STORIES BY

# Sturgeon

INTRODUCED PRINGLE



'Sturgeon? The name was magnetic. There it was, perpetually cropping up attached to the stories I most admired.' Brian Aldiss

'Ted's stories are among the best ever produced in our genre.' Arthur C. Clarke

'How I watched for his stories ... and how eagerly I read them and how hopelessly I decided I couldn't match him.' Isaac Asimov

These are among the tributes to Theodore Sturgeon's work that poured in from readers and fellowwriters after his death in 1985. He was a genius of a story-teller, whose writing had a profound influence on successive generations of SF writers, including the American New Wave. He was also a writer of great tolerance and humanity, who was frequently ahead of his time in his treatment of political, social and sexual issues. He introduced alien intelligences, new social systems, marvellous inventions and strange mutations into his stories as a means of emphasizing the extraordinary qualities of ordinary people.

This book is a celebration of all that is finest and most original in Sturgeon's writing. David Pringle's selection is the first to take into account Sturgeon's whole writing career of more than forty years, and it contains several stories never previously published in Britain. It is a treat not to be missed.



## A TOUCH OF STURGEON

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Stories by Theodore Sturgeon

Selected and introduced by David Pringle This selection first published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster Limited 1987

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### Introduction

Theodore Sturgeon once defined the ideal science fiction story as 'a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content.' This definition was startling for its day (1951), since most American SF of the period was concerned with super-machines, super-beings and super-weapons, with nary a human being in sight. A typical book title of the time was the chilly *I*, *Robot* (Isaac Asimov, 1950).

Sturgeon's own SF ran counter to the trend: it was warm, emotional and humane. The scientific content of his stories was sometimes arbitrary and tacked on, or even non-existent. Many of his early stories were unabashed fantasies; others were published as science fiction but had hoaxing plots which undermined their status as pure SF. For example, in 'Unite and Conquer' (1948) a brilliant professor endeavours to put an end to war by creating an artificial alien menace which will unite the human race in opposition to its threat. Human problem, human solution - but a 'scientific content' which smacks of bathos. Sturgeon went on writing this sort of story for over twenty years: such pieces as 'The Comedian's Children' (1958) and 'Occam's Scalpel' (1971) are based on essentially the same gimmick. It is tempting, therefore, to describe Sturgeon as one of the anti-science science fiction writers, like his nearcontemporary and admirer Ray Bradbury. It could be said that he was not really interested in science at all; he was an author who used the rhetoric of SF in order to write about perennial human affairs, emotional problems, and matters of the heart.

But I believe that most of the stories in the present collection prove this assessment to be inadequate. True, human problems and matters of the heart are well to the fore in all of them, but I am also impressed by the ways in which Sturgeon uses scientific and technological metaphors to embody his humanistic themes. In the earliest of these tales, 'Killdozer!', the malevolent alien intelligence which threatens the human characters is rather perfunctorily explained – it may as well be a purely supernatural force – but the monster is eventually defeated by sweet scientific reason, and by a technological expertise which the author evidently holds in high esteem. One could read this story as a *Frankenstein*-like parable of

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humanity's machines in revolt – save that in this case human beings, these 'soft, persistent bipeds', are able to gain control by reasserting the technical ability which created those machines in the first place. (The setting of the story was highly topical: it was first published towards the end of World War II, at the precise moment when the American and Japanese military 'machines' were busy constructing airfields and army bases on sundry idyllic Pacific islands.)

Still more impressive is Sturgeon's use of biological metaphor in 'The Golden Helix', a complex tale of other-worldly ecology and human devolution which was written in 1953, the very year in which Watson and Crick published their first paper on the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule. Possibly Sturgeon learned of this theory through some newspaper report; more likely, his use of the helical image was a happy coincidence. This scarcely matters, for the tale gains its power from the fresh and exciting embodiment in terms of biological SF of an ancient theme: separation, loss, death and dissolution redeemed by the promise of rebirth and by an almost pantheistic acceptance of the cosmos as one vast living entity. The moving conclusion of the story puts me in mind of a later short masterpiece of science fiction, J. G. Ballard's 'The Voices of Time' (1960). Sturgeon uses other biological metaphors very effectively in the aliens-in-our-midst story 'The Sex Opposite' (which is about syzygy, or sexless sex - a favourite concept of Sturgeon's), and in the beautifully controlled 'Slow Sculpture'.

If one accepts the 'soft' sciences of psychology and sociology as fit subject matter for science fiction, then one can no longer be in doubt that Sturgeon was a true SF writer. Most of his stories are, in the broad sense, psychological. Of the tales collected here, 'Mr Costello, Hero', 'When You're Smiling' and 'And Now the News ... ' are all good examples. He was fond of pointing out that the word 'science' derives from the Latin scientia, meaning 'knowledge'; and strange byways of knowledge were a continual delight to Sturgeon, a man who was constitutionally incapable of accepting the usual humdrun barriers between fields of human endeavour. In 'The Sex Opposite' there occurs this sentence: 'She nodded as if he had ben talking about cats or cathedrals or cam-shafts, or anything else beautiful and complex.' This amounts to a brief expression of Sturgeon's credo. He had an admiration for the beautiful and the complex, in technology as well as in art and in nature, and he was ready to find that beauty and complexity in any area of knowledge, any product of the human mind and heart.

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Theodore Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo in Staten Island, New York, on 26 February 1918. Known throughout his life as 'Ted', he changed his surname to Sturgeon when his mother remarried in 1929. Ted's initial ambition to become a circus acrobat was thwarted by ill-health, and in his teens he became a merchant seaman. He began writing in 1939, selling such stories as 'Ether Breather' and 'A God in a Garden' to the science fiction and fantasy magazines Astounding and Unknown (both edited by the influential John W. Campbell, Jr). During World War II Sturgeon worked in the West Indies, as a hotel manager, army steward, bulldozer operator. He became a literary agent for a few years after the war, and re-established his writing career with scores of short stories in Weird Tales, Argosy, Galaxy SF and elsewhere. His first collection, Without Sorcery, was published in 1948, and his first novel, The Draming Jewels, in 1950. These were followed by his masterpiece, the International Fantasy Award-winning novel More Than Human (1953).

At his prolific peak in the 1950s, Sturgeon contributed stories to a wider range of anthologies and magazines than any other American SF writer (apart from Ray Bradbury). The majority of these tales have been collected in some fifteen scattered volumes, ranging from E Pluribus Unicorn in 1953 to The Golden Helix in 1980. His later novels include The Cosmic Rape (1958), Venus Plus X (1960) and Some of Your Blood (1961). Apart from his SF and fantasy, Sturgeon also wrote an historical novel, I, Libertine (1956, as by Frederick R. Ewing), and a detective novel, The Player on the Other Side (1963, as by Ellery Queen). His output of fiction declined during the 1960s and 70s, but he continued to write numerous book reviews and served as a well-loved tutor in many writers' workshops, both formal and informal. Ted Sturgeon married four times, and fathered seven children. He died, aged 67, on 8 May 1985.

Sturgeon's fellow SF writers soon came to regard him with a kind of awe. Ray Bradbury was among his early admirers, and contributed a laudatory preface to the collection Without Sorcery. Sturgeon was described by Damon Knight in 1954 as 'the most accomplished technician this field has produced, bar nobody . . . he writes about people first and other marvels second.' James Blish later stated: 'He has made himself the finest conscious artist science fiction has yet had' (1962). Samuel R. Delany, the leading figure in the American 'New Wave' of the 1960s, has said: 'The corpus of science fiction produced by Theodore Sturgeon is the single most important body of science fiction by an American to date' (1977).

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Other words of praise have come from Poul Anderson: 'Sturgeon is one of the finest writers alive, by any standard whatsoever. His knowledge of people and their world is profound, his gift of language incomparable' (1979); from Clifford D. Simak: 'Theodore Sturgeon is one of the more important twentieth-century writers' (1980); from the scientist Carl Sagan: 'Sturgeon's short stories are treasures from Elfland' (1980); and from Isaac Asimov: 'He had a delicacy of touch that I couldn't duplicate if my fingers were feathers' (1985).

Of his nearly two hundred short stories and novellas, the ones which Sturgeon's contemporaries most approved include the early fantasy 'It' (1940), about a hideous, misshapen creature which awakes in a forest and sets out in search of something to kill; 'Microcosmic God' (1941), about a scientist who breeds a race of tiny intelligent beings; 'Thunder and Roses' (1947), a sentimental meditation on the morality of atomic war, in which the hero nobly concludes that nuclear retaliation can never be justified; 'A Saucer of Loneliness' (1953), about a lonely woman who is touched by an alien emissary which assures her (in verse) 'That in immensity/ There is one lonelier than you'; 'The World Well Lost' (1953), a daring tale about a pair of homosexual aliens who scandalize the macho society of Earth; 'Affair with a Green Monkey' (1957), another 'queer-bashing is wrong' story which ends with a rather coy dirty joke; and 'The Man Who Lost the Sea' (1959), about an astronaut's thoughts as he lies dying on Mars. I decided not to include any of these stories here, partly because they are so familiar and partly because several of them have not worn well.

In his 1977 essay on Sturgeon, written as an introduction to a library reprint of the novel The Cosmic Rape, Samuel Delany makes a useful distinction between Sturgeon's 'well-mannered' stories (by and large, the ones which were most praised in their day) and those less 'mannerly' pieces that 'today's reader is likely to find ... most interesting, most stimulating, most impressive and obsessive'. Among the stories which Delany includes in the latter category are the powerful fantasies 'Bianca's Hands' (1947 - but written almost a decade earlier), 'Die, Maestro, Die' (1949) and 'Bright Segment' (1955), as well as several of the SF stories I have chosen for this volume. Other tales which may be accounted among Sturgeon's best were simply too long for inclusion here, for much of his finest work was written at novella length: 'The Perfect Host' (1948), 'Baby is Three' (1952; incorporated into the novel More Than Human), 'To Here and the Easel' (1954), 'The (Widget), the (Wadget) and Boff' (1955), 'The Other Man' (1956), 'To Marry INTRODUCTION

Medusa' (1958; expanded as *The Cosmic Rape*), 'Need' (1960) and 'When You Care, When You Love' (1962), to name a few.

What are the 'obsessive' themes which make this author's stories so interesting? The most frequently remarked is the theme of union of meeting, melding, and becoming one. This takes various forms: love-and-togetherness, human-and-alien syzygy, the 'bleshing' of a gestalt consciousness (as in 'Baby is Three') or a racial hive-mind (as in 'To Marry Medusa'). Such unions are usually portrayed as highly desirable events, kinds of salvation, like the cosmic vision which concludes 'The Golden Helix'. However, this joyful blending and meshing can sometimes turn into nightmare, when the society of the benign group-mind becomes that of the ant-hill dominated by some demonic leader-figure, as in 'Mr Costello, Hero'. Here the eponymous anti-hero is a born manipulator, and manipulation in all its aspects is another of the grand Sturgeon themes. We see an evil manipulator at work in 'When You're Smiling', and a near-saintly one in 'Slow Sculpture'. The image of the 'good' manipulator blurs into that of the supremely talented performer, another favourite type. These performers are usually innately gifted. Sturgeon's fondness for ESP and other supernormal powers - apparently arbitrarily bestowed - implies an impatience with steady learning and the gradual achievement of competence. He is very much in favour of the spontaneous - instant grace. 'They're not skills. They're talents. I have no skills,' says Robin English, the immature hero of 'Maturity' (1947), and the text glosses his statement by adding: 'One had to spend a little time in practice to acquire a skill. If Robin couldn't do promisingly the first time he tried something, he would hardly try again.' Yet so many of Sturgeon's graceful performers (like his monsters) are pitted against society. They are alienated, and their superhuman abilities both deepen and justify their alienation, pointing (at best) towards some higher social reintegration - in the gestalt, the hive-mind, the union of perfect love.

In fact, alienation is as strong and abiding a theme as is union or love. The themes mirror each other throughout Sturgeon's work. Nothing could be more alienated from society than the nameless, shambling creature of 'It' or, for that matter, the mute, shambling Lone of 'The Fabulous Idiot' (the first part of *More Than Human*). Horty Bluett, the young boy who runs away from a vicious stepfather to join a travelling circus in Sturgeon's first novel, *The Dreaming Jewels*, is one of society's outcasts, as is the inarticulate, self-educated surgeon of 'Bright Segment' (a disturbing variant on

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the Esmeralda and Quasimodo story), as is the fumbling, voyeuristic Slim of 'The Other Celia'. The same could be said of the monstrous, talented children who populate a dozen other tales.

But the central characters of these stories are not merely children or child-like adults - rather, they are adolescents. There is a sense in which all Sturgeon's protagonists are adolescents, whatever their stated ages. Each has a teenager's sense of alienation and injured innocence, and a teenager's longing for immediate gratification, love at first sight, instant acclaim. Each has an adolescent's love of the bull-session, a penchant for 'asking the next question', an admiration for unorthodox style and rebellious grace, and a readiness to bow to the guru. The Dreaming Jewels begins: 'They caught the kid doing something disgusting out under the bleachers at the high-school stadium . . .' It is an extremely effective hook for any adolescent reader, whose identification with the character will be instantaneous and total (no matter that it turns out Horty is only eight years old and has been caught eating ants). Teenagers agonize over 'dirty secrets'; they also snicker over dirty jokes, and Sturgeon's fiction contains dramatized versions of both.

So one could argue that Sturgeon was, in his creative imagination, an eternal adolescent. A quintessential Sturgeon story, not included here, is 'The Claustrophile' (1956), in which a painfully shy teenager discovers that he is not a normal Earth-person at all but an unwitting member of a secret spacefaring élite. He also gets the girl, and is able to cock a snook at his loud, domineering, wide-shouldered, elder brother, making this the perfect story of adolescent wish-fulfilment. It is not one of Sturgeon's best pieces, in

my view, but it is certainly symptomatic.

The treatment of adolescent psychology may be less obvious than this in the bulk of Sturgeon's fiction, but hints of a teenager's-eye view are continually present throughout his work. This is not intended as an adverse criticism. On the contrary, I believe that Sturgeon's stories gain a great deal of their power from the emotional fuel of adolescence — and it is a power which can continue to move us at other stages of life, just as we respond to a young child's-eye view in the fiction of Ray Bradbury or, for that matter, Charles Dickens.

Despite the admiration of his science fiction peers, Theodore Sturgeon is an underrated author nowadays. This is partly because he did not exploit his own output in the ways that so many of his SF contemporaries have done. (Where are the belated four-hundred-page sequels to *More Than Human*, or the novel-length expansions

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of 'Killdozer!' and 'The Golden Helix'?) He favoured the long short story, a form which is highly suitable to SF but which nevertheless tends to be neglected by contemporary readers in favour of flaccid blockbuster novels. His reputation has also suffered slightly from the fact that he became known as a 'daring' author during the 1950s, the last decade of puritanism before the onset of a twenty-five-year period which has enjoyed comparative freedom of expression in sexual matters. Nothing seems more passé than the day before yesterday's naughtiness. Stories such as 'The World Well Lost' and 'Affair with a Green Monkey' were very effective in their day but now seem a little embarrassing. By the time he came to write his novella 'If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?' (1967), Sturgeon's penchant for taboobreaking stories seemed merely coy, earning him the patronizing nickname of 'Steamy Ted'.

There have been related causes of embarrassment - specifically, his oft-criticized sentimentality and (the reverse of the same coin) his 'sadism'. Sturgeon's fiction brims with feeling, so it is not surprising that it should occasionally slop over into sentimentality. Just how acceptable these excesses of emotion are in particular cases depends on the taste of the individual reader, and, to some extent, on the taste of the times. Sturgeon's greatest admirer, Samuel R. Delany, is not worried. Contrasting Sturgeon's sentimentality with the 'brittleness' of Alfred Bester, a slightly older SF writer who also loomed large in the 1950s, Delany concludes: 'of the two flaws, sentimentality is the flaw of the great storytellers . . . Charlotte Brontë and Tolstoy and [George] Eliot and Dickens . . . This is not just because sentimentality was a nineteenth-century fictive convention: it was the convention because fiction, to be great, must be generous. And Sturgeon's sentimentality (by no means so common as his detractors would have it), when it comes, comes from this same, solid generosity.'

For me, some of Sturgeon's stories *are* vitiated by too much sentiment, although none of the pieces in this volume suffers in that way. As for the charge of sadism, I have occasionally been worried by some of Sturgeon's nastier tales – particularly 'Bright Segment', which is about a dumb recluse who rescues a badly injured woman, nurses her tenderly, then mutilates her again when she threatens to leave him – but in an era when the public has developed an insatiable appetite for gory horror fiction, from the works of the talented Stephen King on down to the gutter, Sturgeon's few stories in this vein seem comparatively mild.

The strengths of Theodore Sturgeon's best writing are undeni-

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able. The fluidity of his language, the inventiveness of his imagination, and the force of his moral concern are all well exemplified by the narratives collected here. They are wonderful performances, sheer tours de force. From the all-male actionadventure story which opens the volume through to the moving tale of love and healing which comes at the close, this book is a testament to the skill of the finest American science fiction writer of the mid-twentieth century.

David Pringle Brighton, 1987

### Killdozer!

Before the race was the deluge, and before the deluge another race, whose nature it is not for mankind to understand. Not unearthly,

not alien, for this was their earth and their home.

There was a war between this race, which was a great one, and another. The other was truly alien, a sentient cloudform, an intelligent grouping of tangible electrons. It was spawned in mighty machines by some accident of a science beyond our aboriginal conception of technology. And then the machines, servants of the people, became the people's masters, and great were the battles that followed. The electron-beings had the power to warp the delicate balances of atom-structure, and their life-medium was metal, which they permeated and used to their own ends. Each weapon the people developed was possessed and turned against them, until a time when the remnants of that vast civilization found a defense—

An insulator. The terminal product or by-product of all energy

research - neutronium.

In its shelter they developed a weapon. What it was we shall never know, and our race will live – or we shall know, and our race will perish as theirs perished. Sent to destroy the enemy, it got out of hand and its measureless power destroyed them with it, and their cities, and their possessed machines. The very earth dissolved in flame, the crust writhed and shook and the oceans boiled. Nothing escaped it, nothing that we know as life, and nothing of the pseudolife that had evolved within the mysterious force-fields of

their incomprehensible machines, save one hardy mutant.

Mutant it was, and ironically this one alone could have been killed by the first simple measures used against its kind – but it was past time for simple expediences. It was an organized electron-field possessing intelligence and mobility and a will to destroy, and little else. Stunned by the holocaust, it drifted over the grumbling globe, and in a lull in the violence of the forces gone wild on Earth, sank to the steaming ground in its half-conscious exhaustion. There it found shelter – shelter built by and for its dead enemies. An envelope of neutronium. It drifted in, and its consciousness at last fell to its lowest ebb. And there it lay while the neutronium, with its strange constant flux, its interminable striving for perfect balance, extended itself and closed the opening. And thereafter in the turbulent eons that followed, the envelope tossed like a gray bubble

on the surface of the roiling sphere, for no substance on Earth would have it or combine with it.

The ages came and went, and chemical action and reaction did their mysterious work, and once again there was life and evolution. And a tribe found the mass of neutronium, which is not a substance but a static force, and were awed by its aura of indescribable chill, and they worshiped it and built a temple around it and made sacrifices to it. And ice and fire and the seas came and went, and the land rose and fell as the years went by, until the ruined temple was on a knoll, and the knoll was an island. Islanders came and went, lived and built and died, and races forgot. So now, somewhere in the Pacific to the west of the archipelago called Islas Revillagigeda, there was an uninhabited island. And one day —

Chub Horton and Tom Jaeger stood watching the *Sprite* and her squat tow of three cargo lighters dwindle over the glassy sea. The big ocean-going towboat and her charges seemed to be moving out of focus rather than traveling away. Chub spat cleanly around the cigar that grew out of the corner of his mouth.

'That's that for three weeks. How's it feel to be a guinea pig?'

'We'll get it done.' Tom had little crinkles all around the outer ends of his eyes. He was a head taller than Chub and rangy, and not so tough, and he was a real operator. Choosing him as a foreman for the experiment had been wise, for he was competent and he commanded respect. The theory of airfield construction that they were testing appealed vastly to him, for here were no officers-incharge, no government inspectors, no time-keeping or reports. The government had allowed the company a temporary land grant, and the idea was to put production-line techniques into the layout and grading of the project. There were six operators and two mechanics and more than a million dollars' worth of the best equipment that money could buy. Government acceptance was to be on a partially completed basis, and contingent on government standards. The theory obviated both goldbricking and graft, and neatly sidestepped the man-power problem. 'When that black-topping crew gets here, I reckon we'll be ready for 'em,' said Tom.

He turned and scanned the island with an operator's vision and saw it as it was, and in all the stages it would pass through, and as it would look when they had finished, with five thousand feet of clean-draining runway, hard-packed shoulders, four acres of plane-park, the access road and the short taxiway. He saw the lay of each lift that the power shovel would cut as it brought down the marl bluff, and the ruins on top of it that would give them stone to

haul down the salt-flat to the little swamp at the other end, there to be walked in by the dozers.

'We got time to run the shovel up there to the bluff before dark.'

They walked down the beach toward the outcropping where the equipment stood surrounded by crates and drums of supplies. The three tractors were ticking over quietly, the two-cycle Diesel chuckling through their mufflers and the big D-7 whacking away its metronomic compression knock on every easy revolution. The Dumptors were lined up and silent, for they would not be ready to work until the shovel was ready to load them. They looked like a mechanical interpretation of Dr. Dolittle's 'Pushme-pullyou,' the fantastic animal with two front ends. They had two large driving wheels and two small steerable wheels. The motor and the driver's seat were side by side over the front - or smaller - wheels; but the driver faced the dump body between the big rear wheels, exactly the opposite of the way he would sit in a dump truck. Hence, in traveling from shovel to dumping-ground, the operator drove backwards, looking over his shoulder, and in dumping he backed the machine up but he himself traveled forward - quite a trick for fourteen hours a day! The shovel squatted in the midst of all the others, its great hulk looming over them, humped there with its boom low and its iron chin on the ground, like some great tired dinosaur.

Rivera, the Puerto Rican mechanic, looked up grinning as Tom and Chub approached, and stuck a bleeder wrench into the top pocket of his coveralls.

'She says "Sigalo",' he said, his white teeth flashlighting out of the smear of grease across his mouth. 'She says she wan' to get dirt on dis paint.' He kicked the blade of the Seven with his heel.

Tom sent the grin back – always a surprising thing in his grave face.

'That Seven'll do that, and she'll take a good deal off her bitin' edge along with the paint before we're through. Get in the saddle, Goony. Build a ramp off the rocks down to the flat there, and blade us off some humps from here to the bluff yonder. We're walking the dipper up there.'

The Puerto Rican was in the seat before Tom had finished, and with a roar the Seven spun in its length and moved back along the outcropping to the inland edge. Rivera dropped his blade and the sandy marl curled and piled up in front of the dozer, loading the blade and running off in two even rolls at the ends. He shoved the load toward the rocky edge, the Seven revving down as it took the load, blat blat blatting and pulling like a supercharged ox as it fired

slowly enough for them to count the revolutions.

'She's a hunk of machine,' said Tom.

'A hunk of operator, too,' gruffed Chub, and added, 'for a mechanic.'

'The boy's all right,' said Kelly. He was standing there with them, watching the Puerto Rican operate the dozer, as if he had been there all along, which was the way Kelly always arrived places. He was tall, slim, with green eyes too long and an easy stretch to the way he moved, like an attenuated cat. He said, 'Never thought I'd see the day when equipment was shipped set up ready to run like this. Guess no one ever thought of it before.'

'There's times when heavy equipment has to be unloaded in a hurry these days,' Tom said. 'If they can do it with tanks, they can do it with construction equipment. We're doin' it to build something instead, is all. Kelly, crank up the shovel. It's oiled. We're walking it over to the bluff.'

Kelly swung up into the cab of the big dipper-stick and, diddling the governor control, pulled up the starting handle. The Murphy Diesel snorted and settled down into a thudding idle. Kelly got into the saddle, set up the throttle a little, and began to boom up.

'I still can't get over it,' said Chub. 'Not more'n a year ago we'd a

had two hundred men on a job like this.'

Tom smiled. 'Yeah, and the first thing we'd have done would be to build an office building, and then quarters. Me, I'll take this way. No timekeepers, no equipment-use reports, no progress and yardage summaries, no nothin' but eight men, a million bucks worth of equipment, an' three weeks. A shovel an' a mess of tool crates'll keep the rain off us, an' army field rations'll keep our bellies full. We'll get it done, we'll get out and we'll get paid.'

Rivera finished the ramp, turned the Seven around and climbed it, walking the new fill down. At the top he dropped his blade, floated it, and backed down the ramp, smoothing out the rolls. At a wave from Tom he started out across the shore, angling up toward the bluff, beating out the humps and carrying fill into the hollows. As he worked, he sang, feeling the beat of the mighty motor, the micrometric obedience of that vast implacable machine.

'Why doesn't that monkey stick to his grease guns?'

Tom turned and took the chewed end of a match stick out of his mouth. He said nothing, because he had for some time been trying to make a habit of saying nothing to Joe Dennis. Dennis was an ex-accountant, drafted out of an office at the last gasp of a defunct project in the West Indies. He had become an operator because they needed operators badly. He had been released with alacrity from

the office because of his propensity for small office politics. It was a game he still played, and completely aside from his boiled-looking red face and his slightly womanish walk, he was out of place in the field; for boot-licking and back-stabbing accomplish even less out on the field than they do in an office. Tom, trying so hard to keep his mind on his work, had to admit to himself that of all Dennis' annoying traits the worst was that he was as good a pan operator as could be found anywhere, and no one could deny it.

Dennis certainly didn't.

'I've seen the day when anyone catching one of those goonies so much as sitting on a machine during lunch would kick his fanny,' Dennis groused. 'Now they give 'em a man's work and a man's pay.'

'Doin' a man's work, ain't he?' Tom said.

'He's a damn Puerto Rican!'

Tom turned and looked at him levelly. 'Where was it you said you come from,' he mused. 'Oh yeah. Georgia.'

'What do you mean by that?'

Tom was already striding away. 'Tell you as soon as I have to,' he flung back over his shoulder. Dennis went back to watching the Seven.

Tom glanced at the ramp and then waved Kelly on. Kelly set his housebrake so the shovel could not swing, put her into travel gear, and shoved the swing lever forward. With a crackling of drive chains and a massive scrunching of compacting coral sand, the shovel's great flat pads carried her over and down the ramp. As she tipped over the peak of the ramp the heavy manganese steel bucket-door gaped open and closed, like a hungry mouth, slamming up against the bucket until suddenly it latched shut and was quiet. The big Murphy Diesel crooned hollowly under compression as the machine ran downgrade and then the sensitive governor took hold and it took up its belly-beating thud.

Peebles was standing by one of the dozer-pan combines, sucking on his pipe and looking out to sea. He was grizzled and heavy, and from under the bushiest gray brows looked the calmest gray eyes Tom had ever seen. Peebles had never gotten angry at a machine – a rare trait in a born mechanic – and in fifty-odd years he had learned it was even less use getting angry at a man. Because no matter what, you could always fix what was wrong with a machine. He said

around his pipestem:

'Hope you'll give me back my boy, there.'

Tom's lips quirked in a little grin. There had been an understanding between old Peebles and himself ever since they had met. It was

one of those things which exists unspoken - they knew little about each other because they had never found it necessary to make small talk to keep their friendship extant. It was enough to know that each could expect the best from the other, without persuasion.

'Rivera?' Tom asked. 'I'll chase him back as soon as he finishes that service road for the dipper-stick. Why - got anything on?'

'Not much. Want to get that arc welder drained and flushed and

set up a grounded table in case you guys tear anything up.' He paused. 'Besides, the kid's filling his head up with too many things at once. Mechanicing is one thing; operating is something else.'

'Hasn't got in his way much so far, has it?'

'Nope. Don't aim t' let it, either. 'Less you need him.'

Tom swung up on the pan tractor. 'I don't need him that bad, Peeby. If you want some help in the meantime, get Dennis.'

Peebles said nothing. He spat. He didn't say anything at all.

'What's the matter with Dennis?' Tom wanted to know.

'Look yonder,' said Peebles, waving his pipestem. Out on the beach Dennis was talking to Chub, in Dennis' indefatigable style, standing beside Chub, one hand on Chub's shoulder. As they watched they saw Dennis call his side-kick, Al Knowles.

'Dennis talks too much,' said Peebles. 'That most generally don't amount to much, but that Dennis, he sometimes says too much. Ain't got what it takes to run a show, and knows it. Makes up for it by messin' in between folks.'

'He's harmless,' said Tom.

Still looking up the beech, Peebles said slowly:

'Is, so far.'

Tom started to say something, then shrugged. 'I'll send you Rivera,' he said, and opened the throttle. Like a huge electric dynamo, the two-cycle motor whined to a crescendo. Tom lifted the dozer with a small lever by his right thigh and raised the pan with the long control sprouting out from behind his shoulder. He moved off, setting the rear gate of the scraper so that anything the blade bit would run off to the side instead of loading into the pan. He slapped the tractor into sixth gear and whined up to and around the crawling shovel, cutting neatly in under the boom and running on ahead with his scraper blade just touching the ground, dragging to a fine grade the service road Rivera had cut.

Dennis was saying, 'It's that little Hitler stuff. Why should I take that kind of talk? "You come from Georgia," he says. What is he a Yankee or something?'

'A crackah f'm Macon,' chortled Al Knowles, who came from

Georgia, too. He was tall and stringy and round-shouldered. All of his skill was in his hands and feet, brains being a commodity he had lived without all his life until he had met Dennis and used him as a reasonable facsimile thereof.

'Tom didn't mean nothing by it,' said Chub.

'No, he didn't mean nothin'. Only that we do what he says the way he says it, specially if he finds a way we don't like it. You wouldn't do like that, Chub. Al, think Chub would carry on thataway?'

'Sure wouldn't,' said Al, feeling it expected of him.

'Nuts,' said Chub, pleased and uncomfortable, and thinking, what have I got against Tom? – not knowing, not liking Tom as well as he had. 'Tom's the man here, Dennis. We got a job to do – let's skit and git. Man can take anything for a lousy six weeks.'

'Oh, sho',' said Al.

'Man can take just so much,' Dennis said. 'What they put a man like that on top for, Chub? What's the matter with you? Don't you know grading and drainage as good as Tom? Can Tom stake out a side hill like you can?'

'Sure, sure, but what's the difference, long as we get a field built? An' anyhow, hell with bein' the boss-man. Who gets the blame if things don't run right, anyway?'

Dennis stepped back, taking his hand off Chub's shoulder, and

stuck an elbow in Al's ribs.

'You see that, Al? Now there's a smart man. That's the thing Uncle Tom didn't bargain for. Chub, you can count on Al and me to do just that little thing.'

'Do just what little thing?' asked Chub, genuinely puzzled.

'Like you said. If the job goes wrong, the boss gets blamed. So, if the boss don't behave, the job goes wrong.'

'Uh-huh,' agreed Al with the conviction of mental simplicity.

Chub double-took this extraordinary logical process and grasped wildly at anger as the conversation slid out from under him. 'I didn't say any such thing! This job is goin' to get done, no matter what! There'll be no damn goldbrick badge on me or anybody else around here if I can help it.'

'Tha's the ol' fight,' feinted Dennis. 'We'll show that guy what we

think of his kind of slowdown.'

'You talk too much,' said Chub and escaped with the remnants of coherence. Every time he talked with Dennis he walked away feeling as if he had an unwanted membership card stuck in his pocket that he couldn't throw away with a clear conscience.

Rivera ran his road up under the bluff, swung the Seven around,

punched out the master clutch and throttled down, idling. Tom was making his pass with the pan, and as he approached, Rivera slipped out of the seat and behind the tractor, laying a sensitive hand on the final drive casing and sprocket bushings, checking for overheating. Tom pulled alongside and beckoned him up on the pan tractor.

'Que pase, Goony? Anything wrong?'

Rivera shook his head and grinned. 'Nothing wrong. She is perfect, that "De Siete." She -'

'That what? "Daisy Etta"?'

'De siete. In Spanish, D-7. It means something in English?'

'Got you wrong,' smiled Tom. 'But Daisy Etta is a girl's name in English, all the same.'

He shifted the pan tractor into neutral and engaged the clutch, and jumped off the machine. Rivera followed. They climbed aboard the Seven, Tom at the controls.

Rivera said 'Daisy Etta,' and grinned so widely that a soft little clucking noise came from behind his back teeth. He reached out his hand, crooked his little finger around one of the tall steering clutch levers, and pulled it all the way back. Tom laughed outright.

'You got something there,' he said. 'The easiest runnin' cat ever built. Hydraulic steerin', clutches and brakes that'll bring you to a dead stop if you spit on 'em. Forward an' reverse lever so's you got all your speeds front and backwards. A little different from the old jobs. They had no booster springs, eight-ten years ago; took a sixty-pound pull to get a steerin' clutch back. Cuttin' a side-hill with an angle-dozer really was a job in them days. You try it sometime, dozin' with one hand, holdin' her nose out o' the bank with the other, ten hours a day. And what'd it get you? Eighty cents an hour an' - Tom took his cigarette and butted the fiery end out against the horny palm of his hand - 'these.'

'Santa Maria!'

'Want to talk to you, Goony. Want to look over the bluff, too, at the stone up there. It'll take Kelly pret' near an hour to get this far and sumped in, anyhow.'

They growled up the slope, Tom feeling the ground under the four-foot brush, taking her up in a zigzag course like a hairpin road on a mountainside. Though the Seven carried a muffler on the exhaust stack that stuck up out of the hood before them, the blat of the four big cylinders hauling fourteen tons of steel upgrade could outshout any man's conversation, so they sat without talking. Tom driving, Rivera watching his hands flick over the controls.

