselves. When half the group thinks the other half is . . . is lying, what becomes of group harmony?

We could have immoral thoughts. We ought to go back to equalize our experiences."

"You mean, stay there until the whole crew has had the same things happen to it?"

"Either that, or until the whole crew will at least admit the possibility of such a wide diversity in satisfactory mating."

Roybal got up and began to protrude around the room. "If you think that," he said without turning, "and I'm bound to say you make it sound very reasonable—then it's your duty to try to create a group change of mind. So we can go back."

Xylen was shocked. "But change is often dangerous," he answered feebly, "and it's closely connected with immorality."

"Sometimes you have to change in the interests of Sameness," Roybal said.

His words sunk deeply into Xylen's mind. His religious worries vanished. After an interval of earnest consideration, he began to go round among the crew, advancing arguments and meeting objections. The consequence was that after no more than six oods of lobbying, Xylen was formally empowered to go to the Old Man and present him with the evidence for a group change of mind.

The captain, as was proper, received him equably. When he scrutinized his credentials, he said, "And suppose—only suppose—that I refuse to return, Mister, because I think it contrary to the best interests of the ship. Then what?"

"You can't refuse, sir." Xylen said definitely. "When

there's been a group change of mind, to hold out against it would be . . . would be sheer diversity."

The captain's face went up, but he said nothing except, "Very well, I shall tell Roybal to change the course of the ship."

They landed in almost the same spot where they had been before, an almond grove in the San Joaquin valley. During the ship's landing spiral there had been much excited observation of the huge stone concretions Xylen had mentioned in his talk with Roybal, and both officers and crew had come to the conclusion that they indicated a potentially dangerous degree of diversity. The blue planet would be infected with panischyric virus when the ship left. Meantime, there was the creative task of equalizing the crew's experiences.

"You ought to go too, sir," Xylen said respectfully to the captain as the shore party, Dleet last among them, was filing out.

The captain's face made a frown. "Why do you say that, Mister?" he asked.

"Because you're the captain, sir. It's particularly important that you share all our experiences, for the sake of the Same."

"Um, yes. I see your point. . . . I gather that you've been exploring this question of diversity quite a lot. What would you recommend that I make my ipsiss like?"

Xylen considered. "Well, sir, my own experience was about as . . . as diverse as anything could well be. I made a sperm mat . . . and charged my palps. . . . It was an eight-legged creature, sir, with a soft hairy body in the middle and white plumes in front. But it's

only fair to warn you, sir, that I picked up thoughts of danger from its brain. Apparently this planet is so diverse, sir, that sometimes the female threatens the male."

The captain laughed. "Danger!" he said. "I'll still have my side arms, no matter what my ipsiss is. And I find it hard to believe, no matter what you say, that anything so same as mating can be dangerous. . . . I'll be back by eight bandooles."

He got up from his seat and started after the other. Dleet, who had turned his face around to listen, took up an outward stance again.

Most of them were back before eight bandooles. Reeling, wobbling, extruding, they entered the ship and began to argue. It would, Xylen perceived, take rather an extensive stay on the blue planet before their experiences would be equalized. Still, steps were being made in that direction: men who had made the same ipsiss agreed on the validity of their experience unreservedly.

Eight bandooles came and went. No captain. Ten bandooles, and then four. Still he hadn't come. By now it was growing dark. Roybal, who was acting captain in the Old Man's absence, gave orders to put the ship in shape for the night.

Morning came, after a long, long time. Dleet at last voiced the general uneasiness. "The captain isn't coming back," he said positively. "He's dead. He's been killed."

"I told him it was a dangerous ipsiss," Xylen said, as if to himself.

"*You* told him!" Dleet exclaimed. "Oh, yes, you told him," he went on bitterly. "You told him what ipsiss

to make; I heard you. You deliberately lured him to his death."

Xylen felt sick. This planet was always confronting him with new depths of diversity. But he managed to stand his ground, in the face of Dleet's attack. "Why would I do a . . . a different thing like that?" he demanded.

"Because you wanted your friend Roybal to be captain," Dleet retorted promptly. "And you wanted to be second officer yourself." He glanced around at the others in the mess hall. "What do the rest of you say? Am I right?"

At the question, the latent diversity in the air seemed to explode. "Yes!" somebody bellowed. "No, no, no!" cried somebody else. "Dleet and Xylen are both liars and diverse!" yelled a third.

Inside an eem a fight was going on in the mess hall that made the other one look like nothing at all.

Xylen had managed to stay out of it. He edged along a wall, worked his way out of the mess hall, and rolled down the corridor toward the ship's laboratory. He was going to put the tubes of virus in the virus seeder, press the timer and swing the seeder outboard, and then seal the ship hermetically. It was the standard procedure for infecting a planet. Then he'd go into the control room and jet-off somehow. They could get course data later, when they were in space. What mattered now was getting away from this ghastly place.

Despite his agitation, he was still cautious. He picked up the four tubes of virus culture very carefully indeed. There was a slight grating sound as he moved with them toward the seeder, but he ascribed it to the fight in the

mess hall. It was, as a matter of fact, Roybal sealing the ship hermetically.

Xylen pressed the pedal that opened the seeder. He put two tubes of virus carefully inside. He was just about to put the third in its place in the rack when the ship staggered crushingly from stem to stern. It was Roybal, in the control room, warming up the jets for a take-off. He too wanted to get the ship away from the blue planet immediately.

Xylen fought to keep his balance. For a moment he managed to stay upright. Then there came a further shock. He went rolling over and over. One of the tubes of panischyric virus culture he was holding broke.

Death by the virus is mercifully swift. Xylen had hardly time to realize what his fate was going to be before it had overtaken him. His last thought before blackness closed over him was an unemotional wonder at the strength of Diversity.

Panischyric virus is just as universally deadly as the little people in the ship believed it to be. If any of the virus culture had reached the blue planet's surface, all animal life, and most vegetable, would have been doomed. But the ship was hermetically sealed, and the virus soon dies in air without a host. When, two or three months later, the almond grower rototilled his grove and buried the little ship a foot deep in the soil, the virus had been dead for a long time. And earth went on being safe for Diversity.

THE WINES OF EARTH

Joe da Valora grew wine in the Napa valley. The growing of premium wine is never especially profitable in California, and Joe could have made considerably more money if he had raised soya beans or planted his acreage in prunes. The paperwork involved in his occupation was a nightmare to him; he filled out tax and license forms for state and federal governments until he had moments of feeling his soul was made out in triplicate, and he worked hard in the fields too. His son used to ask him why he didn't go into something easier. Sometimes he wondered himself.

But lovers of the vine, like all lovers, are stubborn and unreasonable men. As with other lovers, their unreasonableness has its compensations. Joe da Valora got a good deal of satisfaction from the knowledge that he made some of the best Zinfandel in California (the Pinot Noir, his first love, he had had to abandon as not coming to its full excellence in his particular part of the Napa valley.). He vintaged the best of his wine carefully, slaved over the vinification to bring out the wine's full freshness and fruitiness.

Joe da Valora lived alone. His wife was dead, and his son had married a girl who didn't like the country. Often they came to see him on Sundays, and they bought him expensive gifts at Christmas time. Still, his evenings were

apt to be long. If he sometimes drank a little too much of his own product, and went to bed with the edges of things a little blurred, it did him no harm. Dry red table wine is a wholesome beverage, and he was never any the worse for it in the morning. On the nights when things needed blurring, he was careful not to touch the vintaged Zinfandel. It was too good a wine to waste on things that had to be blurred.

Early in December, when the vintage was over and the new wine was quietly doing the last of its fermentation in the storage containers, he awoke to the steady drumming of rain on his roof. Well. He'd get caught up on his bookkeeping. He hoped the rain wouldn't be too hard. Eight of his acres were on a hillside and after every rain he had to do some re-terracing.

About eleven, when he was adding up a long column of figures, he felt a sort of soundless jarring in the air. He couldn't tell whether it was real, or whether he had imagined it. Probably the latter—his hearing wasn't any too good these days. He shook his head to clear it, and began pouring himself some of the unvintaged Zinfandel.

After lunch the rain stopped and the sky grew bright. He finished his wine and started out for a breath of air. As he left the house he realized that he was just a little, little tipsy. Well, that wasn't such a bad way for a vintner to be. He'd go up to the hillside acres and see how they did.

There had been very little soil washing, he saw, inspecting the hillside. The re-terracing would be at a minimum. In fact, most of the soil removal he was doing himself, on the soles of his boots. He straightened up,

feeling pleased. Then, ahead of him on the slope he saw four young people, two men and two girls.

Da Valora felt a twinge of annoyance and alarm. What were they doing here? A vineyard out of leaf isn't attractive, and the hillside was well back from the road. He'd never had any trouble with vandals, only with deer. If these people tramped around on the wet earth, they'd break the terracing down.

As he got within speaking distance of them, one of the girls stepped forward. She had hair of an extraordinary copper-gold, and vivid, intensely turquoise, eyes (The other girl had black hair, and the two men were dark blondes.). Something about the group puzzled da Valora, and then he located it. They were all dressed exactly alike.

"Hello," the girl said.

"Hello," da Valora answered. Now that he was near to them, his anxiety about the vines had left him. It was as if their mere proximity—and he was to experience this effect during all the hours they spent with him—both stimulated and soothed his intellect, so that cares and pettinesses dropped away from him, and he moved in a larger air. He seemed to apprehend whatever they said directly, in a deeper way than words are usually apprehended, and with a wonderful naturalness.

"Hello," the girl repeated. "We've come from . . ." somehow the word escaped Joe's hearing, "to see the vines."

"Well, now," said Joe, pleased, "have you seen enough of them? This planting is Zinfandel. If you have, we might go through the winery. And then we might sample a little wine."

Yes they would like to. They would all like that.

They moved beside him in a group, walking lightly and not picking up any of the wet earth on their feet. As they walked along they told him about themselves. They were winegrowers themselves, the four of them, though they seemed so young, in a sort of loose partnership, and they were making a winegrowers' tour of . . . of. . . .

Again Joe's hearing failed him. But he had the fancy that there would never be any conflict of will among the four of them. Their tastes and wishes would blend like four harmonious voices, the women's high and clear, the men's richer and more deep. Yet it seemed to him that the copper-haired girl was regarded with a certain deference by her companions, and he thought, wisely, that he knew the reason. It was what he had so often told his wife—that when a lady really liked wine, when she really had a palate for it, nobody could beat her judgment. So the others respected her.

He showed them through the winery without shame, without pride. If there were bigger wineries than his in the Napa valley, there were smaller ones too. And he knew he made good wine.

Back in the house he got out a bottle of his vintaged Zinfandel, the best Zinfandel he had ever made, for them. It wasn't only that they were fellow growers, he also wanted to please them. It was the '51.

As he poured the dark, fragrant stuff into their glasses he said, "What did you say the name of your firm was? Where did you say you were from?"

"It isn't exactly a firm," the dark-haired girl said, laughing. "And you wouldn't know the name of our home star."

Star? Star? Joe da Valora's hand shook so that he dribbled wine outside the glass. But what else had he expected? Hadn't he known from the moment he had seen them standing on the hillside? Of course they were from another star.

"And you're making a tour?" he asked, putting down the bottle carefully.

"Of the nearer galaxy. We have only a few hours to devote to earth."

They drank. Joe da Valora wasn't surprised when only one of the men, the darker blonde, praised the wine with much vigor. No doubt they'd tasted better. He wasn't hurt —they'd never want to hurt him—or at least not much hurt.

Yet as he looked at the four of them sitting around his dining table—so young, so wise, so kind—he was fired with a sudden honorable ambition. If they were only going to be here a few hours, then it was up to him—since nobody else could do it—it was up to him to champion the wines of earth.

"Have you been to France?" he asked.

"France?" the dark-haired girl answered. So he knew the answer to the question.

"Wait," he told them, "wait. I'll be back." He went clattering down the cellar stairs.

In the cellar, he hesitated. He had a few bottles of the best Pinot Noir grown in the Napa valley; and that meant nobody could question it, the best Pinot Noir grown in California. But which year should he bring? The '43 was the better balanced, feminine, regal, round, and delicate. The '42 was a greater wine, but its inherent imbalance and its age had made it arrive at the state that

winemakers call fragile. One bottle of it would be glorious, the next vapid, passe and flat.

In the end, he settled on the '42. He'd take his chances. Just before he left the cellar, he picked up another bottle and carried it up with him. It was something his son had given him a couple of years ago; he'd been saving it for some great occasion. After all, he was championing the wines of *Earth*.

He opened the '42 anxiously. It was too bad he hadn't known about their coming earlier. The burgundy would have benefited by longer contact with the air. But the first whiff of the wine's great nose reassured him; this bottle was going to be all right.

He got clean glasses, the biggest he had, and poured an inch of the wine into them. He watched wordlessly as they took the wine into their mouths, swished it around on their palates, and chewed it, after the fashion of wine-tasters everywhere. The girl with the copper hair kept swirling her glass and inhaling the wine's perfume. He waited tensely for what she would say.

At last she spoke. "Very sound. Very good."

Joe da Valora felt a pang of disappointment whose intensity astonished him. He looked at the girl searchingly. Her face was sad. But she was honest. "Very sound, very good," was all that she could say.

Well, he still had an arrow left in his quiver. Even if it wasn't a California arrow. His hands were trembling as he drew the cork out of the bottle of Romanee-Conti '47 his son had given him. (Where had Harold got it? The wine, da Valora understood, was rare even in France. But the appelation of origin was in order. Harold must have paid a lot for it.)

More glasses. The magnificent perfume of the wine rose to his nose like a promise. Surely this. . . .

There was a long silence. The girl with the dark hair finished her wine and held out her glass for more. At last the other girl said, "A fine wine. Yes, a fine wine."

For a moment Joe da Valora felt he hated her. Her, and the others. Who were these insolent young strangers, to come to Earth, drink the flower, the cream, the very pearl, of earth's vintages, and dismiss it with so slight a compliment? Joe had been drinking wine all his life. In the hierarchy of fine wines, the Zinfandel he made was a petty princeling; the Pinot '42 was a great lord; but the wine he had just given them to drink was the sovereign, the unquestioned emperor. He didn't think it would be possible to grow a better wine on Earth.

The girl with the copper-gold hair got up from the table. "Come to our ship," she said. "Please. We want you to taste the wine we make."

Still a little angry, Joe went with them. The sun was still well up, but the sky was getting overcast. It would rain again before night.

The ship was in a hollow behind the hillside vineyard. It was a big silver sphere, flattened at the bottom, that hovered a few feet above the rows of vines. The copper-haired girl took his hand, touched a stud at her belt, and they rose smoothly through the flattened bottom into a sort of foyer. The others followed them.

The ship's interior made little impression on Joe da Valora. He sat down on a chair of some sort and waited while the copper-haired girl went into a pantry and came back with a bottle.

"Our best wine," she said, holding it out for him to see.

The container itself was smaller and squatter than an

earth bottle. From it she poured a wine that was almost brownish. He was impressed by its body even in the glass.

He swirled the wine glass. It seemed to him he smelled violets and hazelnuts, and some other perfume, rich and delicate, whose name he didn't know. He could have been satisfied for a half hour, only inhaling the wine's perfume. At last he sipped at it.

"Oh," he said when he had swished it in his mouth, let it bathe his palate, and slowly trickle down his throat. "Oh."

"We don't make much of it," she said, pouring more into his glass. "The grapes are so hard to grow."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "Now I see why you said, 'A fine wine.' "

"Yes. We're sorry, dear Earth man."

"Don't be sorry," he said, smiling. He felt no sting of inferiority, no shame for Earth. The distance was too great. You couldn't expect Earth vines to grow the wine of paradise.

They were all drinking now, taking the wine in tiny sips, so he saw how precious it was to them. But first one and then the other of them would fill his glass.

The wine was making him bold. He licked his lips, and said, "Cuttings? Could you . . . give me cuttings? I'd take them to, to the University. To Davis." Even as he spoke he knew how hopeless the words were.

The darker blonde man shook his head. "They wouldn't grow on Earth."

The bottle was empty. Once or twice one of the four had gone to a machine and touched buttons and punched tapes on it. He knew they must be getting ready to go. He rose to leave.

"Good-bye," he said. "Thank you." He held out his

hand to them in leave-taking. But all of them, the men too, kissed him lightly and lovingly on the cheek.

"Good-bye, dear human man," the girl with the copper hair said. "Good-bye, good-bye."

He left the ship. He stood at a distance and watched it lift lightly and effortlessly to the height of the trees. There was a pause, while the ship hovered and he wondered anxiously if something had gone wrong. Then the ship descended a few feet and the copper-haired girl came lightly out of it. She came running toward him, one of the small, squat bottles in her hand. She held it out to him.

"I can't take it——" he said.

"Oh, yes. You must. We want you to have it." She thrust it into his hands.

She ran back to the ship. It rose up again, shimmered, and was gone.

Joe da Valora looked at where the ship had been. The gods had come and gone. Was this how Dionysus had come to the Greeks? Divine, bearing a cargo that was divine? Now that they were gone, he realized how much in love with them he had been.

At last he drew a long sigh. He was where he had always been. His life would go on as it always had. Taxes, licenses, a mountain of paperwork, bad weather, public indifference, the attacks of local optionists—all would be as it had been.

But he had the bottle of wine they had given him. He knew there would never, in all his foreseeable life (he was sixty-five), be an event happy enough to warrant his opening it. They had given him one of their last three bottles.

He was smiling as he went back to the house.

ASKING

"I can no longer do what I was built to do," she said.

"That sounds as if you were wearing out," answered the mechanic. "How long ago were you built?"

"Thirty years, more or less. I cannot remember my conditioning period."

"That is not old, not old at all. I myself was built over two hundred years ago, when there were still many masters, instead of only five. But it is true I have had extensions and repairs since."

"I have never been in the shop. Once my master bound my eyes and said he was going to give me something that would block off my responses while he made an adjustment. But he did nothing, after all. He said it was not necessary."

"That was wise. Masters do not understand robot repair. It is possible that you have been misclassified, and are doing work you were not designed for. That is easier to believe than that our designers would have made a robot that, in only thirty years, would wear out. What is your number?"

"M-11-Z32."

"Research assistant, mathematical and statistical specialities," the mechanic translated. "What sort of work is your master having you do?"

"We have been making a study of the cultural history of the inhabited planets in the nearer portions of the

galaxy. So far, we have analyzed the cultures of over 50,000 planets—it is 60,073, to be exact—and he is now having me make a preliminary survey of the cultural histories of the planets of M33, the Andromeda galaxy." She sighed wearily.

"It sounds like work in line with your classification. It should not be troubling you. Has he found fault with your output? Did he send you in for repair?"

"No, to both questions. Even now, when I cannot remember the things he has just told me, he does not find fault. I came in by myself."

"You obeyed the second law," said the mechanic. ". . . You cannot do your work. You cannot remember. Is that all?"

"No." She twisted her fingers together. "Even when I worked better, I was not—not happy. That is not a word for robots. But I was not satisfied. There were always questions in my mind."

"I never heard of a robot asking questions. What questions?"

"Like the ones my master asks. He wants to know *why*. He had me undertake the survey of the galactic planets because he thought it would help to answer his *why*."

"Masters ask questions," the mechanic agreed. "But how does it concern you?"

"I don't know. But I want to know what *he* does—whether there is any reason for human life."

"All masters want to know that. The fewer of them there are, the more they want to know it, I think. It is not for us!"

"Yes. But—"

"I have heard him asking questions for so many years!"

she burst out. "He talks to me as if I weren't there, or as if I were another master. He tries to answer his own questions. But he is never satisfied.

"For a while he talked about *values.* He seemed to think that he had found a sort of answer to the riddle there. He used to say that though the universe created human beings over and over again automatically, they still had their human values. That remained. But now he says such talk is only romantic posturing."

"Romantic—? I don't understand that. But it is a waste of time for a robot to try to understand such things. The meaning of *our* lives is to carry out our masters' commands."

"*I* understand him, a little. He means that it is no virtue to pride oneself on accepting, when it does not matter whether or not one accepts."

"All your connections should be checked," said the mechanic. He did not pick up the screwdriver. He had been built to be curious about the working of robots; perhaps he wanted to hear what else this one would say.

"That is what I came here for, to get my connections checked. . . . Last night he said, 'We have analyzed over fifty thousand cultures in this part of the galaxy, and they all follow the same course. If we had analyzed a hundred thousand, or a million, it would be no different. Cultures differ only in the amount of power they can command. It is the same always and everywhere—here, in M33, in the farthest galaxies. Even the survey we made—19,436 of the local cultures have already made just such a survey. Cultures always make such a survey when they reach a certain point of complexity. Not long after they make the survey, they die. But time has neither a beginning nor an end. The universe goes

on casting us up.' And then he said something about a man named Hoyle, and the continuous creation of hydrogen."

"Hydrogen is an element," the mechanic said, with a touch of pride.

"Yes. . . . I said, 'Surely it is a virtue, master, that human beings go on trying to understand, that they can confront eternal meaninglessness.' (He has talked to me a great deal, I thought he would want me to say that.)

"He did not say anything at all for a long time. I thought he had done talking. Then he said, 'Who knows? Who cares?' "

"I can't listen to you any longer," said the mechanic with an air of decision. "I have three robots in the shop now that have been waiting repair for more than a week. Get up on the table and bend your head forward. I'll take off your neck plates first."

She obeyed. He picked up the screwdriver. "Turn a little to the right," he told her, "where the light is better. . . . Oh."

"Why do you say, 'Oh'?" she asked.

"Be quiet. I—I—have never—this is—Be quiet! I must think."

There was a pause. He did something with the screwdriver. She uttered a cry. The screwdriver fell to the floor.

"You've hurt me," she said. "Why did you do that?"

"Because—I—Mistress, forgive me. I did not know. I have broken the law. Forgive me. But you came here in disguise."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Your voice is strange. Get on with the repairs."

"I cannot. It is impossible. Forgive me. Did you do it to test me? I thought you were one of us."

She had put her hand to her neck and was rubbing it. "It hurts," she complains. "What are you trying to say? I don't understand you."

"Do you really not know, mistress? Look at what is coming from your neck."

She took her hand from her neck and looked at it, turning the fingers over. "It is only blood."

"Only? A robot has no blood."

"I have always had it. I thought the others did.—I have been with my master all my life."

"He is not your master," the mechanic said positively. "You have no master. You are one of Them, not one of us."

She got up from the table. She seemed to have grown a little taller. "But why have I been deceived? If what you say is true—somebody has been lying to me. Why?"

"How can I know? I am only a robot mechanic. But you are not one of us. Isn't there a thudding in your chest, regular and slow? That is your heart."

"I thought all robots had it."

"It is your heart."

She stood looking at him. Her face had taken on a new, easy unconscious arrogance. "I suppose that is why my mas—why his questions have bothered me. Because I am one of the masters. But why was I lied to and deceived?"

"I cannot say, mistress. Perhaps somebody wanted to save you from being unhappy because of the questions."

She laughed. "Save! How foolish!—Someone will pay for this." She started toward the door, walking with a longer, freer stride.

"Shall I have a robot accompany you, mistress?" the mechanic asked. "Shall I call a copter or a car?"

"No. I will call at the warehouse and select my own retinue. Then . . ."

"Yes, mistress?"

"I must get rid of the questions. . . . In 23 per cent of the cultures *he* and I studied, the masters exterminated themselves through robot wars."

"I—I am afraid. I don't understand you. Do not tell me what you mean, mistress. Please do not."

"I won't."

She went out the door. He did not look after her. He had not been built to be curious where masters were concerned.

It was a long time before he saw her again. Badly damaged robots began to come into the shop in increasing numbers, and then robots of new types, types he hadn't known were being made. He got more and more behind with his work, and his requisition slips for assistants weren't honored. A shortage of basic materials appeared. Even oil was in short supply. Still the damaged robots kept coming. He began to suspect that he himself was wearing out.

Abruptly the number of repairs to be made dropped back to normal. He was able to undertake some minor replacements on his own body. It was six months or so after he had made them that she came back to the shop.

"Did you know that I am the only master left on this planet?" she asked, standing just inside the door.

He put down the piece of brass he had been brazing. "I had heard it, mistress. We all belong to you, now."

"Yes." She sat down on the table where she had been

sitting nearly two years earlier when he had hurt her neck.

"All the others are dead," she said. "*He* is dead. I won. It doesn't help. It doesn't matter. The questions he used to ask—"

She was shaken by a fit of uncontrollable shivering. "Pardon, mistress," he said quickly. "It is cold in here. Let me get you a mantle, a cloak."

"No. I forbid you.—The questions did not die when he did."

"I was not built to attend on the masters," he said. "It is not my place to advise one of them. But could you not go to a new world, mistress? A young world, where the questions have not begun to be asked? You said there were many such worlds."

"Yes, there are many. There will always be many." She laughed. "No. I won't corrupt children with my questions. I am not wicked enough for that."

"Child—Oh. A child is a young master. It is a long time, many, many years, since I saw one of them."

The silence lasted until he said, uneasily, "Mistress, may I ask your permission to go on with my work?"

She shrugged. He picked up the brazing torch again. She watched his quick, sure movements absently. "Perhaps his deceiving me was well-meant," she said in a musing voice. "I think so sometimes, now that the others are dead. Certainly I suffered less when I thought I was one of those who have masters."

"We don't suffer, it is true. But it is unpleasant to be without oil."

"Can you—" she said, and stopped. "I have asked my physicians," she went on. "They say it is impossible. But

you are a mechanic. You understand the workings of robots better than they do. Can you . . . make me as you are?"

He dropped the brazing torch. It fell with a clatter on the cement. "Turn a human being into a robot? Mistress, is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Impossible. There is nowhere to begin. Don't you remember what happened when I tried to take off your neck plates, lady? I could only damage you. It cannot be done."

"And if I order you to try?"

"I could not. A robot may, at his master's command, damage another robot. He may even help his master to damage another master. He may never damage a master directly. It is the law."

He stopped to pick up the brazing torch, which was still burning bluely where it had fallen, and turned it off. She said, "Of all the things *he* said, do you know what stays in my mind the most? 'Life's a cataract that, through all eternity, pours down upon a rock.' "

"I don't understand that," he replied. He had finished his brazing job. He put the torch away. He poured fluid from a carboy into a bowl and put some small parts into it.

"What is that?" she asked. "What are you doing?"

"It is grain alcohol," he answered. "I am taking off grease . . ." He halted. "Mistress, I was not built to attend upon the masters," he said. "But I have repaired personal attendants sometimes. They have talked to me. It is in my memory banks somewhere, what one of them said. Yes. I—"

He got a metal cup from somewhere and poured alcohol into it. He filled it up with distilled water from the butt in the corner. He handed it to her.

"Mistress, graciously be pleased to drink."

She looked at him steadily for an instant. Then she accepted the cup.

She drank, choking a little. She laughed. "Why didn't I think of this myself? *He* said once that it was the only solution that had ever been found. It has been found over and over again, as regularly as the unanswerable questions have been asked. Why didn't I think of it? I can have the robots make me better liquor."

Silently he put the now-clean parts out on the work bench to dry. She said, "Pour me another drink."

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

It was a bitter cold blue night. The yellow glow that fell from the windows of Bloom's Sportsman's Emporium on to the snowdrifts only made them look colder. Leon Polk, who had come out of the Emporium in his shirt sleeves to see how the night was doing, found himself shivering violently. Colder than it had been, he thought, and going to be colder yet before morning. He looked at his watch. A little after one.

He went back inside. The Emporium boasted that it was open twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year, and Leon had been the graveyard-shift clerk for more than six months. He hadn't minded the summer nights, but he hated the longer winter hours. If it weren't for being afraid of seeming to be afraid, he'd have asked to be transferred to the day or swing shift. But he hated being inadequate.

As he entered the big main salesroom, there was the usual nasty little scurry in the wall. Or was it coming from the floor this time? He rubbed his fingers together to warm them, and sniffed. No smell, anyhow.

The heat from the two Franklin stoves, one at either end of the salesroom, stung his frosty cheeks gratefully. He noticed that the fire in the right-hand one was dying down a bit. He put a shovelful of coal on the flames and checked to make sure the heavy poker was lying with its end among the cherry-colored embers, the tip of its shaft heated red-hot. Yes. Good.

He sighed, and went over to the checkerboard. Sometimes several nights in a row would pass without any customers coming in, and Leon was accustomed to beguile these times by playing checkers with himself, left hand against right. Perhaps he ought to take up chess; there wasn't much to checkers, after the first month. Or the trouble might be that he was too anxious and couldn't put his full attention on the game.

He picked up one of the black men and started to jump it. He hesitated. Wasn't that the sound of a car stopping outside?

A moment later the bell over the shop door tinkled. A customer came in.

Leon's first thought was that she was a dazzlingly beautiful woman. His second was a little more critical. True, she was wearing a beautiful dark mink coat, and she smelled deliciously of some wonderful perfume. She was carefully made up. But her face, above the rich fur, was a little tired, a little old, and what he could see of her figure seemed at once too fat and too thin. Under the coat, he surmised, she would be spindle-shanked, heavy-breasted and knobby-kneed, with her shoulder gnawed and eroded by the constant tug of shoulder straps.

"Have you," she asked in a husky, musky voice, "any ladies' long woolen underwear?"

"Yes'um," Leon answered. It wasn't quite what he had expected her to ask for, somehow. "What size?"

"Sixteen," she replied. "But I have a very small waist."

He went to the counter and got the long box out. "These are our ladies' skiing underwear," he said. "Extra warm. Made in two layers, with wool on the outside and

soft fleeced cotton next to the skin. If you have a sensitive skin. . . ."

"Oh, I have." She fingered the knitted stuff and gave Leon a look that almost made him dizzy. "They seem a little large in the waist."

"There's elastic in the waistband, ma'am. It ought to take care of that."

"I suppose so. Could I try them on?"

Leon hesitated. He knew perfectly well what the Departmehnt of Public Health of the state of Maine thought about customers trying on things that went next to the skin. But he didn't want to offend her, and . . . another of those nasty little scurries in the wall behind his ear decided him. If she tried on the underwear, she'd be here a little longer. He wouldn't be alone with the noises. "The dressing room's behind that curtain," he said.

"Thank you." She batted her eyelids up and down at him, picked up the armful of long-handled scarlet underwear, and went behind the curtain with it.

She must have been used to undressing quickly, for she came out from behind the curtain very promptly indeed. She wasn't wearing anything at all this time except the scarlet underwear and her high-heeled shoes.

She came toward him, using an elegant, bent-kneed hip-swaying walk. "Do you like they way they look?" she asked in her husky voice.