The bluff started in a low ridge running almost the length of the

little island, like a lopsided backbone. Toward the center it rose abruptly, sent a wing out toward the rocky outcropping at the beach where their equipment had been unloaded, and then rose again to a small, almost square plateau area, half a mile across. It was humpy and rough until they could see all of it, when they realized how incredibly level it was, under the brush and ruins that covered it. In the centre — and exactly in the center they realized suddenly — was a low, overgrown mound. Tom threw out the clutch and revved her down.

'Survey report said there was stone up here,' Tom said, vaulting out of the seat. 'Let's walk around some.'

They walked toward the knoll, Tom's eyes casting about as he went. He stooped down into the heavy, short grass and scooped up a piece of stone, blue-gray, hard and brittle.

'Rivera – look at this. This is what the report was talking about. See – more of it. All in small pieces, though. We need big stuff for the bog if we can get it.'

'Good stone?' asked Rivera.

'Yes, boy – but it don't belong here. Th' whole island's sand and marl and sandstone on the outcrop down yonder. This here's a bluestone, like a diamond clay. Harder'n blazes. I never saw this stuff on a marl hill before. Or near one. Anyhow, root around and see if there is any big stuff.'

They walked on. Rivera suddenly dipped down and pulled grass

aside.

'Tom – here's a beeg one.'

Tom came over and looked down at the corner of stone sticking up out of the topsoil. 'Yeh. Goony, get your girlfriend over here and we'll root it out.'

Rivera sprinted back to the idling dozer and climbed aboard. He brought the machine over to where Tom waited, stopped, stood up and peered over the front of the machine to locate the stone, then sat down and shifted gears. Before he could move the machine Tom was on the fender beside him, checking him with a hand on his arm.

'No, boy – no. Not third. First. And half throttle. That's it. Don't try to bash a rock out of the ground. Go on up to it easy; set your blade against it, lift it out, don't boot it out. Take it with the middle of your blade, not the corner – get the load on both hydraulic cylinders. Who told you to do like that?'

'No one tol' me, Tom. I see a man do it, I do it.'

'Yeah? Who was it?'

'Dennis, but -'

'Listen, Goony, if you want to learn anything from Dennis,

watch him while he's on a pan. He dozes like he talks. That reminds me – what I wanted to talk to you about. You ever have any trouble with him?'

Rivera spread his hands. 'How I have trouble when he never talk to me?'

'Well, that's all right then. You keep it that way. Dennis is O.K., I

guess, but you better keep away from him.'

He went on to tell the boy then about what Peebles had said concerning being an operator and a mechanic at the same time. Rivera's lean dark face fell, and his hand strayed to the blade control, touching it lightly, feeling the composition grip and the machined locknuts that held it. When Tom had quite finished he said:

'O.K., Tom – if you want, you break 'em, I feex 'em. But if you wan' help some time, I run *Daisy Etta* for you, no?'

'Sure, kid, sure. But don't forget, no man can do everything.'

'You can do everything,' said the boy.

Tom leaped off the machine and Rivera shifted into first and crept up to the stone, setting the blade gently against it. Taking the load, the mighty engine audibly bunched its muscles; Rivera opened the throttle a little and the machine set solidly against the stone, the tracks slipping, digging into the ground, piling loose earth up behind. Tom raised a fist, thumb up, and the boy began lifting his blade. The Seven lowered her snout like an ox pulling through mud; the front of the tracks buried themselves deeper and the blade slipped upward an inch on the rock, as if it were on a ratchet. The stone shifted, and suddenly heaved itself up out of the earth that covered it, bulging the sod aside like a ship's slow bow-wave. And the blade lost its grip and slipped over the stone. Rivera slapped out the master clutch within an ace of letting the mass of it poke through his radiator core. Reversing, he set the blade against it again and rolled it at last into daylight.

Tom stood staring at it, scratching the back of his neck. Rivera got off the machine and stood beside him. For a long time they said

nothing.

The stone was roughly rectangular, shaped like a brick with one end cut at about a thirty-degree angle. And on the angled face was a square-cut ridge, like the tongue on a piece of milled lumber. The stone was 3 x 3 x 2 feet, and must have weighed six or seven hundred pounds.

'Now that,' said Tom, bug-eyed, 'didn't grow here, and if it did it

never grew that way.'

'Una piedra de una casa,' said Rivera softly. 'Tom, there was a building here, no?'

Tom turned suddenly to look at the knoll.

'There is a building here – or what's left of it. Lord on'y knows how old –'

They stood there in the slowly dwindling light, staring at the knoll; and there came upon them a feeling of oppression, as if there were no wind and no sound anywhere. And yet there was a wind, and behind them *Daisy Etta* whacked away with her muttering idle, and nothing had changed and — was that it? That nothing had changed? That nothing would change, or could, here?

Tom opened his mouth twice to speak, and couldn't, or didn't want to – he didn't know which. Rivera slumped down suddenly on

his hunkers, back erect, and his eyes wide.

It grew very cold. 'It's cold,' Tom said, and his voice sounded harsh to him. And the wind blew warm on them, the earth was warm under Rivera's knees. The cold was not a lack of heat, but a lack of something else – warmth, but the specific warmth of life-force, perhaps. The feeling of oppression grew, as if their recognition of the strangeness of the place had started it, and their increasing sensitivity to it made it grow.

Rivera said something, quietly, in Spanish. 'What are you looking at?' asked Tom.

Rivera started violently, threw up an arm, as if to ward off the crash of Tom's voice.

'I... there is nothin' to see, Tom. I feel this way wance before. I dunno -' He shook his head, his eyes wide and blank. 'An' after, there was being wan hell of a thunderstorm -' His voice petered out.

Tom took his shoulder and hauled him roughly to his feet. 'Goony! You slap-happy?'

The boy smiled, almost gently. The down on his upper lip held little spheres of sweat. 'I ain' nothin', Tom. I'm jus' scare like hell.'

'You scare yourself right back up there on that cat and git to work,' Tom roared. More quietly then, he said, 'I know there's something – wrong – here, Goony, but that ain't goin' to get us a runway built. Anyway, I know what to do about a dawg 'at gits gunshy. Ought to be able to do as much fer you. Git along to th' mound now and see if it ain't a cache o' big stone for us. We got a swamp down there to fill.'

Rivera hesitated, started to speak, swallowed and then walked slowly over to Seven. Tom stood watching him, closing his mind to the impalpable pressure of something, somewhere near, making his

guts cold.

The bulldozer nosed over to the mound, grunting, reminding Tom suddenly that the machine's Spanish slang name was *puerco* – pig, boar. Rivera angled into the edge of the mound with the cutting corner of the blade. Dirt and brush curled up, fell away from the mound and loaded from the bank side, out along the moldboard. The boy finished his pass along the mound, carried the load past it and wasted it out on the flat, turned around and started back again.

Ten minutes later Rivera struck stone, the manganese steel screaming along it, a puff of gray dust spouting from the cutting corner. Tom knelt and examined it after the machine had passed. It was the same kind of stone they had found out on the flat – and shaped the same way. But here it was a wall, the angled faces of the

block ends obviously tongued and grooved together.

Cold, cold as -

Tom took one deep breath and wiped sweat out of his eyes.

'I don't care,' he whispered, 'I got to have that stone. I got to fill me a swamp.' He stood back and motioned to Rivera to blade into

a chipped crevice in the buried wall.

The Seven swung into the wall and stopped while Rivera shifted into first, throttled down and lowered his blade. Tom looked up into his face. The boy's lips were white. He eased in the master clutch, the blade dipped and the corner swung neatly into the crevice.

The dozer blatted protestingly and began to crab sideways, pivoting on the end of the blade. Tom jumped out of the way, ran around behind the machine, which was almost parallel with the wall now, and stood in the clear, one hand raised ready to signal, his eyes on the straining blade. And then everything happened at once.

With a toothy snap the block started and came free, pivoting outward from its square end, bringing with it its neighbor. The block above them dropped, and the whole mound seemed to settle. And *something* whooshed out of the black hole where the rocks had been. Something like a fog, but not a fog that could be seen, something huge that could not be measured. With it came a gust of that cold which was not cold, and the smell of ozone, and the prickling crackle of a mighty static discharge.

Tom was fifty feet from the wall before he knew he had moved. He stopped and saw the Seven suddenly buck like a wild stallion, once, and Rivera turning over twice in the air. Tom shouted some meaningless syllable and tore over to the boy, where he sprawled in

the rough grass, lifted him in his arms, and ran. Only then did he realize that he was running from the machine.

It was like a mad thing. Its moldboard rose and fell. It curved away from the mound, howling governor gone wild, controls flailing. The blade dug repeatedly into the earth, gouging it up in great dips through which the tractor plunged, clanking and bellowing furiously. It raced away in a great irregular arc, turned and came snorting back to the mound, where it beat at the buried wall, slewed and scraped and roared.

Tom reached the edge of the plateau sobbing for breath, and

kneeling, laid the boy gently down on the grass.

'Goony, boy ... hey -'

The long silken eyelashes fluttered, lifted. Something wrenched in Tom as he saw the eyes, rolled right back so that only the whites showed. Rivera drew a long quivering breath which caught suddenly. He coughed twice, threw his head from side to side so violently that Tom took it between his hands and steadied it.

'Ay ... Maria madre ... que me pasado, Tom - w'at has happen

to me?'

'Fell off the Seven, stupid. You ... how you feel?'

Rivera scrabbled at the ground, got his elbows half under him, then sank back weakly. 'Feel O.K. Headache like hell. W-w'at happen to my feets?'

'Feet? They hurt?'

'No hurt -' The young face went gray, the lips tightened with effort. 'No nothin', Tom.'

'You can't move 'em?'

Rivera shook his head, still trying. Tom stood up. 'You take it easy. I'll go get Kelly. Be right back.'

He walked very quickly and when Rivera called to him he did not turn around. Tom had seen a man with a broken back before.

At the edge of the little plateau Tom stopped, listening. In the deepening twilight he could see the bulldozer standing by the mound. The motor was running; she had not stalled herself. But what stopped Tom was that she wasn't idling, but revving up and down as if an impatient hand were on the throttle – *broom hrooom*, running up and up far faster than even a broken governor should permit, then coasting down to near silence, broken by the explosive punctuation of sharp and irregular firing. Then it would run up and up again, almost screaming, sustaining a r.p.m. that threatened every moving part, shaking the great machine like some deadly ague.

Tom walked swiftly toward the Seven, a puzzled and grim frown

on his weather-beaten face. Governors break down occasionally, and once in a while you will have a motor tear itself to pieces, revving up out of control. But it will either do that or it will rev down and quit. If an operator is fool enough to leave his machine with the master clutch engaged, the machine will take off and run the way the Seven had – but it will not turn unless the blade corner catches in something unresisting, and then the chances are very strong that it will stall. But in any case, it was past reason for any machine to act this way, revving up and down, running, turning, lifting and dropping the blade.

The motor slowed as he approached, and at last settled down into something like a steady and regular idle. Tom had the sudden crazy impression that it was watching him. He shrugged off the

feeling, walked up and laid a hand on the fender.

The Seven reacted like a wild stallion. The big Diesel roared, and Tom distinctly saw the master clutch lever snap back over center. He leaped clear, expecting the machine to jolt forward, but apparently it was in a reverse gear, for it shot backwards, one track locked, and the near end of the blade swung in a swift vicious arc, breezing a bare fraction of an inch past his hip as he danced back out of the way.

And as if it had bounced off a wall, the tractor had shifted and was bearing down on him, the twelve-foot blade rising, the two big headlights looming over him on their bow-legged supports, looking like the protruding eyes of some mighty toad. Tom had no choice but to leap straight up and grasp the top of the blade in his two hands, leaning back hard to brace his feet against the curved moldboard. The blade dropped and sank into the soft topsoil, digging a deep little swale in the ground. The earth loading on the moldboard rose and churned around Tom's legs; he stepped wildly, keeping them clear of the rolling drag of it. Up came the blade then, leaving a four-foot pile at the edge of the pit; down and up the tractor raced as the tracks went into it; up and up as they climbed the pile of dirt. A quick balance and overbalance as the machine lurched up and over like a motorcycle taking a jump off a ramp, and then a spine-shaking crash as fourteen tons of metal smashed blade-first into the ground.

Part of the leather from Tom's tough palms stayed with the blade as he was flung off. He went head over heels backwards, but had his feet gathered and sprang as they touched the ground; for he knew that no machine could bury its blade like that and get out easily. He leaped to the top of the blade, got one hand on the radiator cap, vaulted. Perversely, the cap broke from its hinge and came away in

his hand, in that split instant when only that hand rested on anything. Off balance, he landed on his shoulder with his legs flailing the air, his body sliding off the hood's smooth shoulder toward the track now churning the earth beneath. He made a wild grab at the air intake pipe, barely had it in his fingers when the dozer freed itself and shot backwards up and over the hump. Again that breathless fight pivoting over the top, and the clanking crash as the machine landed, this time almost flat on its tracks.

The jolt tore Tom's hand away, and as he slid back over the hood the crook of his elbow caught the exhaust stack, the dull red metal biting into his flesh. He grunted and clamped the arm around it. His momentum carried him around it, and his feet crashed into the steering clutch levers. Hooking one with his instep, he doubled his legs and whipped himself back, scrabbling at the smooth warm metal, crawling frantically backward until he finally fell heavily into the seat.

'Now,' he gritted through the red wall of pain, 'you're gonna git operated.' And he kicked out the master clutch.

The motor wailed, with the load taken off so suddenly. Tom grasped the throttle, his thumb down on the ratchet release, and he shoved the lever forward to shut off the fuel.

It wouldn't shut off; it went down to a slow idle, but it wouldn't shut off.

'There's one thing you can't do without,' he muttered, 'compression.'

He stood up and leaned around he dash, reaching for the compression-release lever. As he came up out of the seat, the engine revved up again. He turned to the throttle, which had snapped back into the 'open' position. As his hand touched it the master clutch lever snapped in and the howling machine lurched forward with a jerk that snapped his head on his shoulders and threw him heavily back into the seat. He snatched at the hydraulic blade control and threw it to 'float' position; and then as the falling moldboard touched the ground, into 'power down.' The cutting edge bit into the ground and the engine began to labor. Holding the blade control, he pushed the throttle forward with his other hand. One of the steering clutch levers whipped back and struck him agonizingly on the kneecap. He involuntarily let go of the blade control and the moldboard began to rise. The engine began to turn faster and he realized that it was not responding to the throttle. Cursing, he leaped to his feet; the suddenly flailing steering clutch levers struck him three times in the groin before he could get between them.

Blind with pain, Tom clung gasping to the dash. The oil-pressure

gauge fell off the dash to his right, with a tinkling of broken glass, and from its broken quarter-inch line scalding oil drenched him. The shock of it snapped back his wavering consciousness. Ignoring the blows of the left steering clutch and the master clutch which had started the same mad punching, he bent over the left end of the dash and grasped the compression lever. The tractor rushed forward and spun sickeningly, and Tom knew he was thrown. But as he felt himself leave the decking his hand punched the compression lever down. The great valves at the cylinder heads opened and locked open; atomized fuel and superheated air chattered out, and as Tom's head and shoulders struck the ground the great wild machine rolled to a stop, stood silently except for the grumble of water boiling in the cooling system.

Minutes later Tom raised his head and groaned. He rolled over and sat up, his chin on his knees, washed by wave after wave of pain. As they gradually subsided, he crawled to the machine and pulled himself to his feet, hand over hand on the track. And groggily he began to cripple the tractor, at least for the night.

He opened the cock under the fuel tank, left the warm yellow fluid gushing out on the ground. He opened the drain on the reservoir by the injection pump. He found a piece of wire in the crank box and with it tied down the compression release lever. He crawled up on the machine, wrenched the hood and ball jar off the air intake precleaner, pulled off his shirt and stuffed it down the pipe. He pushed the throttle all the way forward and locked it with the locking pin. And he shut off the fuel on the main line from the tank to the pump.

Then he climbed heavily to the ground and slogged back to the edge of the plateau where he had left Rivera.

They didn't know Tom was hurt until an hour and a half later — there had been too much to do — rigging a stretcher for the Puerto Rican, building him a shelter, an engine crate with an Army pup tent for a roof. They brought out the first-aid-kit and the medical books and did what they could — tied and splinted and dosed with an opiate. Tom was a mass of bruises, and his right arm, where it had hooked the exhaust stack, was a flayed mass. They fixed him up then, old Peebles handling the sulfa powder and bandages like a trained nurse. And only then was there talk.

'I've seen a man thrown off a pan,' said Dennis, as they sat around the coffee urn munching C rations. 'Sittin' up on the arm rest on a cat, looking backwards. Cat hit a rock and bucked. Threw him off on the track. Stretched him out ten feet long.' He

in-whistled some coffee to dilute the mouthful of food he had been talking around, and masticated noisily. 'Man's a fool to set up there on the side of his butt even on a pan. Can't see why th' goony was doin' it on a dozer.'

'He wasn't,' said Tom.

Kelly rubbed his pointed jaw. 'He set flat on th' seat an' was th'owed?'

'That's right.'

After an unbelieving silence Dennis said, 'What was he doin' - drivin' over sixty?'

Tom looked around the circle of faces lit up by the over-artificial brilliance of a pressure lantern, and wondered what the reaction would be if he told it all just as it was. He had to say something, and it didn't look as if it could be the truth.

'He was workin',' he said finally. 'Bucking stone out of the wall of an old building up on the mesa there. One turned loose an' as it did the governor must've gone haywire. She bucked like a loco hoss and run off.'

'Run off?'

Tom opened his mouth and closed it again, and just nodded.

Dennis said, 'Well, reckon that's what happens when you put a mechanic to operatin'.'

'That had nothin' to do with it,' Tom snapped.

Peebles spoke up quickly. 'Tom – what about the Seven? Broke up any?'

'Some,' said Tom. 'Better look at the steering clutches. An' she was hot.'

'Head's cracked,' said Harris, a burly young man with shoulders like a buffalo and a famous thirst.

'How do you know?'

'Saw it when Al and me went up with the stretcher to get the kid while you all were building the shelter. Hot water runnin' down the side of the block.'

'You mean you walked all the way out to the mound to look at that tractor while the kid was lyin' there? I told you where he was!'

'Out to the mound!' Al Knowles' pop eyes teetered out of their sockets. 'We found that cat stalled twenty feet away from where the kid was!'

'What!'

'That's right, Tom,' said Harris. 'What's eatin' you? Where'd you leave it?'

'I told you ... by the mound ... the ol' building we cut into.'

'Leave the startin' motor runnin'?'

'Starting motor?' Tom's mind caught the picture of the small, two-cylinder gasoline engine bolted to the side of the big Diesel's crankcase, coupled through the Bendix gear and clutch to the flywheel of the Diesel to crank it. He remembered his last glance at the still machine, silent but for the sound of water boiling. 'Hell no!'

Al and Harris exchanged a glance. 'I guess you were sort of slap-happy at the time, Tom,' Harris said, not unkindly. 'When we were halfway up the hill we heard it, and you know you can't mistake that racket. Sounded like it was under a load.'

Tom beat softly at his temples with his clenched fists. 'I left that machine dead,' he said quietly. 'I got compression off her and tied down the lever. I even stuffed my shirt in the intake. I drained the tank. But – I didn't touch the starting motor.'

Peebles wanted to know why he had gone to all that trouble. Tom just looked vaguely at him and shook his head. 'I should pulled the wires. I never thought about the starting motor,' he whispered. Then 'Harris – you say you found the starting motor running when you got to the top?'

'No – she was stalled. And hot – awmighty hot. I'd say the startin' motor was seized up tight. That must be it, Tom. You left the startin' motor runnin' and somehow engaged the clutch an' Bendix.' His voice lost conviction as he said it – it takes seventeen separate motions to start a tractor of this type. 'Anyhow, she was in gear an' crawled along on the little motor.'

'I done that once,' said Chub. 'Broke a con rod on a Eight, on a highway job. Walked her about three-quarters of a mile on the startin' motor that way. Only I had to stop every hundred yards and let her cool down some.'

Not without sarcasm, Dennis said, 'Seems to me like the Seven was out to get th' goony. Made one pass at him and then went back to finish the job.'

Al Knowles haw-hawed extravagantly.

Tom stood up, shaking his head, and went off among the crates to the hospital they had jury-rigged for the kid.

A dim light was burning inside, and Rivera lay very still, with his eyes closed. Tom leaned in the doorway – the open end of the engine crate – and watched him for a moment. Behind him he could hear the murmur of the crew's voices; the night was otherwise windless and still. Rivera's face was the peculiar color that olive skin takes when drained of blood. Tom looked at his chest and for a panicky moment thought he could discern no movement there. He entered and put a hand over the boy's heart. Rivera shivered, his

eyes flew open, and he drew a sudden breath which caught raggedly at the back of his throat. 'Tom . . . Tom!' he cried weakly.

'O.K., Goony ... que pase?' 'She comeen back ... Tom!'

"Who?"

'El de siete.'

Daisy Etta - 'She ain't comin' back, kiddo. You're off the mesa

now. Keep your chin up, fella.'

Rivera's dark, doped eyes stared up at him without expression. Tom moved back and the eyes continued to stare. They weren't seeing anything. 'Go to sleep,' he whispered. The eyes closed instantly.

Kelly was saying that nobody ever got hurt on a construction job unless somebody was dumb. 'An' most times you don't realize how dumb what you're doin' is until somebody does get hurt.'

'The dumb part was gettin' a kid, an' not even an operator at

that, up on a machine,' said Dennis in his smuggest voice.

'I heard you try to sing that song before,' said old Peebles quietly. 'I hate to have to point out anything like this to a man because it don't do any good to make comparisons. But I've worked with that fella Rivera for a long time now, an I've seen 'em as good but doggone few better. As far as you're concerned, you're O.K. on a pan, but the kid could give you cards and spades and still make you look like a cost accountant on a dozer.'

Dennis half rose and mouthed something filthy. He looked at Al Knowles for backing and got it. He looked around the circle and got none. Peebles lounged lack, sucking on his pipe, watching from under those bristling brows. Dennis subsided, running now on another tack.

'So what does that prove? The better you say he is, the less reason he had to fall off a cat and get himself hurt.'

'I haven't got the thing straight yet,' said Chub, in a voice whose tone indicated 'I hate to admit it, but -'

About this time Tom returned, like a sleepwalker, standing with the brilliant pressure lantern between him and Dennis. Dennis rambled right on, not knowing he was anywhere near: 'That's something you never will find out. That Puerto Rican is a pretty husky kid. Could be Tom said something he didn't like an' he tried to put a knife in Tom's back. They all do, y'know. Tom didn't get all that bashin' around just stoppin' a machine. They must of went round an' round for a while an' the goony wound up with a busted back. Tom sets the dozer to walk him down while he lies there and

comes on down here and tries to tell us -' His voice fluttered to a stop as Tom loomed over him.

Tom grabbed the pan operator up by the slack of his shirt front with his uninjured arm and shook him like an empty burlap bag.

'Skunk,' he growled. 'I oughta lower th' boom on you.' He set Dennis on his feet and backhanded his face with the edge of his forearm. Dennis went down – cowered down, rather than fell. 'Aw, Tom, I was just talkin'. Just a joke, Tom, I was just –'

'Yellow, too,' snarled Tom, stepping forward, raising a solid Texan boot. Peebles barked 'Tom!' and the foot came back to the

ground.

'Out o' my sight,' rumbled the foreman. 'Git!'

Dennis got. Al Knowles said vaguely, 'Naow, Tom, y'all cain't -'
'You, y'wall-eyed string-bean!' Tom raved, his voice harsh and strained. 'Go 'long with your Siamese twin!'

'O.K., O.K.,' said Al, white-faced, and disappeared into the dark

with Dennis.

'Nuts to this,' said Chub. 'I'm turnin' in.' He went to a crate and hauled out a mosquito-hooded sleeping bag and went off without another word. Harris and Kelly, who were both on their feet, sat down again. Old Peebles hadn't moved.

Tom stood staring out into the dark, his arms straight at his

sides, his fists knotted.

'Sit down,' said Peebles gently. Tom turned and stared at him.

'Sit down. I can't change that dressing 'less you do.' He pointed at the bandage around Tom's elbow. It was red, a widening stain, the tattered tissues having parted as the big Georgian bunched his infuriated muscles. He sat down.

'Talkin' about dumbness,' said Harris calmly, as Peebles went to work, 'I was about to say that I got the record. I done the dumbest

thing anybody ever did on a machine. You can't top it.'

'I could,' said Kelly. 'Runnin' a crane dragline once. Put her in boom gear and started to boom her up. Had an eighty-five-foot stick on her. Machine was standing on wooden mats in the middle of a swamp. Heard the motor miss and got out of the saddle to look at the filter-glass. Messed around back there longer than I figured, and the boom went straight up in the air and fell backwards over the cab. Th' jolt titled my mats an' she slid backwards slow and stately as you please, butt-first into the mud. Buried up to the eyeballs, she was.' He laughed quietly. 'Looked like a ditching machine!'

'I still say I done the dumbest thing ever, bar none,' said Harris. 'It was on a river job, widening a channel. I come back to work

from a three-day binge, still rum-dumb. Got up on a dozer an' was workin' around on the edge of a twenty-foot cliff. Down at the foot of the cliff was a big hickory tree, an' growin' right along the edge was a great big limb. I got the dopey idea I should break it off. I put one track on the limb and the other on the cliff edge and run out away from the trunk. I was about halfway out, an' the branch saggin' some, before I thought what would happen if it broke. Just about then it did break. You know hickory - if it breaks at all it breaks altogether. So down we go into thirty feet of water - me an' the cat. I got out from under somehow. When all them bubbles stopped comin' up I swum around lookin' down at it. I was still paddlin' around when the superintendent came rushin' up. He wants to know what's up. I yell at him, "Look down there, the way that water is movin' an' shiftin', looks like the cat is workin' down there." He pursed his lips and tsk tsked. 'My, that man said some nasty things to me.'

'Where'd you get your next job?' Kelly exploded.

'Oh, he didn't fire me,' said Harris soberly. 'Said he couldn't afford to fire a man as dumb as that. Said he wanted me around to look at whenever he felt bad.'

Tom said, 'Thanks, you guys. That's as good a way as any of sayin' that everybody makes mistakes.' He stood up, examining the new dressing, turning his arm in front of his lantern. 'You all can think what you please, but I don't recollect there was any dumbness went on that mesa this evenin'. That's finished with, anyway. Do I have to say that Dennis' idea about it is all wet?'

Harris said one foul word that completely disposed of Dennis

and anything he might say.

Peebles said, 'It'll be all right. Dennis an' his popeyed friend'll hang together, but they don't amount to anything. Chub'll do whatever he's argued into.'

'So you got 'em all lined up, hey?' Tom shrugged. 'In the

meantime, are we going to get an airfield built?'

'We'll get it built,' Peebles said. 'Only – Tom, I got no right to give you any advice, but go easy on the rough stuff after this. It does a lot of harm.'

'I will if I can,' said Tom gruffly. They broke up and turned in.

Peebles was right. It did do harm. It made Dennis use the word 'murder' when they found, in the morning, that Rivera had died during the night.

The work progressed in spite of everything that had happened. With equipment like that, it's hard to slow things down. Kelly bit

two cubic yards out of the bluff with every swing of the big shovel, and Dumptors are the fastest short haul earth movers yet devised. Dennis kept the service road clean for them with his pan, and Tom and Chub spelled each other on the bulldozer they had detached from its pan to make up for the lack of the Seven, spending their alternate periods with transit and stakes. Peebles was rod-man for the surveys, and in between times worked on setting up his field shop, keeping the water cooler and battery chargers running, and lining up his forge and welding tables. The operators fueled and serviced their own equipment, and there was little delay. The rocks and marl that came out of the growing cavity in the side of the central mesa - a whole third of it had to come out - were spun down to the edge of the swamp, which lay across the lower end of the projected runway, in the hornet-howling dump-tractors, their big driving wheels churning up vast clouds of dust, and were dumped and spread and walked in by the whining two-cycle dozer. When muck began to pile up in front of the fill, it was blasted out of the way with carefully placed charges of sixty percent dynamite and the craters filled with rocks and stone from the ruins, and surfaced with easily compacting marl, run out of a clean deposit by the pan.

And when he had his shop set up, Peebles went up the hill to get the Seven. When he got it he just stood there for a moment scratching his head, and then, shaking his head, he ambled back down the hill and went for Tom.

'Been looking at the Seven,' he said, when he had flagged the moaning two-cycle and Tom had climbed off.

'What'd you find?'

Peebles held out an arm. 'A list as long as that.' He shook his head. 'Tom, what really happened up there?'

'Governor went haywire and she run away,' Tom said promptly,

deadpan.

'Yeah, but -' For a long moment he held Tom's eyes. Then he sighed. 'O.K., Tom. Anyway, I can't do a thing up there. We'll have to bring her back and I'll have to have this tractor to tow her down. And first I have to have some help - the track idler adjustment bolt's busted and the right track is off the track rollers.'

'Oh-h-h. So that's why she couldn't get to the kid, running on the

starting motor. Track would hardly turn, hey?'

'It's a miracle she ran as far as she did. That track is really jammed up. Riding right up on the roller flanges. And that ain't the half of it. The head's gone, like Harris said, and Lord only knows what I'll find when I open her up.'

'Why bother?'

'What?'

'We can get along without that dozer,' said Tom suddenly. 'Leave her where she is. There's lots more for you to do.'

'But what for?'

'Well, there's no call to go to all that trouble.'

Peebles scratched the side of his nose and said, 'I got a new head, track master pins – even a spare starting motor. I got tools to make what I don't stock.' He pointed at the long row of dumps left by the hurtling dump-tractors while they had been talking. 'You got a pan tied up because you're using this machine to doze with, and you can't tell me you can't use another one. You're gonna have to shut down one or two o' those Dumptors if you go on like this.'

'I had all that figured out as soon as I opened my mouth,' Tom

said sullenly. 'Let's go.'

They climbed on the tractor and took off, stopping for a moment

at the beach outcropping to pick up a cable and some tools.

Daisy Etta sat at the edge of the mesa, glowering out of her stilted headlights at the soft sward which still bore the impression of a young body and the tramplings of the stretcher-bearers. Her general aspect was woebegone – there were scratches on her olive-drab paint and the bright metal of the scratches was already dulled red by the earliest powder-rust. And though the ground was level, she was not, for her right track was off its lower rollers, and she stood slightly canted, like a man who has had a broken hip. And whatever passed for consciousness within her mulled over that paradox of the bulldozer that every operator must go through while he is learning his own machine.

It is the most difficult thing of all for the beginner to understand, that paradox. A bulldozer is a crawling powerhouse, a behemoth of noise and toughness, the nearest thing to the famous irrisistible force. The beginner, awed and with the pictures of unconquerable Army tanks printed on his mind from the newsreels, takes all in his stride and with a sense of limitless power treats all obstacles alike, not knowing the fragility of a cast-iron radiator core, the mortality of tempered manganese, the friability of over-heated babbitt, and most of all, the ease with which a tractor can bury itself in mud. Climbing off to stare at a machine which he has reduced in twenty seconds to a useless hulk, or which was running a half-minute before on ground where it now has its tracks out of sight, he has that sense of guilty disappointment which overcomes any man on having made an error in judgment.

So, as she stood, *Daisy Etta* was broken and useless. These soft persistent bipeds had built her, and if they were like any other race that built machines, they could care for them. The ability to reverse the tension of a spring, or twist a control rod, or reduce to zero the

friction in a nut and lock-washer, was not enough to repair the crack in a cylinder head nor bearings welded to a crankshaft in an overheated starting motor. There had been a lesson to learn. It had been learned. *Daisy Etta* would be repaired, and the next time – well, at least she would know her own weaknesses.

Tom swung the two-cycle machine and edged in next to the Seven, with the edge of his blade all but touching *Daisy Etta's* push-beam. They got off and Peebles bent over the drum-tight right track.

'Watch yourself,' said Tom.

'Watch what?'

'Oh – nothin', I guess.' He circled the machine, trained eyes probing over frame and fittings. He stepped forward suddenly and grasped the fuel-tank drain cock. It was closed. He opened it; golden oil gushed out. He shut it off, climbed up on the machine and opened the fuel cap on top of the tank. He pulled out the bayonet gauge, wiped it in the crook of his knee, dipped and withdrew it.

The tank was more than three quarters full.

'What's the matter?' asked Peebles, staring curiously at Tom's drawn face.

'Peeby, I opened the cock to drain this tank. I left it with oil runnin' out on the ground. She shut herself off.'

'Now, Tom, you're lettin' this thing get you down. You just thought you did. I've seen a main-line valve shut itself off when it's worn bad, but only 'cause the fuel pump pulls it shut when the motor's runnin'. But not a gravity drain.'

'Main-line valve?' Tom pulled the seat up and looked. One glance was enough to show him this one was open.

'She opened this one, too.'

'O.K. - O.K. Don't look at me like that!' Peebles was as near to exasperation as he could possibly get. 'What difference does it make?'

Tom did not answer. He was not the type of man who, when faced with something beyond his understanding, would begin to doubt his own sanity. His was a dogged insistence that what he saw and sensed was what had actually happened. In him was none of the fainting fear of madness that another, more sensitive, man might feel. He doubted neither himself nor his evidence, and so could free his mind for searching out the consuming 'why' of a problem. He knew instinctively that to share 'unbelievable' happenings with anyone else, even if they had really occurred, was to put even further obstacles in his way. So he kept his clamlike

silence and stubbornly, watchfully, investigated.

The slipped track was so tightly drawn up on the roller flanges that there could be no question of pulling the master pin and opening the track up. It would have to be worked back in place – a very delicate operation, for a little force applied in the wrong direction would be enough to run the track off altogether. To complicate things, the blade of the Seven was down on the ground and would have to be lifted before the machine could be maneuvered, and its hydraulic hoist was useless without the motor.

Peebles unhooked twenty feet of half-inch cable from the rear of the smaller dozer, scratched a hole in the ground under the Seven's blade, and pushed the eye of the cable through. Climbing over the moldboard, he slipped the eye on the big towing hook bolted to the underside of the belly-guard. The other end of the cable he threw out on the ground in front of the machine. Tom mounted the other dozer and swung into place, ready to tow. Peebles hooked the cable onto Tom's drawbar, hopped up on the Seven. He put her in neutral, disengaged the master clutch, and put the blade control over into 'float' position, then raised an arm.

Tom perched upon the arm rest of his machine, looking backwards, moved slowly, taking up the slack in the cable. It straightened and grew taut, and as it did it forced the Seven's blade upward. Peebles waved for slack and put the blade control into 'hold.' The cable bellied downward away from the blade.

'Hydraulic system's O.K., anyhow,' called Peebles, as Tom throttled down. 'Move over and take a strain to the right, sharp as you can without fouling the cable on the track. We'll see if we can walk this track back on.'

Tom backed up, cut sharply right, and drew the cable out almost at right angles to the other machine. Peebles held the right track of the Seven with the brake and released both steering clutches. The left track now could turn free, the right not at all. Tom was running at a quarter throttle in his lowest gear, so that his machine barely crept along, taking the strain. The Seven shook gently and began to pivot on the taut right track, unbelievable foot-pounds of energy coming to bear on the front of the track where it rode high up on the idler wheel. Peebles released the right brake with his foot and applied it again in a series of skilled, deft jerks. The track would move a few inches and stop again, force being applied forward and sideward alternately, urging the track persuasively back in place. Then, a little jolt and she was in, riding true on the five truck rollers, the two track carrier rollers, the driving sprocket and the idler.

Peebles got off and stuck his head in between the sprocket and

the rear carrier, squinting down and sideways to see if there were any broken flanges or roller bushes. Tom came over and pulled him out by the seat of his trousers. 'Time enough for that when you get her in the shop,' he said, masking his nervousness. 'Reckon she'll roll?'

'She'll roll. I never saw a track in that condition come back that easy. By gosh, it's as if she was tryin' to help!'

'They'll do it sometimes,' said Tom, stiffly. 'You better take the two-tractor, Peeby. I'll stay with this'n.'

'Anything you say.'

And cautiously they took the steep slope down, Tom barely holding the brakes, giving the other machine a straight pull all the way. And so they brought *Daisy Etta* down to Peebles' outdoor shop, where they pulled her cylinder head off, took off her starting motor, pulled out a burned clutch facing, had her quite helpless –

And put her together again.

'I tell you it was outright, cold-blooded murder,' said Dennis hotly. 'An' here we are takin' orders from a guy like that. What are we goin' to do about it?' They were standing by the cooler – Dennis has run his machine there to waylay Chub.

Chub Horton's cigar went down and up like a semaphore with a short circuit. 'We'll skip it. The blacktopping crew will be here in another two weeks or so, an' we can make a report. Besides, I don't know what happened up there any more than you do. In the

meantime we got a runway to build.'

'You don't know what happened up there? Chub, you're a smart man. Smart enough to run this job better than Tom Jaeger even if he wasn't crazy. And you're surely smart enough not to believe all that cock and bull about that tractor runnin' out from under that grease-monkey. Listen —' he leaned forward and tapped Chub's chest. 'He said it was the governor. I saw that governor myself an' heard ol' Peebles say there wasn't a thing wrong with it. Th' throttle control rod had slipped off its yoke, yeah — but you know what a tractor will do when the throttle control goes out. It'll idle or stall. It won't run away, whatever.'

'Well, maybe so, but -'

'But nothin'! A guy that'll commit murder ain't sane. If he did it once, he can do it again and I ain't fixin' to let that happen to me.'

Two things crossed Chub's steady but not too bright mind at this. One was that Dennis, whom he did not like but could not shake, was trying to force him into something that he did not want to do. The other was that under all of his swift talk Dennis was scared spitless.

'What do you want to do - call up the sheriff?'

Dennis ha-ha-ed appreciatively – one of the reasons he was so hard to shake. 'I'll tell you what we can do. As long as we have you here, he isn't the only man who knows the work. If we stop takin' orders from him, you can give 'em as good or better. An' there

won't be anything he can do about it.'

'Doggone it, Dennis,' said Chub, with sudden exasperation. 'What do you think you're doin' - handin' me over the keys to the kingdom or something? What do you want to see me bossin' around here for?' He stood up. 'Suppose we did what you said? Would it get the field built any quicker? Would it get me any more money in my pay envelope? What do you think I want – glory? I passed up a chance to run for councilman once. You think I'd raise a finger to get a bunch of mugs to do what I say – when they do it anyway?'

'Aw, Chub – I wouldn't cause trouble just for the fun of it. That's not what I mean at all. But unless we do something about that guy

we ain't safe. Can't you get that through your head?'

'Listen, windy. If a man keeps busy enough he can't get into trouble. That goes for Tom – you might keep that in mind. But it goes for you, too. Get back up on that rig an' get back to the marl pit.' Dennis, completely taken by surprise, turned to his machine.

'It's a pity you can't move earth with your mouth,' said Chub as he walked off. 'They could have left you do this job singlehanded.'

Chub walked slowly toward the outcropping, switching at beach pebbles with a grade stake and swearing to himself. He was essentially a simple man and believed in the simplest possible approach to everything. He liked a job where he could do everything required and where nothing turned up to complicate things. He had been in the grading business for a long time as an operator and survey party boss, and he was remarkable for one thing - he had always held aloof from the cliques and internecine politics that are the breath of life to most construction men. He was disturbed and troubled at the back-stabbing that went on around him on various jobs. If it was blunt, he was disgusted, and subtlety simply left him floundering and bewildered. He was stupid enough so that his basic honesty manifested itself in his speech and actions, and he had learned that complete honesty in dealing with men above and below him was almost invariably painful to all concerned, but he had not the wit to act otherwise, and did not try to. If he had a bad tooth, he had it pulled out as soon as he could. If he got a raw deal from a superintendent over him, that superintendent would get told exactly what the trouble was, and if he didn't like it, there were other jobs. And if the pulling and hauling of cliques got in his hair, he had always said so and left. Or he had sounded off and stayed; his completely selfish reaction to things that got in the way of his work had earned him a lot of regard from men he had worked under. And so, in this instance, he had no hesitation about choosing a course of action. Only – how did you go about asking a man if he was a murderer?

He found the foreman with an enormous wrench in his hand, tightening up the new track adjustment bolt they had installed in

the Seven.

'Hey, Chub! Glad you turned up. Let's get a piece of pipe over the end of this thing and really bear down.' Chub went for the pipe, and they fitted it over the handle of the four-foot wrench and hauled until the sweat ran down their backs, Tom checking the track clearance occasionally with a crowbar. He finally called it good enough and they stood there in the sun gasping for breath.

'Tom,' panted Chub, 'did you kill that Puerto Rican?'

Tom's head came up as if someone had burned the back of his neck with a cigarette.

'Because,' said Chub, 'if you did you can't go on runnin' this job.'

Tom said, 'That's a lousy thing to kid about.' 'You know I ain't kiddin'. Well, did you?'

'No!' Tom sat down on a keg, wiped his face with a bandanna. 'What's got into you?'

'I just wanted to know. Some of the boys are worried about it.'

Tom's eyes narrowed. 'Some of the boys, huh? I think I get it. Listen to me, Chub. Rivera was killed by that thing there.' He thumbed over his shoulder at the Seven, which was standing ready now, awaiting only the building of a broken cutting corner on the blade. Peebles was winding up the welding machine as he spoke. 'If you mean, did I put him up on the machine before he was thrown, the answer is yes. That much I killed him, and don't think I don't feel it. I had a hunch something was wrong up there, but I couldn't put my finger on it and I certainly didn't think anybody was going to get hurt.'

'Well, what was wrong?'

'I still don't know.' Tom stood up. 'I'm tired of beatin' around the bush, Chub, and I don't much care any more what anybody thinks. There's somethin' wrong with that Seven, something that wasn't built into her. They don't make tractors better'n that one, but whatever it was happened up there on the mesa has queered this one. Now go ahead and think what you like, and dream up any story you want to tell the boys. In the meantime you can pass the word – nobody runs that machine but me, understand? Nobody!'

'Tom-'

Tom's patience broke. 'That's all I'm going to say about it! If anybody else gets hurt, it's going to be me, understand? What more do you want?'

He strode off, boiling. Chub stared after him, and after a long moment reached up and took the cigar from his lips. Only then did he realize that he had bitten it in two; half the butt was still inside his mouth. He spat and stood there shaking his head.

'How's she going, Peeby?'

Peebles looked up from the welding machine. 'Hi, Chub, have her ready for you in twenty minutes.' He gauged the distance between the welding machine and the big tractor. 'I should have forty feet of cable,' he said, looking at the festoons of arc and ground cables that hung from the storage hooks in the back of the welder. 'Don't want to get a tractor over here to move the thing, and don't feel like cranking up the Seven just to get it close enough.' He separated the arc cable and threw it aside, walked to the tractor, paying the ground cable off his arms. He threw out the last of his slack and grasped the ground clamp when he was eight feet from the machine. Taking it in his left hand, he pulled hard, reaching out with his right to grasp the moldboard of the Seven, trying to get it far enough to clamp on to the machine.

Chub stood there watching him, chewing on his cigar, absent-mindedly diddling with the controls on the arc-welder. He pressed the starter-button, and the six-cylinder motor responded with a purr. He spun the work-selector dials idly, threw the arc generator switch –

A bolt of incredible energy, thin, searing, blue-white, left the rod-holder at his feet, stretched itself *fifty feet* across to Peebles, whose fingers had just touched the moldboard of the tractor. Peebles' head and shoulders were surrounded for a second by a violet nimbus, and then he folded over and dropped. A circuit breaker clacked behind the control board of the welder, but too late. The Seven rolled slowly backward, without firing, on level ground, until it brought up against the road-roller.

Chub's cigar was gone, and he didn't notice it. He had the knuckles of his right hand in his mouth, and his teeth sunk into the pudgy flesh. His eyes protruded; he crouched there and quivered, literally frightened out of his mind. For old Peebles was burned almost in two.

They buried him next to Rivera. There wasn't much talk afterwards; the old man had been a lot closer to all of them than they had realized until now. Harris, for once in his rum-dumb, lightheaded life, was quiet and serious, and Kelly's walk seemed to

lose some of its litheness. Hour after hour Dennis' flabby mouth worked, and he bit at his lower lip until it was swollen and tender. Al Knowles seemed more or less unaffected, as was to be expected from a man who had something less than the brains of a chicken. Chub Horton had snapped out of it after a couple of hours and was very nearly himself again. And in Tom Jaeger swirled a black, furious anger at this unknowable curse that had struck the camp.

And they kept working. There was nothing else to do. The shovel kept up its rhythmic swing and dig, swing and dump, and the Dumptors screamed back and forth between it and the little that was left of the swamp. The upper end of the runway was grassed off; Chub and Tom set grade stakes and Dennis began the long job of cutting and filling the humpy surface with his pan. Harris manned the other and followed him, a cut behind. The shape of the runway emerged from the land, and then that of the paralleling taxiway; and three days went by. The horror of Peebles' death wore off enough so that they could talk about it, and very little of the talk helped anybody. Tom took his spells at everything, changing over with Kelly to give him a rest from the shovel, making a few rounds with a pan, putting in hours on a Dumptor. His arm was healing slowly but clean, and he worked grimly in spite of it, taking a perverse sort of pleasure from the pain of it. Every man on the job watched his machine with the solicitude of a mother with her first-born; a serious break-down would have been disastrous without a highly skilled mechanic.

The only concession that Tom allowed himself in regard to Peebles' death was to corner Kelly one afternoon and ask him about the welding machine. Part of Kelly's rather patchy past had been spent in a technical college, where he had studied electrical engineering and women. He had learned a little of the former and enough of the latter to get him thrown out on his ear. So, on the off-chance that he might know something about the freak arc, Tom put it to him.

Kelly pulled off his high-gauntlet gloves and batted sandflies with them. 'What sort of an arc was that? Boy, you got me there. Did you ever hear of a welding machine doing like that before?'

'I did not. A welding machine just don't have that sort o' push. I saw a man get a full jolt from a 400-amp welder once, an' although it sat him down it didn't hurt him any.'

'It's not amperage that kills people,' said Kelly, 'it's voltage. Voltage is the pressure behind a current, you know. Take an amount of water, call it amperage. If I throw it in your face, it won't

hurt you. If I put it through a small hose you'll feel it. But if I pump it through them tiny holes on a Diesel injector nozzle at about twelve hundred pounds, it'll draw blood. But a welding arc generator just is not wound to build up that kind of voltage. I can't see where any short circuit anywhere through the armature or field windings could do such a thing.'

'From what Chub said, he had been foolin' around with the work selector. I don't think anyone touched the dials after it happened. The selector dial was run all the way over to the low current application segment, and the current control was around the halfway mark. That's not enough juice to get you a good bead with a quarter-inch rod, let alone kill somebody – or roll a tractor back thirty feet on level ground.'

'Or jump fifty feet,' said Kelly. 'It would take thousands of volts

to generate an arc like that.'

'Is it possible that something in the Seven could have pulled that arc? I mean, suppose the arc wasn't driven over, but was drawn

over? I tell you, she was hot for four hours after that.'

Kelly shook his head. 'Never heard of any such thing. Look, just to have something to call them, we call direct current terminals positive and negative, and just because it works in theory we say that current flows from negative to positive. There couldn't be any more positive attraction in one electrode than there is negative drive in the other; see what I mean?'

'There couldn't be some freak condition that would cause a sort of oversize positive field? I mean one that would suck out the negative flow all in a heap, make it smash through under a lot of pressure like the water you were talking about through an injector nozzle?'

'No, Tom. It just don't work that way, far as anyone knows. I dunno, though – there are some things about static electricity that nobody understands. All I can say is that what happened couldn't happen and if it did it couldn't have killed Peebles. And you know the answer to that.'

Tom glanced away at the upper end of the runway, where the two graves were. There was bitterness and turbulent anger naked there for a moment, and he turned and walked away without another word. And when he went back to have another look at the welding machine, *Daisy Etta* was gone.

Al Knowles and Harris squatted together near the water cooler. 'Bad,' said Harris.

'Nevah saw anythin' like it,' said Al. 'Ol' Tom come back f'm the shop theah just' *raisin*' Cain. "Weah's 'at Seven gone? Weah's 'at Seven?" I never heered sech cah'ins on.'

'Dennis did take it, huh?'

'Sho' did.'

Harris said. 'He came spoutin' around to me a while back, Dennis did. Chub'd told him Tom said for everybody to stay off that machine. Dennis was mad as a wet hen. Said Tom was carryin' that kind o' business too far. Said there was probably somethin' about the Seven Tom didn't want us to find out. Might incriminate him. Dennis is ready to say Tom killed the kid.'

'Reckon he did, Harris?'

Harris shook his head. 'I've known Tom too long to think that. If he won't tell us what really happened up on the mesa, he has a reason for it. How'd Dennis come to take the dozer?'

'Blew a front tire on his pan. Came back heah to git anothah rig — maybe a Dumptor. Saw th' Seven standin' theah ready to go. Stood theah lookin' at it and cussin' Tom. Said he was tired of bashin' his kidneys t'pieces on them othah rigs an' bedamned if he wouldn't take suthin' that rode good fo' a change. I tol' him ol' Tom'd raise th' roof when he found him on it. He had a couple mo' things t'say 'bout Tom then.'

'I didn't think he had the guts to take the rig.'

'Aw, he talked hisself blind mad.'

They looked up as Chub Horton trotted up, panting. 'Hey, you guys, come on. We better get up there to Dennis.'

'What's wrong?' asked Harris, climbing to his feet.

'Tom passed me a minute ago lookin' like the wrath o' God and hightailin' it for the swamp fill. I asked him what was the matter and he hollered that Dennis had taken the Seven. Said he was always talkin' about murder and he'd get his fill of it foolin' around that machine.' Chub went wall-eyed, licked his lips beside his cigar.

'Oh-oh,' said Harris quietly. 'That's the wrong kind o' talk for

just now.'

'You don't suppose he -'

'Come on!'

They saw Tom before they were halfway there. He was walking slowly, with his head down. Harris shouted. Tom raised his face, stopped, stood there waiting with a peculiarly slumped stance.

'Where's Dennis?' barked Chub.

Tom waited until they were almost up to him and then weakly raised an arm and thumbed over his shoulder. His face was green.

'Tom - is he -'

Tom nodded, and swayed a little. His granite jaw was slack.

'Al, stay with him. He's sick. Harris, let's go.'

Tom was sick, then and there. Very. Al stood gaping at him, fascinated.

Chub and Harris found Dennis. All of twelve square feet of him, ground and churned and rolled out into a torn-up patch of earth. *Daisy Etta* was gone.

Back at the outcropping, they sat with Tom while Al Knowles

took a Dumptor and roared away to get Kelly.

'You saw him?' he said dully after a time.

'Harris said, 'Yeh.'

The screaming Dumptor and a mountainous cloud of dust arrived, Kelly driving, Al holding on with a death-grip to the dump-bed guards. Kelly flung himself off, ran to Tom. 'Tom – what is all this? Dennis dead? And you ... you –'

Tom's head came up slowly, the slackness going out of his long face, a light suddenly coming into his eyes. Until this moment it had

not crossed his mind what these men might think.

'I - what?'

'Al says you killed him.'

Tom's eyes flicked at Al Knowles, and Al winced as if the glance had been a quirt.

Harris said, 'What about it, Tom?'

'Nothing about it. He was killed by that Seven. You saw that for yourself.'

'I stuck with you all along,' said Harris slowly. 'I took everything you said and believed it.'

'This is too strong for you?' Tom asked.

Harris nodded. 'Too strong, Tom.'

Tom looked at the grim circle of faces and laughed suddenly. He stood up, put his back against a tall crate. 'What do you plan to do about it?'

There was a silence. 'You think I went up there and knocked that windbag off the machine and ran over him?' More silence. 'Listen. I went up there and saw what you saw. He was dead before I got there. That's not good enough either?' He paused and licked his lips. 'So after I killed him I got up on the tractor and drove it far enough away so you couldn't see or hear it when you got there. And then I sprouted wings and flew back so's I was halfway here when you met me – ten minutes after I spoke to Chub on my way up!'

Kelly said vaguely, 'Tractor?'

'Well,' said Tom harshly to Harris, 'was the tractor there when you and Chub went up and saw Dennis?'

'No-'

Chub smacked his thigh suddenly. 'You could of drove it into the swamp, Tom.'

Tom said angrily, 'I'm wastin' my time. You guys got it all

figured out. Why ask me anything at all?'

'Aw, take it easy,' said Kelly. 'We just want the facts. Just what did happen? You met Chub and told him that Dennis would get all the murderin' he could take if he messed around that machine. That right?'

'That's right.'
'Then what?'

'Then the machine murdered him.'

Chub, with remarkable patience, asked, 'What did you mean the day Peebles was killed when you said that something had queered

the Seven up there on the mesa?"

Tom said furiously, 'I meant what I said. You guys are set to crucify me for this and I can't stop you. Well, listen. Something's got into that Seven. I don't know what it is and I don't think I ever will know. I thought that after she smashed herself up that it was finished with. I had an idea that when we had her torn down and helpless we should have left her that way. I was dead right but it's too late now. She's killed Rivera and she's killed Dennis and she sure had something to do with killing Peebles. And my idea is that she won't stop as long as there's a human being alive on this island.

'Whaddaya know!' said Chub.

'Sure, Tom sure,' said Kelly quietly. 'That tractor is out to get us. But don't worry; we'll catch it and tear it down. Just don't you worry about it any more; it'll be all right.'

'That's right, Tom,' said Harris. 'You just take it easy around camp for a couple of days till you feel better. Chub and the rest of

us will handle things for you. You had too much sun.'

'You're a swell bunch of fellows,' gritted Tom, with the deepest sarcasm. 'You want to live,' he shouted, 'git out there and throw that maverick bulldozer!'

'That maverick bulldozer is at the bottom of the swamp where you put it,' growled Chub. His head lowered and he started to move in. 'Sure we want to live. The best way to do that is to put you

where you can't kill anybody else. Get him!'

He leaped. Tom straightened him with his left and crossed with his right. Chub went down, tripping Harris. Al Knowles scuttled to a toolbox and dipped out a fourteen-inch crescent wrench. He circled around, keeping out of trouble, trying to look useful. Tom loosened a haymaker at Kelly, whose head seemed to withdraw like

a turtle's; it whistled over, throwing Tom badly off balance. Harris, still on his knees, tackled Tom's legs; Chub hit him in the small of the back with a meaty shoulder, and Tom went flat on his face. Al Knowles, holding the wrench in both hands, swept it up and back like a baseball bat; at the top of its swing Kelly reached over, snatched it out of his hands and tapped Tom delicately behind the ear with it. Tom went limp.

It was late, but nobody seemed to feel like sleeping. They sat around the pressure lantern, talking idly. Chub and Kelly played an inconsequential game of casino, forgetting to pick up their points; Harris paced up and down like a man in a cell, and Al Knowles was squinched up close to the light, his eyes wide and watching, watching—

'I need a drink,' said Harris.

'Tens,' said one of the casino players.

Al Knowles said, 'We should killed him. We ought kill him now.'

'There's been too much killin' already,' said Chub. 'Shut up, you.' And to Kelly, 'With big casino,' sweeping up cards.

Kelly caught his wrist and grinned. 'Big casino's ten of diamonds,

not the ten of hearts. Remember?'

'Oh.'

'How long before the blacktopping crew will be here?' quavered Al Knowles.

'Twelve days,' said Harris. 'And they better bring some likker.'

'Hey, you guys.'

They fell silent.

'Hey!'

'It's Tom,' said Kelly. 'Building sixes, Chub.'

'I'm gonna go kick his ribs in,' said Knowles, not moving.

'I heard that,' said the voice from the darkness. 'If I wasn't hogtied-'

We know what you'd do,' said Chub. 'How much proof do you think we need?'

'Chub, you don't have to do any more to him!' It was Kelly, flinging his cards down and getting up. 'Tom, you want water?'

'Yes.'

'Siddown, siddown,' said Chub.

'Let him lay there and bleed,' Al Knowles said.

'Nuts!' Kelly went and filled a cup and brought it to Tom. The big Georgian was tied thoroughly, wrists together, taut rope between elbow and elbow behind his back, so that his hands were immovable over his solar plexus. His knees and ankles were bound as well, although Knowles' little idea of a short rope between ankles and throat hadn't been used.

'Thanks, Kelly.' Tom drank greedily, Kelly holding his head. 'Goes good.' He drank more. 'What hit me?'

'One of the boys. 'Bout the time you said the cat was haunted.'

'Oh, yeah.' Tom rolled his head and blinked with pain.

'Any sense asking you if you blame us?'

'Kelly, does somebody else have to get killed before you guys wake up?'

'None of us figure there will be any more killin' - now.'

The rest of the men drifted up. 'He willing to talk sense?' Chub wanted to know.

Al Knowles laughed, 'Hyuk! hyuk! Don't he look dangerous now.'

Harris said suddenly, 'Al, I'm gonna hafta tape your mouth with the skin off your neck.'

'Am I the kind of guy that makes up ghost stories?'

'Never have that I know of, Tom.' Harris kneeled down beside him. 'Never killed anyone before, either.'

'Oh, get away from me. Get away,' said Tom tiredly.

'Get up and make us,' jeered Al.

Harris got up and backhanded him across the mouth. Al squeaked, took three steps backward and tripped over a drum of grease. 'I told you,' said Harris almost plaintively. 'I told you, Al.'

Tom stopped the bumble of comment. 'Shut up!' he hissed.

'SHUT UP!' he roared.

They shut.

'Chub,' said Tom, rapidly, evenly. 'What did you say I did with that Seven?'

'Buried it in the swamp.'

'Yeh. Listen.'

'Listen at what?'

'Be quiet and listen!'

So they listened. It was another still, windless night, with a thin crescent of moon showing nothing true in the black and muffled silver landscape. The smallest whisper of surf drifted up from the beach, and from far off to the right, where the swamp was, a scandalized frog croaked protest at the manhandling of his mudhole. But the sound that crept down, freezing their bones, came from the bluff behind their camp.

It was the unmistakable staccato of a starting engine.

'The Seven!'

"At's right, Chub,' said Tom.

'Wh-who's crankin' her up?'

'Are we all here?'

'All but Peebles and Dennis and Rivera,' said Tom.

'It's Dennis' ghost,' moaned Al.

Chub snapped, 'Shut up, lamebrain.'

'She's shifted to Diesel,' said Kelly, listening.

'She'll be here in a minute,' said Tom. 'Y'know, fellas, we can't all be crazy, but you're about to have a time convincin' yourself of it.'

'You like this, doncha?'

'Some ways. Rivera used to call that machine Daisy Etta, 'cause she's de siete in Spig. Daisy Etta, she wants her a man.'

'Tom,' said Harris. 'I wish you'd stop that chatterin'. You make

me nervous.'

'I got to do somethin'. I can't run,' Tom drawled.

'We're going to have a look,' said Chub. 'If there's nobody on that cat, we'll turn you loose.'

'Mighty white of you. Reckon you'll get back before she does?'

'We'll get back. Harris, come with me. We'll get one of the pan tractors. They can outrun a Seven. Kelly, take Al and get the other one.'

'Dennis' machine has a flat tire on the pan,' said Al's quivering

'Pull the pin and cut the cables, then! Git!' Kelly and Al Knowles ran off.

'Good huntin', Chub.'

Chub went to him, bent over. 'I think I'm goin' to have to apologize to you, Tom.'

'No you ain't. I'd a done the same. Get along now, if you think you got to. But hurry back,'

'I got to. An' I'll hurry back.'

Harris said, 'Don't go 'way, boy.' Tom returned the grin, and they were gone. But they didn't hurry back. They didn't come back at all.

It was Kelly who came pounding back, with Al Knowles on his heels, a half hour later. 'Al - gimme your knife.'

He went to work on the ropes. His face was drawn.

'I could see some of it,' whispered Tom. 'Chub and Harris?'

Kelly nodded. 'There wasn't nobody on the Seven like you said.' He said it as if there was nothing else in his mind, as if the most rigid self-control was keeping him from saying it over and over.

'I could see the lights,' said Tom. 'A tractor angling up the hill.

Pretty soon another, crossing it, lighting up the whole slope.'

'We heard it idling up there somewhere,' Kelly said. 'Olive-drab

paint - couldn't see it.'

'I saw the pan tractor turn over – oh, four, five times down the hill. It stopped, lights still burning. Then something hit it and rolled it again. That sure blacked it out. What turned it over first?'

'The Seven. Hanging up there just at the brow of the bluff. Waited until Chub and Harris were about to pass, sixty, seventy feet below. Tipped over the edge and rolled down on them with her clutches on. Must've been going thirty miles an hour when she hit. Broadside. They never had a chance. Followed the pan as it rolled down the hill and when it stopped booted it again.'

'Want me to rub yo' ankles?' asked Al.

'You! Get outa my sight!'

'Aw, Tom -' whimpered Al.

'Skip it, Tom,' said Kelly. 'There ain't enough of us left to carry on that way. Al, you mind your manners from here on out, hear?'

'Ah jes' wanted to tell y'all. I knew you weren't lyin' 'bout Dennis, Tom, if only I'd stopped to think. I recollect when Dennis said he'd take that tractuh out ... 'membah, Kelly? ... He went an' got the crank and walked around to th' side of th' machine and stuck it in th' hole. It was barely in theah befo' the startin' engine kicked off. "Whadda ya know!" he says t'me. "She started by herse'f! I nevah pulled that handle!" And I said, "She sho' rarin' t'go!"

'You pick a fine time to "recollec" something,' gritted Tom

'C'mon - let's get out of here.'

'Where to?'

'What do you know that a Seven can't move or get up on?'

'That's a large order. A big rock, maybe.'

'Ain't nothing that big around here,' said Tom.

Kelly thought a minute, then snapped his fingers. 'Up on the top of my last cut with the shovel,' he said. 'It's fourteen feet if it's an inch. I was pullin' out small rock an' topsoil, and Chub told me to drop back and dip out marl from a pocket there. I sumped in back of the original cut and took out a whole mess o' marl. That left a big neck of earth sticking thirty feet or so out of the cliff. The narrowest part is only about four feet wide. If *Daisy Etta* tries to get us from the top, she'll straddle the neck and hang herself. If she tries to get us from below, she can't get traction to climb; it's too loose and too steep.'

'And what happens if she builds herself a ramp?'

'We'll be gone from there.'

'Let's go.'

Al agitated for the choice of a Dumptor because of its speed, but was howled down. Tom wanted something that could not get a flat tire and that would need something really powerful to turn it over. They took the two-cycle pan tractor with the bulldozer blade that had been Dennis' machine and crept out into the darkness.

It was nearly six hours later that *Daisy Etta* came and woke them up. Night was receding before a paleness in the east, and a fresh ocean breeze had sprung up. Kelly had taken the first lookout and Al the second, letting Tom rest the right out. And Tom was far too tired to argue the arrangement. Al had immediately fallen asleep on his watch, but fear had such a sure, cold hold on his vitals that the first faint growl of the big Diesel engine snapped him erect. He tottered on the edge of the tall neck of earth that they slept on and squeaked as he scrabbled to get his balance.

'What's giving?' asked Kelly, instantly wide awake.

'It's coming,' blubbered Al. 'Oh my, oh my -'

Kelly stood up and stared into the fresh, dark dawn. The motor boomed hollowly, in a peculiar way heard twice at the same time as it was thrown to them and echoed back by the bluffs under and around them.

'It's coming and what are we goin' to do?' chanted Al. 'What is

going to happen?'

'My head is going to fall off,' said Tom sleepily. He rolled to a sitting position, holding the brutalized member between his hands. 'If that egg behind my ear hatches, it'll come out a full-sized jack-hammer.' He looked at Kelly. 'Where is she?'

'Don't rightly know,' said Kelly. 'Somewhere down around the

camp.'

'Probably pickin' up our scent.'

'Figure it can do that?'

'I figure it can do anything,' said Tom. 'Al, stop your moanin'.'

The sun slipped its scarlet edge into the thin slot between sea and sky, and rosy light gave each rock and tree a shape and a shadow. Kelly's gaze swept back and forth, back and forth, until, minutes later, he saw movement.

'There she is!'

'Where?'

'Down by the grease rack.'

Tom rose and stared. 'What's she doin'?'

After an interval Kelly said, 'She's workin'. Diggin' a swale in front of the fuel drums.'

'You don't say. Don't tell me she's goin' to give herself a grease job.'

'She don't need it. She was completely greased and new oil put in

the crankcase after we set her up. But she might need fuel.'

'Not more'n half a tank.'

'Well, maybe she figures she's got a lot of work to do today.' As Kelly said this Al began to blubber. They ignored him.

The fuel drums were piled in a pyramid at the edge of the camp, in forty-four-gallon drums piled on their sides. The Seven was moving back and forth in front of them, close up, making pass after pass, gouging earth up and wasting it out past the pile. She soon had a huge pit scooped out, about fourteen feet wide, six feet deep and thirty feet long, right at the very edge of the pile of drums.

'What you reckon she's playin' at?'

'Search me. She seems to want fuel, but I don't ... look at that! She stopped in the hole; ... turnin' ... smashing the top corner of the moldboard into one of the drums on the bottom!'

Tom scraped the stubble on his jaw with his nails. 'An' you wonder how much that critter can do! Why, she's got the whole thing figured out. She knows if she tried to punch a hole in a fuel drum that she'd only kick it around. If she did knock a hole in it, how's she going to lift it? She's not equipped to handle hose, so ... see? Look at her now! She just get herself lower than the bottom drum on the pile, and punches a hole. She can do that then, with the whole weight of the pile holding it down. Then she backs her tank under the stream of fuel runnin' out!'

'How'd she get the cap off?'

Tom snorted and told them how the radiator cap had come off its

hinges as he vaulted over the hood the day Rivera was hurt.

'You know,' he said after a moment's thought, 'if she knew as much then as she does now, I'd be snoozin' beside Rivera and Peebles. She just didn't know her way around then. She run herself like she'd never run before. She's learned plenty since.'

'She has,' said Kelly, 'and here's where she uses it on us. She's

headed this way.

She was. Straight out across the roughed-out runway she came, grinding along over the dew-sprinkled earth, yesterday's dust swirling up from under her tracks. Crossing the shoulder line, she took the tougher ground skillfully, angling up over the occasional swags in the earth, by-passing stones, riding free and fast and easily. It was the first time Tom had actually seen her clearly running without an operator, and his flesh crept as he watched. The machine was unnatural, her outline somehow unreal and dreamlike purely through the lack of the small silhouette of a man in the saddle. She looked hulked, compact, dangerous.

'What are we gonna do?' wailed Al Knowles.

'We're gonna sit and wait,' said Kelly, 'and you're gonna shut your trap. We won't know for five minutes yet whether she's going to go after us from down below or from up here.'

'If you want to leave,' said Tom gently, 'go right ahead.' Al sat

down.

Kelly looked ruminatively down at his beloved power shovel, sitting squat and unlovely in the cut below them and away to their right. 'How do you reckon she'd stand up against the dipper stick?'

'If it ever came to a rough-and-tumble,' said Tom, 'I'd say it would be just too bad for *Daisy Etta*. But she wouldn't fight. There's no way you could get the shovel within punchin' range; *Daisy*'d just stand there and laugh at you.'