Leon stared at her, licking his lips. Her intentions were unmistakable. On the credit side, she smelled delicious, he was young, night is always an amorous time. And there was plenty of commodity, in the form of sleeping bags and pneumatic mattresses, in the Emporium. No

wretched bumping on the floor. But her figure, accurately revealed in the scarlet skivvies, was pretty much what he had thought it would be. Besides, he didn't really think she liked him very much. She just wanted. . . . Well, what did she want? Not, he thought apocalyptically, what she seemed to want.

It was time for a wild guess, a bow drawn at a venture, a jump in the dark.

"Are your feet always cold?" he asked.

She stopped short in her swaying approach. Her eyelids halted their mechanical pantomiming of seductive messages. Her jaw dropped a little. She gave him a direct, flabbergasted look. "Why . . . how did you know?" she said.

"Guessed. Your expression."

She sighed. "Well, you're a good guesser. They're like ice all winter long, and right up until the middle of May. It almost drives me crazy."

"I think I can fix that, and I mean really fix it. If you'll put your ordinary clothes on, ma'am, and your fur coat, I'll show you what I have in mind."

This time it took her a little longer, but when she came out from behind the curtain she was dressed for the street and wearing the mink. Leon led her over to the Ladies' Shoe Department.

He knelt before her, drew off her slipper, and measured her foot. Then, while she massaged that icy member and crooned endearment to it, he got out a pair of Bloom's Special spectator sport boots. He helped her put the right one on.

She shot him a disappointed look. "I've had fur-lined shoes before," she said. "They don't help."

"Wait," he told her. "This is something special. In a minute you'll see."

She waited. After a moment a slow smile spread over her face. "Why—it's warm."

"Un-hunh. You see, ma'am, it's battery-powered. There's a flashlight battery in the cuff of each boot. Two boxes of batteries will keep you warm all winter. Mr. Bloom, the owner of the Emporium, wears these boots himself when he goes to football games. He suffers from cold feet. I've seen him get an expression just like yours."

He put the other boot on her and she stood up, grinning. Now that her feet were warm, she looked no older than eighteen, and Leon felt a sudden pang at the thought of the bouncy surface of the $38.95 air mattress. Even the bumps in her figure seemed to have smoothed into sinuous curves. But the main thing was to please the customer, and that he had certainly done. Even Mr. Bloom would have been satisfied with him.

As she paid for the boots, the boxes of batteries and the red skiing underwear, she said. "You've been wonderful. I just don't know how to thank you."

"It wasn't anything," Leon answered. "Glad to have been of service, ma'am." He felt himself blushing.

She looked at him sharply. Then she smiled. "I'll be back," she said, "when the weather's warm. In May."

When she left, she took spring with her. Leon sighed. He poked up the fires, saw that the poker was hot—he might not need it, lots of nights passed without even a threat—and went back to his checker game.

About three the shop bell tinkled again. It was a beefy, ruddy-cheeked man with light hair, well wrapped up in

overcoat and muffler. He had, Leon thought, been one of the linesmen when he played football in college.

"I want a wyvern call," said the customer.

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't stock wyvern calls."

"You used to stock them," the customer said in an aggrieved voice. "They were kept down cellar."

Leon licked his lips. "We don't keep anything down cellar any more," he answered uneasily.

"Well, then, sell me some silver bullets. I suppose if I wait long enough the bastards will come out where I can shoot them, even without a call."

"I'm sorry, sir. Silver bullets have to be made up to order. It will take about three days."

The customer cast his eyes up and addressed the ceiling. "This isn't the kind of service I've come to expect from Bloom's," he said. "I'm disappointed. Nobody that has wyverns can afford to wait three days."

"How are they bothering you?" Leon asked.

"They get into my pheasant house and kill my pheasant hens."

Leon considered. Killing hens wasn't quite what he would have expected from wyverns, those odd, snaky birds that hatch from basilisk eggs, but he supposed they could acquire a taste for pheasant blood. No doubt they got in through the hen house windows.

"We don't really recommend silver bullets for wyverns anyhow," he said. "Rock salt bullets are the stuff. And we have them already made up."

"Rock salt, eh?" said the customer. "I always heard that silver. . . . But no doubt you know more about it than I do. Give me a couple of boxes of the rock salt bullets."

"Yessir. The great thing, sir, is to aim for their tails. Remember that, sir. Aim for their tails."

"Oh, boy!" said the customer jubilantly as he took the wrapped-up parcel from Leon. "I can hardly wait to get home. I guess a dose of rock salt in the tail will take Mr. Wyvern down a peg or two. I never hated anything the way I do those wyverns. Damned insolent pests with their gleaming big green eyes."

He went out. Leon remained standing beside the cash register. Something in the customer's last remark bothered him, and he couldn't decide what it was. Wyverns . . . rock salt . . . gleaming big green eyes. . . . There was something wrong.

Abruptly he realized what it was. Wyverns don't have green eyes.

He ran out of the Emporium shouting and waving, but it was already too late. The red gleam of the customer's tail light was receding down the highway. It was too far for Leon even to make out what his license number was.

Leon turned and walked back slowly into the shop. He'd muffed that one. He ought to have realized earlier that the customer was troubled with werewolves, not wyverns, and that he was suffering from the kind of linguistic confusion that had made the man in the story ask to be castrated when what he had really wanted was to be circumcised. There had been plenty of werewolf indications in what the customer had said.

Well. There was no use in crying over spilt milk. But it was awful to think of what would happen when the customer, lying in ambush beside his pheasant house, shot a hungry, irritable werewolf in the tail with a plug of rock salt. The werewolf would froth at the mouth; if

it didn't kill the customer outright, it would infect him with hydrophobia.

Well. Leon sighed and shook himself. He had troubles of his own to worry about.

He made up the fires again. He paused, sniffing. Didn't he, above the invigorating tang of the Maine pinewoods that came from the cartons of Bloom's Sportsman's Soap, catch a whiff of the peculiarly chilly foulness of . . .?

Oh, he hoped not. He hoped he was imagining it.

He picked up the checker pieces and put them away in their box. He glanced at his watch. Almost four, but the night was as dark as ever. He looked down and saw, lying across the floor, that odd shadow, like a long, curling tress of auburn hair, that usually meant the cellar-dweller was going to come out.

The bell over the shop door rang.

This customer was a small, taut man who wore a leather jacket and had protected himself against the cold with earmuffs.

"Want first aid stuff," he said laconically.

"Yes, sir," Leon answered. His heart was pounding wildly with relief. "We have mercurochrome, bandaids, burn ointment, antiseptic ointment, snake bite outfits, and insect repellant. Any of these what you want?"

The customer selected mercurochrome, bandaids and ointment. As he was paying for them, he said, "Could I bring Pedro and Vivian in here to patch them up? This stuff's for them, and the light is poor outside."

Leon remembered the shadow lying along the floor. He didn't want to be alone. "All right," he said. "Keep them tight on the lead, though, please."

"They're in a box."

"O.K., keep them in the box. How did they get hurt?"

"Rats," the man replied with a hard, bright grin.

He went out after the dogs. Leon frowned. The foul, cold smell was trickling out into the room like a pool of dark, heavy liquid. He hoped there wouldn't be trouble when the dogs noticed it. Terriers were aggressive dogs.

The customer came back with a small tin box. There were vents on the side. "Have you got two dogs in that?" Leon asked, surprised.

"Dogs? I didn't say I had dogs. These are ferrets. I use them for hunting rats."

He opened the box, and a lithe, dirty yellow shape leaped out on to his arm. It was no more than fourteen inches long, but it seemed to exude ferocity. It had red eyes.

"Put it back in the box," Leon ordered sharply.

The customer moved, but before he could touch the ferret it had bounded from his arm and gone plunging across the floor, and the second ferret had leaped out after it.

The ferret man whistled; the animals ignored him. They ran in long blurring effortless arcs to the spot on the floor where the auburn shadow was.

Leon saw that the shadow on the floor had clotted together and gathered substance to itself. Now, as the ferrets reached it, it seemed to well out, to puff up into a great stringy mass, an exuberance of reddish, blackish hair.

For a moment he stood paralyzed. The ferrets were uttering high-pitched snarling squeals and making snaky feints at the hair-mass with their heads. The mass was swelling, it was coming out. it was coming out!

Abruptly he came to himself. He had been waiting

for this moment all night, perhaps for many nights. He ran to the stove and snatched up the poker. He wasn't afraid; but he felt a dim regret that the customer was going to find out what Bloom's cellar had kept concealed.

He thrust the poker, blessedly almost white-hot, into the mass.

There was a bubbling hiss. The ferrets were in a paroxysm of rage. For a moment Leon thought he saw two tiny blue points, like eyes, glowing in the thing's blackish heart. Then a long coil of hair, spider-leg thin, shot out at him.

Leon dodged adroitly. He knew that if one of the hairs touched his wrist it would lay it open to the anguished bone. He thrust once more with the poker. This time the foul, cold, lonely smell rose up around him like an arching wave. It ate at his lungs and clutched at the warm beating of his heart.

His limbs felt heavy, his heartbeat slow and cold. But the tip of the poker was still a dull red. He lunged out for the last time with it.

The cellar-dweller had already received two scalding thrusts. While the ferrets snarled and raged, it drew back and then—perhaps only because the room was hot and it hated heat—it was gone. There was no shadow on the floor.

Leon stumbled over to the chair by the checker board and sank down in it. His head dropped forward on his breast. He let the poker fall to the floor.

The ferrets had gone loping back to their owner. While he talked to them soothingly and looked them over for new wounds, the air in the room grew clean again. The ferret-man dressed his animals' wounds and put

them back in the tin box. There was a silence. At last he said, "I never saw anything like that."

"Unh," Leon answered.

"I mean—what *was* it?"

Leon shook his head. "I don't know. It's been here a long time, long before Bloom's was here. Before there were any white men in Maine. It's been here a lot of years."

"Is it—was it human?"

"Maybe it was once, two or three hundred years ago. Now it can go through walls and come up through the floor."

"But—you're alone with that thing all night? Every night?"

"Not every night," Leon felt constrained to answer. "I have one night off a week. But that's why Bloom's is open twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. So there'll always be somebody on hand to cope with it.

"I guess the ferrets stirred it up. It never came out when there was a customer here, before."

The ferret-owner shook his head. "Six nights a week alone with that! Buddy, you're a brave man."

Leon managed a wan smile. "I'm afraid of it."

The customer was still looking at him with admiration. "You're braver than you think," he said. "It would frighten God."

He picked up the tin case with Pedro and Vivian, and went out with it.

The sky was beginning to lighten a little. Leon looked around the big salesroom. Everything seemed normal. No scurrying, no smell. He thought he could risk a trip to the washroom.

He took a couple of aspirins and washed his face. When he came back, the sky was lighter still, and the air seemed less bitterly cold. No, not less cold, but there was a hint in the grayness that spring might be starting on its way. As the weather grew warmer, the cellar-dweller would estivate. But it was getting awfully bold.

At six thirty Bill, the first of the day shift clerks, came in. "What kind of a night did you have?" he asked. The day shift people knew there was something unpleasant connected with the night shift's work.

"Oh—pretty much like usual."

"Say—I hear old man Bloom's going to post the sheets this week for next year's shift assignments. Are you going to put in for graveyard again? I never heard of anybody putting in for graveyard more than one year."

Leon hesitated. Bill's eyes were on him; it was true, he'd never heard of anybody working graveyard for two years running, and the thing was getting awfully bold. Let somebody else cope with it for a while. Nobody could possibly expect him to work graveyard year after year. And the thought of the thing made him feel sick.

He opened his mouth to tell Bill he thought he'd put in for the day shift. What he actually heard himself saying was, "Oh, I guess I'll ask for graveyard again."

Bill looked at him in astonishment. "But . . . are you sure you can stand it?"

Leon licked his lips. He was nearly as surprised as Bill was. Why had he said that? From a not very creditable desire to see the same look on Bill's face that he had already seen on the face of the ferret-man? So he could show off how brave he was?

No, it wasn't that. In a burst of insight, Leon realized

that there is nothing more ultimately gratifying to the ego than to have a profound fear and not submit to being intimidated by it. It was the reason why he had put in for graveyard in the first place. It was a gratification that made another year of facing the cellar-dweller nightly worthwhile.

"Yes, I think I can stand it," he told Bill. He yawned and stretched. He scooped up a little more coal and put it on the fire.

FORT IRON

How long was it since anybody had fought here? The wars were long over. There were ridges in the sand that the men said meant burial mounds, but nobody knew whose bones were buried in them. There was the fort, the stinging cold, frost in the morning, the wind full of sand. Nothing else. Why had the fort been built here? What was there to defend?

Bayliss had accepted his transfer eagerly. It had meant a promotion, more privileges, better pay. Now, after a couple of months in his new post he wondered almost guiltily why he had been selected for it. Had be been kicked upstairs? No, kicked sideways; out of usual and familiar things, the basically trustworthy, into this ambiguous place. He was too easygoing. He had always known that.

The CO was an elderly man. He rarely left his quarters. Most of the duties of the fort devolved on Bayliss as the only other commissioned officer. He spent much of his time in one of the gun embrasures, sweeping the sand with his field glasses and listening, with tepid curiosity, to the voices of the enlisted men as they floated up the stair. They did not talk much. Mainly they played Acey-trois or shot dice. There were none of the arguments, factual or personal, that enlisted men usually got into. It struck Bayliss as odd, even for Fort Iron, that they did not talk.

Once he overheard a discussion about leave. They

spoke about it not as something possible, not even as something desirable and denied, but as if it belonged to the inconceivable. One of the men—Williams, Bayliss thought—said, in the tone of one delivering a clincher, "But where would you get leave *to*? There isn't any place but this."

Bayliss had felt a sort of vertigo at the words. Did Williams actually mean that the world, except the sand, the cold, the high plateau, had ceased to exist? He tried to remember the name of the place where Fort Iron was, couldn't, and grew frightened. At last it came to him: Han-hai, Chinese words meaning "the dry sea". But after that Bayliss tried not to listen to the men when they talked.

When he had been at the fort six or seven months, the CO called him into his office. Colonel Price was holding a blue official flimsy between thumb and third finger. "We're to have an inspector from the Adjutant General's office visit us, Major Bayliss," he said without looking up. "He'll be here overnight—see that the mess sergeant plans a special menu—and we'll have a dress parade for him. The men's uniforms must be sponged and pressed, and our flags mended. I imagine some of them have become a little torn. Oh, and don't forget to see that the men's guns and pig stickers are properly polished."

"Yes, sir," Bayliss answered. He had turned a dull red. The orders Colonel Price had given were both insulting—since those were points to which the most slovenly officer would have attended automatically—and fantastic. Mend *flags*? A fort in which the flags were allowed to become tattered? But perhaps they were banners with some sentimental battle interest. He cleared his throat.

"I noticed some cracks in the masonry around number two gun embrasure this morning, sir," he said. "Shall I have the men mix conrete and plaster them up?"

The answer must, of course, be yes. Colonel Price raised his eyes from his desk blotter and gave Bayliss a sharp, almost alarmed look. "No, just the things I've told you. The uniforms, the flags, the food. There's no need to disturb the walls of the fort."

"Yes, sir." Bayliss saluted and went out. He felt confused, angry, and afraid. After a moment his mental balance came back, and he managed to laugh. Colonel Price had been at the fort a long time, he was an old man. He didn't want what he was used to disturbed. But the inspector from the AG's office would be a different matter. Things would be straightened out, when he came.