'I can't see her now,' whined Al.

Tom looked. 'She's taken the bluff. She's going to try it from up here. I move we sit tight and see if she's foolish enough to try to walk out here over that narrow neck. If she does, she'll drop on her belly with one truck on each side. Probably turn herself over trying to dig out.'

The wait then was interminable. Back over the hill they could hear the laboring motor; twice they heard the machine stop momentarily to shift gears. Once they looked at each other hopefully as the sound rose to a series of bellowing roars, as if she were backing and filling; then they realized that she was trying to take some particularly steep part of the bank and having trouble getting traction. But she made it; the motor revved up as she made the brow of the hill, and she shifted into fourth gear and came lumbering out into the open. She lurched up to the edge of the cut, stopped, throttled down, dropped her blade on the ground and stood there idling. Al Knowles backed away to the very edge of the tongue of earth they stood on, his eyes practically on stalks.

'O.K. - put up or shut up,' Kelly called across harshly.

'She's looking the situation over,' said Tom. 'That narrow

pathway don't fool her a bit.'

Daisy Etta's blade began to rise, and stopped just clear of the ground. She shifted without clashing her gears, began to back slowly, still at little more than an idle.

'She's gonna jump!' screamed Al. 'I'm gettin' out of here!'

'Stay here, you fool,' shouted Kelly. 'She can't get us as long as we're up here! If you go down, she'll hunt you down like a rabbit.'

The blast of the Seven's motor was the last straw for Al. He squeaked and hopped over the edge, scrambling and sliding down and almost sheer face of the cut. He hit the bottom running.

Daisy Etta lowered her blade and raised her snout and growled

forward, the blade loading. Six, seven, seven and a half cubic yards of dirt piled up in front of her as she neared the edge. The loaded blade bit into the narrow pathway that led out to their perch. It was almost all soft, white, crumbly marl, and the great machine sank nose down into it, the monstrous overload of topsoil spilling down on each side.

'She's going to bury herself!' shouted Kelly.

'No – wait.' Tom caught his arm. 'She's trying to turn – she made it! She made it! She's ramping herself down to the flat!'

'She is - and she's cut us off from the bluff!'

The bulldozer, blade raised as high as it could possibly go, the hydraulic rod gleaming clean in the early light, freed herself of her tremendous load, spun around and headed back upward, sinking her blade again. She made one more pass between them and the bluff, making a cut now far too wide for them to jump, particularly to the crumbly footing at the bluff's edge. Once down again, she turned to face their haven, now an isolated pillar of marl, and revved down, waiting.

'I never thought of this,' said Kelly guiltily. 'I knew we'd be safe from her ramping up, and I never thought she'd try it the other

way!'

'Skip it. In the meantime, here we sit. What happens – do we wait

up here until she idles out of fuel, or do we starve to death?'

'Oh, this won't be a siege, Tom. That thing's too much of a killer. Where's Al? I wonder if he's got guts enough to make a pass near here with our tractor and draw her off?'

'He had just guts enough to take our tractor and head out,' said

Tom. 'Didn't you know?'

'He took our – what?' Kelly looked out toward where they had left their machine the night before. It was gone. 'Why the dirty little yellow rat!'

'No sense cussin',' said Tom steadily, interrupting what he knew was the beginning of some really flowery language. 'What else

could you expect?'

Daisy Etta decided, apparently, how to go about removing their splendid isolation. She uttered the snort of too-quick throttle, and moved into their peak with a corner of her blade, cutting out a huge swipe, undercutting the material over it so that it fell on her side and track as she passed. Eight inches disappeared from that side of their little plateau.

'Oh-oh. That won't do a-tall,' said Tom.

'Fixin' to dig us down,' said Kelly grimly. 'Take her about twenty minutes. Tom, I say leave.'

'It won't be healthy. You just got no idea how fast that thing can move now. Don't forget, she's a good deal more than she was when she had a man runnin' her. She can shift from high to reverse to fifth speed forward like that' – he snapped his fingers –'and she can pivot faster'n you can blink and throw that blade just where she wants it.'

The tractor passed under them, bellowing, and their little table was suddenly a foot shorter.

'Awright,' said Kelly. 'So what do you want to do? Stay here and

let her dig the ground out from under our feet?'

'I'm just warning you,' said Tom. 'Now listen. We'll wait until she's taking a load. It'll take her a second to get rid of it when she knows we're gone. We'll split – she can't get both of us. You head out in the open, try to circle the curve of the bluff and get where you can climb it. Then come back over here to the cut. A man can scramble off a fourteen-foot cut faster'n any tractor ever built. I'll cut in close to the cut, down at the bottom. If she takes after you, I'll get clear all right. If she takes after me, I'll try to make the shovel and at least give her a run for her money. I can play hide an' seek in an' around and under that dipper-stick all day if she wants to play.'

'Why me out in the open?'

'Don't you think those long laigs o' yours can outrun her in that distance?'

'Reckon they got to,' grinned Kelly. 'O.K., Tom.'

They waited tensely. Daisy Etta backed close by, started another pass. As the motor blatted under the load, Tom said, 'Now!' and they jumped. Kelly, catlike as always, landed on his feet. Tom, whose knees and ankles were black and blue with rope bruises, took two staggering steps and fell. Kelly scooped him to his feet as the dozer's steel prow came around the bank. Instantly she was in fifth gear and howling down at them. Kelly flung himself to the left and Tom to the right, and they pounded away, Kelly out toward the runway, Tom straight for the shovel. Daisy Etta let them diverge for a moment, keeping her course, trying to pursue both; then she evidently sized Tom up as the slower, for she swung toward him. The instant's hesitation was all Tom needed to get the little lead necessary. He tore up to the shovel, his legs going like pistons, and dived down between the shovel's tracks.

As he hit the ground, the big manganese-steel moldboard hit the right track of the shovel, and the impact set all forty-seven tons of the great machine quivering. But Tom did not stop. He scrabbled his way under the rig, stood up behind it, leaped and caught the sill of the rear window, clapped his other hand on it, drew himself up

and tumbled inside. Here he was safe for the moment; the huge tracks themselves were higher than the Seven's blade could rise, and the floor of the cab was a good sixteen inches higher than the top of the track. Tom went to the cab door and peeped outside. The tractor had drawn off and was idling.

'Study away,' gritted Tom, and went to the big Murphy Diesel. He unhurriedly checked the oil with the bayonet gauge, replaced it, took the governor cut-out rod from its rack and inserted it in the governor casing. He set the master throttle at the halfway mark, pulled up the starter-handle, twitched the cut-out. The motor spat a wad of blue smoke out of its hooded exhaust and caught. Tom put the rod back, studied the fuel-flow glass and pressure gauges, and then went to the door and looked out again. The Seven had not moved, but it was revving up and down in the uneven fashion it had shown up on the mesa. Tom had the extraordinary idea that it was gathering itself to spring. He slipped into the saddle, threw the master clutch. The big gears that half-filled the cab obediently began to turn. He kicked the brake-locks loose with his heels, let his feet rest lightly on the pedals as they rose.

Then he reached over his head and snapped back the throttle. As the Murphy picked up he grasped both hoist and swing levers and pulled them back. The engine howled; the two-yard bucket came up off the ground with a sudden jolt as the cold friction grabbed it. The big machine swung hard to the right; Tom snapped his hoist lever forward and checked the bucket's rise with his foot on the brake. He shoved the crowd lever forward; the bucket ran out to the end of its reach, and the heel of the bucket wiped across the Seven's hood, taking with it the exhaust stack, muffler and all, and the pre-cleaner on the air intake. Tom cursed. He had figured on the machine's leaping backward. If it had, he would have smashed the cast-iron radiator core. But she had stood still, making a split-second decision.

Now she moved, though, and quickly. With that incredibly fast shifting, she leaped backwards and pivoted out of range before Tom could check the shovel's mad swing. The heavy swing-friction blocks smoked acridly as the machine slowed, stopped and swung back. Tom checked her as he was facing the Seven, hoisted his bucket a few feet, and rehauled, bringing it about halfway back, ready for anything. The four great dipper-teeth gleamed in the sun. Tom ran a practiced eye over cables, boom and dipper-stick, liking the black polish of crater compound on the sliding parts, the easy tension of well-greased cables and links. The huge machine stood strong, ready and profoundly subservient for all its brute power.

Tom looked searchingly at the Seven's ruined engine hood. The gaping end of the broken air-intake pipe stared back at him. 'Aha!' he said. 'A few cupfuls of nice dry marl down there'll give you something to chew on.'

Keeping a wary eye on the tractor, he swung into the bank, dropped his bucket and plunged it into the marl. He crowded it deep, and the Murphy yelled for help but kept on pushing. At the peak of the load a terrific jar rocked him in the saddle. He looked back over his shoulder through the door and saw the Seven backing off again. She had run up and delivered a terrific punch to the counterweight at the back of the cab. Tom grinned tightly. She'd have to do better than that. There was nothing back there but eight or ten tons of solid steel. And he didn't much care at the moment whether or not she scratched his paint.

He swung back again, while marl running away on both sides of the heaped bucket. The shovel rode perfectly now, for a shovel is counterweighted to balance true when standing level with the bucket loaded. The hoist and swing frictions and the brake linings had heated and dried themselves of the night's condensation moisture, and she answered the controls in a way that delighted the operator in him. He handled the swing lever lightly, back to swing to the right, forward to swing to the left, following the slow dance the Seven had started to do, stepping warily back and forth like a fighter looking for an opening. Tom kept the bucket between himself and the tractor, knowing that she could not hurt a tool that was built to smash hard rock for twenty hours a day and like it.

Daisy Etta bellowed and rushed in. Tom snapped the hoist lever back hard, and the bucket rose, letting the tractor run underneath. Tom punched the bucket trip, and the great steel jaw opened, cascading marl down on the broken hood. The tractor's fan blew it back in a huge billowing cloud. The instant that it took Tom to check and dump was enough, however, for the tractor to dance back out of the way, for when he tried to drop it on the machine to smash the coiled injector tubes on top of the engine block, she was gone.

The dust cleared away, and the tractor moved in again, feinted to the left, then swung her blade at the bucket, which was just clear of the ground. Tom swung to meet her, her feint having gotten her in a little closer than he liked, and bucket met blade with a shower of sparks and a clank that could be heard for half a mile. She had come in with her blade high, and Tom let out a wordless shout as he saw that the A-frame brace behind the blade had caught between two of his dipper-teeth. He snatched at his hoist lever and the

bucket came up, lifting with it the whole front end of the bulldozer.

Daisy Etta plunged up and down and her tracks dug violently into the earth as she raised and lowered her blade, trying to shake herself free. Tom rehauled, trying to bring the tractor in closer, for the boom was set too low to attempt to lift such a dead weight. As it was, the shovel's off track was trying its best to get off the ground. But the crowd and rehaul frictions could not handle her alone; they

began to heat and slip.

Tom hoisted a little; the shovel's off track came up a foot off the ground. Tom cursed and let the bucket drop, and in an instant the dozer was free and running clear. Tom swung wildly at her, missed. The dozer came in on a long curve; Tom swung to meet her again, took a vicious swipe at her which she took on her blade. But this time she did not withdraw after being hit, but bored right in, carrying the bucket before her. Before Tom realized what she was doing his bucket was around in front of the tracks and between them, on the ground. It was as swift and skillful a maneuver as could be imagined, and it left the shovel without the ability to swing as long as *Daisy Etta* could hold the bucket trapped between the tracks.

Tom crowded furiously, but that succeeded only in lifting the boom higher in the air since there is nothing to hold a boom down but its own weight. Hoisting did nothing but make his frictions smoke and rev the engine down dangerously close to the stalling

point.

Tom swore again and reached down to the cluster of small levers at his left. These were the gears. On this type of shovel, the swing lever controls everything except crowd and hoist. With the swing lever, the operator, having selected his gear, controls the travel—that is, power to the tracks—in forward and reverse; booming up and booming down; and swinging. The machine can do only one of these things at a time. If she is in travel gear, she cannot swing. If she is in swing gear, she cannot boom up or down. Not once in years of operating would this inability bother an operator; now, however, nothing was normal.

Tom pushed the swing gear control down and pulled up on the travel. The clutches involved were jaw clutches, not frictions, so that he had to throttle down to an idle before he could make the castellations mesh. As the Murphy revved down, *Daisy Etta* took it as a signal that something could be done about it, and she shoved furiously into the bucket. But Tom had all controls in neutral and all she succeeded in doing was to dig herself in, her sharp new cleats, spinning deep into the dirt.

Tom set his throttle up again and shoved the swing lever forward. There was a vast crackling of drive chains; and the big tracks started to turn.

Daisy Etta had sharp cleats; her pads were twenty inches wide and her tracks were fourteen feet long, and there were fourteen tons of steel on them. The shovel's big flat pads were three feet wide and twenty feet long, and forty-seven tons aboard. There was simply no comparison. The Murphy bellowed the fact that the work was hard, but gave no indications of stalling. Daisy Etta performed the incredible feat of shifting into forward gear while she was moving backwards, but it did her no good. Round and round her tracks went, trying to drive her forward, gouging deep; and slowly and surely she was forced backward toward the cut wall by the shovel.

Tom heard a sound that was not part of a straining machine; he looked out and saw Kelly on top of the cut, smoking, swinging his feet over the edge, making punching motions with his hands as if he

had a ringside seat at a big fight - which he certainly had.

Tom now offered the dozer little choice. If she did not turn aside before him, she would be borne back against the bank and her fuel tank crushed. There was every possibility that, having her pinned there, Tom would have time to raise his bucket over her and smash her to pieces. And if she turned before she was forced against the bank, she would have to free Tom's bucket. This she had to do.

The Murphy gave him warning, but not enough. It crooned as the load came off, and Tom knew that the dozer was shifting into a reverse gear. he whipped the hoist lever back, and the bucket rose as the dozer backed away from him. He crowded it out and let it come smashing down – and missed. For the tractor danced aside – and while he was in travel gear he could not swing to follow it. Daisy Etta charged then, put one track on the bank and went over almost on her beam-ends, throwing one end of her blade high in the air. So totally unexpected was it that Tom was quite unprepared. The tractor flung itself on the bucket, and the cutting edge of the blade dropped between the dipper teeth. This time there was the whole weight of the tractor to hold it there. There would be no way for her to free herself – but at the same time she had trapped the bucket so far out from the center pin of the shovel that Tom couldn't hoist without overbalancing and turning the monster over.

Daisy Etta ground away in reverse, dragging the bucket out until it was checked by the bumper-blocks. Then she began to crab sideways, up against the bank and when Tom tried tentatively to rehaul, she shifted and came right with him, burying one whole end

of her blade deep into the bank.

Stalemate. She had hung herself up on the bucket, and she had immobilized it. Tom tried to rehaul, but the tractor's anchorage in the bank was too solid. He tried to swing, to hoist. All the overworked frictions could possibly give out was smoke. Tom grunted and throttled to an idle, leaned out the window. *Daisy Etta* was idling too, loudly without her muffler, the stackless exhaust giving out an ugly flat sound. But after the roar of the two great motors the partial silence was deafening.

Kelly called down, 'Double knockout, hey?'

'Looks like it. What say we see if we can't get close enough to her to quiet her down some?'

Kelly shrugged. 'I dunno. If she's really stopped herself, it's the first time. I respect that rig, Tom. She wouldn't have got herself into

that spot if she didn't have an ace up her sleeve.'

'Look at her, man! Suppose she was a civilized bulldozer and you had to get her out of there. She can't raise her blade high enough to free it from those dipper-teeth, y'know. Think you'd be able to do it?'

'It might take several seconds,' Kelly drawled. 'She's sure high and dry.'

'O.K., let's spike her guns.'

'Like what?'

'Like taking a bar and prying out her tubing.' He referred to the coiled brass tubing that carried the fuel, under pressure, from the pump to the injectors. There were many feet of it, running from the pump reservoir, stacked in expansion coils over the cylinder head.

As he spoke Daisy Etta's idle burst into that maniac revving up

and down characteristic of her.

'What do you know!' Tom called above the racket. 'Eavesdrop-

ping!'

Kelly slid down the cut, stood up on the track of the shovel and poked his head in the window. 'Well, you want to get a bar and try?'

'Let's go!'

Tom went to the toolbox and pulled out a pinch bar that Kelly used to replace cables on his machine, and swung to the ground. They approached the tractor warily. She revved up as they came near, began to shudder. The front end rose and dropped and the tracks began to turn as she tried to twist out of the vise her blade had dropped into.

'Take it easy, sister,' said Tom. 'You'll just bury yourself. Set still

and take it, now, like a good girl. You got it comin'.'

'Be careful,' said Kelly. Tom hefted the bar and laid a hand on the fender.

The tractor literally shivered, and from the rubber hose connection at the top of the radiator, a blinding steam of hot water shot out. It fanned and caught them both full in the face. They staggered back, cursing.

'You O.K., Tom?' Kelly gasped a moment later. He had got most of it across the mouth and cheek. Tom was on his knees, his shirt

tail out, blotting his face.

'My eyes . . . oh, my eyes -'

'Let's see!' Kelly dropped down beside him and took him by the wrists, gently removing Tom's hands from his face. He whistled. 'Come on,' he gritted. He helped Tom up and led him away a few feet. 'Stay here,' he said hoarsely. He turned, walked back toward the dozer, picking up the pinch-bar. 'You dirty –!' he yelled, and flung it like a javelin at the tube coils. It was a little high. It struck the ruin hood, made a deep dent in the metal. The dent promptly inverted with a loud *thung-g-g!* and flung the bar back at him. He ducked; it whistled over his head and caught Tom in the calves of his legs. He went down like a poled ox, but staggered to his feet again.

'Come on!' Kelly snarled, and taking Tom's arm, hustled him

around the turn of the cut. 'Sit down! I'll be right back.'

'Where are you going? Kelly - be careful!'

'Careful and how!'

Kelly's long legs ate up the distance back to the shovel. He swung into the cab, reached back over the motor and set up the master throttle all the way. Stepping up behind the saddle, he opened the running throttle and the Murphy howled. Then he hauled back on the hoist lever until it knuckled in, turned and leaped off the

machine in one supple motion.

The hoist drum turned and took up slack; the cable straightened as it took the strain. The bucket stirred under the dead weight of the bulldozer that rested on it; and slowly, then, the great flat tracks began to lift their rear ends off the ground. The great obedient mass of machinery teetered forward on the tips of her tracks, the Murphy revved down and under the incredible load, but it kept the strain. A strand of the two-part hoist cable broke and whipped around, singing; and then she was balanced – over-balanced –

And the shovel had hauled herself right over and had fallen with an earth-shaking crash. The boom, eight tons of solid steel, clanged down onto the blade of the bulldozer, and lay there, crushing it down tightly onto the imprisoning row of dipper-teeth.

Daisy Etta sat there, not trying to move now, racing her motor impotently. Kelly strutted past her, thumbing his nose, and went back to Tom.

'Kelly! I thought you were never coming back! What happened?'

'Shovel pulled herself over on her nose.'

'Good boy! Fall on the tractor?'

'Nup. But the boom's laying across the top of her blade. Caught like a rat in a trap.'

'Better watch out the rat don't chew it's leg off to get out,' said

Tom, drily. 'Still runnin', is she?'

'Yep. But we'll fix that in a hurry.'

'Sure. Sure. How?'

'How? I dunno. Dynamite, maybe. How's the optics?'

Tom opened one a trifle and grunted. 'Rough. I can see a little, though. My eyelids are parboiled, mostly. Dynamite, you say? Well, let's think first. Think.'

Tom sat back against the bank and stretched out his legs. 'I tell you, Kelly, I been too blessed busy these last few hours to think much, but there's one thing that keeps comin' back to me – somethin' I was mullin' over long before the rest of you guys knew anything was up at all, except that Rivera had got hurt in some way I wouldn't tell you all about. But I don't reckon you'll call me crazy if I open my mouth now and let it all run out?'

'From now on,' Kelly said fervently, 'nobody's crazy. After this

I'll believe anything.' He sat down.

'O.K. Well, about that tractor. What do you suppose has got into her?'

'Search me. I dunno.'

'No – don't say that. I just got an idea we can't stop at "I dunno." We got to figure all the angles on this thing before we know just what to do about it. Let's just get this thing lined up. When did it start? On the mesa. How? Rivera was opening an old building with the Seven. This thing came out of there. Now here's what I'm getting at. We can dope these things out about it: It's intelligent. It can only get into a machine and not into a man. It –'

'What about that? How do you know it can't?'

'Because it had the chance to and didn't. I was standing right by the opening when it kited out. Rivera was up on the machine at the time. It didn't directly harm either of us. It got into the tractor, and the tractor did. By the same token, it can't hurt a man when it's out of a machine, but that's all it wants to do when it's in one. O.K.?

'To get on: once it's in the machine it can't get out again. We

know that because it had plenty of chances and didn't take them. That scuffle with the dipper-stick, f'r instance. My face woulda been plenty red if it had taken over the shovel – and you can bet it would have if it could.'

'I got you so far. But what are we going to do about it?'

'That's the thing. You see, I don't think it's enough to wreck the tractor. We might burn it, blast it, and still not hurt whatever it was that got into it up on the mesa.'

'That makes sense. But I don't see what else we can do than just break up the dozer. We haven't got a line on actually what the thing

is.'

'I think we have. Remember I asked you all those screwy questions about the arc that killed Peebles. Well, when that happened, I recollected a flock of other things. One – when it got out of that hole up there, I smelled that smell that you notice when you're welding; sometimes when lightning strikes real close.'

'Ozone,' said Kelly.

'Yeah – ozone. Then, it likes metal, not flesh. But most of all, there was that arc. Now, that was absolutely screwy. You know as well as I do – better – that an arc generator simply don't have the push to do a thing like that. It can't kill a man, and it can't throw an arc no fifty feet. But it did. An' that's why I asked you if there could be something – a field, or some such – that could *suck* current out of a generator, all at once, faster than it could flow. Because this thing's electrical; it fits all around.'

'Electronic,' said Kelly doubtfully, thoughtfully.

'I wouldn't know. Now then. When Peebles was killed, a funny thing happened. Remember what Chub said? The Seven moved back – straight back, about thirty feet, until it bumped into a roadroller that was standing behind it. It did that with no fuel in the starting engine – without even using the starting engine, for that

matter - and with the compression valves locked open!

'Kelly, that thing in the dozer can't do much, when you come right down to it. It couldn't fix itself up after that joyride on the mesa. It can't make the machine do too much more than the machine can do ordinarily. What it actually can do, seems to me, is to make a spring push instead of pull, like the control levers, and make a fitting slip when it's supposed to hold, like the ratchet on the throttle lever. It can turn a shaft, like the way it cranks its own starting motor. But if it was so all-fired high-powered, it wouldn't have to use the starting motor! The absolute biggest job it's done so far, seems to me, was when it walked back from that welding machine when Peebles got his. Now, why did it do that just then?'

'Reckon it didn't like the brimstone smell, like it says in the Good Book,' said Kelly sourly.

'That's pretty close, seems to me. Look, Kelly – this thing *feels* things. I mean, it can get sore. If it couldn't it never woulda kept driving in at the shovel like that. It can think. But if it can do all those things, then it can be *scared!*'

'Scared? Why should it be scared?'

'Listen. Something went on in that thing when the arc hit it. What's that I read in a magazine once about heat – something about molecules runnin' around with their heads cut off when they got hot?'

'Molecules do. They go into rapid motion when heat is applied.

'But nothin'. That machine was hot for four hours after that. But she was hot in a funny way. Not just around the place where the arc hit, like as if it was a welding arc. But hot all over — from the moldboard to the fuel-tank cap. Hot everywhere. And just as hot behind the final drive housings as she was at the top of the blade where the poor guy put his hand.

'And look at this.' Tom was getting excited, as his words crystallized his ideas. 'She was scared – scared enough to back off from that welder, putting everything she could into it, to get back from that welding machine. And after that, she was sick. I say that because in the whole time she's had that what-ever-ya-call-it in her, she's never been near men without trying to kill them, except for those two days after the arc hit her. She had juice enough to start herself when Dennis came around with the crank, but she still needed someone to run her till she got her strength back.'

'But why didn't she turn and smash up the welder when Dennis took her?'

'One of two things. She didn't have the strength, or she didn't have the guts. She was scared, maybe, and wanted out of there, away from that thing.'

'But she had all night to go back for it!'

'Still scared. Or ... oh, *that's* it! She had other things to do first. Her main idea is to kill men – there's no other way you can figure it. It's what she was built to do. Not the tractor – they don't build 'em sweeter'n that machine; but the thing that's runnin' it.'

'What is that thing?' Kelly mused. 'Coming out of that old building – temple – what have you – how old is it? How long was it

there? What kept it in there?'

'What kept it in there was some funny gray stuff that lined the

inside of the buildin',' said Tom. 'It was like rock, an' it was like smoke.

'It was a color that scared you to look at it, and it gave Rivera and me the creeps when we got near it. Don't ask me what it was. I went up there to look at it, and it's gone. Gone from the building, anyhow. There was a little lump of it on the ground. I don't know whether that was a hunk of it, or all of it rolled up into a ball. I get the creeps again thinkin' about it.'

Kelly stood up. 'Well, the heck with it. We been beatin' our gums up here too long anyhow. There's just enough sense in what you say to make me want to try something nonsensical, if you see what I mean. If that welder can sweat the Ol' Nick out of that tractor, I'm on. Especially from fifty feet away. There should be a Dumptor around here somewhere; let's move from here. Can you navigate now?'

'Reckon so, a little.' Tom rose and together they followed the cut until they came on the Dumptor. They climbed on, cranked it up and headed toward camp.

About half way there Kelly looked back, gasped, and putting his mouth close to Tom's ear, bellowed against the scream of the motor. 'Tom! 'Member what you said about the rat in the trap biting off a leg?'

'Well, Daisy did too! She's left her blade an' pushbeams an' she's followin' us in!'

ionowin us in:

They howled into the camp, gasping against the dust that followed when they pulled up by the welder.

Kelly said, 'You cast around and see if you can find a drawpin to hook that rig up to the Dumptor with. I'm goin' after some water an' chow!'

Tom grinned. Imagine old Kelly forgetting that a Dumptor had no drawbar! He groped around to a toolbox, peering out of the narrow slit beneath swollen lids, felt behind it and located a shackle. He climbed up on the Dumptor, turned it around and backed up to the welding machine. He passed the shackle through the ring at the end of the steering tongue of the welder, screwed in the pin and dropped the shackle over the front towing hook of the Dumptor. A Dumptor being what it is, having no real front and no real rear, and direct reversing gears in all speeds, it was no trouble to drive it 'backwards' for a change.

Kelly came pounding back, out of breath. 'Fix it? Good. Shackle? No drawbar! Daisy's closin' up fast; I say let's take the beach. We'll

be concealed until we have a good lead out o' this pocket, and the going's pretty fair, long as we don't bury this jalopy in the sand.'

'Good,' said Tom as they climbed on and he accepted an open tin of K. 'Only go easy; bump around too much and the welder'll slip off the hook. An' I somehow don't want to lose it just now.'

They took off, zooming up the beach. A quarter of a mile up, they sighted the Seven across the flat. It immediately turned and

took a course that would intercept them.

'Here she comes,' shouted Kelly, and stepped down hard on the accelerator. Tom leaned over the back of the seat, keeping his eye on their tow. 'Hey! Take it easy! Watch it!

'Hey!'

But it was too late. The tongue of the welding machine responded to that one bump too many. The shackle jumped up off the hook, the welder lurched wildly, slewed hard to the left. The tongue dropped to the sand and dug in; the machine rolled up on it and snapped it off, finally stopped, leaning crazily askew. By a miracle it did not quite turn over.

Kelly tramped on the brakes and both their heads did their utmost to snap off their shoulders. They leaped off and ran back to the welder. It was intact, but towing it was now out of the question.

'If there's going to be a showdown, it's gotta be here.'

The beach here was about thirty yards wide, the sand almost level, and undercut banks of sawgrass forming the landward edge in a series of little hummocks and headlands. While Tom stayed with the machine, testing starter and generator contacts, Kelly walked up one of the little mounds, stood up on it and scanned the beach back the way he had come. Suddenly he began to shout and wave his arms.

'What's got into you?'

'It's Al!' Kelly called back. 'With the pan tractor!'

Tom dropped what he was doing, and came to stand beside Kelly. 'Where's the Seven? I can't see.'

'Turned on the beach and followin' our track. Al! Al! You little skunk, c'mere!'

Tom could now dimly make out the pan tractor cutting across directly toward them and the beach.

'He don't see *Daisy Etta*,' remarked Kelly disgustedly, 'or he'd sure be headin' the other way.'

Fifty yards away Al pulled up and throttled down. Kelly shouted and waved to him. Al stood up on the machine, cupped his hands around his mouth. 'Where's the Seven?'

'Never mind that! Come here with that tractor!'

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Al stayed where he was. Kelly cursed and started out after him.

'You stay away from me,' he said when Kelly was closer.

'I ain't got time for you now,' said Kelly. 'Bring that tractor down to the beach.'

'Where's that Daisy Etta?' Al's voice was oddly strained.

'Right behind us.' Kelly tossed a thumb over his shoulder. 'On the beach.'

Al's pop eyes clicked wide almost audibly. He turned on his heel and jumped off the machine and started to run. Kelly uttered a wordless syllable that was somehow more obscene than anything else he had ever uttered, and vaulted into the seat of the machine. 'Hey!' he bellowed after Al's rapidly diminishing figure. 'You're runnin' right into her.' Al appeared not to hear, but went pelting down the beach.

Kelly put her into fifth gear and poured on the throttle. As the tractor began to move he whacked out the master clutch, snatched the overdrive lever back to put her into sixth, rammed the clutch in again, all so fast that she did not have time to stop rolling. Bucking and jumping over the rough ground the fast machine whined for the beach.

Tom was fumbling back to the welder, his ears telling him better than his eyes how close the Seven was – for she was certainly no nightingale, particularly without her exhaust stack. Kelly reached the machine as he did.

'Get behind it,' snapped Tom. 'I'll jamb the tierod with the shackle, and you see if you can't bunt her up into that pocket between those two hummocks. Only take it easy – you don't want to tear up that generator. Where's Al?'

'Don't ask me. He run down the beach to meet Daisy.'

'He what?'

The whine of the two-cycle drowned out Kelly's answer, if any. He got behind the welder and set his blade against it. Then in a low gear, slipping his clutch in a little, he slowly nudged the machine toward the place Tom indicated. It was a little hollow in between two projecting banks. The surf and the high-tide mark dipped inland here to match it; the water was only a few feet away.

Tom raised his arm and Kelly stopped. From the other side of the projecting shelf, out of their sight now, came the flat roar of the Seven's exhaust. Kelly sprang off the tractor and went to help Tom, who was furiously throwing out coils of cable from the rack of the welder. 'What's the game?'

'We got to ground that Seven some way,' panted Tom. He threw the last bit of cable out to clear it of kinks and turned to the panel. 'How was it – about sixty volts and the amperage on "special application"?' He spun the dials, pressed the starter button. The motor responded instantly. Kelly scooped up ground clamp and rod holder and tapped them together. The solenoid governor picked up the load and the motor hummed as a good live spark took the jump.

'Good,' said Tom, switching off the generator. 'Come on, Lieutenant General Electric, figure me out a way to ground that

maverick.'

Kelly tightened his lips, shook his head. 'I dunno – unless somebody actually claps this thing on her.'

'No, boy, can't do that. If one of us gets killed -'

Kelly tossed the ground clamp idly, his lithe body taut. 'Don't give me that, Tom. You know I'm elected because you can't see good enough yet to handle it. You know you'd do it if you could. You -'

He stopped short, for the steadily increasing roar of the approaching Seven had stopped, was blatting away now in that extraordinary irregular throttling that *Daisy Etta* affected.

'Now, what's got into her?'

Kelly broke away and scrambled up the bank. 'Tom!' he gasped. 'Tom – come up here!'

Tom followed, and they lay side by side, peering out over the top

of the escarpment at the remarkable tableau.

Daisy Etta was standing on the beach, near the water, not moving. Before her, twenty or thirty feet away, stood Al Knowles, his arms out in front of him, talking a blue streak. Daisy made far too much racket for them to hear what he was saying.

'Do you reckon he's got guts enough to stall her off for us?' said

Tom.

'If he has, it's the queerest thing that's happened yet on this old

island,' Kelly breathed, 'an' that's saying something.'

The Seven revved up till she shook, and then throttled back. She ran down so low then that they thought she had shut herself down, but she caught on the last two revolutions and began to idle quietly. And then they could hear.

Al's voice was high, hysterical. '- I come t' he'p you, I come t' he'p you, don' kill me, I'll he'p you -' He took a step forward; the dozer snorted and he fell to his knees. 'I'll wash you an' grease you and change yo' ile,' he said in a high singsong.

'The guy's not human,' said Kelly wonderingly. 'He ain't housebroke either,' Tom chuckled.

'- lemme he'p you. I'll fix you when you break down. I'll he'p you kill those other guys -'

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'She don't need any help!' said Tom.

'The louse,' growled Kelly. 'The rotten little double-crossing polecat!' He stood up. 'Hey, you Al! Come out o' that. I mean now! If she don't get you I will, if you don't move.'

Al was crying now. 'Shut up!' he screamed. 'I know who's bawss hereabouts, an' so do you!' He pointed at the tractor. 'She'll kill us all off'n we don't do what she wants!' He turned back to the machine. I'll k-kill 'em fo' you. I'll wash you and shine you up and f-fix yo' hood. I'll put yo' blade back on....'

Tom reached out and caught Kelly's legs as the tall man started out, blind mad. 'Git back here,' he barked. 'What you want to do -

get killed for the privilege of pinnin' his ears back?'

Kelly subsided and came back, threw himself down beside Tom,

put his face in his hands. He was quivering with rage.

'Don't take on so,' Tom said. 'The man's plumb loco. You can't argue with him any more'n you can with *Daisy*, there. If he's got to get his, *Daisy'll* give it to him.'

'Aw, Tom, it ain't that. I know he ain't worth it, but I can't sit up

here and watch him get himself killed. I can't Tom.'

Tom thumped him on the shoulder, because there were simply no

words to be said. Suddenly he stiffened, snapped his fingers.

'There's our ground,' he said urgently, pointing seaward. 'The water – the wet beach where the surf runs. If we can get our ground clamp out there and her somewhere near it –'

'Ground the pan tractor. Run it out into the water. It ought to

reach - partway, anyhow.'

'That's it - c'mon.'

They slid down the bank, snatched up the ground clamp,

attached it to the frame on the pan tractor.

'I'll take it,' said Tom, and as Kelly opened his mouth, Tom shoved him back against the welding machine. 'No time to argue,' he snapped, swung on to the machine, slapped her in gear and was off. Kelly took a step toward the tractor, and then his quick eyes saw a bight of the ground cable about to foul a wheel of the welder. He stopped and threw it off, spread out the rest of it so it would pay off clear. Tom, with the incredible single-mindedness of the trained operator, watched only the black line of the trailing cable on the sand behind him. When it straightened he stopped. The front of the tracks were sloshing in the gentle surf. He climbed off the side away from the Seven and tried to see. There was movement, and the growl of her motor now running at a bit more than idle, but he could not distinguish much.

Kelly picked up the rod holder and went to peer around the head

of the protruding bank. Al was on his feet, still crooning hysterically, sidling over toward *Daisy Etta*. Kelly ducked back, threw the switch on the arc generator, climbed the bank and crawled along through the sawgrass paralleling the beach until the holder in his hand tugged and he knew he had reached the end of the cable. He looked out at the beach; measured carefully with his eye the arc he would travel if he left his position and, keeping the cable taut, went out on the beach. At no point would he come within seventy feet of the possessed machine, let alone fifty. She had to be drawn in closer. And she had to be maneuvered out to the wet sand, or in the water —

Al Knowles, encouraged by the machine's apparent decision not to move, approached, though warily, and still running off at the mouth. '- we'll kill 'em off an' then we'll keep it a secret and th' bahges'll come an' take us offen th' island and we'll go to anothah job an' kill us lots mo' ... an' when yo' tracks git dry an' squeak we'll wet 'em with blood, and you'll be rightly king o' the hill ... look yondah, look yondah, Daisy Etta, see them theah, by the otheh tractuh, theah they are, kill 'em, Daisy, kill 'em, Daisy, an' lemme he'p ... heah me. Daisy, heah me, say you heah me -' and the motor roared in response. Al laid a timid hand on the radiator guard, leaning far over to do it, and the tractor still stood there grumbling but not moving. Al stepped back, motioned with his arm, began to walk off slowly toward the pan tractor, looking backwards as he did so like a man training a dog. 'C'mon, c'mon, theah's one theah, le's kill'm, kill'm, kill'm...'

And with a snort the tractor revved up and followed.

Kelly licked his lips without effect because his tongue was dry, too. The madman passed him, walking straight up the center of the beach, and the tractor, now no longer a bulldozer, followed him; and there the sand was bone dry, sun-dried, dried to powder. As the tractor passed him, Kelly got up on all fours, went over the edge of the bank onto the beach, crouched there.

Al crooned, 'I love ya, honey, I love ya, 'deed I do -'

Kelly ran crouching, like a man under machine-gun fire, making himself as small as possible and feeling as big as a barn door. The torn-up sand where the tractor had passed was under his feet now; he stopped, afraid to get too much closer, afraid that a weakened, badly grounded arc might leap from the holder in his hand and serve only to alarm and infuriate the thing in the tractor. And just then Al saw him.

'There!' he screamed; and the tractor pulled up short. 'Behind you! Get'm, Daisy! Kill'm kill'm, kill'm.'

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Kelly stood up almost wearily, fury and frustration too much to be borne. 'In the water,' he yelled, because it was what his whole being wanted. 'Get'er in the water! Wet her tracks, Al!'

'Kill'm, kill'm-'

As the tractor started to turn, there was a commotion over by the pan tractor. It was Tom, jumping, shouting, waving his arms, swearing. He ran out from behind his machine, straight at the Seven. Daisy Etta's motor roared and she swung to meet him, Al barely dancing back out of the way. Tom cut sharply, sand spouting under his pumping feet, and ran straight into the water. He went out to about waist deep, suddenly disappeared. He surfaced, spluttering, still trying to shout. Kelly took a better grip on his rod holder and rushed.

Daisy Etta, in following Tom's crazy rush, had swung in beside the pan tractor, not fifteen feet away; and she, too, was now in the surf. Kelly closed up the distance as fast as his long legs would let him; and as he approached to within that crucial fifty feet, Al Knowles hit him.

Al was frothing at the mouth, gibbering. The two men hit full tilt; Al's head caught Kelly in the midriff as he missed a straightarm, and the breath went out of him in one great whoosh! Kelly went down like tall timber, the whole world turned to one swirling red-gray haze. Al flung himself on the bigger man, clawing, smacking, too berserk to ball his fists.

'Ah'm go' to kill you,' he gurgled. 'She'll git one, I'll git t'other, an' then she'll know -'

Kelly covered his face with his arms, and as some wind was sucked at last into his laboring lungs, he flung them upward and sat up in one mighty surge. Al was hurled upward and to one side, and as he hit the ground Kelly reached out a long arm, and twisted his fingers into the man's coarse hair, raised him up, and came across with his other fist in a punch that would have killed him had it landed square. But Al managed to jerk to one side enough so that it only amputated a cheek. He fell and lay still. Kelly scrambled madly around in the sand for his welding-rod holder, found it and began to run again. He couldn't see Tom at all now, and the Seven was standing in the surf, moving slowly from side to side, backing out, ravening. Kelly held the rod-clamp and its trailing cable blindly before him and ran straight at the machine. And then it came - that thin, soundless bolt of energy. But this time it had its full force, for poor old Peeble's body had not been the ground that this swirling water offered. Daisy Etta literally leaped backwards toward him, and the water around her tracks spouted upward in hot steam. The

sound of her engine ran up and up, broke, took on the rhythmic, uneven beat of a swing drummer. She threw herself from side to side like a cat with a bag over its head. Kelly stepped a little closer, hoping for another bolt to come from the clamp in his hand, but there was none, for –

'The circuit breaker!' cried Kelly.

He threw the holder up on the deck plate of the Seven in front of the seat, and ran across the little beach to the welder. He reached behind the switchboard, got his thumb on the contact hinge and jammed it down.

Daisy Etta leaped again, and then again, and suddenly her motor stopped. Heat in turbulent waves blurred the air over her. The little gas tank for the starting motor went out with a cannon's roar, and the big fuel tank, still holding thirty-odd gallons of Diesel oil followed. It puffed itself open rather than exploded, and threw a great curtain of flame over the ground behind the machine. Motor or no motor, then, Kelly distinctly saw the tractor shudder convulsively. There was a crawling movement of the whole frame, a slight wave of motion away from the fuel tank, approaching the front of the machine, and moving upward from the tracks. It culminated in the crown of the radiator core, just in front of the radiator cap; and suddenly an area of six or seven square inches literally blurred around the edges. For a second, then, it was normal, and finally it slumped molten, and liquid metal ran down the sides, throwing out little sparks as it encountered what was left of the charred paint. And only then was Kelly conscious of agony in his left hand. He looked down. The welding machine's generator had stopped, though the motor was still turning, having smashed the friable coupling on its drive shaft. Smoke poured from the generator, which had become little more than a heap of slag. Kelly did not scream, though, until he looked and saw what had happened to his hand -

When he could see straight again, he called for Tom, and there was no answer. At last he saw something out in the water, and plunged in after it. The splash of cold salt water on his left hand he hardly felt, for the numbness of shock had set in. He grabbed at Tom's shirt with his good hand, and then the ground seemed to pull itself out from under his feet. That was it, then – a deep hole right off the beach. The Seven had run right to the edge of it, had kept Tom there out of his depth and –

He flailed wildly, struck out for the beach, so near and so hard to get to. He gulped a stinging lungful of brine, and only the lovely shock of his knee striking solid beach kept him from giving up to

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the luxury of choking to death. Sobbing with effort, he dragged Tom's dead weight inshore and clear of the surf. It was then that he became conscious of a child's shrill weeping; for a mad moment he thought it was he himself, and then he looked and saw that it was Al Knowles. He left Tom and went over to the broken creature.

'Get up, you,' he snarled. The weeping only got louder. Kelly rolled him over on his back – he was quite unresisting – and belted him back and forth across the mouth until Al began to choke. Then he hauled him to his feet and led him over to Tom.

'Kneel down, scum. Put one of your knees between his knees.' Al stood still. Kelly hit him again and he did as he was told.

'Put your hands on his lower ribs. There. O.K. Lean, you rat. Now sit back.' He sat down, holding his left wrist in his right hand, letting the blood drop from the ruined hand. 'Lean. Hold it – sit back. Lean. Sit. Lean. Sit.'

Soon Tom sighed and began to vomit weakly, and after that he was all right.

This is the story of *Daisy Etta*, the bulldozer that went mad and had a life of its own, and not only the story of the missile test that they don't talk about except to refer to it as the missile test that they don't talk about. But you may have heard about it for all that – rumors, anyway. The rumor has it that an early IRBM tested out a radically new controls system by proving conclusively that it did not work. It was a big bird and contained much juice, and flew far, far afield. Rumor goes on to assert that a) it alighted somewhere in the unmapped rain forests of South America and that b) there were no casualties. What they *really* don't talk about is the closely guarded report asserting that both a) and b) are false. There are only two people (aside from yourself, now) who know for sure that though a) is certainly false, b) is strangely true, and there were indeed no casualties.

Al Knowles may well know too, but he doesn't count.

It happened two days after the death of *Daisy Etta*, as Tom and Kelly sat in (of all places) the coolth of the ruined temple. They were poring over paper and pencil, trying to complete the impossible task of making a written statement of what had happened on the island, and why they and their company had failed to complete their contract. They had found Chub and Harris, and had buried them next to the other three. Al Knowles was back in the shadows, tied up, because they had heard him raving in his sleep, and it seemed he could not believe *Daisy* was dead and he still wanted to go around killing operators for her. They knew that

there must be an investigation, and they new just how far their story would go; and having escaped a monster like *Daisy Etta*, they found life too sweet to want any part of it spent under observation or in jail.

The warhead of the missile struck near the edge of their camp, just between the pyramid of fuel drums and the dynamite stores. The second stage alighted a moment later two miles away, in the vicinity of the five graves. Kelly and Tom stumbled out to the rim of the mesa, and for a long while watched the jetsam fall and the flotsam rise. It was Kelly who guessed what must have happened, and 'Bless their clumsy little hearts,' he said happily. And he took the scribbled papers from Tom and tore them across.

But Tom shook his head, and thumbed back at the mound. 'He'll

talk.'

'Him?' said Kelly, with such profound eloquence in his tone that he clearly evoked the image of Al Knowles, with his mumbling voice and his drooling mouth and his wide glazed eyes. 'Let him,' Kelly said, and tore the papers again.

So they let him.

## The Sex Opposite

Budgie slid into the laboratory without knocking, as usual.

She was flushed and breathless, her eyes bright with speed and

eagerness. 'Whatcha got, Muley?'

Muhlenberg kicked the morgue door shut before Budgie could get in line with it. 'Nothing,' he said flatly, 'and of all the people I don't want to see – and at the moment that means all the people there are – you head the list. Go away.'

Budgie pulled off her gloves and stuffed them into an oversized shoulder-bag, which she hurled across the laboratory onto a work-surface. 'Come on, Muley. I saw the meat-wagon outside. I know what it brought, too. That double murder in the park. Al told me.'

'Al's jaw is one that needs more tying up than any of the stiffs he taxis around,' said Muhlenberg bitterly. 'Well, you're not getting near this pair.'

She came over to him, stood very close. In spite of his annoyance, he couldn't help noticing how soft and full her lips were just then. *Just then* – and the sudden realization added to the annoyance. He had known for a long time that Budgie could turn on mechanisms that made every one of a man's ductless glands purse up its lips and blow like a trumpet. Every time he felt it he hated himself. 'Get away from me,' he growled. 'It won't work.'

'What won't, Muley?' she murmured.

Muhlenberg looked her straight in the eye and said something about his preference for raw liver over Budgie-times-twelve.

The softness went out of her lips, to be replaced by no particular hardness. She simply laughed good-naturedly. 'All right, you're immune. I'll try logic.'

'Nothing will work,' he said. 'You will not get in there to see those two, and you'll get no details from me for any of that couche-con-carne stew you call a newspaper story.'

'Okay,' she said surprisingly. She crossed the lab and picked up her handbag. She found a glove and began to pull it on. 'Sorry I interrupted you, Muley. I do get the idea. You want to be alone.'

His jaw was too slack to enunciate an answer. He watched her go out, watched the door close, watched it open again, heard her say in a very hurt tone, 'But I do think you could tell me why you won't say anything about this murder.'

He scratched his head. 'As long as you behave yourself, I guess I do owe you that.' He thought for a moment. 'It's not your kind of a story. That's about the best way to put it.'

'Not my kind of story? A double murder in Lover's Lane? The maudlin mystery of the mugger, or mayhem in Maytime? No

kidding, Muley - you're not serious!'

'Budgie, this one isn't for fun. It's ugly. Very *damn* ugly. And it's serious. It's mysterious for a number of other reasons than the ones you want to siphon into your readers.'

'What other reasons?'

'Medically. Biologically. Sociologically.'

'My stories got biology. Sociology they got likewise; stodgy truisms about social trends is the way I dish up sex in the public prints, or didn't you know? So – that leaves medical. What's so strange medically about this case?'

'Good night, Budgie.'

'Come on, Muley. You can't horrify me.'

'That I know. You've trod more primrose pathology in your research than Krafft-Ebing plus eleven comic books. No, Budgie. No more.'

'Dr. F. L. Muhlenberg, brilliant young biologist and special medical consultant to the City and State Police, intimated that these aspects of the case — the brutal murder and disfigurement of the embarrassed couple — were superficial compared with the unspeakable facts behind them. "Medically mysterious", he was quoted as saying.' She twinkled at him. 'How's that sound?' She looked at her watch. 'And I can make the early edition, too, with a head. Something like doc shocked speechless — and a subhead: Lab Sleuth Suppresses Medical Details of Double Park Killing. Yeah, and your picture.'

'If you dare to print anything of the sort,' he raged, 'I'll -'

'All right, all right,' she said conciliatingly. 'I won't. I really won't.'

'Promise me?'

'I promise, Muley ... if -'

'Why should I bargain?' he demanded suddenly. 'Get out of here.'

He began to close the door. 'And something for the editorial page,' she said. 'Is a doctor within his rights in suppressing information concerning a murderous maniac and his methods?' She closed the door.

Muhlenberg bit his lower lip so hard he all but yelped. He ran to the door and snatched it open. 'Wait!' Budgie was leaning against the doorpost lighting a cigarette. 'I was waiting,' she said reasonably.

'Come in here,' he grated. He snatched her arm and whirled her

inside, slamming the door.

'You're a brute,' she said rubbing her arm and smiling dazzlingly. 'The only way to muzzle you is to tell you the whole story.

Right?'

'Right. If I get an exclusive when you're ready to break the story.'

'There's probably a kicker in that, too,' he said morosely. He glared at her. Then, 'Sit down,' he said.

She did. 'I'm all yours.'

'Don't change the subject,' he said with a ghost of his natural humor. He lit a thoughtful cigarette. 'What do you know about this case so far?'

'Too little,' she said. 'This couple were having a conversation without words in the park when some muggers jumped them and killed them, a little more grusomely than usual. But instead of being delivered to the city morgue, they were brought straight to you on the orders of the ambulance interne after one quick look.'

'How did you know about it?'

'Well, if you must know, I was in the park. There's a shortcut over by the museum, and I was about a hundred yards down the path when I...'

Muhlenberg waited as long as tact demanded, and a little longer.

Her face was still, her gaze detached. 'Go on.'

'... when I heard a scream,' she said in the precise tone of voice

which she had been using. Then she began to cry.

'Hey,' he said. He knelt beside her, put a hand on her shoulder. She shoved it away angrily, and covered her face with a damp towel. When she took it down again she seemed to be laughing. She was doing it so badly that he turned away in very real embarrassment.

'Sorry,' she said in a very shaken whisper. 'It ... was that kind of a scream. I've never heard anything like it. It did something to me. It had more agony in it than a single sound should be able to have.' She closed her eyes.

'Man or woman?'

She shook her head.

'So,' he said matter-of-factly, 'what did you do then?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all, for I don't know how long.' She slammed a small fist down on the table. 'I'm supposed to be a reporter!' she flared. 'And there I stand like a dummy, like a wharf rat in concussion-shock!' She wet her lips. 'When I came around I

was standing by a rock wall with one hand on it.' She showed him. 'Broke two perfectly good fingernails, I was holding on so tight. I ran toward where I'd heard the sound. Just trampled brush, nothing else. I heard a crowd milling around on the avenue. I went up there. The meat-wagon was there, Al and that young sawbones Regal – Ruggles –'

'Regalio.'

'Yeah, him. They'd just put those two bodies into the ambulance. They were covered with blankets. I asked what was up. Regalio waved a finger and said "Not for school-girls" and gave me a real death-mask grin. He climbed aboard. I grabbed Al and asked him what was what. He said muggers had killed this couple, and it was pretty rugged. Said Regalio had told him to bring them here, even before he made a police report. They were both about as upset as they could get.'

'I don't wonder,' said Muhlenberg.

'Then I asked if I could ride and they said no and took off. I grabbed a cab when I found one to grab, which was all of fifteen minutes later, and here I am. Here I am,' she repeated, 'getting a story out of you in the damndest way yet. You're asking, I'm answering.' She got up. 'You write the feature, Muley. I'll go on into your icebox and do your work.'

He caught her arm. 'Nah! No you don't! Like the man said - it's

not for school-girls.'

'Anything you have in there can't be worse than my imagina-

tion!' she snapped.

'Sorry. It's what you get for barging in on me before I've had a chance to think something through. You see, this wasn't exactly two people.'

'I know!' she said sarcastically. 'Siamese twins.'

He looked at her distantly. 'Yes. 'Taint funny, kiddo.'

For once she had nothing to say. She put one hand slowly up to her mouth and apparently forgot it, for there it stayed. 'That's what's so ugly about this. Those two were ... torn apart.' He closed his eyes. 'I can just see it. I wish I couldn't. Those thugs drifting through the park at night, out for anything they could get. They hear something ... fall right over them ... I don't know. Then —'

'All right, all right,' she whispered hoarsely. 'I can hear you.'

'But, damn it,' he said angrily. 'I've been kicking around this field long enough to know every documented case of such a creature. And I just can't believe that one like this could exist without having been written up in some medical journal somewhere. Even if they

were born in Soviet Russia, some translation of a report would've appeared somewhere.'

'I know Siamese twins are rare. But surely such a birth wouldn't

make international headlines!'

'This one would,' he said positively. 'For one thing, Siamese twins usually bear more anomalies than just the fact that they are attached. They're frequently fraternal rather than identical twins. More often than not one's born more fully developed than the other. Usually when they're born at all they don't live. But these—'

'What's so special?'

Muhlenberg spread his hands. 'They're perfect. They're costally joined by a surprisingly small tissue-organ complex -'

'Wait, professor, "Costally" - you mean at the chest?'

'That's right. And the link is – was – not major. I can't understand why they were never surgically separated. There may be a reason, of course, but that'll have to wait on the autopsy.'

'Why wait?'

'It's all I can do to wait.' He grinned suddenly. 'You see, you're more of a help than you realize, Budge. I'm dying to get to work on them, but under the circumstances I have to wait until morning. Regalio reported to the police, and I know the coroner isn't going to come around this time of night, not if I could show him quintuplets in a chain like sausages. In addition, I don't have identities, I don't have relatives' releases — you know. So — a superficial examination, a lot of wild guesses, and a chance to sound off to you to keep myself from going nuts.'

'You're using me!'

'That's bad?'

'Yes - when I don't get any fun out of it.'

He laughed. 'I love those incendiary statements of yours. I'm just not flammable.'

She looked at him, up and a little sidewise. 'Not at all?'

'Not now.'

She considered that. She looked down at her hands, as if they were the problems of Muhlenberg's susceptibility. She turned the hands over. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'I really enjoy it when we share something else besides twitches and moans. Maybe we should be more inhibited.'

'Do tell.'

She said, 'We have nothing in common. I mean, but *nothing*. We're different to the core, to the bone. You hunt out facts and so do I, but we could never share that because we don't use facts for

the same things. You use facts only to find more facts.'

'What do you use them for?'

She smiled. 'All sorts of things. A good reporter doesn't report just what happens. He reports what he sees – in many cases a very different thing. Anyway...'

'Wonder how these biological pressures affected our friends

here,' he mused, thumbing over his shoulder at the morgue.

'About the same, I'd judge, with certain important difficulties. But wait – were they men or women, or one of each?'

'I didn't tell you, did I?' he said with real startlement.

'No,' she said.

He opened his mouth to answer, but could not. The reason came.

It came from downstairs, or outside, or perhaps from nowhere or everywhere, or from a place without a name. It was all around them, inside, behind them in time as well as space. It was the echo of their own first cry when they lost the first warmth and found loneliness, early, as everyone must. It was hurt: some the pain of impact, some of fever and delirium, and some the great pressure of beauty too beautiful to bear. And like pain, it could not be remembered. It lasted as long as it was a sound, and perhaps a little longer, and the frozen time after it died was immeasurable.

Muhlenberg became increasingly conscious of an ache in his calves and in the trapezoid muscles of his back. They sent him a gradual and completely intellectualized message of strain, and very consciously he relieved it and sat down. His movement carried Budgie's arm forward, and he looked down at her hand, which was clamped around his forearm. She moved it away, opening it slowly, and he saw the angry marks of her fingers, and knew they would be

bruises in the morning.

She said, 'That was the scream. The one I heard. Wasn't once enough?'

It was only then that he could look far enough out of himself to see her face. It was pasty with shock, and wet, and her lips were pale. He leapt to his feet. 'Another one! *Come on!*'

He pulled her up and through the door. 'Don't you understand?' he blazed. 'Another one! It can't be, but somewhere out there it's happened again.'

happened again -'

She pulled back. 'Are you sure it wasn't ...' She nodded at the closed door of the morgue.

'Don't be ridiculous,' he snorted. 'They couldn't be alive.' He hurried her to the stairs.

It was very dark. Muhlenberg's office was in an ageing business building which boasted twenty-five-watt bulbs on every other floor.

They hurtled through the murk, past the deepest doorways of the law firm, the doll factory, the import-export firm which imported and exported nothing but phone calls, and all the other dim mosaics of enterprise. The building seemed quite deserted, and but for the yellow-orange glow of the landings and the pathetic little bulbs, there were no lights anywhere. And it was as quiet as it was almost dark; quiet as late night; quiet as death.

They burst out onto the old brownstone steps and stopped, afraid to look, wanting to look. There was nothing. Nothing but the street, a lonesome light, a distant horn and, far up at the corner, the distinct clicking of the relays in a traffic-light standard as they changed an ignored string of emeralds to an unnoticed ruby rope.

'Go up to the corner,' he said pointing. 'I'll go down the other

way. That noise wasn't far away -'

'No,' she said. 'I'm coming with you.'

'Good,' he said, so glad he was amazed at himself. They ran north to the corner. There was no one on the street within two blocks in any direction. There were cars, mostly parked, one coming, but none leaving.

'Now what?' she asked.

For a moment he did not answer. She waited patiently while he listened to the small distant noises which made the night so quiet. Then, 'Good night, Budge.'

'Good - what!'

He waved a hand. 'You can go home now.'

'But what about the -'

'I'm tired,' he said. 'I'm bewildered. That scream wrung me like a floor-mop and pulled me down too many stairs too fast. There's too much I don't know about this and not enough I can do about it. So go home.'

'Aw, Muley ...'

He sighed. 'I know. Your story. Budgie, I faithfully promise you I'll give you an exclusive as soon as I have facts I can trust.'

She looked carefully at his face in the dim light and nodded at what she saw there. 'All right, Muley. The pressure's off. Call me?'

'I'll call you.'

He stood watching her walk away. Quite a gal, he thought. He wondered what had moved her to make that odd remark about inhibitions. They'd certainly never bothered her before. But — perhaps she had something there. Sometimes when you take what is loosely called 'everything,' you have an odd feeling that you haven't gotten much. He shrugged and ambled back toward the the laboratory, pondering morphology, teratology, and a case where

monstra per defectum could coexist with monstra per fabricam alienam.

Then he saw the light.

It flickered out over the street, soft and warm. He stopped and looked up. The light showed in a third-storey window. It was orange and yellow, but with it was a flaring blue-white. It was pretty. It was also in his laboratory. No – not the laboratory. The morgue.

Muhlenberg groaned. After that he saved his breath. He needed it

badly by the time he got back to the laboratory.

Muhlenberg drove for the heavy morgue door and snatched it open. A great pressure of heat punted a gout of smoke into the lab. He slammed the door, ran to a closet, snatched out a full-length lab smock, spun the faucets in the sink and soaked the smock. From another cabinet he snatched up two glass-globe fire extinguishers. He wrapped the wet cloth twice around his face and let the rest drop over his chest and back. Cradling the extinguishers in one bent forearm, he reached for the side of the door and grabbed the pump-type extinguisher racked there.

Now, suddenly not hurrying, he stepped up on the sill and stood tiptoe, peering through a fold of the wet cloth. Then he crouched low and peered again. Satisfied, he stood up and, carefully pegged the two glass extinguishers, one straight ahead, one to the right and down. Then he disappeared into the smoke, holding the third

extinguisher at the ready.

There was a rising moan, and the smoke shook like a solid entity and rushed into the room and away. As it cleared, Muhlenberg, head and shoulders wrapped in sooty linen, found himself leaning against the wall, gasping, with one hand on a knife-switch on the wall. A three-foot exhaust fan in the top sash of one window was making quick work of the smoke.

Racks of chemicals, sterilizers, and glass cabinets full of glittering surgeon's tools lined the left wall. Out on the floor were four massive tables, on each of which was a heavy marble top. The rest of the room was taken up by a chemist's bench, sinks, a partitioned-off darkroom with lightproof curtains, and a massive

centrifuge.

On one of the tables was a mass of what looked like burned meat and melted animal fat. It smelled bad – not rotten bad, but acrid and – and *wet*, if a smell can be described that way. Through it was the sharp, stinging odor of corrosive chemicals.

He unwound the ruined smock from his face and threw it into a corner. He walked to the table with the mess on it and stood

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looking bleakly at it for a time. Suddenly he put out a hand, and with thumb and forefinger pulled out a length of bone.

'What a job,' he breathed at length.

He walked around the table, poked at something slumped there and snatched his hand away. He went to the bench and got a pair of forceps, which he used to pick up the lump. It looked like a piece of lava or slag. He turned on a hooded lamp and studied it closely.

'Thermite, by God,' he breathed.

He stood quite still for a moment, clenching and unclenching his square jaw. He took a long slow turn around the seared horror on the morgue slab, then carefully picked up the forceps and hurled them furiously into a corner. Then he went out to the lab and

picked up the phone. He dialled.

'Emergency,' he said. 'Hello, Sue. Regalio there? Muhlenberg. Thanks. ... Hello, Doc. Are you sitting down? All right. Now get this. I'm fresh out of symmetrical teratomorphs. They're gone. ... Shut up and I'll tell you! I was out in the lab talking to a reporter when I heard the damndest scream. We ran out and found nothing. I left the reporter outside and came back. I couldn't've been out more'n ten-twelve minutes. But somebody got in here, moved both stiffs onto one slab, incised them from the thorax to the pubis, crammed them full of iron oxide and granulated aluminum - I have lots of that sort of stuff around here - fused 'em with a couple of rolls of magnesium foil and touched 'em off. Made a great big messy thermite bomb out of them. ... No, dammit, of course there's nothing left of them! What would you think eight minutes at seven thousand degrees would do? ... Oh, dry up, Regalio! I don't know who did it or why, and I'm too tired to think about it. I'll see you tomorrow morning. No - what would be the use of sending anyone down here? This wasn't done to fire the building; whoever did it just wanted to get rid of those bodies, and sure did a job. ... The coroner? I don't know what I'll tell him. I'm going to get a drink and then I'm going to bed. I just wanted you to know. Don't tell the press. I'll head off that reporter who was here before. We can do without this kind of story. "Mystery arsonist cremates evidence of double killing in lab of medical consultant." A block from headquarters, yet. ... Yeah, and get your driver to keep his trap shut, too. Okay, Regalio. Just wanted to let you know. ... Well, you're no sorrier'n I am. We'll just have to wait another couple hundred years while something like that gets born again, I guess.'

Muhlenberg hung up, sighed, went into the morgue. He turned off the fan and lights, locked the morgue door, washed up at the

laboratory sink, and shut the place up for the night.

It was eleven blocks to his apartment – an awkward distance most of the time, for Muhlenberg was not of the fresh-air and deep-breathing fraternity. Eleven blocks was not far enough to justify a cab and not near enough to make walking a negligible detail. At the seventh block he was aware of an overwhelming thirst and a general sensation that somebody had pulled the plug out of his energy barrel. He was drawn as if by a vacuum into Rudy's, a Mexican bar with Yma Sumac and Villa-Lobos on the juke-box.

'Olé, amigo,' said Rudy. 'Tonight you don' smile.'

Muhlenberg crawled wearily onto a stool. 'Deme una tequila sour, and skip the cherry,' he said in his bastard Spanish. 'I don't know what I got to smile about.' He froze, and his eyes bulged. 'Come back here, Rudy.'

Rudy put down the lemon he was slicing and came close. 'I don't

want to point, but who is that?'

Rudy glanced at the girl. 'Ay,' he said rapturously. 'Que chuchin.'

Muhlenberg remembered vaguely that *chuchin* was untranslatable, but that the closest English could manage with it was 'cute'. He shook his head. 'That won't do.' He held up his hand. 'Don't try to find me a Spanish word for it. There isn't any word for it. Who is she?'

Rudy spread his hands. 'No sé.'

'She by herself?'

'Si.'

Muhlenberg put his chin on his hand. 'Make my drink. I want to think.'

Rudy went, his mahogany cheeks drawn in and still in his version of a smile.

Muhlenberg looked at the girl in the booth again just as her gaze swept past his face to the bartender. 'Rudy'!' she called softly, 'are you making a tequila sour?'

'Si. senorita.'

'Make me one too?'

Rudy beamed. He did not turn his head toward Muhlenberg, but his dark eyes slid over toward him, and Muhlenberg knew that he was intensely amused. Muhlenberg's face grew hot, and he felt like an idiot. He had a wild fantasy that his ears had turned forward and snapped shut, and that the cello-and-velvet sound of her voice, captured, was nestling down inside his head like a warm little animal.

He got off the bar stool, fumbled in his pocket for change and went to the juke-box. She was there before him, slipping a coin in,

selecting a strange and wonderful recording called *Vene a Mi Casa*, which was a *borracho* version of 'C'mon-a My House.'

'I was just going to play that!' he said. He glanced at the juke-box. 'Do you like Yma Sumac?'

'Oh, yes!'

'Do you like *lots* of Yma Sumac? She smiled and, seeing it, he bit his tongue. He dropped a quarter and punched out six sides of Sumac. When he looked up Rudy was standing by the booth with a little tray on which were two tequila sours. His face was utterly impassive and his head was tilted at the precise angle of inquiry as to where he should put Muhlenberg's drink. Muhlenberg met the girl's eyes, and whether she nodded ever so slightly or whether she did it with a single movement of her eyelids, he did not know, but it meant 'yes'. He slid into the booth opposite her.

Music came. Only some of it was from the records. He sat and listened to it all. Rudy came with a second drink before he said anything, and only then did he realize how much time had passed while he rested there, taking in her face as if it were quite a new painting by a favorite artist. She did nothing to draw his attention or to reject it. She did not stare rapturously into his eyes or avoid them. She did not even appear to be waiting, or expecting anything of him. She was neither remote nor intimate. She was close, and it was good.

He thought, in your most secret dreams you cut a niche in yourself, and it is finished early, and then you wait for someone to come along to fill it – but to fill it exactly, every cut, curve, hollow and plane of it. And people do come along, and one covers up the niche, and another rattles around inside it, and another is so surrounded by fog that for the longest time you don't know if she fits or not; but each of them hits you with a tremendous impact. And then one comes along and slips in so quietly that you don't know when it happened, and fits so well you almost can't feel anything at all. And that is it.

'What are you thinking about?' she asked him.

He told her, immediately and fully. She nodded as if he had been talking about cats or cathedrals or cam-shafts, or anything else beautiful and complex. She said. 'That's right. It isn't all there, of course. It isn't even enough. But everything else isn't enough without it.'

'What is "everything else"?'

'You know,' she said.

He thought he did. He wasn't sure. He put it aside for later. 'Will you come home with me?'

'Oh, yes.'

They got up. She stood by the door, her eyes full of him, while he went to the bar with his wallet.

'¿Quánto le debo?'

Rudy's eyes had a depth he had never noticed before. Perhaps it hadn't been there before. 'Nada,' said Rudy.

'On the house? Muchissimo gracias, amigo.' He knew, profound-

ly, that he shouldn't protest.