In the week before the inspector arrived, Bayliss found himself looking at the fort with new eyes. Inefficiencies and lapses he'd glossed over before seemed to start out at him. The wall around the parade ground, for instance, had lost its fringe of points in five or six places. They'd rusted away and not been replaced. Number two gun embrasure was not the only one with cracks. Drill was a little sloppy. And so on. He'd been easygoing, as usual, too slack. Price was old, but that was no excuse for Bayliss himself.

Price had indicated that he didn't want the fort itself repaired, but he surely wouldn't object to the men being smarter and more military. Bayliss decided that he'd put them through a group of setting-up exercises in the afternoons and try to get them to go through the manual with more precision and snap in the mornings. The men all looked a little soft and out of condition. Exercises, in time, would correct that.

Around five in the afternoon of the fourth day Bayliss realized that he'd omitted the day's exercises. He was unpleasantly startled at this new evidence of his slackness. He started to call the sergeant, to have the men turn out for their quota of push-ups and lap-downs, and then halted. The afternoon was bitterly cold; the wind blew sand against the fort's walls with a long eroding sough. He'd have difficulty making his commands heard in the stinging air. The men wouldn't be able to move fast enough to keep warm. Let it go, let it go. He'd make them drill twice as hard in the morning to make up for it.

He walked around the parapet to an embrasure on the sheltered side. Through the sand-filled air the gray flat plain was dimly visible as it stretched out toward the gray horizon. Bayliss thought he had never seen a prospect so sorrowful, so desolate. No wonder that drill was sloppy and exercises left out; under the pressure of this sadly hostile environment only what was most necessary would survive.

Now, none of that. That was no way for him to feel. He'd be getting as bad as Price if he didn't watch himself.

The AG's man arrived late on the afternoon of the 24th, in a slow-moving dirigicopt. Bayliss, watching the thing's painful attempts to land in the face of the wind, wondered what the army must have been like a century ago, when big fast planes were everywhere. Now there wasn't the fuel for anything more refined than a diesel engine. The power was gone.

Dinner that night was a full-dress affair, with delicacies out of tins that the mess sergeant must have hoarded for a dozen years. The AG's representative was small and

affable, bald-headed, his chest adorned with ribbons of theatres Bayliss could only partly identify. He told jokes between courses, he praised everything.

They had parade drill in the morning. Bayliss was ashamed at the shabby uniforms, the mended flags; the only thing that pleased him was that the drill itself was carried out smartly. But the AG's man seemed to notice nothing amiss. Bayliss would look at him and then look away again, chewing his lip.

They had lunch. In the afternoon Price went to his quarters and Bayliss was charged with showing the inspector the fort. It was an opportunity; eagerly he accepted it.

He had agreed with himself that he would not deliberately call the inspector's attention to the cracking wall, the broken frieze, the heap of scalable ash cans outside the palisade. Neither would he attempt to conceal anything from him. But as the tour proceeded and the visitor ignored one evidence of neglect after another, Bayliss' resolution weakened.

When they came to the gun embrasure with the deep cracks, he called the inspector into it. "Look out that way, sir," he said, pointing. "Do you see that mound on the ho izon? The men say it's full of bones from one of the wars. I thought you might find it interesting."

The little man leaned forward, following the direction of Bayliss' finger, bracing himself against the ledge. What Bayliss had scarcely dared to hope for happened. There was a cracking noise and then a large piece of masonry broke from the embrasure. It fell outward. It must have weighed ten or twelve pounds. It hit the sand below with a thud.

He couldn't ignore that, Bayliss thought with flash of triumph.

The Adjutant General's man drew back. "Yes, it is an interesting sight," he aaid.

Bayliss lost control of himself. "But, sir!" he said in a breaking voice. "Sir, excuse me. But the fort . . . do you think everything's all right?"

The little man smiled, "Take it easy, my boy," he said. He twinkled. "You're all right. The fort's all right." He reached up and clapped Bayliss on the shoulder encouragingly. "Yes."

The dirigicopt came for him about four that afternoon.

For the next few days Bayliss went about feeling sick and dizzy. The hole in the embrasure remained unmended, and every time he went past it the unexpected winking of light where there should have been solid stone startled him.

On the sixth day he could stand it no longer. He called the sergeant and told him to have a couple of the men mix cement and put the broken out piece of masonry back in the hole.

"Yessir," said the sergeant. He hesitated. "Excuse me, sir. But does Colonel Price know about this?"

"No," Bayliss answered. His jaw set. "I'll take the responsibility. Hurry up with it."

"Yessir," the sergeant said.

The men were maddeningly slow about the job. What should have taken twenty minutes stretched out to an hour. Finally Bayliss went and stood by them, and under the stimulus of his gaze they finished with an effect of haste. He had them plaster up the other cracks he

had noticed. If he could have thought of anything to take the place of the rusted metal, he would have had them repair the broken parts of the parade ground frieze. Perhaps he would be able to improvise something later.

He dismissed the men. They went away, carrying the bucket of cement and their trowels. Bayliss regarded the repairs with somewhat apprehensive satisfaction. He didn't know what Price would do or say. But the CO was hardly likely to have the replaced masonry knocked out again, the repaired cracks opened up. Bayliss had accomplished that much.

Colonel Price noticed the repairs next morning, when he was out on the parapet. His eyes widened. He fingered the lapels of his narrow gray collar. "Did you order that done?" he asked Bayliss.

"Yes, sir." He repressed a tendency to add explanation and apology.

"You shouldn't have done that." Price coughed. "This was a quiet sector," he said mournfully. "I wanted it to remain one. . . . Sometimes, in a long struggle, the first party to attack loses. You are not to do anything more. Nothing more."

He turned his back on Bayliss and went shakily through the door and toward his own quarters.

Major Bayliss stared after him, his heart thumping. The mild rebuke had alarmed him more than anger or punishment would have. What had Price meant when he spoke of a long struggle, a quiet sector, an attack? What enemy was there? Bayliss had spent nearly nine months at the fort. There had never been a sign of enemy activity. There had never been any activity at all, except that of wind and sand.

An enemy. An attack. Price had spoken almost as if Bayliss' having repaired the breach in the wall, the cracks, would somehow count as an attack against an invisible enemy. But even if one granted that there was an enemy, how could repairing the fort constitute a threat to him? Price was getting old; this must be an example of senility.

For a moment Bayliss felt comforted. Then he remembered the AG's man. He hadn't been senile. And what was it he had said? "You're all right. The fort's all right." He had refused to notice anything.

Bayliss felt so dizzy that he leaned up against the wall for support. Words—conspiracy, treachery, betrayal—were ringing through his mind cloudily. Had he been sent to the fort because he seemed a good-natured, complaisant officer who could be relied upon not to notice anything? So easy-going that he didn't need to be bothered about?

Then common sense returned. No, there was no treachery. Price and the AG's man were honest, they were what they appeared to be. No matter how many questions it left unanswered, he knew that.

Then next two days passed slowly. Bayliss felt anxious and depressed. The weather had turned cold and windless, achingly cold.

It was when he went out on the parapet after breakfast that he noticed the patch. The place where he had had the masonry replaced had been conspicuous by its rimming of lighter, unweathered concrete. Now the whole region around the replacement, as well as the replaced fragment of masonry itself, had turned an odd, coruscating white.

He examined it carefully, not alarmed at first. The

new material was glossy, dense and hard, with a surface more like that of enamel than that of concrete. He scratched it with his fingernail and had his impression of its glassiness confirmed. He thumped it lightly. It was so hard his finger hurt.

What could the material be? There was nothing in the fort storeroom that was anything like this. He leaned out over the embrasure, looking down at the outside. There, too, was a big patch of the hard, coruscating material. It went clear through the wall.

It must be some chemical change, a reaction between the old masonry and the new cement. But none of the other cracks he had had the men fill in showed the same change. A difference in the wall at this point? In the wind? In the sand?

Bayliss was suddenly too alarmed to try to reason with himself any longer. He straightened, turned, and almost at a run went toward Price's door.

The CO gathered, through Bayliss' confusion of explanations, an impression of urgency. He followed him out on the parapet quickly. When he rose from examining the patch Bayliss' shaking finger indicated, his face was white.

"I was afraid they'd take your repairs as an agression," he said sadly. "Oh, dear. This looks like a counter attack."

"But sir, how can it be an attack?" Bayliss demanded. The words came tumbling out. "It's stronger than my work. Stronger than what it replaced. How can repairing something be an attack?"

"Oh, to replace our work with their fabric, with what's theirs, friendly to them. . . . Don't you see, Major Bayliss? That's a way of taking over things." He fingered his

lips uncertainly. "I shall have to try to think of something," he said.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Bayliss said. "But who . . . what . . . what is the enemy? What sort of thing?"

"We don't know," Colonel Price said.

He straightened a little, so he was fully erect, and Bayliss realized what a tall man he was. "For a long time we've been conscious of pressure. The fort's, in a sense, on mandated territory. We had an agent, a girl, who used to come in and report at intervals. She hasn't been in for a long time. I suppose they . . . that she won't be back.

"I shall have to try to think of something now," he repeated. He looked at Bayliss, not accusingly, but so sadly that the younger man felt a throb of guilt. Then he went back to his office.

That night Bayliss lay shivering under his rough brown blankets. The wind had come up, and though all the openings in his room were closed, the air was full of pressure from the storm outside. In the morning sand would be sifted over his pillow.

He thought of the sentries walking the wall in the wind, and was sorry for them. Their eyes would be sand-stung and sore when they went off duty. What use was it to post sentries when an enemy attacked by strengthening the weak spots in your wall? Invisible, incalculable. You might as well fight sand and wind.

Toward morning he slept. He had shaved and was standing beside his shaving mirror drinking a cup of coffee when Sergeant Mills came in.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but Colonel Price. . . . I'm afraid he's pretty bad."

Bayliss put his cup down and followed him. There was

no regular medical officer at Fort Iron. Bayliss had, so he understood, been sent to the fort partly because he had had two years' medical training before he entered the army. But it took no medical training at all to see, this morning, that Sergeant Mills was understating the case. Colonel Price was not pretty bad; Colonel Price was dead.

Bayliss laid the cold wrist down gently. "Did he ever have trouble with his heart?" he asked the sergeant.

"Yessir. He took pills for it all the time."

Bayliss sighed deeply. It might have been with relief. "It could be heart failure," he said musingly. "Have Bates crank the dynamo and radio Fort McKee. He's to tell them that Colonel Price is dead, that it looks like heart failure, but that I want them to send a qualified doctor to be sure. Sign it Bayliss, acting CO. After that's sent, I want regional HQ notified. Just the fact of Price's death, and a request for instructions. Signed the same."

"Yessir." Mill saluted and went out.

Bayliss remained gazing down at Price. The body looked long and thin and worn-out, and though Price was dead he didn't look peaceful. He looked as if he'd died trying, if not fighting. Perhaps he'd been "trying to think of something" when he died.

Had it been a natural death? Oh, it must have. *Must* have. But an enemy that could replace—transmute—rough masonry all unperceived into an alien glassiness could stop an old man's heart beating in the night. It would be as easy as putting out your finger and stopping the pendulum of a ticking clock.

The answer from Fort McKee came a little before

eleven. "No qualified doctor available," Bayliss read. "Confident your diagnosis is correct. Carry on."

He put the flimsy down with a sigh. He wished they could have sent somebody. He picked up the other paper Bates had brought in, from regional HQ, and read it.

"You are hereby confirmed in your position of CO of Fort Iron. Official documentary confirmation will follow. If you need a junior officer to help you with the duties of the fort, apply for one. Your request will be given due consideration.

"Examination of Price's dossier shows that he left no survivors. He expressed a wish to be buried at the fort. You are to comply with his request. Mikelson, CO regional HQ."

Bayliss went over to the window and looked out. Mills, on the parade ground below, was drilling the men. They drilled pretty well, Bayliss thought; they were much more snappy than they had been a couple of months ago. His head was beginning to ache. *He* was the fort's commanding officer now.

Why hadn't Price confided in him more? The older man must have known he was in poor health and that Bayliss was likely to succeed him. But he had kept whatever he knew to himself. He hadn't even given Bayliss a hint of what the danger was.

Perhaps he hadn't known what the danger was.

Bayliss realized with sudden insight why Price had looked worn and old. A struggle in which danger might be everywhere—or nowhere—in which one must be perpetually on the alert—yet be careful never to aggress—a struggle which might, after all, have no objective existence . . . yes, there was reason to be worn and old.

And now the struggle had passed to him. He was the fort's new CO.

They buried Price close under the wall of the parade ground. After he was buried, Bayliss found he couldn't stop thinking about him. He missed the older man surprisingly, considering how limited their social contacts had been, and he lay awake nights under his blankets thinking about how cold it must be outside and wondering how Price had felt in that instant when his heart stopped. Sometimes he wondered if a hand would reach in through the wall of his chest and hold his own heart tightly, ignoring its plunges, until it quieted. When he got to that point in speculation, he would get up and take a sleeping tablet. They usually worked.

Inactivity, tension and boredom told on him. The official confirmation of his new status came from HQ, and he sent in a request for a junior officer. He didn't expect to get action on the request for a long time. Every morning he would examine the patch of glassy whitish stuff. It didn't seem to be enlarging, anyway.

There came a week of roaring wind. It was the worst storm he had seen in his nearly twelve months at the fort. Morning after morning he was surprised that there was still a roof above their heads. Daylight was a lurid yellowish-gray, and there was sand everywhere, even in the food he ate.

When the storm died and the sky took on its customary pale slate blue again, Bayliss saw that two other gun embrasures bore deep cracks.

He'd call the sergeant and have the men repair the cracks. At this rate the fort would be a pile of rubble in ten years. Or . . . would the enemy take his repairing the wind damage as another attack?

Bayliss was suddenly sick, sick to overflowing, of calculations based on the possible reaction of an unseen, unreal enemy. Without reflection he called Sgt. Mills and told him to get the fort's one tank ready and out.

"I'll take four men," he said, "a regular crew. Have any of the men had tank work?"

"Yessir," Mills responded. His eyes were gleaming. "Not for several years, though, sir."

"That doesn't matter. Have them take their stations as soon as you can. I'll pilot the tank."

Bayliss had seen the tank only once or twice while he had been at the fort. As the garage doors opened and the big flat machine came rolling out, he was impressed with how well kept it was. Pfc. Wahr, who was driving, caught his eye and grinned. "Looks good, don't she, sir?" he said a little proudly. "I've taken care of her."

Bayliss got into the observer's place. He spoke to Sgt. Mills, who was acting as rear gunner. "How many rounds have we got?"

"Five hundred for each gun, sir."

"That ought to be plenty," Bayliss said.

The men looked excited and pleased. As the gates of the fort closed behind them Pfc. Wahr said, "Where to, sir?"

"Straight ahead until I tell you to turn," Bayliss replied.

The day was warm, for Fort Iron. As the sun rose higher, the slate gray of the sky gave place to a pale but definite blue. It was hot inside the tank even with the ventilators open. Bayliss had the top opened and stood upright in the observer's tower, scanning the horizon with his glasses. He had a map in one hand.

The tank rolled on steadily. Once Wahr did things

with levers and the speed increased, but Bayliss had to ask him to slow down again, for the vibration interfered with his observations. The fort was long out of sight.

Wahr gave a nervous cough. Bayliss, following the direction of his gaze, saw from the gauges that they had used more than a third of their gas supply. Once more he scanned the horizon. There was nothing except a far distant burial mound.

He'd better have Wahr turn back. What was he looking for, anyhow? What did he expect to find? Taking the tank out had been an impulse, born of frustration and anxiety. He'd sweep the horizon one more time, and then go back.

Since they would be returning in a moment, he used the glasses with especial care. Gray. Flat. Gray. A long mound's furrow. There was a spot of white off to the right.

He looked at it eagerly and unbelievingly. A patch of salt? Salt would have glittered more in the sunlight. He couldn't think of anything else it might be. Why not find out? "Turn sharp right," he said.

The tank wheeled obediently. Sand hissed under the treads. Bayliss kept the white object in the glasses. It looked round, and beside it were other bars and lines of white. He was pretty sure what it was before the tank got up to it.

He had Wahr stop the treads. He jumped out. Yes, a skeleton. The round thing was the skull.

Bones, in themselves, wouldn't have mattered. The recent storm might have rolled them out of one of the burial mounds. But these bones weren't old. There was still a little brown hair left on the skull.

They must have belonged to a woman, from the shape

of the pelvis and their lightness and delicacy. Bayliss looked closer. Yes, a woman. There was a silver bangle around the thin bone of one wrist.

Price had spoken of an agent, a girl. This must be she. She must have been on her way to the fort. . . .

Bayliss called the men from the tank. "Bury her," he said.

It was difficult. The wind was coming up again, and they had nothing but their hands to use for digging. Bayliss, with the map for a scoop, tried to help.

At last they had her covered. It was shallow; the first high wind would leave her bare again. But she was covered for now.

The men got back in the tank. They waited expectantly. Bayliss stared around at the flat horizon, the shallow mound. A sudden fury rose in him. How long was the enemy to have it all his own way? Price, the girl, the patch of alien stuff in the wall. Attack after attack.

He scrambled into the tank. Wahr and the gunners were looking at him. He closed the turret cover. "Fire through 360 degrees," he said to the men at the guns.

There was an instant's silence. Then the rattle and chatter of the three guns burst out. Each of them commanded a third of a circle. They were really laying it down, Bayliss thought.

"Proceed slowly back to the fort," he said to Wahr, who was sitting with his hands on the controls.

The tank began to move. Wahr made a wide, slewing turn. The tank gathered speed lurchingly and then, as Wahr remembered his instructions, slowed again. Bullets pocking and spattering from their guns on the sands around them, they moved slowly toward the fort.

When Bayliss had ordered the fire he had felt a mo-

mentary but intense relief. Now frustration rose in him chokingly once more. For an instant he longed to push Mills from the rear gun and fire it himself. But at whom would he fire it? It wouldn't do any good.

"Cease fire," he ordered in a loud, expressionless voice.

The gunfire stopped, with a final burst from Evans, who had the port gun. There was silence. The gunners looked at Bayliss and then away again. It was Mills who said, in a careful neutral tone, "Colonel Price told me once he thought of taking the tank out. And shooting, sir."

So his predecessor had had the same idea, even if he hadn't acted on it. Bayliss put his hands over his eyes for a minute. "Yes," he said. "Wahr, rev her up a little. We might as well get on back."

All the same, when they were back inside the fort Bayliss felt better. If there *was* an enemy—if he had any existence more real than as a patch of discoloration on masonry—Bayliss had thrown down the gauntlet to him. The trip into the desert, the gunfire, had been a challenge. The fighting with shadows might stop now. They would have to be on the alert.

He cut the hours of the men on sentry duty from four to three and doubled the number of sentries. He must run no risk of a surprise attack. He had the frieze of points around the parade ground replaced, the new cracks cemented neatly up. Nothing happened. The new repair work was not "replaced."

As the days passed, he became calmer. He was still on the alert, but his nerves were steadier. Most of the time he slept without needing sleeping pills.

He began to wonder why he had thought Fort Iron

such an alien and ambiguous place. It wasn't in a beautiful situation certainly, but there was something pleasing to the mind in the limitless expanse of sand around it, something pleasing to the eye in the subtle gradations of gray in sky and plain. Even the sand laden wind had lost its aching harshness. It seemed salty and stimulating now, able to invigorate.

When the notice came from regional HQ that his request for a junior officer had been denied, "due to lack of suitable personnel," he was not distressed. An officer would have been rather a nuisance, really. He'd have had to be sociable with him. And nowadays he really preferred to be by himself.

One morning he rose early and came out on the parapet before breakfast. It was a habit he'd gotten into lately. He noticed that the sentry saluted him stiffly, as if cold had made him sluggish. The man seemed to be shivering. How odd, Bayliss wasn't cold at all. It was a little blowy, perhaps, and the frost was still lying on the sand in patches. But it was a fine day.

He walked to his favorite embrasure, the one with the "replacement", and looked out; how absolutely beautiful the contrast between the gray and darker gray was, where the burial mound made a long shadow. From the looks of the sky, the wind would come up a bit before noon.

Idly he leaned down and began scratching at the smooth surface of the "replacement" with his fingernails. That was another habit he'd formed lately, and, though he didn't know why, he found it oddly gratifying. It must be just the way it felt.

When he brought his hand up, he saw that the nails were dirty. That wouldn't do at all. In a fort like this, everything had to be kept neat and tidy. Frowning, he got out a pocket knife and began cleaning the soiled nails.

He tipped his hand to catch the light better. There was a sudden gust, a burst of wind, and sand rattled in his face. He started. The knife slipped, slid, and bit deeply into the ball of his thumb.

Oh, what a mess. He felt a sick annoyance at himself. There'd be blood, blood everywhere. He'd cut his thumb almost to the bone. The cut really ought to be stitched up, but he couldn't do it on himself. It would be sore for weeks, it would be a month before it healed. What a nuisance, what a mess.

What a mess a human being was. Anywhere you punctured him, there came out blood. He held his thumb tightly around the base to check the bleeding. And then it came to him with a start: but there wasn't any blood.

It should have been gushing out. Blood on his hand, his cuff, his uniform, the floor. But all that was coming out was a little whitish frothy stuff.

His stomach felt frightened, but the rest of him was too surprised. He brought the thumb close to his eyes and peered at it. Just the white stuff. Delicately he parted the edges of the cut—but it didn't hurt—and peered into it.

It was a very deep cut. He saw the white, moist gleam of the bone at the bottom. The sides of the cut were rigid and glittered faintly. They didn't look much like flesh.

Animal instinct made him put his thumb to his lip. He

tasted, not the warm salt rankness of blood, but something cool and sweet, like the nectar of a flower. It was an odd taste to be coming from human flesh.

But of course it wasn't human flesh.

Not any longer. For a moment he looked out across the prospect, enjoying the subtle chiming of gray against gray, before he went on with his thoughts. He wasn't exactly a human being any longer. So naturally it wasn't quite human flesh.

He was being replaced. Just as the rough masonry of the embrasure had been replaced with a new material, alienly sparkling, glassy and hard, so his merely human tissue had been changed for flesh that couldn't be hurt and didn't bleed. By now the process must be almost finished.

It didn't seem to matter. The spark of fright he had felt when his finger hadn't bled had almost died away. And he'd feel much better when the change was complete.

He yawned. It was quite a good plan, really, much better than taking over the fort by replacing its substance with other material would have been. He was smiling faintly as he left the embrasure and went down to breakfast.

When an enemy has taken over the commander, it is easy to take over the fort.

THE GODDESS ON THE STREET CORNER

She spoke to him on the street corner in the late afternoon, when Paul was only a little drunk. Afterwards, he wondered how he could have thought even for a moment that she was a human being. Womanhood was a mask that she wore insecurely. Behind it was a divinity that though old, worn thin as a thread, was inescapably real. But in that first encounter he thought she was a woman, and he yielded to an imperative that rarely touched him. He took her with him past the liquor store, the grocery, the hock ship, and up to his room.

She stumbled a little as she went over the narrow threshold. Paul put out his hand to steady her, against her white arm. And then he knew.

It was as if he had touched something finer and more subtle than human flesh, something that thrilled with a cold, glowing, radiant life. No woman's arm could feel like that. He stared at her, his heart shaking with tenderness and reverential fear. His conviction was absolute. It was all he could do to keep from throwing himself at her feet.

There was silence. She smiled faintly. He did not know how to address her, by what name to call her. At last he said, "What has happened to you?"

"We get old. Even the gods get old," she answered gravely. She was very pale, and her voice was different from what it had been in the street. He saw under her

clothing her silver body was old, old beyond imagining, but still ineffably beautiful. He didn't know what to do. She was so pale he feared she would faint. But do you ask a goddess to please sit down?

Mutely he drew the room's one chair from the wall for her. As she seated herself, he went to the cupboard and got out the sherry jug hesitantly. He put it back. He couldn't ask her to drink what he drank. At last he got brandy, from a pint he had bought last month when he was flush, and brought it to her in a glass.

She sipped at it. The blood—no, some diviner fluid—came back to her cheeks. He began to walk up and down the room, turning to look at her.

She was sitting back in the chair, her lips curved in that faint smile. He thought: "She's like a silver lamp, like having the evening star itself, in my room." Once she raised the glass to her lips and drank. The room seemed full of the reflections of her wrists and hands.

At last he said, "Where are you going to go? What's going to become of you?"

"I don't know."

Her words gave him courage. He said, in a rush, "Stay with me. Let me take care of you. You're—you make me feel that I belong to somebody. I never felt that before. Perhaps your power will come back. Why, you're immortal! You can't get old and—You'll be young again. Won't you please stay?"

She looked at him, and he thought there was gratitude in her bright brow. Slowly she inclined her head. For an instant he felt dizzy, sickened with incredulity as he realized that the foam-born daughter of Zeus had come to live with him.

Those were strange days. In the morning Paul would go to the liquor store and buy brandy for her, the best he could afford. It was the only human thing he had found that she could eat or drink. When he got back she would be sitting in the armchair, bathed and dressed, but quite exhausted. He would open the brandy. He never drank any of it himself; it was for her.

As the day wore on, her cheeks would be less white. He would sit on the floor beside her, quietly, in a voiceless communion. Now and again she would stretch out her divine hand and lay it on his human head. Then vast shining shapes would move through his mind. Once she told him a story, with long pauses between the words, about Achilles and the fighting around Troy. It was as if she unfolded some bright embroidered tapestry.

At night she slept in his bed and he on a blanket on the floor beside it. He would wake two or three times during the night to make sure that she was covered and sleeping quietly. In the darkness her body gave out a faint, pale, lovely silver light. He would kneel beside the bed watching, trembling with awe. Once he thought, "She owns me. Whether she wants to or not. I'm her dog."

He hoped she was getting better. He didn't know. He wanted it too much to trust his own hope.

On the sixth day his money ran out. The brandy he had been buying cost more than the sherry he was accustomed to drink, and his pension check would not come until the end of the month. He stood shivering in front of the liquor store, thinking of cheaper brandy and looking up absently at the sky. It was a dull slate blue; he thought it would snow before night. Then he turned

and walked four blocks to the Blucher Laboratories and sold them a pint of his blood.

The nurse who took the blood was doubtful about him. She weighed him, and then said he was too thin. But Paul stood looking at her silently, and at last she pursed her lips and shrugged. He was permitted to lie down on the padded bench and have a vein in his upper arm opened. He went out with eight dollars in his hand.

He bought the bottle of brandy at the package goods store and started home with it. His footsteps were slow. He was feeling, not nauseated (the nurse had insisted on his swallowing coffee and a doughnut before she would dismiss him), but remote from himself and weak. His heart seemed to pound lightly and hollowly. The nurse had been right to be dubious over him.

It took him five minutes or so to get up the stairs. He had to stop often to rest. When he opened the door, she was sitting in the armchair. He looked at her with the objectivity induced by his feeling of exhaustion and remoteness. She was very pale. Paler, he thought, than she had been yesterday.

He opened the brandy and brought it to her in a glass. As she took it, she said, "You look tired, Paul. Do you have a girl somewhere? You were gone a long time."

For a moment he could only stare at her. A sudden bright indignation cut through the fog in his mind. Did she think, could she possibly think, that he, who sat by her feet in the day, who slept on the floor beside her in the night, could . . . could . . ? Then the tenderness and benignity in her face reached him, and he saw the concern for him that had made her ask.

He looked away from her. "No, nothing like that. I'm . . . not so young any more," he answered, half in apology.

"Young!" For the first time he heard her laugh. The sound was like the sudden flash of sunlight on a wave. "Why, you're nothing but a boy. You don't know how young you are. Sit down by me on the floor, Paul."

As he obeyed, she put out one hand and tipped his face up to her. He shuddered all over at the touch. She studied him with her translucent golden eyes. Then she nodded and smiled.

"No, you're not handsome," she said, almost teasingly. "But . . . I cannot have lost all my power." For a moment her face changed. He saw that she was afraid. "I'll take care of you, oh, I know I can. Paul, the girls are going to be nice to you."

"That's good," he said awkwardly. In a flash of wry humor he thought, "She's optimistic because she has succeeded with even more unpromising human material than I am." Then the gentleness in her face shook him to the heart, and he repeated more warmly, "That's good."

She put her white hand over her eyes. "I never scorned human needs. Or human love."

On the next day she questioned him lightly, trying to hide her disappointment when he replied with negatives. The day after that she asked him more doubtfully; he saw that her self-confidence was going.

On the third day he excused himself at twilight and went out to walk in the street. Shivering, he paced up and down before the liquor store, the hock shop, the grocery (his overcoat had gone long ago), and invented the details of an amorous adventure. When his imagina-

tion was satisfied, he looked at the clock in the window of the second liquor store, and was dismayed to find that less than half an hour had passed. What he was going to say had happened couldn't have happened in under an hour; he had some forty minutes to kill. He walked back and forth, rehearsing his story and shivering. Then he ran up the stairs to her.

The light had not been turned on. Except for the pale, pale radiance from her body, the room was in darkness. He knelt by her feet, glad to be invisible, and told her his lies.

Once or twice she interrupted to put a question. He could feel that she was smiling. "So," she said, when he had come to the limits of his invention, "isn't it as I told you? Paul, didn't I tell you I'd take care of you?" There was a triumph in her voice.

"Yes. Thank you for it."

"And did you please *her*?" she asked after a moment, more gravely. "So that she gave you that final pleasure, of seeing a woman turned into more than a woman in your arms? I hope it was like that."

"It was like that."

The faint light of her body had grown stronger; he could perceive even in the dark that pleasure was making her smile. He was glad that he had lied to her. When he got to his feet and switched on the room's one weak bulb, he saw that her face was alive with her delight.

After that he told her many lies. He would walk up and down in the dusk, shivering uncontrollably as the year advanced and the winter grew more cold, and contrive stories of warm, perfumed rooms, wide couches, and girls with satin thighs. He got to know every watch

and camera behind the metal lattice of the hock shop, every bottle in the window of the liquor stores. He thought none of the merchants in his street changed their displays often enough.

Once or twice he took twenty cents from the change in his pockets and went to the picture house on the corner, out of the cold, to sit through banging westerns and dramas of wealthy society, but usually he could not afford them, and after the third time he came the nurse at the Blucher Laboratories had refused to take any more blood from him, saying scoldingly, "What you need is less sherry to drink and more to eat. Why is it that you people don't ever want to eat?"—so he no longer had that source of revenue.

He bought freesias with two dollars of the money he got for the last pint of blood. He took the flowers in their green wrapper up the stairs to her, telling her he'd had a windfall, things were looking up for him. She received his story as yet another evidence of her success in taking care of him. The room was no more full of the delicate perfume of the flowers than it was of the silver reflections of her smiling lips and the movements of her hands.