They went to his apartment. While he was pouring brandy – brandy because, if it's good brandy, it marries well with tequila – she asked him if he knew of a place called Shank's, down in the warehouse district. He thought he did; he knew he could find it. 'I want to meet you there tomorrow night at eight,' she said. 'I'll be there,' he smiled. He turned to put the brandy carafe back, full of wordless pleasure in the knowledge that all day tomorrow he could look forward to being with her again.

He played records. He was part sheer technician, part delighted child when he could demonstrate his sound system. He had a copy of the Confucian 'Analects' in a sandalwood box. It was printed on rice-paper and hand-illuminated. He had a Finnish dagger with intricate scrollwork which, piece by piece and as a whole, made many pictures. He had a clock made of four glass discs, the inner two each carrying one hand, and each being rim-driven from the

base so it seemed to have no works at all.

She loved all these things. She sat in his biggest chair while he stared out at the blue dark hours and she read aloud to him from 'The Crock of Gold' and from Thurber and Shakespeare for laughter, and from Shakespeare and William Morris for a good sadness.

She sang, once.

Finally she said, 'It's bedtime. Go and get ready.'

He got up and went into the bedroom and undressed. He showered and rubbed himself pink. Back in the bedroom, he could hear the music she had put on the phonograph. It was the second movement of Prokofiev's 'Classical' Symphony, where the orchestra is asleep and the high strings tiptoe in. It was the third time she had played it. He sat down to wait until the record was over, and when it was, and she didn't come or speak to him, he went into the living-room door and looked in.

She was gone.

He stood absolutely still and looked around the room. The whole time she had been there she had unostentatiously put everything back after they had looked at it. The amplifier was still on. The phonograph was off, because it shut itself off. The record album of

the Prokofiev, standing edge-up on the floor by the amplifier, was waiting to receive the record that was still on the turntable.

He stepped into the room and switched off the amplifier. He was suddenly conscious that in doing so he had removed half of what she had left there. He looked down at the record album; then, without touching it, he turned out the lights and went to bed.

You'll see her tomorrow, he thought.

He thought, you didn't so much as touch her hand. If it weren't

for her eyes and ears, you'd have no way of knowing her.

A little later something deep within him turned over and sighed luxuriously. Muhlenberg, it said to him, do you realize that not once during that entire evening did you stop and think: this is an Occasion, this is a Great Day? Not once. The whole thing was easy as breathing.

As he fell asleep he remembered he hadn't even asked her her

name.

THE SEX OPPOSITE

He awoke profoundly rested, and looked with amazement at his alarm clock. It was only eight, and after what he had been through at the lab last night, plus what he had drunk, plus staying up so late, this feeling was a bonus indeed. He dressed quickly and got down to the lab early. The phone was already ringing. He told the coroner

to bring Regalio and to come right down.

It was all very easy to explain in terms of effects; the burned morgue room took care of that. They beat causes around for an hour or so without any conclusion. Since Muhlenberg was so close to the Police Department, though not a member of it, they agreed to kill the story for the time being. If relatives or a carnival owner or somebody came along, that would be different. Meantime, they'd let it ride. It really wasn't so bad.

They went away, and Muhlenberg called the paper.

Budgie had not come to work or called. Perhaps she was out on a

story, the switchboard suggested.

The day went fast. He got the morgue cleaned up and a lot done on his research project. He didn't begin to worry until the fourth time he called the paper – that was about five p.m. – and Budgie still hadn't come or called. He got her home phone number and called it. No; she wasn't there. She'd gone out early to work. Try her at the paper.

He went home and bathed and changed, looked up the address of Shank's and took a cab there. He was much too early. It was barely

seven-fifteen.

Shank's was a corner bar of the old-fashioned type with plate-glass windows on its corner fronts and flyblown wainscoting

behind them. The booths gave a view of the street corner which did the same for the booths. Except for the corner blaze of light, the rest of the place was in darkness, punctuated here and there by the unreal blues and greens of beer signs in neon script.

Muhlenberg glanced at his watch when he entered, and was appalled. He knew now that he had been artificially busier and busier as the day wore on, and that it was only a weak effort to push aside the thoughts of Budgie and what might have happened to her. His busyness had succeeded in getting him into a spot where he would have nothing to do but sit and wait, and think his worries through.

He chose a booth on the mutual margins of the cave-like

darkness and the pallid light, and ordered a beer.

Somebody – let's be conventional and call him Mr. X – had gone 'way out of his way to destroy two bodies in his morgue. A very thorough operator. Of course, if Mr. X was really interested in suppressing information about the two pathetic halves of the murdered monster in the park, he'd only done part of the job. Regalio, Al, Budgie and Muhlenberg knew about it. Regalio and Al had been all right when he had seen them this morning, and certainly no attempts had been made on him. On the other hand, he had been in and around the precinct station and its immediate neighborhood all day, and about the same thing applied to the ambulance staff.

But Budgie ...

Not only was she vulnerable, she wasn't even likely to be missed for hours by anyone since she was so frequently out on stories. Why - as a reporter she presented the greatest menace of all to anyone who wanted to hide information!

With that thought came its corollary: Budgie was missing, and if she had been taken care of he, Muhlenberg, was next on the list. Had to be. He was the only one who had been able to take a good long look at the bodies. He was the one who had given the information to the reporter and the one who still had it to give. In other words, if Budgie had been taken care of, he could expect some sort of attack too, and quickly.

He looked around the place with narrowing eyes. This was a

rugged section of town. Why was he here?

He had a lurching sense of shock and pain. The girl he'd met last night - that couldn't be a part of this thing. It mustn't be. And yet because of her he found himself here, like a sitting duck.

He suddenly understood his unwillingness to think about the

significance of Budgie's disappearance.

'Oh, no' he said aloud.

Should he run?

Should he – and perhaps be wrong? He visualized the girl coming there, waiting for him, perhaps getting in some trouble in this dingy place, just because he'd gotten the wind up over his own fantasies.

He couldn't leave. Not until after eight anyway. What else then? If they got him, who would be next? Regalio, certainly. Then Al.

Then the coroner himself.

Warn Regalio. That at least he might do, before it was too late. He jumped up.

There was, of course, someone in the phone booth. A woman. He swore and pulled the door open.

'Budgie!'

He reached in almost hysterically, pulled her out. She spun limply into his arms, and for an awful split second his thoughts were indescribable. Then she moved. She squeezed him, looked up incredulously, squeezed him again. 'Muley! Oh Muley, I'm so glad it's you!'

'Budgie, you lunkhead - where've you been?'

'Oh, I've had the most awful - the most wonderful -'

'Hey, yesterday you cried. Isn't that your quota for the year?'

'Oh, shut up. Muley, Muley, no one could get mixed up more than I've been!'

'Oh,' he said reflectively. 'I dunno. Come on over here. Sit down. Bartender! Two double whiskey sodas!' Inwardly, he smiled at the difference in a man's attitude toward the world when he has something to protect. 'Tell me.' He cupped her chin. 'First of all, where have you been? You had me scared half to death.'

She looked up at him, at each of his eyes in turn. There was a beseeching expression in her whole pose. 'You won't laugh at me,

Muley?'

'Some of this business is real un-funny.'

'Can I really talk to you? I never tried.' She said, as if there were no change of subject, 'You don't know who I am.'

'Talk then, so I'll know.'

'Well,' she began, 'it was this morning. When I woke up. It was such a beautiful day! I went down to the corner to get the bus. I said to the man at the newsstand, "Post?" and dropped my nickel in his cup, and right in chorus with me was this man...'

'This man,' he prompted.

'Yes. Well, he was a young man, about – oh, I don't know how old. Just right, anyway. And the newsdealer didn't know who to give the paper to because he had only one left. We looked at each

other, this fellow and I, and laughed out loud. The newsy heard my voice loudest, I guess, or was being chivalrous, and he handed the paper to me. The bus came along then and we got in, and the fellow, the young one, I mean, he was going to take a seat by himself but I said come on – help me read the paper – you helped me buy it.'

She paused while the one-eyed bartender brought the drinks.

'We never did look at the paper. We sort of ... talked. I never met anyone I could talk to like that. Not even you, Muley, even now when I'm trying so. The things that came out ... as if I'd known him all my – no,' she said, shaking her head violently, 'not even like that. I don't know. I can't say. It was fine.

'We crossed the bridge and the bus ran alongside the meadow, out there between the park and the fairgrounds. The grass was too green and the sky was too blue and there was something in me that just wanted to explode. But good, I mean, good. I said I was going to play hookey. I didn't say I'd like to, or I felt like it. I said I was going to. And he said let's, as if I'd asked him, and I didn't question that, not one bit. I don't know where he was going or what he was giving up, but we pulled the cord and the bus stopped and we got out and headed cross country.'

'What did you do all day?' Muhlenberg asked as she sipped.

'Chased rabbits. Ran. Lay in the sun. Fed ducks. Laughed a lot. Talked. Talked a *whole* lot.' Her eyes came back to the present, back to Muhlenberg. 'Gosh, I don't know, Muley. I tried to tell myself all about it after he left me. I couldn't. Not so I'd believe it if I listened.'

'And all this wound up in a crummy telephone booth?'

She sobered instantly. 'I was supposed to meet him here. I couldn't just wait around home. I couldn't stomach the first faint thought of the office. So I just came here.

'I sat down to wait. I don't know why he asked me to meet him in

a place like - what on earth is the matter with you?'

'Nothing,' choked Muhlenberg. 'I was having an original thought called "It's a small world." He waved her forthcoming questions away. 'Don't let me interrupt. You first, then me. There's

something weird and wonderful going on here.'

'Where was I? Oh. Well, I sat here waiting and feeling happy, and gradually the feeling went away and the gloom began to seep in. Then I thought about you, and the murder in the park, and that fantastic business at your lab last night, and I began to get scared. I didn't know what to do. I was going to run from here, and then I had a reaction, and wondered if I was just scaring myself. Suppose

he came and I wasn't here? I couldn't bear that. Then I got scared again and – wondered if he was part of the whole thing, the Siamese-twin murder and all. And I hated myself for even thinking such a thing. I went into a real hassle. At last I squared myself away and figured the only thing to do was to call you up. And you weren't at the lab. And the coroner didn't know where you'd gone and – oh-h-h, *Muley!*'

'It meant that much?'

She nodded.

'Fickle bitch! Minutes after leaving your lover-boy -'

She put her hand over his mouth. 'Watch what you say,' she said fiercely. 'This was no gay escapade, Muley. This was like – like nothing I've ever heard of. He didn't touch me, or act as if he wanted to. He didn't have to; it wasn't called for. The whole thing was the whole thing, and to a preliminary to anything else. It was – it was – oh, damn this language!'

Muhlenberg thought about the Prokofiev album standing upright by his amplifier. Damn it indeed, he thought. 'What was his name?'

he asked gently.

'His -' She snapped her head up, turned slowly to him. She whispered, 'I never asked him. . . .' and her eyes went quite round.

'I thought not.' Why did I say that? he asked himself. I almost know....

He said, suddenly, 'Budgie, do you love him?'

Her face showed surprise. 'I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I don't know what love is. I thought I knew. But it was less than this.' She frowned. 'It was more than this, though, some ways.'

'Tell me something. When he left you, even after a day like that,

did you feel ... that you'd lost something?'

She thought about it. 'Why ... no. No, I didn't. I was full up to here, and what he gave me he left with me. That's the big difference. No love's like that. Can you beat that? I didn't *lose* anything!'

He nodded. 'Neither did I,' he said.

'You what?'

But he wasn't listening. He was rising slowly, his eyes on the door.

The girl was there. She was dressed differently, she looked trim and balanced. Her face was the same, though, and her incredible eyes. She wore blue jeans, loafers, a heavy, rather loose sweater, and two soft-collar points gleamed against her neck and chin. Her hair hardly longer than his own, but beautiful, beautiful. . . .

He looked down, as he would have looked away from a great light. He saw his watch. It was eight o'clock. And he became aware

of Budgie looking fixedly at the same figure in the door, her face radiant. 'Muley, come on. Come on, Muley. There he is!'

The girl in the doorway saw him then and smiled. She waved and pointed to the corner booth, the one with windows on two streets. Muhlenberg and Budgie went to her.

She sat down as they came to her. 'Hello. Sit there. Both of you.'

Side by side they sat opposite her. Budgie stared in open admiration. Muhlenberg stared too, and something in the back of his mind began to grow, and grow, and – 'No,' he said, incredulously.

'Yes,' she said, directly to him. 'It's true.' She looked at Budgie.

'She doesn't know yet, does she?'

Muhlenberg shook his head. 'I hadn't time to tell her.'

'Perhaps you shouldn't,' said the girl.

Budgie turned excitedly to Muhlenberg. 'You know him!'

Muhlenberg said, with difficulty, 'I know . . . know -'

The girl laughed aloud. 'You're looking for a pronoun.' Budgie said, 'Muley, what's he mean? Let me in on it.'

'An autopsy would have shown it, wouldn't it?' he demanded.

The girl nodded. 'Very readily. That was a close call.'

Budgie looked from one to the other. 'Will somebody tell me what in blazes this is all about?'

Muhlenberg met the girl's gaze. She nodded. He put an arm around Budgie. 'Listen, girl reporter. Our – our friend here's something... something new and different.'

'Not new,' said the girl. 'We've been around for thousands of

years.'

'Have you now!' He paused to digest that, while Budgie

squirmed and protested, 'But - but - but -'

'Shush, you,' said Muhlenberg, and squeezed her shoulders gently. 'What you spent the afternoon with isn't a man, Budgie, any more than what I spent most of the night with was a woman. Right?'

'Right,' the girl said.

'And the Siamese twins weren't Siamese twins, but two of our friend's kind who – who –'

'They were in syzygy.' An inexpressible sadness was in the smooth, almost contralto, all but tenor voice.

'In what?' asked Budgie.

Muhlenberg spelled it for her. 'In some forms of life,' he started to explain, 'well, the microscopic animal called paramecium's a good example – reproduction is accomplished by fission. The creature elongates, and so does its nucleus. Then the nucleus breaks

in two, and one half goes to each end of the animal. Then the rest of the animal breaks, and presto – two paramecia.'

'But you - he -'

'Shaddup,' he said. 'I'm lecturing. The only trouble with reproduction by fission is that it affords no variation of strains. A single line of paramecium would continue to reproduce that way until, by the law of averages, its dominant traits would all be nonsurvival ones, and bang — no more paramecia. So they have another process to take care of that difficulty. One paramecium rests beside another, and gradually their contacting side walls begin to fuse. The nuclei gravitate toward that point. The side walls then break down, so that the nuclei then have access to one another. The nuclei flow together, mix and mingle, and after a time they separate and half goes into each animal. Then the side walls close the opening, break away from one another, and each animal goes its way.

'That is syzygy. It is in no sense a sexual process, because paramecia have no sex. It has no direct bearing on reproduction either – that can happen with or without syzygy.' He turned to their companion. 'But I'd never heard of syzygy in the higher forms.'

The faintest of smiles. 'It's unique with us, on this planet

anyway.'

'What's the rest of it?' he demanded.

'Our reproduction? We're parthenogenetic females.'

'Y-you're a female?' breathed Budgie.

'A term of convenience,' said Muhlenberg. 'Each individual has both kinds of sex organs. They're self-fertilizing.'

'That's a - a what do you call it? - a hermaphrodite,' said

Budgie. 'Excuse me,' she added in a small voice.

Muhlenberg and the girl laughed uproariously; and the magic of that creature was that the laughter couldn't hurt. 'It's a very different thing,' said Muhlenberg. 'Hermaphrodites are human. She – our friend there – isn't.'

'You're the humanest thing I ever met in my whole life,' said

Budgie ardently.

The girl reached across the table and touched Budgie's arm. Muhlenberg suspected that that was the very first physical contact either he or Budgie had yet received from the creature, and that it was a rare thing and a great compliment.

'Thank you,' the girl said softly. 'Thank you very much for

saying that.' She nodded to Muhlenberg. 'Go on.'

'Technically – though I know of no case where it has actually been possible – hermaphrodites can have contact with either sex. But parthenogenetic females won't, can't, and wouldn't. They don't need to. Humans cross strains along with the reproductive process. Parthenogenesis separates the two acts completely.' He turned to the girl. 'Tell me, how often do you reproduce?'

'As often as we wish to.'

'And syzygy?'

'As often as we must. Then - we must.'

'And that is -'

'It's difficult. It's like the paramecia, essentially, but it's infinitely more complex. There's cell meeting and interflow, but in tens and then dozens, hundreds, then thousands of millions of cells. The join begins here —' she put her hand at the approximate location of the human heart — 'and extends. But you saw it in those whom I burned. You are one of the few human beings who ever have.'

'That isn't what I saw,' he reminded her gently.

She nodded, and again there was that deep sadness. 'That murder was such a stupid, incredible, unexpected thing!'

'Why were they in the park?' he asked, his voice thick with pity. 'Why, out there, in the open, where some such human slugs could find them?'

'They took a chance, because it was important to them,' she said wearily. She looked up, and her eyes were luminous. 'We love the outdoors. We love the earth, the feel and smell of it, what lives from it and in it. Especially then. It was such a deep thicket, such an isolated pocket. It was the merest accident that those – those men found them there. They couldn't move. They were – well, medically you could call it unconscious. Actually, there – there never was a consciousness like the one which comes with syzygy.'

'Can you describe it?'

She shook her head slowly, and it was no violation of her complete frankness. 'Do you know, you couldn't describe sexuality to me so that I could understand it? I have no – no comparison, no analogies. It –' she looked from one to the other – 'it amazes me. In some ways I envy it. I know it is a strife, which we avoid, for we are very gentle. But you have a capacity for enjoying strife, and all the pain, all the misery and poverty and cruelty which you suffer, is the cornerstone of everything you build. And you build more than anyone or anything in the known universe.'

Budgie was wide-eyed. 'You envy us. You?'

She smiled. 'Don't you think the things you admire me for are rather commonplace among my own kind? It's just that they're rare in humans.'

Muhlenberg said slowly, 'Just what is your relationship to humanity?'

'It's symbiotic, of course.'

'Symbiotic? You live with us, and us with you, like the cellulose-digesting microbes in a termite? Like the yucca moth, which can eat only nectar from the yucca cactus, which can spread its pollen only through the yucca moth?'

She nodded. 'It's purely symbiotic. But it isn't easy to explain. We live on that part of humans which makes them different from

animals.'

'And in turn -'

'We cultivate it in humans.'

'I don't understand that,' said Budgie flatly.

'Look into your legends. We're mentioned often enough there. Who were the sexless angels? Who is the streamlined fat boy on your Valentine's Day cards? Where does inspiration come from? Who knows three notes of a composer's new symphony, and whistles the next phrase as he walks by the composer's house? And – most important to you two – who really understands that part of love between humans which is not sexual – because we can understand no other kind? Read your history, and you'll see where we've been. And in exchange we get the building – bridges, yes, and aircraft and soon, now, space-ships. But other kinds of building too. Songs and poetry and this new thing, this increasing sense of the oneness of all your species. And now it is fumbling toward a United Nations, and later it will grope for the stars; and where it builds, we thrive.'

'Can you name this thing you get from us – this thing that is the difference between men and the rest of the animals?'

'No. But call it a sense of achievement. Where you feel that most, you feed us most. And you feel it most when others of your kind enjoy what you build.'

'Why do you keep yourselves hidden?' Budgie suddenly asked. 'Why?' She wrung her hands on the edge of the table. 'You're so beautiful!'

'We have to hide,' the other said gently. 'You still kill anything that's ... different.'

Muhlenberg looked at that open, lovely face and felt a sickness, and he could have cried. He said, 'Don't you ever kill anything?' and then hung his head, because it sounded like a defense for the murdering part of humanity. Because it was.

'Yes,' she said very softly, 'we do.'

'You can hate something?'

'It isn't hate. Anyone who hates, hates himself as well as the object of his hate. There's another emotion called righteous anger. That makes us kill.'

'I can't conceive of such a thing.'

'What time is it?'

'Almost eight-forty.'

She raised herself from her booth and looked out to the corner. It was dark now, and the usual crowd of youths had gathered under the street-lights.

'I made appointments with three more people this evening,' she said. 'They are murderers. Just watch.' Her eyes seemed to blaze.

Under the light, two of the youths were arguing. The crowd, but for a prodding yelp or two, had fallen silent and was beginning to form a ring. Inside the ring, but apart from the two who were arguing, was a third – smaller, heavier and compared with the sharp-creased, bright-tied arguers, much more poorly dressed, in an Eisenhower jacket with one sleeve tattered up to the elbow.

What happened then happened with frightening speed. One of the arguers smashed the other across the mouth. Spitting blood, the other staggered back, made a lightning move into his coat pocket. The blade looked for all the world like a golden fan as it moved in the cyclic pulsations of the street-lamp. There was a bubbling scream, a deep animal grunt, and two bodies lay tangled and twitching on the sidewalk while blood gouted and seeped and defied the sharpness of creases and the colors of ties.

Far up the block a man shouted and a whistle shrilled. Then the street corner seemed to become a great repulsing pole for humans. People ran outward, rayed outward, until, from above, they must have looked like a great splash in mud, reaching out and out until the growing ring broke and the particles scattered and were gone. And then there were only the bleeding bodies and the third one, the one with the tattered jacket, who hovered and stepped and waited did not know which way to go. There was the sound of a single pair of running feet, after the others had all run off to silence, and these feet belonged to a man who ran fast and ran closer and breathed heavily through a shrieking police whistle.

The youth in the jacket finally turned and ran away, and the policeman shouted once around his whistle, and then there were two sharp reports and the youth, running hard, threw up his hands and fell without trying to turn his face away, and skidded on it and lay still with one foot turned in and the other turned out.

The girl in the dark sweater and blue jeans turned away from the

windows and sank back into her seat, looking levelly into the drawn faces across the table. 'Those were the men who killed those two in the park,' she said in a low voice, 'and that is how we kill.'

'A little like us,' said Muhlenberg weakly. He found his handkerchief and wiped off his upper lip. 'Three of them for two of you.'

'Oh, you don't understand,' she said, and there was pity in her voice. 'It wasn't because they killed those two. It was because they

pulled them apart.'

Gradually, the meaning of this crept into Muhlenberg's awed mind, and the awe grew with it. For here was a race which separated insemination from the mixing of strains, and apart from them, in clean-lined definition, was a third component, a psychic interflow. Just a touch of it had given him a magic night and Budgie an enchanted day; hours without strife, without mixed motives or

misinterpretations.

If a human, with all his grossly efficient combination of functions, could be led to appreciate one light touch to that degree, what must it mean to have that third component, pure and in essence, torn apart in its fullest flow? This was worse than any crime could be to a human; and yet, where humans can claim clear consciences while jailing a man for a year for stealing a pair of shoes, these people repay the cruelest sacrilege of all with a quick clean blow. It was removal, not punishment. Punishment was alien and inconceivable to them.

He slowly raised his face to the calm, candid eyes of the girl. 'Why have you shown us all this?'

'You needed me,' she said simply.

'But you came up to destroy those bodies so no one would know

'And I found you two, each needing what the other had, and blind to it. No, not blind. I remember you said that if you ever could really share something, you could be very close.' She laughed. 'Remember your niche, the one that's finished early and never exactly filled? I told you at the time that it wouldn't be enough by itself if it were filled, and anyone completely without it wouldn't have enough either. And you —' She smiled at Budgie. 'You never made any secret about what you wanted. And there the two of you were, each taking what you already had, and ignoring what you needed.'

'Headline!' said Budgie, 'Common Share Takes Stock.'

'Subhead!' grinned Muhlenberg, 'Man With a Niche Meets Girl With An Itch.'

The girl slid out of the booth. 'You'll do,' she said.

'Wait! You're not going to leave us! Aren't we ever going to see you again?'

'Not knowingly. You won't remember me, or any of this.'

'How can you take away -'

'Shush, Muley. You know she can.'

'Yes, I guess she - wait though - wait! You give us all this knowledge just so we'll understand - and then you take it all away

again. What good will that do us?'

She turned toward them. It may have been because they were still seated and she was standing, but she seemed to tower over them. In a split second of fugue, he had the feeling that he was looking at a great light on a mountain.

'Why, you poor things – didn't you know? Knowledge and understanding aren't props for one another. Knowledge is a pile of bricks, and understanding is a way of building. Build for me!'

They were in a joint called Shank's. After the triple killing, and the wild scramble to get the story phoned in, they started home.

'Muley,' she asked suddenly, 'what's syzygy?'

'What on earth made you ask me that?'

'It just popped into my head. What is it?'

'A non-sexual interflow between the nuclei of two animals.'

'I never tried that,' she said thoughtfully.

'Well, don't until we're married,' he said. They began to hold hands while they walked.

## Mr. Costello, Hero

'Come in, Purser. And shut the door.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?' The Skipper never invited anyone in -

not to his quarters. His office, yes, but not here.

He made an abrupt gesture, and I came in and closed the door. It was about as luxurious as a compartment on a spaceship can get. I tried not to goggle at it as if it was the first time I had ever seen it, just because it was the first time I had ever seen it.

I sat down.

He opened his mouth, closed it, forced the tip of his tongue through his thin lips. He licked them and glared at me. I'd never seen the Iron Man like this. I decided that the best thing to say would be nothing, which is what I said.

He pulled a deck of cards out of the top-middle drawer and slid

them across the desk. 'Deal.'

I said, 'Ib-'

'And don't say you beg my pardon!' he exploded.

Well, all right. If the skipper wanted a cozy game of gin rummy to while away the parsecs, far be it from me to ... I shuffled. Six years under this cold-blooded, fish-eyed automatic computer with eyebrows, and this was the first time that he –

'Deal,' he said. I looked up at him. 'Draw, five-card draw. You

do play poker, don't you, Purser?'

'Yes, sir.' I dealt and put down the pack. I had three threes and a couple of court cards. The skipper scowled at his hand and threw down two. He glared at me again.

I said, 'I got three of a kind, sir.'

He let his cards go as if they no longer existed, slammed out of his chair and turned his back to me. He tilted his head back and stared up at the see-it-all, with its complex of speed, time, position and distance-run coordinates. Borinquen, our destination planet, was at spitting distance — only a day or so off — and Earth was a long, long way behind. I heard a sound and dropped my eyes. The Skipper's hands were locked behind him, squeezed together so hard that they crackled.

'Why didn't you draw?' he grated.

'I beg your –'

'When I played poker – and I used to play a hell of a lot of poker – as I recall it, the dealer would find out how many cards each

player wanted after the deal and give him as many as he discarded. Did you ever hear of that, Purser?'

'Yes, sir, I did.'

'You did.' He turned around. I imagine he had been scowling this same way at the see-it-all, and I wondered why it was he hadn't shattered the cover glass.

'Why, then, Purser,' he demanded, 'did you show your three of a kind without discarding, without drawing – without, mister, asking

me how many cards I might want?'

I thought about it. 'I - we - I mean, sir, we haven't been playing

poker that way lately.'

'You've been playing draw poker without drawing!' He sat down again and beamed that glare at me again. 'And who changed the rules?'

'I don't know, sir. We just - that's the way we've been playing.'

He nodded thoughtfully. 'Now tell me something, Purser. How much time did you spend in the galley during the last watch.'

'About an hour, sir.'

'About an hour.'

'Well, sir,' I explained hurriedly, 'it was my turn.'

He said nothing, and it suddenly occurred to me that these galley-watches weren't in the ship's orders.

I said quickly, 'It isn't against your orders to stand such a watch,

is it, sir?'

'No,' he said, 'it isn't.' His voice was so gentle, it was ugly. 'Tell

me, Purser, doesn't Cooky mind these galley-watches?'

'Oh, no, sir! He's real pleased about it.' I knew he was thinking about the size of the galley. It was true that two men made quite a crowd in a place like that. I said, 'That way, he knows everybody can trust him.'

'You mean that way you know he won't poison you.'

'Well - yes, sir.'

'And tell me,' he said, his voice even gentler, 'who suggested he

might poison you?'

'I really couldn't say, Captain. It's just sort of something that came up. Cooky doesn't mind,' I added. 'If he's watched all the time, he knows nobody's going to suspect him. It's all right.'

Again he repeated my words.

'It's all right.' I wished he wouldn't. I wished he'd stop looking at me like that. 'How long,' he asked, 'has it been customary for the deck officer to bring a witness with him when he takes over the watch?'

'I really couldn't say, sir. That's out of my department.'

'You couldn't say. Now think hard, Purser. Did you ever stand galley-watches, or see deck-officers bring witnesses with them when they relieve the bridge, or see draw poker played without drawing – before this trip?'

'Well, no, sir. I don't think I have. I suppose we just never

thought of it before.'

'We never had Mr. Costello as a passenger before, did we?' 'No, sir.'

I thought for a moment he was going to say something else, but

he didn't, just: 'Very well, Purser. That will be all.'

I went out and started back aft, feeling puzzled and sort of upset. The Skipper didn't have to hint things like that about Mr. Costello. Mr. Costello was a very nice man. Once, the Skipper had picked a fight with Mr. Costello. They'd shouted at each other in the day-room. That is, the Skipper had shouted – Mr. Costello never did. Mr. Costello was as good-natured as they come. A good-natured soft-spoken man, with the kind of a face they call open. Open and honest. He'd once been a Triumver back on Earth – the youngest ever appointed, they said.

You wouldn't think such an easygoing man was as smart as that. Triumvers are usually life-time appointees, but Mr. Costello wasn't satisfied. Had to keep moving, you know. Learning all the time, shaking hands all around, staying close to the people. He loved

people.

I don't know why the Skipper couldn't get along with him. Everybody else did. And besides – Mr. Costello didn't play poker; why should he care one way or the other how we played it? He didn't eat the galley food – he had his own stock in his cabin – so what difference would it make to him if the cook poisoned anyone? Except, of course, that he cared about us. People – he liked people.

Anyway, it's better to play poker without the draw. Poker's a good game with a bad reputation. And where do you suppose it gets the bad reputation. From cheaters. And how do people cheat at poker? Almost never when they deal. It's when they pass out cards after the discard. That's when a shady dealer knows what he holds, and he knows what to give the others so he can win. All right, remove the discard and you remove nine-tenths of the cheaters. Remove the cheaters and the honest men can trust each other.

That's what Mr. Costello used to say, anyhow. Not that he cared one way or the other for himself. He wasn't a gambling man.

I went into the dayroom and there was Mr. Costello with the Third Officer. He gave me a big smile and a wave, so I went over.

'Come on, sit down, Purser,' he said. 'I'm landing tomorrow.

Won't have much more chance to talk to you.'

I sat down. The Third snapped shut a book he'd been holding

open on the table and sort of got it out of sight.

Mr. Costello laughed at him. 'Go ahead, Third, show the Purser. You can trust him – he's a good man. I'd be proud to be shipmates with the Purser.'

The Third hesitated and then raised the book from his lap. It was the *Space Code* and expanded *Rules of the Road*. Every licensed officer has to bone up on it a lot, to get his license. But it's not the kind of book you ordinarily kill time with.

'The Third here was showing me all about what a captain can

and can't do,' said Mr. Costello.

'Well, you asked me to,' the Third said.

'Now just a minute,' said Costello rapidly, 'now just a minute.' He had a way of doing that sometimes. It was part of him, like the thinning hair on top of his head and the big smile and the way he had of cocking his head to one side and asking you what it was you just said, as if he didn't hear so well. 'Now just a minute, you wanted to show me this material, didn't you?'

'Well, yes, Mr. Costello,' the Third said.

'You're going over the limitations of a spacemaster's power of your own free will, aren't you?'

'Well,' said the Third, 'I guess so. Sure.'

'Sure,' Mr. Costello repeated happily. 'Tell the Purser the part you just read to me.'

'The one you found in the book?'

'You know the one. You read it out your own self, didn't you?'

'Oh,' said the Third. He looked at me – sort of uneasily, I thought – and reached for the book.

Mr. Costello put his hand on it. 'Oh, don't bother looking it up,' he said. 'You can remember it.'

'Yeah, I guess I do,' the Third admitted. 'It's a sort of safeguard against letting the skipper's power go to his head, in case it ever does. Suppose a time comes when a captain begins to act up, and the crew gets the idea that a lunatic has taken over the bridge. Well, something has to be done about it. The crew has the power to appoint one officer and send him up to the Captain for an accounting. If the Skipper refuses, or if the crew doesn't like his accounting, then they have the right to confine him to his quarters and take over the ship.'

'I think I heard about that,' I said. 'But the Skipper has rights, too. I mean the crew has to report everything by space-radio the second it happens, and then the Captain has a full hearing along with the crew at the next port.'

Mr. Costello looked at us and shook his big head, full of admiration. When Mr. Costello thought you were good, it made you feel good all over.

The Third looked at his watch and got up. 'I got to relieve the

bridge. Want to come along, Purser?'

'I'd like to talk to him for a while,' Mr. Costello said. 'Do you suppose you could get somebody else for a witness?'

'Oh, sure, if you say so,' said the Third.

'But you're going to get someone.'

'Absolutely,' said the Third.

'Safest ship I was ever on,' said Mr. Costello. 'Gives a fellow a nice feeling to know that the watch is never going to get the orders wrong.'

I thought so myself and wondered why we never used to do it before. I watched the Third leave and stayed where I was, feeling good, feeling safe, feeling glad that Mr. Costello wanted to talk to me. And me just a Purser, him an ex-Triumver.

Mr. Costello gave me the big smile. He nodded toward the door. 'That young fellow's going far. A good man. You're all good men here.' He stuck a sucker-cap in the heater and passed it over to me with his own hands. 'Coffee,' he said. 'My own brand. All I ever use.'

I tasted it and it was fine. He was a very generous man. He sat back and beamed at me while I drank it.

'What do you know about Borinquen?' he wanted to know.