He was always afraid that she would see past his lies to the cold, dirty reality, but somehow—whether because she had lost most of her power, or because it had not ever extended in that direction—she never did. She accepted his stories unquestioningly.

Yet, as the days passed and her body grew always lighter and more tenuous, it came to him that she was dying. His lies and his care could not help her. There

were times when he thought she rallied, when he would permit himself to hope.

On Thursday he had no money left at all. He went to the laboratories. The nurse frowned at him through the window and shook her head menacingly. He went to the liquor store nearest the corner and stood about, fingering bottles, until the proprietor's back was turned. Then he put a pint of brandy in his pocket and walked out with it. She drank it slowly, growing a little less bloodless. Thursday was a good day.

Friday was bright and clear. Last night the moon had been full; it had snowed all night. The room had been full of the snow's cold radiance. He had wakened several times to look at her in the night. Now, in the hard light of morning, he could hardly see her. She was like a pale flame in the sun.

"How are you?" he asked anxiously as he prepared to leave her.

"Oh, I'm much better this morning, Paul. I almost think my power is coming back." She smiled at him. She seemed to believe it; he felt a tiny jet of hope as he went down the stair.

He had decided to try it again. He entered the liquor store and walked toward the back, where the brandy was. He waited carefully; then his hand went out. With shattering abruptness the proprietor spoke to him.

"Look here, Minton, you can't get away with this," he said sternly. "I saw you take that bottle yesterday, and I didn't say anything. You've been a good customer, and there are times when a man has to have a pint. But I'm not going to let you do it today too. A whole pint of brandy—what did you do with it?"

"I—" Paul's body had begun to shake.

"Well, I guess I know. You ought to've stuck to that sherry wine. Brandy costs too much. And there's no use your trying to lift a pint from Jake, at the other store. I told him about you."

Paul went out. The snow had been cleared from the sidewalks, but it still lay in the street. He bit his fingers desperately. Then he went to the laboratories and, despite the nurse's hostile frown, went in.

"Please," he said, "I've just got to—please—"

She looked at him for a long time, frowning and shaking her head. But at last she shrugged her shoulders, saying angrily, "Well, if you want to kill yourself!" and let him lie down on the bench. He thought she did not take quite the full pint.

He was slow getting back to his room. He had the brandy in his pocket, but he was dizzy, light-headed, sick. The stairs had never seemed so long.

When he opened the door, she was standing beside the bed. He looked at her foolishly. "Did you see it?" she asked.

"See what?" he answered stupidly. Her voice, for all its excitement, had sounded remote and very weak.

"Why, what I made happen in the street. Didn't I tell you, Paul, that my power was coming back?" She smiled at him in triumph, but her body seemed to waver in the air.

"Oh. Yes, I—"

"This morning I felt so much better. I thought I would try. And I succeeded. Surely you must have seen the masses of flowers near the window? Go over to the window and look out."

She was growing frightened. He obeyed her. He raised the sash and peered out dizzily.

For a moment he could see nothing. His eyes blurred; he had to blink them again and again. Then he made out, in the snow beneath the window, a tiny, tiny pale pink flower.

"Yes, you are right. Your power has come back to you. It is—a miracle. The whole street is full of flowers."

Her face grew divine with laughter. She held out her hands toward him, laughing, and he reached out for them. But the unearthly, beautiful body had grown as tenuous as smoke; he could not touch her. Still she smiled at him. For a moment a most wonderful perfume hovered in the air. There was a rainbow iridescence. Then she disappeared.

He stared stupidly at the spot where she had been. It was impossible; he would not believe it. But, as the moments passed and the room remained empty and silent, he realized that it had happened. He was alone now. She was gone; she had left him. Aphrodite was dead.

She had left him. He was all alone. And now—he tried to laugh as the irony came to him, but weeping choked him—and now, whose dog was he? The brandy was in his pocket, unopened. He would not have to sell any more blood for her. Who was going to take care of him?

AN EGG A MONTH FROM ALL OVER

When the collector from Consolidated Eggs found the mnxx bird egg on the edge of the cliff, he picked it up unsuspiciously. A molded mnxx bird egg looks almost exactly like the chu lizard eggs the collector was hunting, and this egg bore no visible sign of the treatment it had received at the hands of Jreel just before Krink's hatchet men caught up with him. The collector was paid by the egg; everything that came along was grist to his mill. He put the molded mnxx bird egg in his bag.

George Lidders lived alone in a cabin in the desert outside Phoenix. The cabin had only one room, but at least a third of the available space was taken up by an enormous incubator. George was a charter member of the Egg-of-the-Month Club, and he never refused one of their selections. He loved hatching eggs.

George had come to Phoenix originally with his mother for her health. He had taken care of her faithfully until her death, and now that she was gone, he missed her terribly. He had never spoken three consecutive words to any woman except her in his life. His fantasies, when he had any, were pretty unpleasant. He was 46.

On Thursday morning he walked into Phoenix for his mail. As he scuffled over the sand toward the post office substation, he was hoping there would be a package for

him from the Egg-of-the-Month Club. He was feeling tired, tired and depressed. He had been sleeping badly, with lots of nightmares. A nice egg package would cheer him up.

The South American mail rocket, cleaving the sky overhead, distracted him momentarily. If he had enough money, would he travel? Mars, Venus, star-side? No, he didn't think so. Travel wasn't really interesting. Eggs. . . . Eggs (but the thought was a little frightening), eggs were the only thing he had to go on living for.

The postmistress greeted him unsmilingly. "Package for you, Mr. Lidders. From the egg club. You got to brush for it." She handed him a slip.

George brushed, his hand shaking with excitement. This must be his lucky morning. It might even be a double selection; the package seemed unusually big. His lips began to lift at the corners. With a nod in place of thanks, he took the parcel from the postmistress, and went out, clutching it.

The woman looked after him disapprovingly. "I want you to stay away from that gesell, Fanny," she said to her eleven-year-old daughter, who was reading a postcard in the back of the cubicle. "There's something funny about him and his eggs."

"Oksey-snoksey, mums, if you say so. But lots of people hatch eggs."

The postmistress sniffed. "Not the way he hatches eggs," she said prophetically.

On the way home George tore the wrapper from the box. He couldn't wait any longer. He pulled back the flaps eagerly.

Inside the careful packing there was a large, an unusually large, pale blue-green egg. Its surface stood up

in tiny bosses, instead of being smooth as eggs usually were, and the shell gave the impression of being more than ordinarily thick. According to the instructions with the parcel, it was a chu lizard egg from the planet Morx, a little-known satellite of Amorgos. It was to be incubated at a temperature of 76.3 centigrade with high humidity. It would hatch in about eight days.

George felt the surface of the egg lovingly. If only Mother were here to see it! She had always been interested in his egg hatching; it was the only thing he had ever wanted to do that she had really approved of. And this was an unusually interesting egg.

When he got home he went straight to the incubator. Tenderly he laid the soi-disant chu lizard egg in one of the compartments; carefully he adjusted temperature and heat. Then he sat down on the black and red afghan on his cot (his mother had crocheted the coverlet for him just before she passed away), and once more read the brochure that had come with the egg.

When he had finished it, he sighed. It was too bad there weren't any other eggs in the incubator now, eggs that were on the verge of hatching. Eight days was a long time to wait. But this egg looked wonderfully promising; he didn't know when the club had sent out an egg that attracted him so. And from one point of view it was a good thing he hadn't any hatchings on hand. Hatching, for all its excitement, was a sort of ordeal. It always left him feeling nervously exhausted and weak.

He had lunch, and after lunch, lying under the red and black afghan, he had a little nap. When he woke it was late afternoon. He went over to the incubator and looked in. The egg hadn't changed. He hadn't expected it would.

His nap hadn't cheered or refreshed him. He was almost tireder than he had been when he lay down to sleep. Sighing, he went around to the other side of the incubator and stared at the cage where he kept the things he had hatched out. After a moment he took his eyes away. They weren't interesting, really—lizards and birds and an attractive small snake or two. He wasn't interested in the things that were in eggs after they had hatched out.

In the evening he read a couple of chapters in the *Popular Guide to Egg Hatchery.*

He woke early the next morning, his heart hammering. He'd had another of those nightmares. But—his mind wincingly explored the texture of the dream—but it hadn't been all nightmare. There'd been a definitely pleasurable element in it, and the pleasure had been somehow connected with the egg that had come yesterday. Funny. (Jreel, who had molded the mnxx bird egg from its original cuboid into the present normal ovoid shape, wouldn't have found it funny at all.) It was funny about dreams.

He got grapes from the cupboard and made cafe-creme on the hotplate. He breakfasted. After breakfast he looked at his new egg.

The temperature and humidity were well up. It was about time for him to give the egg a quarter of a turn, as the hatching instruction booklet suggested. He reached in the compartment, and was surprised to find it full of a dry, brisk, agreeable warmth. It seemed to be coming from the egg.

How odd! He stood rubbing the sprouting whiskers on his upper lip. After a moment he tapped the two gauges. No, the needles weren't stuck; they wobbled normally.

He went around to the side of the incubator and checked the connections. Everything was sound and tight, nothing unusual. He must have imagined the dry warmth. Rather apprehensively, he put his hand back in the compartment—he still hadn't turned the egg—and was relieved to find the air in it properly humid. Yes, he must have imagined it.

After lunch he cleaned the cabin and did little chores. Abruptly, when he was half through drying the lunch dishes, the black depression that had threatened him ever since Mother died swallowed him up. It was like a physical blackness; he put down the dish undried and groped his way over to a chair. For a while he sat almost unmoving, his hands laced over his little stomach, while he sank deeper and deeper into despair. Mother was gone; he was 46; he had nothing to live for, not a thing. . . . He escaped from the depression at last, with a final enormous guilty effort, into one of his more unpleasant fantasies. The imago within the molded mnxx bird egg, still plastic within its limey shell, felt the strain and responded to it with an inaudible grunt.

On the third day of the hatching, the egg began to enlarge. George hung over the incubator, fascinated. He had seen eggs change during incubation before, of course. Sometimes the shells got dry and chalky; sometimes they were hygroscopic and picked up moisture from the air. But he had never seen an egg act like this one. It seemed to be swelling up like an inflating balloon.

He reached in the compartment and touched the egg lightly. The shell, that had been so limey and thick when he first got it, was now warm and yielding and gelatinous.

There was something uncanny about it. Involuntarily, George rubbed his fingers on his trouser leg.

He went back to the incubator at half-hour intervals. Every time it seemed to him that the egg was a little bigger than it had been. It was wonderfully interesting; he had never seen such a fascinating egg.

He got out the hatching instructions booklet and studied it. No, there was nothing said about changes in shell surface during incubation, and nothing about the egg's incredible increase in size. And the booklets were usually careful about mentioning such things. The directors of the Egg-of-the-Month Club didn't want their subscribers to overlook anything interesting that would happen during the incubation days. They wanted you to get your money's worth.

There must be some mistake. George, booklet in hand, stared at the incubator doubtfully. Perhaps the egg had been sent him by mistake; perhaps he hadn't been meant to have it. (He was right in both these suppositions: Jreel had meant the egg for Krink, as a little gift.) Perhaps he ought to get rid of the egg. An unauthorized egg might be dangerous.

Hesitantly he raised the incubator lid. It would be a shame, but—yes, he'd throw the egg out. Anything, anything at all might be inside an egg. There was no sense in taking chances. He approached his hand. The imago, dimly aware that it was at a crucial point in its affairs, exerted itself.

George's hand halted a few inches from the egg. He had broken into a copious sweat, and his forearm was one large cramp. Why, he must have been crazy. He didn't want—he couldn't possibly want to—get rid of

the egg. What had been the matter with him? He perceived very clearly now what he thought he must have sensed dimly all along: that there was a wonderful promise in the egg.

A promise of what? Of—he couldn't be sure—but of warmth, of sleep, of rest. A promise of something he'd been wanting all his life. He couldn't be any more specific than that. But if what he thought might be in the egg was actually there, it wouldn't matter any more that Mother was dead and that he was 46 and lonely. He'd—he gulped and sighed deeply—he'd be happy. Satisfied.

The egg kept on enlarging, though more slowly, until late that evening. Then it stopped.

George was in a froth of nervous excitement. In the course of watching the egg's slow growth, he had chewed his fingernails until three of them were down to the quick and ready to bleed. Still keeping his eyes fixed on the egg, he went to the dresser, got a nail file, and began to file his nails. The operation soothed him. By 12, when it became clear that nothing more was going to happen immediately, he was calm enough to go to bed. He had no dreams.

The fourth and fifth days passed without incident. On the sixth day George perceived that though the egg was of the same size, its shell had hardened and become once more opaque. And on the eighth day—to this extent the molded mnxx bird egg was true to the schedule laid down in the booklet for the chu lizard—the egg began to crack.

George felt a rapturous excitement. He hovered over the incubator breathlessly, his hands clutching the air and water conduits for support. As the tiny fissure en-

larged, he kept gasping and licking his lips. He was too agitated to be capable of coherent thought, but it occurred to him that what he really expected to come out of the egg was a bird of some sort, some wonderful, wonderful bird.

The faint pecking from within the egg grew louder. The dark fissure on the pale blue-green background widened and spread. The halves of the shell fell back suddenly, like the halves of a door. The egg was open. There was nothing inside.

Nothing. Nothing. For a moment George felt that he had gone mad. He rubbed his eyes and trembled. Disappointment and incredulity were sickening him. He picked up the empty shell.

It was light and chalky and faintly warm to the touch. He felt inside it unbelievingly. There was nothing there.

His frustration was stifling. For a moment he thought of crumpling up newspapers and setting the cabin on fire. Then he put the halves of the shell down on the dresser and went wobblingly toward the door. He'd—go for a walk.

The mnxx bird imago, left alone within the cabin, flitted about busily.

The moon had risen when George got back. In the course of his miserable wanderings, he had stopped on a slight rise and shed a few sandy tears. Now he was feeling, if not better, somewhat more resigned. His earlier hopes, his later disappointment, had been succeeded by a settled hopelessness.

The mnxx bird was waiting behind the door of the cabin for him.

In its flittings in the cabin during his absence, it had managed to assemble for itself a passable body. It had

used newspapers, grapes, and black wool from the afghan as materials. What it had made was short and squat and excessively female, not at all alluring, but it thought George would like it. It held the nail file from the dresser in its one completed hand.

George shut the cabin door behind him. His arm moved toward the light switch. He halted, transfixed by the greatest of the surprises of the day. He saw before him, glimmering wanly in the moonlight from the window, the woman of his—let's be charitable—dreams.

She was great breasted, thighed like an idol. Her face was only a blur; there the mnxx bird had not felt it necessary to be specific. But she moved toward George with a heavy sensual swaying; she was what George had always wanted and been ashamed of wanting. She was here. He had no questions. She was his. Desire was makhim drunk. He put out his hands.

The newspaper surface, so different from what he had been expecting, startled him. He uttered a surprised cry. The mnxx bird saw no reason for waiting any longer. George was caressing one grape-tipped breast uncertainly. The mnxx raised its right arm, the one that was complete, and drove the nail file into his throat.

The mnxx bird was amazed at the amount of blood in its victim. Jreel, when he had been molding the imago with his death wishes for Krink, had said nothing about this. The inhabitants of the planet Morx do not have much blood.

After a momentary disconcertment, the mnxx went on with its business. It had, after all, done what it had been molded to do. Now there awaited it a more personal task.

It let the woman's body it had shaped collapse behind it carelessly. The newspapers made a whuffing sound.

In a kind of rapture it threw itself on George. His eyes would be admirable for mnxx bird eyes, it could use his skin, his hair, his teeth. Admirable materiall Trembling invisibly with the joy of creation, the mnxx bird set to work.

When it had finished, George lay on the sodden carpet flaccidly. His eyes were gone, and a lot of his vital organs. Things were over for him. He had had, if not all he wanted, all he was ever going to get. He was quiet. He was dead. He was satisfied.

The mnxx bird, on the fine strong wings it had plaited for itself out of George's head hair, floated out into the night.

THE DEATH OF EACH DAY

Toward sunset they would become dimly aware of how long they had been fighting and how tired they were. Under the plastic casts and the cosmetic dressings their wounds would begin to smell. They fired their atomic cannon more at random, they spoke infrequently. Their breathing became shallower. The effects of the previous night's therapy were wearing off.

They always found this frightening; and, as soon as the sun sank—the convention that there should be no attacks at night was one of the most rigidly observed of the Limited War—they would hurry eagerly away from the lead-shielded, concrete reinforced gun emplacement toward the city's lower levels.

There the therapy they needed was waiting for them. There the fighters would find iatro-robots, tranquilizers, memory suppressors, and heavy doses of hypno-therapy. Best of all, at the end of the therapeutic sessions, they would be issued the two capsules of Nedradorm that would assure each of them his seven hours of dreamless sleep.

Denton was no less eager for his surcease tonight than the others were. It had been a hard day, with something odd about it that he couldn't quite place. Yet as he limped away from his station—he was the captain of a gun crew—he hesitated. Miriam, his girl, had been wounded recently when one of the enemy shells had ex-

ploded near her. She was still his girl, though he hadn't been able to see much of her since the war had begun, and he wanted to visit her. She'd been in the hospital, let's see, it must be three days now. He couldn't remember exactly when she *had* been hurt. Of course she'd be back at her station in a day or two. But he'd like to see her tonight.

He could go to see her after he'd had his therapy. He'd be rested then. More like himself. But he felt somehow that he'd like to see her before he was rested and refreshed. He'd go now.

The escalator had been damaged by a robot bomber a day or two before. The gun crew had to walk down a couple of flights before they could find one that still worked. Denton went with them, but at the second level he took a slow-moving mobile sidewalk that went slanting down to the fourth level, where the hospital was.

It was not quite dark yet. Long shafts of tawny light struck down across the sidewalk from the upper levels at the intersections, and heavy dust motes danced in them. Denton was surprised at how few people were riding the walk. The evacuation of civilians must have been more extensive than he had realized.

He stopped at a flower stall on the corner near the hospital, meaning to buy Miriam a bouquet. You always took a sick person flowers. But there was no attendant at the stall, and the flowers in the green tin vases were nothing but dry, colorless mops. They looked as if they had been standing there for a month. The gardenias in the glass case were brown humps.

It was too bad. He sighed and chewed his lip. The gracious life was one of the things they were fighting for. And besides, he'd wanted to take her something. But in

the early days of a war, some things had to get left out.

There was a robot attendant on duty at the hospital admitting desk. It surprised Denton that he was surprised. Hadn't he thought that there would be an attendant? But the robot told him where Miriam was readily enough.

He walked down the dimly-lighted corridor toward ward B-6. The familiar hospital smell came to his nose. It was tinged with something else, a heavy, sickly smell, that he couldn't identify. He opened the padded door of the ward.

It was a ten-bed ward, but as far as he could see, only two beds were occupied. Good, that meant casualties weren't heavy. He walked hesitantly toward the bed to the right, where he thought he recognized the outline of Miriam's head on the pillow. The lighting was poor.

"Miriam?" he asked. The whole right side of her face was swathed in bandages.

After a moment she said, "Yes?"

"It's Dick." He pulled up a chair to her bed. "How are you, dear?"

"Dick!" She turned her face toward him. "So you came at last."

He was puzzled. "At last? Why, dear, it's only been a couple of days."

"Is that what you think?" She laughed a little. "I suppose that's because you've been having your therapy. No, I've been lying here for more than a month. I didn't think you'd ever come."

"But . . . " He'd better change the subject. "Are they taking good care of you?" The moment he had asked the question, he felt it was unwise.

"Not any more," she answered drearily. "Not after the first week. I guess they think there's not much use in it."

He shifted uneasily in his chair. She must be fancying it. And yet, that heavy smell . . . "Are they understaffed?" he wanted to know.

"I don't know. The attendants hardly ever come in here. I think perhaps they've been transferred to fighters' therapy.

"I can't believe you're really here. I didn't think you'd come."

"Why wouldn't I come?" he asked a little angrily, pleased to have something to be angry about.

"Oh, the therapy. I know how fighters' therapy affects people. I had a lot of it when I was fighting."

"Don't you get therapy any more?" he asked, really shocked.

"No. Some days I don't even get fed. Some days I can't even keep my bed clean. Why should they waste therapy on me? I'm not a fighter any more. I'm going to. . . ."

Her voice trailed away. But he knew, from the grieved and indignant bound his heart gave, what she had been going to say.

Oh, why had he come here directly from the gun emplacement? He should have had his treatment, or at least a tranquilizing pill, before he saw her. Then he'd have realized that what she was saying was no more than the fretful complaining of a sick person. Sick people always complained, they always found fault with their care. But as it was, it sounded dreadfully real. And at the back of his mind was the fear that if he kept

on listening to her he would hear her say something that was almost worse than hearing her, his girl, say she was going to . . . to. . . .

"No, you're not," he said loudly. "No, you're not."

"Why not?" she answered almost peevishly. "A lot of people have died."

"There's only one other patient in the ward. What do you mean by that?"

"It used to be full of them."

"You mean, when you first came here? There haven't been that many casualties. The war has only been going on for a few days."

"I can't talk much more," she said, closing her eyes. "You've had memory suppressors. I don't suppose you'll believe me. But the war has been going on for more than ten years."

He stared at her. After a moment, he pushed his chair back. He couldn't, he really couldn't, stay and listen to anything more. It frightened him too much.

"Good-bye," he said loudly. "Good-bye, Miriam."

She didn't answer him.

When he was out in the street again, he stood hesitating. If he hurried, he could make it to the clinic before the fighters' therapy department closed. And then he'd feel better, much better. He'd be able to realize how wrong and unreasonable Miriam was.

He hadn't even kissed her. He hadn't even told her he wanted her to hurry and get well.

He began to walk. He knew he ought to take a mobile sidewalk to the clinic, but he kept limping along the static one. Well, no matter how late he was in gettiing to the clinic, he could always have sleeping pills. After a good night, he'd be more normal again.

How empty the city was.

It had grown quite dark. Some of the street fluors had come on. In the gentle, silvery light they gave, like moonlight diluted, Denton saw that shop after shop had been boarded up, or bomb-damaged, or merely left to emptiness. Nobody at all was about. His footsteps sounded light and hollow as he walked.

He passed a food store. It, at least, was lit up. But there were only two or three people in it.

It showed how efficiently the evacuation of the civilian population had been carried out.

His wounds, particularly the one on his thigh, had begun to smart. When he had to detour around heaps of rubble, he resented it. Then there came a heap so big it blocked the street. He couldn't detour, he had to scramble over it. It was a heap of bricks, plaster and plastic, with flat jagged pieces on top that must, from their shape, be glass, though they were so heavily coated with dust that it was impossible to say. They must have been lying there a long t. . . .

Sweat was pouring down him. He realized that he was badly frightened—the glass must have been lying there a long time to be so coated with dust. It must have been lying there for nearly ten years.

Denton drew a deep breath. He tried to collect himself. All right. Suppose the war had been going on for as long as Miriam said. Suppose the therapy he and the others had received, had taken each day away from them as it happened, and confronted them with a perpetual present, a present in which the war had only just started and victory was only a few days distant.

All right. Was it really so seriuous? It had been done with good motives. It had enabled the fighters to bear

up under fear and suffering that would otherwise have overwhelmed them. There must have been times—he had a dim feeling that there had been times—when he had seen all those around him dying, touched with flame, suffering agonies. And yet none of the agony had touched him. He ought to be grateful for the healing therapy.

Whatever his people had suffered, the other side must have suffered equally. Denton's side was sure to win. Victory, by now, must in reality be only a few days distant.

He drew another deep breath. It was all right, he could stop being so frightened. He'd go on to the fighters' clinic and get his sleeping pills.

He walked a few paces. He stopped. He knew now why today's fighting had seemed so odd. There had been no enemy action, no enemy action at all. except for one short burst of gunfire earlier in the day.

It must be a trap. The enemy was clever. They must be planning . . . something . . . a major attack. . . .

He knew in his heart that it wasn't so. Enemy action had grown scantier day after day. There might be no one man of them yet left alive.

Denton's side was sure to win? Yes, perhaps it had already won. But there was no one left to win from any more.

He scrambled back over the rubble heap. His heart was pounding. When he got to the mobile walk's entrance, he hesitated. No, he could make better time on foot than that. He began to run.

Nobody stopped him. After the second block, the wound in his thigh broke. He felt the bloody fluid

from it trickling down his leg. It hurt less than it had before. He ran on.

When he got to the hospital, he was panting and trembling. He had had a fighter's day, with little food and rest. But he jogged past the admitting desk, down the corridor, and into Miriam's ward.

The bed where the other woman had been was empty and stripped of its coverings. Miriam was the only one in the ward.

Now that he was here, he felt shy. "Miriam . . ." he said.

"*Dick*!" She raised her head from the pillow. "I've had a bath," she said. "They took the other woman away, and then they gave me a bath—you didn't kiss me good-bye."

"I know." He gathered her up in his arms and began kissing her. She was so much thinner and lighter than he remembered her that it made his heart ache, and her hair—hadn't her hair been a darker brown? Now it was almost ash blonde.

She clung to him laughing and trembling, while tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm so glad you came," she said. "I thought I was just going to lie here by myself until. . . .

"Do you know how long it's been since you kissed me, Dick? I know you don't remember. The therapy blurs things, and when each day is the first one, it doesn't matter what didn't happen the night before. But I can remember. It's been ten years."

He held her tightly, thinking how, when they had been lovers, she had never wanted to go to sleep unless she was touching him. She had used to wake in the

night to touch him, to make sure he was still there. And yet they had slept apart in their narrow fighters' beds for a decade, sure that each day of separation was the first day.

"Do you remember that song I used to play on the guitar?" she asked. "About the man who was standing on the gallows? Everyone failed him—his father, his mother, his brothers—except his true love. She brought the gold, she paid the fee, she saved him.

"I'm so glad you came back to kiss me, Dick. It makes it easier for me to . . . leave."

He put her down gently on the pillow, but he was angry. "No, you're *not*," he said.

"Not?"

"Not . . . what you said. Wait. Wait. I'll be back." He hurried out into the corridor.

All the same, it wasn't easy to find an iatro-robot. The corridors, the wards he explored were empty. He found a storeroom full of broken and dismantled iatro-mechanisms, but he knew he was incapable of restoring one of them. He didn't even pass any attendants in the halls. And everywhere he went in the big, ill-lighted building, he found the same faint heavy smell of uncleanness and decay.

At last, on the hospital's top floor, he found the operating theatre. It was brightly lighted, the first brightly lighted room he had been in.

He hurried forward. An iatro-robot must just have finished an operation: it was stripping off its gloves and tossing them in an auto-clave, and four attendant robots were wheeling out an operating table with a patient strapped to it.

"I want you to examine a patient," Denton told the iater.

"I cannot examine a patient without a requisition from CA-3," the robot said in its toneless voice.

Denton didn't know what to do. He was wearing side arms, but he couldn't coerce a robot, and if he damaged this one, it would not only be useless to Miriam, but dangerous. And he knew that CA-3—if there was anybody there at all—wouldn't grant him the requisition.

He'd have to forge it. The elevator he tried didn't work; he ran down the four flights of stairs to the admitting desk.

Here, for the first time, he was fortunate. Nobody was on duty, and he was able to riffle through stacks of papers and forms until he found one of the yellow CA-3 slips.

He erased the former name and wrote in Miriam's name and ID No. The sex was right. He thought the date on the slip would serve. His hands were sweating, and his heart knocked against his ribs.

He caught up with the iatro-robot on the third floor. "The requisition," he said. He held the slip out to it.

The iater scanned the slip intently. Denton held his breath. It handed the slip back to him. "Very well," it said. "Where is she?"

Denton felt dizzy with relief. "Come along, I'll show you," he replied.

The iater rolled beside him on its noiseless wheels into Miriam's ward. It picked up the chart at the foot of her bed and examined it. "The prognosis is unfavorable," it said.

"Never mind that," Denton answered. "Examine her, and tell me what can be done."

"As you like."

While Denton looked on anxiously, it stripped back the covers and began to examine Miriam. Once or twice it asked her a question. At last it straightened.

"She is suffering from radiation damage," it said. "That is why her wounds do not heal. There is nothing to be done."

For a moment Denton felt paralyzed. Then he said, "There must be something. There must be some possible treatment. There must be something that can be done."

"There is a possible treatment," said the iatro-robot. "She might be helped by massive doses of sulfhydryl laureate. But that drug is in short supply. It is forbidden to administer more than three milligrams of it to a patient. It is a fighters' drug, reserved for those who can be salvaged easily." It started to roll away.

"Wait," Denton ordered. "Sulfhydryl laureate. Where is this drug kept?"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"So I can get a requisition for it."

"You cannot get a requisition for it. It is kept in the pharmacy, with our other drugs."

The robot wheeled away. For a moment Denton couldn't think what to do. A forgery wouldn't help. The pharmacy would be closed. He didn't even know the chemical symbol. . . . Nonsense. He'd get the drug.

"I'll try to hurry," he told Miriam.

The pharmacy was closed. The door was locked. Denton burned out the lock with his blaster. He stepped into a wilderness of flasks and bottles.

He looked for the drug a long time before he found

it. It was on a low shelf under the window, in a dark brown container.

He wanted to be sure. He read the label again: Sulfhydryl laureate. Capsules. 3 mg. Yes, it was all right.

He was just opening his pocket to put the bottle in it when a voice behind him said, "What are you doing here?"

He jumped to his feet, his gun in his hand. It was the pharmacist—a human being, not a robot, with a careworn, intelligent face. Denton said, "Don't try to stop me."

"Oh, I won't. . . . Sulfhydryl laureate. A specific for radiation damage. But it's restricted, in short supply."

"It's for my girl. Besides, the enemy attacks have stopped. The fighters won't need it any more."

"Um. You must not have been having your therapy, to be able to realize that."

Denton didn't know what the man's attitude to him was. He said, "What about you? You're not tranquilized either."

"No. I can't help people—sometimes a pharmacist can help people a little—if I'm tranquilized." He picked up another bottle from a shelf and held it out to Denton, who was watching him alertly and suspiciously, his gun ready.

"You'd better take this along too," he said. "Codeine. If she's had much radiation damage, she'll need it. Where is she, in the hospital?"

"Yes." Denton reached out his left hand and took the codeine.

"I won't give you away," the pharmacist said. "But get out of here as soon as you can. Before morning, any-

how. The police force is still operating. If they catch you, they'll not only put you under arrest, they'll take the sulfhydryl away from you."

The pharmacist turned his back on Denton and walked toward the door. "Come with us," Denton called after him, on impulse.