I told him all I could. Borinquen's a pretty nice place, what they call 'four-nines Earth Normal' – which means that the climate, gravity, atmosphere and ecology come within .9999 of being the same as Earth's. There are only about six known planets like that. I told him about the one city it had and the trapping that used to be the main industry. Coats made out of *glunker* fur last forever. They shine green in white light and real warm ember-red in blue light, and you can take a full-sized coat and scrunch it up and hide it in your two hands, it's that light and fine. Being so light, the fur made ideal space-cargo.

Of course, there was a lot more on Borinquen now – rare isotope ingots and foodstuffs and seeds for the drug business and all, and I suppose the *glunker* trade could dry right up and Borinquen could still carry its weight. But furs settled the planet, furs supported the city in the early days, and half the population still lived out in the

bush and trapped.

Mr. Costello listened to everything I said in a way I can only call respectful.

I remember I finished up by saying, 'I'm sorry you have to get off

there, Mr. Costello. I'd like to see you some more. I'd like to come see you at Borinquen, whenever we put in, though I don't suppose a man like you would have much spare time.'

He put his big hand on my arm. 'Purser, if I don't have time when you're in port, I'll make time. Hear?' Oh, he had a wonderful way

of making a fellow feel good.

Next thing you know, he invited me right into his cabin. He sat me down and handed me a sucker full of a mild red wine with a late flavor of cinnamon, which was a new one on me, and he showed me some of his things.

He was a great collector. He had one or two little bits of colored paper that he said were stamps they used before the Space Age, to prepay carrying charges on paper letters. He said no matter where he was, just one of those things could get him a fortune. Then he had some jewels, not rings or anything, just stones, and a fine story for every single one of them.

'What you're holding in your hand,' he said, 'cost the life of a king and the loss of an empire half again as big as United Earth.' And: 'This one was once so well guarded that most people didn't know whether it existed or not. There was a whole religion based on it – and now it's gone, and so is the religion.'

It gave you a queer feeling, being next to this man who had so much, and him just as warm and friendly as your favorite uncle.

'If you can assure me these bulkheads are soundproof, I'll show

you something else I collect,' he said.

I assured him they were, and they were, too. 'If ships' architects ever learned anything,' I told him, 'They learned that a man has just got to be by himself once in a while.'

He cocked his head to one side in a way that he had. 'How's that

again?'

'A man's just got to be by himself once in a while,' I said. 'So, mass or no, cost or no, a ship's bulkheads are built to give a man his

privacy.'

'Good,' he said. 'Now let me show you.' He unlocked a handcase and opened it, and from a little compartment inside he took out a thing about the size of the box a watch comes in. He handled it very gently as he put it down on his desk. It was square, and it had a fine grille on the top and two little silver studs on the side. He pressed one of them and turned to me, smiling. And let me tell you, I almost fell right off the bunk where I was sitting, because here was the Captain's voice as loud and clear and natural as if he was right there in the room with us. And do you know what he said?

He said, 'My crew questions my sanity - yet you can be sure that if a single man aboard questions my authority, he will learn that I am master here, even if he must learn it at the point of a gun.'

What surprised me so much wasn't only the voice but the words - and what surprised me especially about the words was that I had heard the Skipper say them myself. It was the time he had had the argument with Mr. Costello. I remembered it well because I had walked into the dayroom just as the Captain started to yell.

'Mr. Costello,' he said in that big heavy voice of his, 'In spite of your conviction that my crew questions my sanity ... and all the rest of it, just like on this recording Mr. Costello had. And I remember he said, too, 'Even if he must learn it at the point of a gun. That, sir, applies to passengers - the crew have legal means of their own.

I was going to mention this to Mr. Costello, but before I could open my mouth, he asked me, 'Now tell me, Purser, is that the voice of the Captain of your ship?'

And I said, 'Well, if it isn't, I'm not the Purser here. Why, I heard

him speak those words my very own self.'

Mr. Costello swatted me on the shoulder. 'You have a good ear,

Purser. And how do you like my little toy?'

Then he showed it to me, a little mechanism on the jeweled pin he wore on his tunic, a fine thread of wire to a pushbutton in his side pocket.

'One of my favorite collections,' he told me. 'Voices. Anybody, anytime, anywhere.' He took off the pin and slipped a tiny bead out of the setting. He slipped this into a groove in the box and pressed

the stud.

And I heard my own voice say, 'I'm sorry you have to get off there, Mr. Costello. I'd like to see you some more.' I laughed and laughed. That was one of the cleverest things I ever saw. And just think of my voice in his collection, along with the Captain and space only knows how many great and famous people!

He even had the voice of the Third Officer, from just a few minutes before, saying, 'A lunatic has taken over the bridge. Well,

something has to be done about it.'

All in all, I had a wonderful visit with him, and then he asked me to do whatever I had to do about his clearance papers. So I went back to my office and got them out. They are kept in the Purser's safe during a voyage. And I went through them with the okays. There were a lot of them – he had more than most people.

I found one from Earth Central that sort of made me mad. I guess

it was a mistake. It was a *Know All Ye* that warned consular officials to report every six months, Earth time, on the activities of Mr. Costello.

I took it to him, and it was a mistake, all right – he said so himself. I tore it out of his passport book and adhesed an official note, reporting the accidental destruction of a used page of fully stamped visas. He gave me a beautiful blue gemstone for doing it.

When I said, 'I better not: I don't want you thinking I take bribes from passengers,' he laughed and put one of those beads in his recorder, and it came out, in my voice, 'I take bribes from

passengers.' He was a great joker.

We lay at Borinquen for four days. Nothing much happened except I was busy. That's what's tough about pursering. You got nothing to do for weeks in space, and then, when you're in spaceport, you have too much work to do even to go ashore much, unless it's a long layover.

I never really minded much. I'm one of those mathematical geniuses, you know, even if I don't have too much sense otherwise, and I take pride in my work. Everybody has something he's good at, I guess. I couldn't tell you how the gimmick works that makes the ship travel faster than light, but I'd hate to trust the Chief Engineer with one of my interplanetary cargo manifests, or a rate-of-exchange table, *glunker* pelts to U.E. dollars.

Some hard-jawed character with Space Navy Investigator credentials came onboard with a portable voice recorder and made me and the Third Officer recite a lot of nonsense for some sort of test, I don't know what. The SNI is always doing a lot of useless and mysterious things. I had an argument with the Port Agent, and I went ashore with Cooky for a fast drink. The usual thing. Then I had to work overtime signing on a new Third – they transferred the old one to a corvette that was due in, they told me.

Oh, yes, that was the trip the Skipper resigned. I guess it was high time. He'd been acting very nervous. He gave me the damndest look when he went ashore the last time, like he didn't know whether to kill me or burst into tears. There was a rumor around that he'd gone beserk and threatened the crew with a gun, but I don't listen to rumors. And anyway, the Port Captain signs on new skippers. It didn't mean any extra work for me, so it didn't matter much.

We unshipped again and made the rounds. Boötes Sigma and Nightingale and Caranho and Earth – chemical glassware, blackprints, sho seed and glitter crystals; perfume, music tape, glizzard skins and Aldebar – all the usual junk for all the usual months. And

round we came again to Borinquen.

Well, you wouldn't believe a place could change so much in so short a time. Borinquen used to be a pretty free-and-easy planet. There was just the one good-sized city, see, and then trapper camps all through the unsettled area. If you liked people, you settled in the city, and you could go to work in the processing plants or maintenance or some such. If you didn't, you could trap *glunkers*. There was always something for everybody on Borinquen.

But things were way different this trip. First of all, a man with a Planetary Government badge came aboard, by God, to censor the music tapes consigned for the city, and he had the credentials for it, too. Next thing I find out, the municipal authorities have confiscated the warehouse – my warehouses – and they were being

converted into barracks.

And where were the goods – the pelts and ingots for export? Where was the space for our cargo? Why, in houses – in hundreds of houses, all spread around every which way, all indexed up with a whole big new office full of conscripts and volunteers to mix up and keep mixed up! For the first time since I went to space, I had to request layover so I could get things unwound.

Anyway it gave me a chance to wander around the town, which I

don't often get.

You should have seen the place! Everybody seemed to be moving out of the houses. All the big buildings were being made over into hollow shells, filled with rows and rows of mattresses. There were banners strung across the streets: ARE YOU A MAN OR ARE YOU ALONE? A SINGLE SHINGLE IS A SORRY SHELTER! THE DEVIL HATES A CROWD!

All of which meant nothing to me. But it wasn't until I noticed a sign painted in whitewash on the glass front of a barroom, saying — TRAPPERS STAY OUT! — that I was aware of one of the biggest changes of all.

There were no trappers on the streets – none at all. They used to be one of the tourist attractions of Borinquen, dressed in *glunker* fur, with the long tailwings afloat in the wind of their walking, and a kind of distance in their eyes that not even spacemen had. As soon as I missed them, I began to see the TRAPPERS STAY OUT! signs just about everywhere – on the stores, the restaurants, the hotels and theaters.

I stood on a street corner, looking around me and wondering what in hell was going on here, when a Borinquen cop yelled something at me from a monowheel prowl car. I didn't understand him, so I just shrugged. He made a U-turn and coasted up to me.

'What's the matter, country boy? Lose your traps?'

I said, 'What?'

He said, 'If you want to go it alone, glunker, we got solitary cells over at the Hall that'll suit you fine.'

I just gawked at him. And, to my surprise, another cop poked his head up out of the prowler. A one-man prowler, mind. They were really jammed in there.

This second one said, 'Where's your trapline, jerker?'

I said, 'I don't have a trapline.' I pointed to the mighty tower of my ship, looming over the spaceport. 'I'm the Purser off that ship.'

'Oh, for God's sakes!' said the first cop. 'I might have known. Look, Spacer, you'd better double up or you're liable to get yourself mobbed. This is no spot for a soloist.'

'I don't get you, Officer. I was just -'

'I'll take him,' said someone. I looked around and saw a tall Borinqueña standing just inside the open doorway of one of the hundreds of empty houses. She said, 'I came back here to pick up some of my things. When I got done in here, there was nobody on the sidewalks. I've been here an hour, waiting for somebody to go with.' She sounded a little hysterical.

'You know better than to go in there by yourself,' said one of the

cops.

'I know – I know. It was just to get my things. I wasn't going to stay.' She hauled up a duffelbag and dangled it in front of her. 'Just

to get my things,' she said again, frightened.

The cops looked at each other. 'Well, all right. But watch yourself. You go along with the Purser here. Better straighten him out – he don't seem to know what's right.'

'I will,' she said thankfully.

But by then the prowler had moaned off, weaving a little under its double load.

I looked at her. She wasn't pretty. She was sort of heavy and stupid.

She said, 'You'll be all right now. Let's go.'

'Where.

'Well, Central Barracks, I guess. That's where most everybody is.'

'I have to get back to the ship.'

'Oh, dear,' she said, all distressed again. 'Right away?'

'No, not right away. I'll go in town with you, if you want.' She picked up her duffelbag, but I took it from her and heaved it up on my shoulder. 'Is everybody here crazy?' I asked her, scowling.

'Crazy?' She began walking, and I went along. 'I don't think so.'

'All this,' I persisted. I pointed to a banner that said, NO LADDER HAS A SINGLE RUNG. 'What's that mean?'

'Just what it says.'

'You have to put up a big thing like that just to tell me ...'

'Oh,' she said. 'You mean what does it *mean!*' She looked at me strangely. 'We've found out a new truth about humanity. Look, I'll try to tell it to you the way the Lucilles said it last night.'

'Who's Lucille?'

'The Lucilles,' she said, in a mildly shocked tone. 'Actually, I suppose there's really only one – though, of course, there'll be someone else in the studio at the time,' she added quickly. 'But on the trideo it looks like four Lucilles, all speaking at once, sort of in chorus.'

'You just go on talking,' I said when she paused. 'I catch on slowly.'

'Well, here's what they say. They say no one human being ever did *anything*. They say it takes a hundred pairs of hands to build a house, ten thousand pairs to build a ship. They say a single pair is not only useless – it's *evil*. All humanity is a thing made up of many parts. No part is good by itself. Any part that wants to go off by itself hurts the whole main thing – the thing that has become so great. So we're seeing to it that no part ever gets separated. What good would your hand be if a finger suddenly decided to go off by itself?'

I said, 'And you believe this - what's your name?'

'Nola. *Believe* it? Well, it's true, isn't it? Can't you see it's true? Everybody *knows* it's true.'

'Well, it *could* be true,' I said reluctantly. 'What do you do with people who want to be by themselves?'

'We help them.'

'Suppose they don't want help?'

'Then they're trappers,' she said immediately. 'We push them back into the bush, where the evil soloists come from.'

'Well, what about the fur?'

'Nobody uses furs any more!'

So that's what happened to our fur consignments! And I was thinking those amateur red-tapers had just lost 'em somewhere.

She said, as if to herself, 'All sin starts in the lonesome dark,' and when I looked up, I saw she'd read it approvingly off another banner.

We rounded a corner and I blinked at a blaze of light. It was one of the warehouses.

'There's the Central,' she said. 'Would you like to see it?'

'I guess so.'

I followed her down the street to the entrance. There was a man sitting at a table in the doorway. Nola gave him a card. He checked it against a list and handed it back.

'A visitor,' she said. 'From the ship.'

I showed him my Purser's card and he said, 'Okay. But if you want to stay, you'll have to register.'

'I won't want to stay,' I told him. 'I have to get back.'

I followed Nola inside.

The place had been scraped out to the absolute maximum. Take away one splinter of vertical structure more and it wouldn't have held a roof. There wasn't a concealed corner, a shelf, a drape, an overhang. There must have been two thousand beds, cots and mattresses spread out, cheek by jowl, over the entire floor, in blocks of four, with only a hand's-breadth between them.

The light was blinding - huge floods and spots bathed every

square inch in yellow-white fire.

Nola said, 'You'll get used to the light. After a few nights, you don't even notice it.'

'The lights never get turned off?'

'Oh, dear, no!'

Then I saw the plumbing – showers, tubs, sinks and everything else. It was all lined up against one wall.

Nola followed my eyes. 'You get used to that, too. Better to have everything out in the open than to let the devil in for one secret second. That's what the Lucilles say.'

I dropped her duffelbag and sat down on it. The only thing I could think of was, 'Whose idea was all this? Where did it start?'

'The Lucilles,' she said vaguely. Then, 'Before them, I don't know. People just started to realize. Somebody bought a warehouse – no, it was a hanger – I don't know,' she said again, apparently trying hard to remember. She sat down next to me and said in a subdued voice, 'Actually, some people didn't take to it so well at first.' She looked around. 'I didn't. I mean it, I really didn't. But you believed, or you had to act as if you believed, and one way or another everybody just came to this.' She waved a hand.

'What happened to the ones who wouldn't come to Central?'

'People made fun of them. They lost their jobs, the schools wouldn't take their children, the stores wouldn't honor their ration cards. Then the police started to pick up soloists – like they did you.' She looked around again, a sort of contented familiarity in her gaze. 'It didn't take long.'

I turned away from her, but found myself staring at all that

plumbing again. I jumped up. 'I have to go, Nola. Thanks for your help. Hey – how do I get back to the ship, if the cops are out to pick up any soloist they see?'

'Oh, just tell the man at the gate. There'll be people waiting to go

your way. There's always somebody waiting to go everywhere.'

She came along with me. I spoke to the man at the gate, and she shook hands with me. I stood by the little table and watched her hesitate, then step up to a woman who was entering. They went in together. The doorman nudged me over toward a group of what appeared to be loungers.

'North!' he bawled.

I drew a pudgy little man with bad teeth, who said not one single word. We escorted each other two-thirds of the way to the spaceport, and he disappeared into a factory. I scuttled the rest of the way alone, feeling like a criminal, which I suppose I was. I swore I would never go into that crazy city again.

And the next morning, who should come out for me, in an armored car with six two-man prowlers as escort, but Mr. Costello

himself!

It was pretty grand seeing him again. He was just like always, big and handsome and good-natured. He was not alone. All spread out in the back corner of the car was the most beautiful blonde woman that ever struck me speechless. She didn't say very much. She would just look at me every once in a while and sort of smile, and then she would look out of the car window and bite her lower lip a little, and then look at Mr. Costello and not smile at all.

Mr. Costello hadn't forgotten me. He had a bottle of that same red cinnamon wine, and he talked over old times the same as ever, like he was a special uncle. We got a sort of guided tour. I told him about last night, about the visit to the Central, and he was pleased as could be. He said he knew I'd like it. I didn't stop to think whether I liked it or not.

'Think of it!' he said, 'All humankind, a single unit. You know

the principle of cooperation, Purser?'

When I took too long to think it out, he said, 'You know. Two men working together can produce more than two men working separately. Well, what happens when a thousand – a million – work, sleep, eat, think, breathe together?' The way he said it, it sounded fine.

He looked out past my shoulder and his eyes widened just a little. He pressed a button and the chauffeur brought us to a sliding stop.

'Get that one,' Mr. Costello said into a microphone beside him.
Two of the prowlers hurtled down the street and flanked a man.

He dodged right, dodged left, and then a prowler hit him and knocked him down.

'Poor chap,' said Mr. Costello, pushing the Go button. 'Some of 'em just won't learn.'

I think he regretted it very much. I don't know if the blonde woman did. She didn't even look.

'Are you the mayor?' I asked him.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'I'm a sort of broker. A little of this, a little of that. I'm able to help out a bit.'

'Help out?'

'Purser,' he said confidentially. 'I'm a citizen of Borinquen now. This is my adopted land and I love it. I mean to do everything in my power to help it. I don't care about the cost. This is a people that has found the *truth*, Purser. It awes me. It makes me humble.'

'I...'

'Speak up, man. I'm your friend.'

'I appreciate that, Mr. Costello. Well, what I was going to say, I saw that Central and all. I just haven't made up my mind. I mean whether it's good or not.'

'Take your time, take your time,' he said in the big soft voice. 'Nobody has to *make* a man to see a truth, am I right? A real truth? A man just sees it all by himself.'

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'Yeah, I guess so.' Sometimes it was hard to find

an answer to give Mr. Costello.

The car pulled up beside a building. The blonde woman pulled herself together. Mr. Costello opened the door for her with his own hands. She got out. Mr. Costello rapped the trideo screen in front of him.

He said, 'Make it a real good one, Lucille, real good. I'll be watching.'

She looked at him. She gave me a small smile. A man came down the steps and she went with him up into the building.

We moved off.

I said, 'She's the prettiest woman I ever saw.'

He said, 'She likes you fine, Purser.'

I thought about that. It was too much.

He asked, 'How would you like to have her for your very own?' 'Oh,' I said, 'she wouldn't.'

'Purser, I owe you a big favor. I'd like to pay it back.'

'You don't owe me a thing, Mr. Costello.'

We drank some of the wine. The big car slid silently along. It went slowly now, headed back out to the spaceport.

'I need some help,' he said after a time. 'I know you, Purser.

You're just the kind of man I can use. They say you're a

mathematical genius.'

'Not mathematics exactly, Mr. Costello. Just numbers – statistics – conversion tables and like that. I couldn't do astrogation or theoretical physics and such. I got the best job I could have right now.'

'No, you haven't. I'll be frank with you. I don't want any more responsibility on Borinquen than I've got, you understand, but the people are forcing it on me. They want order, peace and order – tidiness. They want to be as nice and tidy as one of your multiple manifests. Now I could organize them, all right, but I need a tidy brain like yours to keep them organized. I want full birth- and death-rate statistics, and then I want them projected so we can get policy. I want calorie-counts and rationing, so we can use the food supply the best way. I want – well, you see what I mean. Once the devil is routed –'

'What devil?'

'The trappers,' he said grayly.

'Are the trappers really harming the city people?'

He looked at me, shocked. 'They go out and spend weeks alone by themselves, with their own evil thoughts. They are wandering cells, wild cells in the body of humanity. They must be destroyed.'

I couldn't help but think of my consignments. 'What about the

fur trade, though?'

He looked at me as if I had made a pretty grubby little mistake. 'My dear Purser,' he said patiently, 'would you set the price of a few pelts above the immortal soul of a race?'

I hadn't thought of it that way.

He said urgently. 'This is just the beginning, Purser. Borinquen is only a start. The unity of that great being, Humanity, will become known throughout the Universe.' He closed his eyes. When he opened them, the organ tone was gone. He said in his old, friendly voice, 'And you and I, we'll show 'em how to do it, hey, boy?'

I learned forward to look up to the top of the shining spire of the spaceship. 'I sort of like the job I've got. But – my contract is up

four months from now ...'

The car turned into the spaceport and hummed across the slag area.

'I think I can count on you,' he said vibrantly. He laughed. 'Remember this little joke, Purser?'

He clicked a switch, and suddenly my own voice filled the tonneau. 'I take bribes from passengers.'

'Oh, that,' I said, and let loose one ha of a ha-ha before I

understood what he was driving at. 'Mr. Costello, you wouldn't use that against me.'

'What do you take me for?' he demanded, in wonderment.

Then we were at the ramp. He got out with me. He gave me his hand. It was warm and hearty.

'If you change your mind about the Purser's job when your contract's up, son, just buzz me through the field phone. They'll connect me. Think it over until you get back here. Take your time.' His hand clamped down on my biceps so hard I winced. 'But you're not going to take any longer than that, are you, my boy?'

'I guess not,' I said.

He got into the front, by the chauffeur, and zoomed away.

I stood looking after him and, when the car was just a dark spot on the slag area, I sort of came to myself. I was standing alone on the foot of the ramp. I felt very exposed.

I turned and ran up to the airlock, hurrying, hurrying to get near people.

That was the trip we shipped the crazy man. His name was Hynes. He was United Earth Consul at Borinquen and he was going back to report. He was no trouble at first, because diplomatic passports are easy to process. He knocked on my door the fifth watch out from Borinquen. I was glad to see him. My room was making me uneasy and I appreciated his company.

Not that he was really company. He was crazy. That first time, he came busting in and said, 'I hope you don't mind, Purser, but if I don't talk to somebody about this, I'll go out of my mind.' Then he sat down on the end of my bunk and put his head in his hands and rocked back and forth for a long time, without saying anything. Next thing he said was, 'Sorry,' and out he went. Crazy, I tell you.

But he was back in again before long. And then you never heard such ravings.

'Do you know what's happened to Borinquen?' he'd demand. But he didn't want any answers. He had the answers. 'I'll tell you what's wrong with Borinquen – Borinquen's gone mad!' he'd say.

I went on with my work, though there wasn't much of it in space, but that Hynes just couldn't get Borinquen out of his mind.

He said, 'You wouldn't believe it if you hadn't seen it done. First the little wedge, driven in the one place it might exist – between the urbans and the trappers. There was never any conflict between them – never! All of a sudden, the trapper was a menace. How it happened, why, God only knows. First, these laughable attempts to

show that they were an unhealthy influence. Yes, laughable – how

could you take it seriously?

'And then the changes. You didn't have to prove that a trapper had done anything. You only had to prove he was a trapper. That was enough. And the next thing — how could you *anticipate* anything as mad as this?' — he almost screamed — 'the next thing was to take anyone who wanted to be alone and lump him with the trappers. It all happened so fast — it happened in our sleep. And all of a sudden you were afraid to be alone in a room for a *second*. They left their homes. They built barracks. Everyone afraid of everyone else, afraid, afraid . . .

'Do you know what they did?' he roared. 'They burned the paintings, every painting on Borinquen they could find that had been done by one artist. And the few artists who survived as artists – I've seen them. By twos and threes, they work together on the one

canvas.'

He cried. He actually sat there and cried.

He said, 'There's food in the stores. The crops come in. Trucks run, plans fly, the schools are in session. Bellies get full, cars get washed, people get rich. I know a man called Costello, just in from Earth a few months, maybe a year or so, and already owns half the city.'

'Oh, I know Mr. Costello,' I said.

'Do you now! How's that?'

I told him about the trip out with Mr. Costello. He sort of backed off from me. 'You're the one!'

'The one what?' I asked in puzzlement.

'You're the man who testified against your Captain, broke him, made him resign.'

'I did no such a thing.'

'I'm the Consul. It was my hearing, man! I was *there!* A recording of the Captain's voice, admitting to insanity, declaring he'd take a gun to his crew if they overrode him. Then your recorded testimony that it was his voice, that you were present when he made the statement. And the Third Officer's recorded statement that all was not well on the bridge. The man denied it, but it was his voice.'

'Wait, wait,' I said. 'I don't believe it. That would need a trial.

There was no trial. I wasn't called to any trial.'

'There would have been a trial, you idiot! But the Captain started raving about draw poker without a draw, about the crew fearing poisoning from the cook, about the men wanting witnesses even to change the bridge-watch. Maddest thing I ever heard. He realized it

suddenly, the Captain did. He was old, sick, tired, beaten. He blamed the whole thing on Costello, and Costello said he got the

recordings from you.'

'Mr. Costello wouldn't do such a thing!' I guess I got mad at Mr. Hynes then. I told him a whole lot about Mr. Costello, what a big man he was. He started to tell me how Mr. Costello was forced off the Triumverate for making trouble in the high court, but they were lies and I wouldn't listen. I told him about the poker, how Mr. Costello saved us from the cheaters, how he saved us from poisoning, how he made the ship safe for us all.

I remember how he looked at me then. He sort of whispered, 'What has happened to human beings? What have we done to ourselves with these centuries of peace, with confidence and cooperation and no conflict? Here's distrust by man for man, waiting under a thin skin to be punctured by just the right vampire,

waiting to hate itself and kill itself all over again . . .

'My God!' he suddenly screamed at me. 'Do you know what I've been hanging onto? The idea that, for all its error, for all its stupidity, this One Humanity idea on Borinquen was a principle? I hated it, but because it was a principle, I could respect it. It's Costello – Costello, who doesn't gamble, but who uses fear to change the poker rules – Costello, who doesn't eat your food, but makes you fear poison – Costello, who can see three hundred years of safe interstellar flight, but who through fear makes the watch officers doubt themselves without a witness – Costello, who runs things without being seen!

'My God, Costello doesn't care! It isn't a principle at all. It's just Costello spreading fear anywhere, everywhere, to make himself

strong!'

He rushed out, crying with rage and hate. I have to admit I was sort of jolted. I guess I might even have thought about the things he said, only he killed himself before we reached Earth. He was crazy.

We made the rounds, same as ever, scheduled like an interurban line: Load, discharge, blastoff, fly and planetfall. Refuel, clearance, manifest. Eat, sleep, work. There was a hearing about Hynes. Mr. Costello sent a spacegram with his regrets when he heard the news. I didn't say anything at the hearing, just that Mr. Hynes was upset, that's all, and it was about as true as anything could be. We shipped a second engineer who played real good accordion. One of the inboard men got left on Caranho. All the usual things, except I wrote up my termination with no options, ready to file.

So in its turn we made Borinquen again, and what do you know,

there was the space fleet of United Earth. I never guessed they had that many ships. They sheered us off, real Navy: all orders and no information. Borinquen was buttoned up tight; there was some kind of fighting going on down there. We couldn't get or give a word of news through the quarantine. It made the skipper mad and he had to use part of the cargo for fuel, which messed up my records six ways from the middle. I stashed my termination papers away for the time being.

And in its turn, Sigma, where he lay over a couple of days to get back in the rut, and, same as always, Nightingale, right on schedule

again.

And who should be waiting for me at Nightingale but Barney Roteel, who was medic on my first ship, years back when I was fresh from the Academy. He had a pot belly now and looked real successful. We got the jollity out of the way and he settled down and looked me over, real sober. I said it's a small Universe – I'd known he had a big job on Nightingale, but imagine him showing up at the spaceport just when I blew in!

'I showed up because you blew in, Purser,' he answered.

Then before I could take that apart, he started asking me questions. Like how was I doing, what did I plan to do.

I said, 'I've been a purser for years and years. What makes you think I want to do anything different?'

'Just wondered.'

I wondered, too. 'Well,' I said, 'I haven't exactly made up my mind, you might say – and a couple of things have got in the way – but I did have a kind of offer.' I told him just in a general way about how big a man Mr. Costello was on Borinquen now, and how he wanted me to come in with him. 'It'll have to wait, though. The whole damn Space Navy has a cordon around Borinquen. They wouldn't say why. But whatever it is, Mr. Costello'll come out on top. You'll see.'

Barney gave me a sort of puckered-up look. I never saw a man look so weird. Yes, I did, too. It was the old Iron Man, the day he

got off the ship and resigned.

'Barney, what's the matter?' I asked.

He got up and pointed through the glass door-lifts to a white monowheel that stood poised in front of the receiving station. 'Come on,' he said.

'Aw, I can't. I got to -'

'Come on!'

I shrugged. Job or no, this was Barney's bailiwick, not mine. He'd cover me.

He held the door open and said, like a mind reader, 'I'll cover you.'

We went down the ramp and climbed in and skimmed off.

'Where are we going?'

But he wouldn't say. He just drove.

Nightingale's a beautiful place. The most beautiful of them all, I think, even Sigma. It's run by the UE, one hundred per cent; this is one planet with no local options, but *none*. It's a regular garden of a world and they keep it that way.

We topped a rise and went down a curving road lined with honest-to-God Lombardy poplars from Earth. There was a little

lake down there and a sandy beach. No people.

The road curved and there was a yellow line across it and then a red one, and after it a shimmering curtain, almost transparent. It extended from side to side as far as I could see.

'Force-fence,' Barney said and pressed a button on the dash.

The shimmer disappeared from the road ahead, though it stayed where it was at each side. We drove through it and it formed behind us, and we went down the hill to the lake.

Just this side of the beach was the coziest little Sigma cabana I've seen yet, built to hug the slope and open its arms to the sky. Maybe when I get old they'll turn me out to pasture in one half as good.

While I was goggling at it, Barney said, 'Go on.'

I looked at him and he was pointing. There was a man down near the water, big, very tanned, built like a spacetug. Barney waved me on and I walked down there.

The man got up and turned to me. He had the same wide-spread, warm deep eyes, the same full, gentle voice. 'Why, it's the Purser! Hi, old friend. So you came, after all!'

It was sort of rough for a moment. Then I got it out. 'Hi, Mr. Costello.'

He banged me on the shoulder. Then he wrapped one big hand around my left biceps and pulled me a little closer. He looked uphill to where Barney leaned against the monowheel, minding his own business. Then he looked across the lake, and up in the sky.

He dropped his voice. 'Purser, you're just the man I need. But I told you that before, didn't I?' He looked around again. 'We'll do it yet, Purser. You and me, we'll hit the top. Come with me. I want to

show you something.'

He walked ahead of me toward the beach margin. He was wearing only a breech-ribbon, but he moved and spoke as if he still had the armored car and the six prowlers. I stumbled after him.

He put a hand behind him and checked me, and then knelt. He

said, 'To look at them, you'd think they were all the same, wouldn't

you? Well, son, you just let me show you something.'

I looked down. He had an anthill. They weren't like Earth ants. These were bigger, slower, blue, and they had eight legs. They built nests of sand tied together with mucus, and tunneled under them so that the nests stood up an inch or two like on little pillars.

'They look the same, they act the same, but you'll see,' said Mr.

Costello.

He opened a synthine pouch that lay in the sand. He took out a dead bird and the thorax of what looked like a Caranho roach, the one that grows as long as your forearm. He put the bird down here and the roach down yonder.

'Now,' he said, 'watch.'

The ants swarmed to the bird, pulling and crawling. Busy. But one or two went to the roach and tumbled it and burrowed around. Mr. Costello picked an ant off the roach and dropped it on the bird. It weaved around and shouldered through the others and scrabbled across the sand and went back to the roach.

'You see, you see?' he said, enthusiastic. 'Look.'

He picked an ant off the dead bird and dropped it by the roach. The ant wasted no time or even curiosity on the piece of roach. It turned around once to get its bearings, and then went straight back to the dead bird.

I looked at the bird with its clothing of crawling blue, and I looked at the roach with its two or three voracious scavengers. I looked at Mr. Costello.

He said raptly, 'See what I mean? About one in thirty eats something different. And that's all we need. I tell you, Purser, wherever you look, if you look long enough, you can find a way to make most of a group turn on the rest.'

I watched the ants. 'They're not fighting.'

'Now wait a minute,' he said swiftly. 'Wait a minute. All we have to do is let these bird-eaters know that the roach-eaters are dangerous.'

'They're not dangerous,' I said. 'They're just different.'

'What's the difference, when you come right down to it? So we'll get the bird-eaters scared and they'll kill all the roach-eaters.'

'Yes, but why, Mr. Costello?'

He laughed. 'I like you, boy. I do the thinking, you do the work. I'll explain it to you. They all look alike. So once we've made 'em drive out these —' he pointed to the minority around the roach — 'they'll never know which among 'em might be a roach-eater. They'll get so worried, they'll do anything to keep from being

suspected of roach-eating. When they get scared enough, we make 'em do anything we want.'

He hunkered down to watch the ants. He picked up a roach-eater

and put it on the bird. I got up.

'Well, I only just dropped in, Mr. Costello,' I said.

'I'm not an ant,' said Mr. Costello. 'As long as it makes no difference to me what they eat, I can make 'em do anything in the world I want.'

'I'll see you around,' I said.

He kept on talking quietly to himself as I walked away. He was watching the ants, figuring, and paid no attention to me.

I went back to Barney. I asked, sort of choked, 'What is he doing,

Barney?'

'He's doing what he has to do,' Barney said.

We went back to the monowheel and up the hill and through the force-gate. After a while, I asked, 'How long will he be here?'

'As long as he wants to be.' Barney was kind of short about it.

'Nobody wants to be locked up.'

He had that odd look on his face again. 'Nightingale's not a jail.'

'He can't get out.'

'Look, chum, we could start him over. We could even make a purser out of him. But we stopped doing that kind of thing a long time ago. We let a man do what he wants to do.'

'He never wanted to be boss over an anthill.'

'He didn't?'

I guess I looked as if I didn't understand that, so he said, 'All his life he's pretended he's a man and the rest of us are ants. Now it's come true for him. He won't run human anthills any more because he will never again get near one.'