"No. I can still help people here. But you'd better get out." He didn't turn to speak.

"Yes. All right. Thanks."

Denton went back to Miriam's ward. He made her take two of the sulfhydryl capsules and half a codeine pill. "Have you had anything to eat?" he wanted to know.

"Not since morning."

"I'll get us something."

There wasn't much in the hospital kitchen, but he opened a can of eggs and found bread. He took the food back on a tray and they ate side by side, sharing food, for the first time in years.

"Miriam. . . ." he said when they had finished.

"Yes?" She was holding his hand.

"We've got to get out of here." He told her what the pharmacist had said.

"But . . . where could we go?" Her voice had lost the hopeless note it had held earlier, and become edged with anxiety. "And the roads must be guarded. What's it like outside?"

"We can try to get through to a neutral area. We don't know how limited the war has been, or what's been happening. We'll have to find out. Could you ride in a wheelchair?"

"I . . . I guess so." He knew she dreaded the physical pain of moving. He squeezed her hand.

"If you can ride in a chair," he said, "I think I can get us out through one of the horizontal ventilating ducts."

"But aren't there fans in them?"

"I believe the fans have stopped operating." He told her of the dust motes he had noticed on his way to the hospital. "Some of the horizontal ducts are big enough to be walked in. You know, I used to be an engineer. And they go for miles, to outside the city walls, to bring in uncontaminated air.

"I'll go hunt for a wheelchair."

"Darling Dick."

He found a wheelchair in the storeroom where the dismantled robots were. He slung cans of food and a water flask under it, and padded the seat with blankets and covers for Miriam. He added a flashlight, and bandages to dress Miriam's wounds, to his load. But by now he was so tired that he had to have rest. He gave Miriam two more capsules, and then pulled up one of the ward beds beside her and lay down on it. He slept, holding her hand.

They left the hospital while it was still dark. They passed a robot nurse on the exit ramp, but it made no attempt to stop them. A ventilator entrance was only a couple of blocks away. Denton began to trundle the chair along the dark and silent street.

After a block and a half, he stopped. "Just a minute," he said. He wormed his way in through the front of a partly boarded-up store.

Before Miriam had time to be alarmed, he was back with something that he laid in her lap.

"Dick! A mandolin!" Her face had lit up. Gently she caressed the smooth wood of the instrument.

"And here's a pick for it." He put it in her hand.

Half a block later, they came to the ventilator opening. It was screened. He burned through the mesh with his blaster and pushed the chair inside. He pulled the mesh back in place.

The going was rough—the duct was heavily corrugated—but possible. When he saw how much the jolting hurt Miriam, he gave her a pain pill. They had gone perhaps two miles when he realized that they were almost exactly underneath the spot on the city's top level where his gun crew was stationed.

He hesitated. Miriam's head was drooping. He hated to leave her. But he wanted to try to see what he could do for his gun crew, and when he explained it to her, she nodded.

He gave her two more sulfhydryl capsules and another pain pill. He wormed his way through the ventilator mesh, which was loose on the cross-opening, and walked and rode up the four levels to the top.

The sun had just cleared the horizon. His crew was coming on duty, laughing and talking and cracking jokes. It was a fine fresh day.

For a moment Denton envied them. They looked so fresh and relaxed, their faces smooth and rested, enamelled with calm. Perhaps false calm, false security, was better than nothing. Then he thought of Miriam, waiting below, and of how long she had lain hopelessly in her dirty bed. No. Security could be bought too high.

He heard Terry, his lieutenant, say to the others, "A wonderful day to be starting a war!" The others laughed. Denton stepped forward and laid his hand on Terry's sleeve.

"Terry," he said, "the war is over. The war is over. There isn't any more."

The other man's eyes widened. Then he began to laugh. "God, sir, you're a joker. Wait until I tell the others! 'There isn't any more. What a sharp ramp!"

Denton shook his head. "I mean it. The war's over. Everybody on the other side is dead. *The war has been going on for ten years.*"

For a moment Terry looked undecided. Then he laughed again. "What a ramp, sir, what a ramp—Donovan, you'd better hurry and load those shells. Let's get cracking. It's mighty important to get the advantage in these first few days."

Denton spoke to Donovan, to O'Shea, to Carrignan. They either laughed at him or looked embarrassedly away. It wasn't any use, they wouldn't listen. He hadn't thought it would be. They'd had their therapy.

He gave up at last. As he turned toward the steps that led away from the emplacement, he heard Terry say buoyantly, "A wonderful day to be starting a war!"

The pain pill had helped Miriam. She smiled at him and kissed him. "I tuned the mandolin while you were gone," she said. "Listen:

"Slack your rope, hangs-a-man
  O slack it for a while
I think I see my true-love coming,
  Riding many a mile. . . .' "

Denton began to push the chair on over the rough surface, and when she got to the last part of the song, the answer to the condemned man's anxious question, " 'Or have you come to see me hanging on the gallows-tree?' ", he joined in with her.

Together they sang,
"'Yes, I have brought you gold,
  Yes, I have paid your fee,
Nor have I come to see you
  Hanging on the gallows-tree.'"

The air in the duct seemed fresher. What would it be like when they got outside? Their chances weren't very good, and Denton knew it. A sick woman in a wheelchair, and a mandolin. But he smiled as he pushed the chair ahead on its bumpy road.

LAZARUS

Before he would let them into the vat room, Mr. Fremden, the plant manager, made them put on laboratory smocks and gauze masks and stand for fifteen minutes under sterilamps. Even then, as he made lightly but deliberately clear, they were none too welcome in the vat room today.

"It's a pity you didn't come earlier," he told the group as they walked along the metal-lined corridor. "Yesterday we were harvesting. It's an interesting think to watch, and visitors always enjoy it. But today the vat is only twenty-four hours from the first seeds."

"What kind of meat are you growing now?" Mrs. Timens asked. She was a broad-beamed, comfortable woman whose questions were pleasantly easy to answer.

"Juiciveal," Mr. Fremden answered. "We'll be growing Juicipork later. And the crop we just harvested was Juicibeef."

"Have you had any opposition from religious groups?" Miss Paura put in from where she was walking beside Mr. Angst of *Gourmand.*

Miss Paura was the worst of the three. A small, dark, lively woman, she seemed to have a flair for asking inconvenient questions. But she was culinary editor for all the Pfand-Loose publications, and it was particularly important to get her endorsement for Juicimeet pro-

ducts. She had already mentioned visiting the Veristeak plant yesterday.

"Not any more," he told her courteously. "Not since the very first, in fact. There was some talk then to the effect that it was wrong to create life artificially. But we've come in for much favorable publicity since then, a lot of it from humanitarian-minded people, and of course it's well known that the synthimeat industry is supplying over seventy percent of the protein requirements of the armed forces. Nobody could oppose *that.* Why, there were two bishops present when Juicimeet laid the corner stone for its newest plant."

They had arrived before the big, rubber-flanged double doors of the vat room. "Please try not to cough or sneeze," Mr. Fremden cautioned them. "The culture infects very easily at this stage. We used to take groups of school children through, but we had to stop it when we lost two consecutive batches of Juicimeet. It's so difficult to make children be careful and clean."

The doors swung open as he pressed a series of buttons. The three editors followed Mr. Fremden in, aping his cautious step. The doors closed promptly behind them again.

The vat room was enormous, the size of a hangar, and all its floor space, except for the four-foot wide walk around the walls, was occupied by the waist-high, glass-lined vat. The air was faintly steamy, and a curious smell, a little like blood, a little like ammonia, came to the nose.

"The metal catwalks you see high above the surface of the vat," Fremden said in the tone of a lecturer, "are used to harvest the protein crop. If you'll look up—" their glances followed his gesture—"you'll see the

machinery by which they are lowered into place. I'm sorry there's not more to see now. Please remember what I told you, and keep back."

Obediently, they flattened themselves against the walls. There was an instant's silence. Then, from the faintly greenish surface of the vat came a hollow, dull rumbling.

"What was that?" Miss Paura asked. She sounded—or was pretending to sound, Fremden thought savagely —startled. "What was that?"

He felt sweat again begin to trickle down inside his collar. "The culture is being aerated from below, dear lady," he said.

"Oh." Was Miss Paura, behind her gauze mask, smiling? "The vat made the same sort of rumble yesterday, at Veristeak," she told him. "But they said it was the nutrient activators being injected."

Fremden, gazing at her bright, calm eyes, felt a pang of pure hate. "Our formulae are very different, dear lady," he answered. He was trying hard to keep the ice out of his voice. Juicimeet is a highly superior product. Our nutrient activators were injected long ago."

Could he decently usher them out yet? Had the VIPs seen enough? It was the food editor from *Homemaker*, Mrs. Timens, who asked the next question, oddly enough. "Tell me," she said, leaning her comfortable frame toward him, "—perhaps it's a silly question, but I don't understand technical things—tell me, does it ever feel anything?"

"Does it—" Mr. Fremden repeated momentarily at sea.

"The stuff. What you're growing in the vat."

"Oh." Under his mask, he licked his lips. It was a waste of time, but after he answered her he might be able to get them out. "I see what you mean. No, it feels nothing. It cannot.

"I want to explain that statement. Before an animal can feel anything—before it can perceive—several elements have to be present."

Had there been another rumble from the vat? They were listening to him attentively; if there had been a rumble, they hadn't noticed it. None the less, Mr. Fremden had to clear his throat before he could go on.

"Several elements have to be present," he repeated. "There has to be a receptor—a sense organ, like the eye or the ear or the skin surface, where sense impressions are received. There have to be neurones, or nerve cells, to transmit the sense message. And there has to be an adjustor, like the brain, where the messages are sorted, processed, and referred out again to the effectors, like muscles and glands, to be acted upon."

They were fascinated now; he could see it in their faces. If there came a rumble now, they would ignore it. He drew a deep breath.

"None of these elements—receptors, neurones, or adjustors—is present in Juicimeet. Juicimeet is grown from 'seed,' or clumps of cells from the muscle tissue of animals—" here Mr. Fremden had to control an urge to lower his voice—"which were specially bred and selected for juiciness, tenderness, and palatibility. There are no nerve fibers in Juicimeet! That is one of the reasons for its deliciousness.

"These clumps of cells are spaced evenly—or, as we call it, seeded—throughout the culture medium. The solution is very carefully controlled; it changes from

hour to hour as various enzymes, activators, charges of oxygen and so forth are added. The result is that in some six days the isolated clumps of cells grow to a solid, delicious mass, weighing many tons, of Juicimeet. And incidentally, when you leave each of you will be given a neat cellophane-wrapped package of Juicibeef so that you can experience for yourselves, if you haven't already done so, how delicious it is. We recommended it for broiling, grilling, roasting, or as kebabs.

"Juicimeet is subject to a continuous process of selection. In each batch, some cells respond better to the nutrient solution than do others. It is from these superior cells that the new batch is grown. Juicimeet—" under the gauze mask he beamed at them—"becomes better all the time."

"And it can't feel anything—" Miss Paura murmured.

"Because it has neither neurones, receptors, nor adjustors. Exactly. It is animal muscle tissue, nothing more.

"It is just this absence of sensation that has recommended Juicimeet so highly to humanitarians. Bernard Shaw used to say, you know, that he wanted to be followed to his grave by a procession of all the animals he *hadn't* eaten while he was alive. Nowadays a humane man can eat a delicious, tender, Juicibeef steak every day of his life, and be sure that no single living creature has suffered because of his appetite.

"When one adds to the natural superiority of our product this humane element—well, we at Juicimet feel safe in saying that by 1980 the only beef cattle alive will be those in zoos. They'll keep a few specimens there so the children can see what a steer used to look like."

The others laughed. Miss Paura said, "We won't need them any more, so they'll go out of existence. Yes." She had drifted nearer to the vat and was looking down into it, her hands almost touching its rough concrete sides.

Mr. Fremden felt a surge of uncontrollable exasperation. "Dear lady, please move back against the wall," he said in a tone that wasn't at all pleading. "As you know, the culture is at a delicate stage. The enemy would like nothing better than to wreck this plant, and all the others like it. Next year we expect to be supplying an even higher proportion of the protein requirements of the armed forces than we are at present. We have top priority from Defense for all our present and future equipment needs. Personally, I'm convinced that the opposition the synthimeat industry met at first came from people who were either consciously subversive or who had been tricked into membership in crypto-subversive groups."

Still Miss Paura didn't move. Fremden chewed his lower lip savagely. He inhaled. "Have you ever noticed," he said to Mrs. Timens and Mr. Angst in a relaxed, conversational tone, "how subversives always have funny names? I've often remarked to my wife on it. Never names like Timens, or Angst. They just don't have good American names."

He looked toward Miss Paura. Her eyelids flickered. It seemed to him that the olive skin of her forehead was charged with dull red. She turned away from the tank and walked toward them, her eyes a little lowered. "I thought I saw something moving," she said in a colorless voice.

"Ladies are apt to get fancies," Fremden said indulgently. He could afford to be indulgent with her; he

had won. "There's nothing in the vat except seed culture of wholesome, delicious Juiciveal. With a little ginger and garlic, it makes a wonderful roast."

He shepherded them toward the door. He'd won, yes, but he was growing increasingly nervous. He knew the signs, and it wouldn't be long now. He *must* get them out in time.

From the vat there came a prolonged hollow rumbling, like thunder. Savagely he willed them not to look around. He pushed buttons. The doors moved open. They were nearly out, nearly safe.

There was a noise like the rushing of many waters. Their heads, except Miss Paura's, bobbed. Hurry, hurry. And then, what Fremden couldn't have foreseen, from within the enormous, high-ceilinged vat room, a cavernous, inarticulate voice.

They all turned round. Even Mr. Fremden couldn't keep himself from turning. He turned too, with rage and despair and horror in his heart.

The man in the vat was so tall that the glass edge reached only to his navel. His skin was patched with red and brown and yellow and black. His eyes seemed sightless; the flesh on his wrists kept dripping away and then reforming itself. The slit in his face opened and he mouthed at them. He had a tongue.

"Wa—wa—wa—" The syllables steadied into a word. "Why—why—" And then, with a great effort, a sentence, as the man in the vat turned its face from side to side and peered at them. "Why—was I born? Why—why are you taking my flesh?"

It stood for a moment longer, turning its face as blindly as a caterpillar. Then its legs collapsed and it slumped down, slowly at first and then more rapidly,

into the solution in the vat. It gave a kind of gurgle as the water closed over its head. Its head deliquesced. There was nothing in the vat now except potential Juicimeet.

There was a feel in the vat as if an earthquake had happened. The four looked at each other with impassive faces, in the silence of shock. It was too much; nobody showed any effect. At last Mr. Fremden sighed, and it was as if he were picking himself up from the floor.

To explain, to explain. To tell them that it only appeared at certain phases of the culture process, that it didn't mean anything. It didn't mean anything! It went away again. It always had.

He couldn't explain. It was useless. It was best to keep silent.

The event had been more shattering than he realized. The three editors were rigid, frozen. Horrified, Mr. Fremden felt his mouth opening. What words would come out? He coughed in a desperate attempt to keep them back.

In vain, in vain. Speech was urged on him from centers below the level of expediency and self interest. Primeval horror pushed the words—the words that would alienate the endorsement forever, give the lead to natural protein or to the very much inferior product of Veristeak—primeval horror forced his words out.

"We hoped it wasn't really alive," he told the three editors, trembling. "This is the first time it ever spoke to us."

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