I looked through the windshield at the shining finger that was my

distant ship. 'What happened on Borinquen, Barney?'

'Some of his converts got loose around the System. That Humanity One idea had to be stopped.' He drove a while, seeing badly out of a thinking face. 'You won't take this hard, Purser, but you're a thick-witted ape. I can say that if no one else can.'

'All right,' I said. 'Why?'

'We had to *smash* into Borinquen, which used to be so free and easy. We got into Costello's place. It was a regular fort. We got him and his files. We didn't get his girl. He killed her, but the files were enough.'

'After a time I said, 'He was always a good friend to me.'

'Was he?'

I didn't say anything. He wheeled up to the receiving station and

stopped the machine.

He said, 'He was all ready for you if you came to work for him. He had a voice recording of you large as life, saying "Sometimes a man's just *got* to be by himself." Once you went to work for him, all he needed to do to keep you in line was to threaten to put that on the air.'

I opened the door. 'What did you have to show him to me for?'

'Because we believe in letting a man do what he wants to do, as long as he doesn't hurt the rest of us. If you want to go back to the lake and work for Costello, for instance, I'll take you there.'

I closed the door carefully and went up the ramp to the ship.

I did my work and when the time came, we blasted off. I was mad. I don't think it was about anything Barney told me. I wasn't especially mad about Mr. Costello or what happened to him, because Barney's the best Navy psych doc there is and Nightingale's the most beautiful hospital planet in the Universe.

What made me mad was the thought that never again would a man as big as Mr. Costello give that big, warm, soft, strong

friendship to a lunkhead like me.

## The Golden Helix

1

Tod awoke first, probably because he was so curious, so deeply alive; perhaps because he was (or had been) seventeen. He fought back, but the manipulators would not be denied. They bent and flexed his arms and legs, squeezed his chest, patted and rasped and abraded him. His joints creaked, his sluggish blood clung sleepily to the walls of his veins, reluctant to move after so long.

He gasped and shouted as needles of cold played over his body, gasped again and screamed when his skin sensitized and the tingling intensified to a scald. Then he fainted, and probably slept, for he

easily re-awoke when someone else started screaming

He felt weak and ravenous, but extraordinarily well rested. His first conscious realization was that the manipulators had withdrawn from his body, as had the needles from the back of his neck. He put a shaky hand back there and felt the traces of spot-tape, already half-fused with his healing flesh.

He listened comfortably to this new screaming, satisfied that it was not his own. He let his eyes open, and a great wonder came over him when he saw that the lid of his Coffin stood open.

He clawed upward, sat a moment to fight a vicious swirl of vertigo, vanquished it, and hung his chin on the edge of the Coffin.

The screaming came from April's Coffin. It was open too. Since the two massive boxes touched and their hinges were on opposite sides, he could look down at her. The manipulators were at work on the girl's body, working with competent violence. She seemed to be caught up in some frightful nightmare, lying on her back, dreaming of riding a runaway bicycle with an off-center pedal sprocket and epicyclic hubs. And all the while her arms seemed to be flailing at a cloud of dream-hornets round her tossing head. The needle-cluster rode with her head, fanning out behind the nape like the mechanical extrapolation of an Elizabethan collar.

Tod crawled to the end of his Coffin, stood up shakily, and grasped the horizontal bar set at chest level. He got an arm over it and snugged it close under his armpit. Half-suspended, he could then manage one of his feet over the edge, then the other, to the top step. He lowered himself until he sat on it, outside the Coffin at last, and slumped back to rest. When his furious lungs and battering

heart calmed themselves, he went down the four steps one at a time, like an infant, on his buttocks.

April's screams stopped.

Tod sat on the bottom step, jackknifed by fatigue, his feet on the metal floor, his knees in the hollows between his pectorals and his shoulders. Before him, on a low pedestal, was a cube with a round switch disc on it. When he could, he inched a hand forward and let it fall on the disc. There was an explosive tinkle and the front panel of the cube disappeared, drifting slowly away as a fine glittering dust. He lifted his heavy hand and reached inside. He got one capsule, two, carried them to his lips. He rested, then took a beaker from the cube. It was three-quarters full of purple crystals. He bumped it on the steel floor. The beaker's cover powdered and fell in, and the crystals were suddenly a liquid, effervescing violently. When it subsided, he drank it down. He belched explosively, and then his head cleared, his personal horizons expanded to include the other Coffins, the compartment walls, the ship itself and its mission.

Out there somewhere - somewhere close, now - was Sirius and its captive planet, Terra Prime. Earth's first major colony, Prime would one day flourish as Earth never had, for it would be a planned and tailored planet. Eight and a half light-years from Earth, Prime's population was composed chiefly of Earth immigrants, living in pressure domes and slaving to alter the atmosphere of the planet to Earth normal. Periodically there must be an infusion of Earth blood to keep the strain as close as possible on both planets, for unless a faster-than-light drive could be developed, there could be no frequent interchange between the worlds. What took light eight years took humans half a lifetime. The solution was the Coffins - the marvelous machine in which a man could slip into a sleep which was more than sleep while still on Earth, and awake years later in space, near his destination, subjectively only a month or so older. Without the Coffins there could be only divergence, possibly mutation. Humanity wanted to populate the stars - but with humanity.

Tod and his five shipmates were hand-picked. They had superiorities – mechanical, mathematical, and artistic aptitudes. But they were not all completely superior. One does not populate a colony with leaders alone and expect it to live. They, like the rest of their cargo (machine designers, microfilms of music and art, technical and medical writings, novels and entertainment) were neither advanced nor extraordinary. Except for Teague, they were

the tested median, the competent; they were basic blood for a mass, rather than an élite.

Tod glanced around the blank walls and into the corner where a thin line delineated the sealed door. He ached to fling it open and skid across the corridor, punch the control which would slide away the armor which masked the port, and soak himself in his first glimpse of outer space. He had heard so much about it, but he had never seen it – they had all been deep in their timeless sleep before the ship had blasted off.

But he sighed and went instead to the Coffins.

Alma's was still closed, but there was sound and motion, in

varying degrees, from all the others.

He glanced first into April's Coffin. She seemed to be asleep now. The needle-cluster and manipulators had withdrawn. Her skin glowed; it was alive and as unlike its former monochrome waxiness as it could be. He smiled briefly and went to look at Teague.

Teague, too, was in real slumber. The fierce vertical line between his brows was shallow now, and the hard, deft hands lax and uncharacteristically purposeless. Tod had never seen him before without a focus for those narrow, blazing green eyes, without decisive spring and balance in his pose. It was good, somehow, to feel that for all his responsibilities, Teague could be as helpless as anyone.

Tod smiled as he passed Alma's closed Coffin. He always smiled at Alma when he saw her, when he heard her voice, when she crossed his thoughts. It was possible to be very brave around Alma, for gentleness and comfort were so ready that it was almost not necessary to call upon them. One could bear anything, knowing she was there.

Tod crossed the chamber and looked at the last pair. Carl was a furious blur of motion, his needle-cluster swinging free, his manipulators in the final phase. he grunted instead of screaming, a series of implosive, startled gasps. His eyes were open but only the whites showed.

Moira was quite relaxed, turned on her side, poured out on the floor of the Coffin like a long golden cat. She seemed in a contented abandonment of untroubled sleep.

He heard a new sound and went back to April. She was sitting up, cross-legged, her head bowed apparently in deep concentration. Tod understood; he knew that sense of achievement and the dedication of an entire psyche to the proposition that these weak and trembling arms which hold one up shall *not* bend.

He reached in and gently lifted the soft white hair away from her

face. She raised the albino's fathomless ruby eyes to him and

whimpered.

'Come on,' he said quietly. 'We're here.' When she did not move, he balanced on his stomach on the edge of the Coffin and put one hand between her shoulderblades. 'Come on.'

She pitched forward but he caught her so that she stayed kneeling. He drew her up and forward and put her hands on the bar. 'Hold tight, Ape,' he said. She did, while he lifted her thin body out of the Coffin and stood her on the top step. 'Let go now. Lean on me.'

Mechanically she obeyed, and he brought her down until she sat, as he had, on the bottom step. He punched the switch at her feet and put the capsules in her mouth while she looked up at him numbly, as if hypnotized. He got her beaker, thumped it, held it until its foaming subsided, and then put an arm around her shoulders while she drank. She closed her eyes and slumped against him, breathing deeply at first, and later, for a moment that frightened him, not at all. Then she sighed, 'Tod...'

'I'm here, Ape.'

She straightened up, turned and looked at him. She seemed to be

trying to smile, but she shivered instead. 'I'm cold.'

He rose, keeping one hand on her shoulder until he was sure she could sit up unassisted, and then brought her a cloak from the clips outside the Coffin. He helped her with it, knelt and put on her slippers for her. She sat quite still, hugging the garment tight to her. At last she looked around and back; up, around, and back again. 'We're – there!' she breathed.

'We're here,' he corrected.

'Yes, here. Here. How long do you suppose we ...'

'We won't know exactly until we can take some readings. Twenty-five, twenty-seven years – maybe more.'

She said, 'I could be old, old –' She touched her face, brought her fingertips down to the sides of her neck. 'I could be forty, even!'

He laughed at her, and then a movement caught the corner of his

eye. 'Carl!'

Carl was sitting sidewise on the edge of his Coffin, his feet still inside. Weak or no, bemused as could be expected, Carl should have grinned at Tod, should have made some healthy, swaggering gesture. Instead he sat still, staring about him in utter puzzlement. Tod went to him. 'Carl! Carl, we're here!'

Carl looked at him dully. Tod was unaccountably disturbed. Carl always shouted, always bounced; Carl had always seemed to be just a bit larger inside than he was outside, ready to burst through,

always thinking faster, laughing more quickly than anyone else.

He allowed Tod to help him down the steps, and sat heavily while Tod got his capsules and beaker for him. Waiting for the liquid to subside, he looked around numbly. Then drank, and almost toppled. April and Tod held him up. When he straightened again, it was abruptly. 'Hey!' he roared. 'We're here!' He looked up at them. 'April! Tod-o! Well what do you know – how are you, kids?'

'Carl?' The voice was the voice of a flute, if a flute could whisper. They looked up. There was a small golden surf of hair tumbled on and over the edge of Moira's Coffin.

Weakly, eagerly, they clambered up to Moira and helped her out. Carl breathed such a sigh of relief that Tod and April stopped to

smile at him, at each other.

Carl shrugged out of his weakness as if it were an uncomfortable garment and went to be close to Moira, to care about Moira and nothing else.

A deep labored voice called, 'Who's up?'

'Teague! It's Teague ... all of us, Teague,' called Tod. 'Carl and Moira and April and me. All except Alma.'

Slowly Teague's great head rose out of the Coffin. He looked around with the controlled motion of a radar sweep. When his head stopped its one turning, the motion seemed relayed to his body, which began to move steadily upward. The four who watched him knew intimately what this cost him in sheer willpower, yet no one made any effort to help. Unasked, one did not help Teague.

One leg over, the second. He ignored the bar and stepped down to seat himself on the bottom step as if it were a throne. His hands moved very slowly but without faltering as he helped himself to the capsules, then the beaker. He permitted himself a moment of stillness, eyes closed, nostrils pinched; then life coursed strongly into him. It was if his muscles visibly filled out a little. He seemed heavier and taller, and when he opened his eyes, they were the deeply vital, commanding light-sources which had drawn them, linked them, led them all during their training.

He looked toward the door in the corner. 'Has anyone -'

'We were waiting for you,' said Tod. 'Shall we ... can we go look now? I want to see the stars.'

'We'll see to Alma first.' Teague rose, ignoring the lip of his Coffin and the handhold it offered. He went to Alma's. With his height, he was the only one among them who could see through the top plate without mounting the steps.

Then, without turning, he said, 'Wait.'

The others, half across the room from him, stopped. Teague turned to them. There was no expression on his face at all. He stood quite motionless for perhaps ten seconds, and then quietly released a breath. He mounted the steps of Alma's Coffin, reached, and the side nearest his own machine sank silently into the floor. He stepped down, and spent a long moment bent over the body inside. From where they stood, tense and frightened, the others could not see inside. They made no effort to move closer.

'Tod,' said Teague, 'get the kit. Surgery Lambda. Moira, I'll need

'you.'

The shock of it went to Tod's bones, regenerated, struck him again; yet so conditioned was he to Teague's commands that he was on his feet and moving before Teague had stopped speaking. He went to the after bulkhead and swung open a panel, pressed a stud. There was a metallic whisper, and the heavy case slid out at his feet. He lugged it over to Teague, and helped him rack it on the side of the Coffin. Teague immediately plunged his hands through the membrane at one end of the kit, nodding to Moira to do likewise at the other. Tod stepped back, studiously avoiding a glance in at Alma, and returned to April. She put both her hands tight around his left biceps and leaned close. 'Lambda . . .' she whispered. 'That's . . . parturition, isn't it?'

He shook his head. 'Parturition is Surgery Kappa,' he said

painfully. He swallowed. 'Lambda's Caesarian.'

Her crimson eyes widened. 'Caesarian? Alma? She'd never need a

Caesarian!'

He turned to look at her, but he could not see, his eyes stung so. 'Not while she lived, she wouldn't,' he whispered. He felt the small white hands tighten painfully on his arm. Across the room, Carl sat quietly. Tod squashed the water out of his eyes with the heel of his hand. Carl began pounding knuckles, very slowly, against his own temple.

Teague and Moira were busy for a long time.

2

Tod pulled in his legs and lowered his head until the kneecaps pressed cruelly against his eyebrow ridges. He hugged his shins, ground his back into the wall-panels, and in this red-spangled blackness he let himself live back and back to Alma and joy, Alma and comfort, Alma and courage.

He had sat once, just this way, twisted by misery and anger, blind

and helpless, in a dark corner of an equipment shed at the spaceport. The rumor had circulated that April would not come after all, because albinism and the Sirius Rock would not mix. It turned out to be untrue, but that did not matter at the time. He had punched her, punched *Alma!* because in all the world he had been given nothing else to strike out at, and she had found him and had sat down to be with him. She had not even touched her face, where the blood ran; she simply waited until at last he flung himself on her lap and wept like an infant. And no one but he and Alma ever knew of it . . .

He remembered Alma with the spaceport children, rolling and tumbling on the lawn with them, and in the pool; and he remembered Alma, her face still, looking up at the stars with her soft and gentle eyes, and in those eyes he had seen a challenge as implacable and pervasive as space itself. The tumbling on the lawn, the towering dignity - these co-existed in Alma without friction. He remembered things she had said to him; for each of the things he could recall the kind of light, the way he stood, the very smell of the air at the time. 'Never be afraid, Tod. Just think of the worst possible thing that might happen. What you're afraid of will probably not be that bad - and anything else just has to be better.' And she said once, 'Don't confuse logic and truth, however good the logic. You can stick one end of logic in solid ground and throw the other end clear out of the cosmos without breaking it. Truth's a little less flexible.' And, 'Of course you need to be loved, Tod! Don't be ashamed of that, or try to change it. It's not a thing you have to worry about, ever. You are loved. April loves you. And I love you. Maybe I love you even more than April, because she loves everything you are, but I love everything you were and ever will be!'

And some of the memories were deeper and more important even than these, but were memories of small things – the meeting of eyes, the touch of a hand, the sound of laughter or a snatch of song, distantly.

Tod descended from memory into a blackness, that was only loss and despair, and then a numbness, followed by a reluctant awareness. He became conscious of what, in itself, seemed the merest of trifles: that there was a significance in his pose there against the bulkhead. Unmoving, he considered it. It was comfortable, to be so turned in upon oneself, and so protected, unaware ... and Alma would have hated to see him this way.

He threw up his head, and self-consciously straightened from his foetal posture. *That's over now*, he told himself furiously, and then, dazed, wondered what he had meant.

He turned to look at April. She was huddled miserably against him, her face and body lax, stopped, disinterested. He thumped his elbow into her ribs, hard enough to make her remember she had ribs. She looked up into his eyes and said, 'How? How could ...'

Tod understood. Of the three couples standard for each ship of the Sirian project, one traditionally would beget children on the planet; one, earlier, as soon as possible after awakening; and one still earlier, for conception would take place within the Coffin. But – not *before* awakening, and surely not long enough before to permit of gestation. It was an impossibility; the vital processes were so retarded within the Coffin that, effectively, there would be no stirring of life at all. So – 'How?' April pleaded. 'How could....'

Tod gazed upon his own misery, then April's, and wondered

what it must be that Teague was going through.

Teague, without looking up, said, 'Tod.'

Tod patted April's shoulder, rose and went to Teague. He did not look into the Coffin. Teague, still working steadily, tilted his head to one side to point. 'I need a little more room here.'

Tod lifted the transparent cube Teague had indicated and looked at the squirming pink bundle inside. He almost smiled. It was a nice baby. He took one step away and Teague said, 'Take 'em all, Tod.'

He stacked them and carried them to where April sat. Carl rose and came over, and knelt. The boxes hummed – a vibration which could be felt, not heard – as nutrient-bearing air circulated inside and back to the power-packs. 'A nice normal deliv – I mean, a nice normal batch o' brats,' Carl said. 'Four girls, one boy. Just right.'

Tod looked up at him. 'There's one more, I think.'

There was – another girl. Moira brought it over in the sixth box. 'Sweet,' April breathed, watching them. 'They're sweet.'

Moira said, wearily, 'That's all.'

Tod looked up at her.

'Alma ...?'

Moira waved laxly toward the neat stack of incubators. 'That's

all,' she whispered tiredly, and went to Carl.

That's all there is of Alma, Tod thought bitterly. He glanced across at Teague. The tall figure raised a steady hand, wiped his face with his upper arm. His raised hand touched the high end of the Coffin, and for an instant held a grip. Teague's face lay against his arm, pillowed, hidden and still. Then he completed the wiping motion and began stripping the sterile plastic skin from his hands. Tod's heart went out to him, but he bit the insides of his cheeks and kept silent. A strange tradition, thought Tod, that makes it impolite to grieve....

Teague dropped the shreds of plastic into the disposal slot and turned to face them. He looked at each in turn, and each in turn found some measure of control. He turned then, and pulled a lever, and the side of Alma's Coffin slid silently up.

Good-bye....

Tod put his back against the bulkhead and slid down beside April. He put an arm over her shoulders. Carl and Moira sat close, holding hands. Moira's eyes were shadowed but very much awake. Carl bore an expression almost of sullenness. Tod glanced, then glared at the boxes. Three of the babies were crying, though of course they could not be heard through the plastic incubators. Tod was suddenly conscious of Teague's eyes upon him. He flushed, and then let his anger drain to the capacious inner reservoir which must hold it and all his grief as well.

When he had their attention, Teague sat cross-legged before them

and placed a small object on the floor.

Tod looked at the object. At first glance it seemed to be a metal spring about as long as his thumb, mounted vertically on a black base. Then he realized that it was an art object of some kind, made of a golden substance which shimmered and all but flowed. It was an interlocked double spiral; the turns went round and up, round and down, round and up again, the texture of the gold clearly indicating, in a strange and alive way, which symbolized a rising and falling flux. Shaped as if it had been wound on a cylinder and the cylinder removed, the thing was formed of a continuous wire or rod which had no beginning and no end, but which turned and rose and turned and descended again in an exquisite continuity.... Its base was formless, an almost-smoke just as the gold showed an almost-flux; and it was as lightless as ylem.

Teague said, 'This was in Alma's Coffin. It was not there when we left Earth.'

'It must have been,' said Carl flatly.

Teague silently shook his head. April opened her lips, closed

them again. Teague said, 'Yes, April?'

April shook her head. 'Nothing, Teague. Really nothing.' But because Teague kept looking at her, waiting, she said, 'I was going to say . . . it's beautiful.' She hung her head.

Teague's lips twitched. Tod could sense the sympathy there. He stroked April's silver hair. She responded, moving her shoulder slightly under his hand. 'What is it, Teague?'

When Teague would not answer, Moira asked, 'Did it ... had it

anything to do with Alma?'

Teague picked it up thoughtfully. Tod could see the yellow loom

it cast against his throat and cheek, the golden points it built in his eyes. 'Something did.' He paused. 'You know she was supposed to conceive on awakening. But to give birth -'

Carl cracked a closed hand against his forehead. 'She must have

been awake for anyway two hundred and eighty days!'

'Maybe she made it,' said Moira.

Tod watched Teague's hand half-close on the object as if it might be precious now. Moira's was a welcome thought, and the welcome could be read on Teague's face. Watching it, Tod saw the complicated spoor of a series of efforts – a gathering of emotions, a determination; the closing of certain doors, the opening of others.

Teague rose. 'We have a ship to inspect, sights to take, calculations ... we've got to tune in Terra Prime, send them a

message if we can. Tod, check the corridor air.'

'The stars – we'll see the stars!' Tod whispered to April, the heady thought all but eclipsing everything else. He bounded to the corner where the door controls waited. He punched the test button, and a spot of green appeared over the door, indicating that with their awakening, the evacuated chambers, the living and control compartments, had been flooded with air and warmed. 'Air okay.'

'Go on then.'

They crowded around Tod as he grasped the lever and pushed. I won't wait for orders, Tod thought. I'll slide right across the corridor and open the guard plate and there it'll be – space, and the stars!

The door opened.

There was no corridor, no bulkhead, no armored port-hole, no -

No ship!

There was a night out there, dank, warm. It was wet. In it were hooked, fleshy leaves and a tangle of roots; a thing with legs which hopped up on the sill and shimmered its wings for them; a thing like a flying hammer which crashed in and smote the shimmering one and was gone with it, leaving a stain on the deck-plates. There was a sky aglow with a ghastly green. There was a thrashing and a scream out there, a pressure of growth, and a wrongness.

Blood ran down Tod's chin. His teeth met through his lower lip. He turned and looked past three sets of terrified eyes to Teague,

who said, 'Shut it!'

Tod snatched at the control. It broke off in his hand....

How long does a thought, a long thought, take?

Tod stood with the fractured metal in his hand and thought:

We were told that above all things we must adapt. We were told that perhaps there would be a thin atmosphere by now, on Terra Prime, but that in all likelihood we must live a new kind of life in pressure-domes. We were warned that what we might find would be flash-mutation, where the people could be more or less than human. We were warned, even, that there might be no life on Prime at all. But look at me now — look at all of us. We weren't meant to adapt to this! And we can't . . .

Somebody shouted while somebody shrieked, each sound a word, each destroying the other. Something thick as a thumb, long as a hand, with a voice like a distant airhorn, hurtled through the door and circled the room. Teague snatched a folded cloak from the clothingrack and, poising just a moment, batted it out of the air. It skittered, squirming, across the metal door. He threw the cloak on it to capture it. 'Get that door closed.'

Carl snatched the broken control out of Tod's hand and tried to fit it back into the switch mounting. It crumbled as if it were dried bread. Tod stepped outside, hooked his hands on the edge of the door, and pulled. It would not budge. A lizard as long as his arm scuttled out of the twisted grass and stopped to stare at him. He shouted at it, and with forelegs much too long for such a creature, it pressed itself upward until its body was forty-five degrees from the horizontal, it flicked the end of its long tail upward, and something flew over its head toward Tod, buzzing angrily. Tod turned to see what it was, and as he did the lizard struck from one side and April from the other.

April succeeded and the lizard failed, for its fangs clashed and it fell forward, but April's shoulder had taken Tod on the chest and, off balance as he was, he went flat on his back. The cold, dry, pulsing tail swatted his hand. He gripped it convulsively, held on tight. Part of the tail broke off and buzzed, flipping about on the ground like a click-beetle. But the rest held. Tod scuttled backward to pull the lizard straight as it began to turn on him, got his knees under him, then his feet. He swung the lizard twice around his head and smashed it against the inside of the open door. The part of the tail he was holding then broke off, and the scaly thing thumped inside and slid, causing Moira to leap so wildly to get out of its way that she nearly knocked the stocky Carl off his feet.

Teague swept away the lid of the Surgery *Lambda* kit, inverted it, kicked the clutter of instruments and medicaments aside and clapped the inverted box over the twitching, scaly body.

'April!' Tod shouted. He ran around in a blind semicircle, saw her struggling to her feet in the grass, snatched her up and bounded inside with her. 'Carl!' he gasped, 'Get the door....'

But Carl was already moving forward with a needle torch. With two deft motions he sliced out a section of the power-arm which was holding the door open. He swung the door to yelling, 'Parametal!'

Tod, grasping, ran to the lockers and brought a length of the synthetic. Carl took the wide ribbon and with a snap of the wrists broke it in two. Each half he bent (for it was very flexible when moved slowly) into a U. He placed one against the door and held out his hand without looking. Tod dropped the hammer into it. Carl tapped the parametal gently and it adhered to the door. He turned his face away and struck it sharply. There was a blue-white flash and the U was rigid and firmly welded to the door. He did the same thing with the other U, welding it to the nearby wall plates. Into the two gudgeons thus formed, Moira dropped a luxalloy bar, and the door was secured.

'Shall I sterilize the floor?' Moira asked.

'No,' said Teague shortly.

'But - bacteria ... spores ...'

'Forget it,' said Teague.

April was crying. Tod held her close, but made no effort to stop her. Something in him, deeper than panic, more essential than wonderment, understood that she could use this circumstance to spend her tears for Alma, and that these tears must be shed now or swell and burst her heart. So cry, he pled silently, cry for both of us, all of us.

With the end of action, belated shock spread visibly over Carl's face. 'The ship's gone,' he said stupidly. 'We're on a planet.' He looked at his hands, turned abruptly to the door, stared at it and began to shiver. Moira went to him and stood quietly, not touching him – just being near, in case she should be needed. April grew

gradually silent. Carl said, 'I-' and then shook his head.

Click. Shh. Clack, click. Methodically Teague was stacking the scattered contents of the medical kit. Tod patted April's shoulder and went to help. Moira glanced at them, peered closely into Carl's face, then left him and came to lend a hand. April joined them, and at last Carl. They swept up, and racked and stored the clutter, when Teague lowered a table, they helped get the dead lizard on it and pegged out for dissection. Moira cautiously disentangled the huge insect from the folds of the cloak and clapped a box over it, slid the lid underneath to bring the feebly squirming thing to Teague. He studied it for a long moment, then set it down and peered at the lizard. With forceps he opened the jaws and bent close. He grunted. 'April....'

She came to look. Teague touched the fangs with the tip of a scalpel. 'Look there.'

'Grooves,' she said. 'Like a snake.'

Teague reversed the scalpel and with the handle he gingerly pressed upward, at the root of one of the fangs. A cloudly yellow liquid beaded, ran down the groove. He dropped the scalpel and slipped a watch-glass under the tooth to catch the droplet. 'Analyze that later,' he murmured. 'But I'd say you saved Tod from something pretty nasty.'

'I didn't even think,' said April. 'I didn't ... I never knew there was any animal life on Prime. I wonder what they call this monster.'

'The honors are yours, April. You name it.' 'They'll have a classification for it already!'

'Who?'

Everyone started to talk, and abruptly stopped. In the awkward silence Carl's sudden laugh boomed. It was a wondrous sound in the frightened chamber. There was comprehension in it, and challenge, and above all, Carl himself, – boisterous and impulsive, quick, sure. The laugh was triggered by the gush of talk and its sudden cessation, a small thing in itself. But its substance was understanding, and with that an emotional surge, and with that, the choice of the one emotional expression Carl would always choose.

'Tell them, Carl,' Teague said.

Carl's teeth flashed. He waved a thick arm at the door. 'That isn't Sirius Prime. Nor Earth. Go ahead, April – name your pet.'

April, staring at the lizard, said, '*Crotalidus*, then, because it has a rattle and fangs like a diamondback.' Then she paled and turned to Carl, as the full weight of his statement came on her. 'Not – *not Prime*?'

Quietly, Teague said, 'Nothing like these ever grew on Earth. And Prime is a cold planet. It could never have a climate like that,' he nodded toward the door, 'no matter how much time has passed.'

'But what ... where ...' It was Moira.

'We'll find out when we can. But the instruments aren't here – they were in the ship.'

'But if it's a new ... another planet, why didn't you let me sterilize? What about airborne spores? Suppose it had been methane out there or —'

'We've obviously been conditioned to anything in the atmosphere. As to its composition — well, it isn't poisonous, or we wouldn't be standing here talking about it. Wait!' He held up a hand and quelled the babble of questions before it could fully start. 'Wondering is a luxury like worrying. We can't afford either. We'll get our answers when we get more evidence.'

'What shall we do?' asked April faintly.

'Eat,' said Teague. 'Sleep.' They waited. Teague said, 'Then we go outside.'

3

There were stars like daisies in a field, like dust in a sunbeam, and like flying, flaming mountains; near ones, far ones, stars of every color and every degree of brilliance. And there were bands of light which must be stars too distant to see. And something was stealing the stars, not taking them away, but swallowing them up, coming closer and closer, eating as it came. And at last there was only one left. Its name was Alma, and it was gone, and there was nothing left but an absorbent blackness and an aching loss.

In this blackness Tod's eyes snapped open, and he gasped,

frightened and lost.

'You awake, Tod?' April's small hand touched his face. He took it and drew it to his lips, drinking comfort from it.

From the blackness came Carl's resonant whisper, 'We're awake.

Teague? ....'

The lights flashed on, dim first, brightening swiftly, but not so fast as to dazzle unsuspecting eyes. Tod sat up and saw Teague at the table. On it was the lizard, dissected and laid out as neatly as an exploded view in a machine manual. Over the table, on a gooseneck, was a floodlamp with its lens masked by an infrared filter. Teague turned away from the table, pushing up his 'black-light' goggles, and nodded to Tod. There were shadows under his eyes, but otherwise he seemed the same as ever. Tod wondered how manly lonely hours he had worked while the two couples slept, doing that meticulous work under the irritating glow so that they would be undisturbed.

Tod went to him. 'Has my playmate been talking much?' He

pointed at the remains of the lizard.

'Yes and no,' said Teague. 'Oxygen-breather, all right, and a true lizard. He had a secret weapon – that tail-segment he flips over his head toward his victims. It has primitive ganglia like an Earth salamander's, so that the tail-segment trembles and squirms, sounding the rattles, after he throws it. He also has a skeleton that – but all this doesn't matter. Most important is that he's the analog of our early Permian life, which means (unless he's an evolutionary dead-end like a cockroach) that this planet is a billion years old at the least. And the little fellow here –' he touched the flying thing –

'bears this out. It's not an insect, you know. It's an arachnid.'

'With wings?'

Teague lifted the slender, scorpion-like pincers of the creature and let them fall. 'Flat chitinous wings are no more remarkable a leg adaptation than those things. Anyway, in spite of the ingenuity of his engineering, internally he's pretty primitive. All of which lets us hypothesize that we'll find fairly close analogs of what we're used to on Earth.'

'Teague,' Tod interrupted, his voice lowered, his eyes narrowed to contain the worry that threatened to spill over, 'Teague, what's

happened?'

'The temperature and humidity here seem to be exactly the same as that outside,' Teague went on, in precisely the same tone as before. 'This would indicate either a warm planet, or a warm season on a temperate planet. In either case it is obvious that -'

'But, Teague -'

' - that a good deal of theorizing is possible with very little evidence, and we need not occupy ourselves with anything else but that evidence.'

'Oh,' said Tod. He backed off a step. 'Oh,' he said again, 'sorry, Teague.' He joined the others at the food dispensers, feeling like a cuffed puppy. But he's right, he thought. As Alma said ... of the many things which might have happened, only one actually has. Let's wait then, and worry about that one thing when we can name it.

There was a pressure on his arm. He looked up from his thoughts and into April's searching eyes. He knew that she had heard, and he was unreasonably angry at her. 'Damn it, he's so cold-blooded,' he blurted defensively, but in a whisper.

April said, 'He has to stay with things he can understand, every minute.' She glanced swiftly at the closed Coffin. 'Wouldn't you?'

There was a sharp pain and a bitterness in Tod's throat as he thought about it. He dropped his eyes and mumbled, 'No, I wouldn't. I don't think I could.' There was a difference in his eyes as he glanced back at Teague. But it's so easy, after all, for strong people to be strong, he thought.

'Teague, what'll we wear?' Carl called.

'Skinflex.'

'Oh, no!' cried Moira. 'It's so clingy and hot!'

Carl laughed at her. He swept up the lizard's head and opened its jaws. 'Smile at the lady. She wouldn't put any tough old skinflex in the way of your pretty teeth!'

'Put it down,' said Teague sharply, though there was a flicker of

amusement in his eyes. 'It's still loaded with God-knows-what alkaloid. Moira, he's right. Skinflex just doesn't puncture.'

Moira looked respectfully at the yellow fangs and went

obediently to storage, where she pulled out the suits.

'We'll keep close together, back to back,' said Teague as they helped each other into the suits. 'All the weapons are ... were ... in the forward storage compartment, so we'll improvise. Tod, you and the girls each take a globe of anesthene. It's the fastest anesthetic we have and it ought to take care of anything that breathes oxygen. I'll take scalpels. Carl—'

'The hammer,' Carl grinned. His voice was fairly thrumming

with excitement.

'We won't attempt to fasten the door from outside. I don't mean to go farther than ten meters out, this first time. Just – you, Carl – lift off the bar as we go out, get the door shut as quickly as possible, and prop it there. Whatever happens, do not attack anything out

there unless you are attacked first, or unless I say so.'

Hollow-eyed, steady. Teague moved to the door with the others close around him. Carl shifted the hammer to his left hand, lifted the bar and stood back a little, holding it like a javelin. Teague, holding a glittering lancet lightly in each hand, pushed the door open with his foot. They boiled through, stepped aside for Carl as he butted the rod deep into the soil and against the closed door. 'All set.'

They moved as a unit for perhaps three meters, and stopped.

It was daytime now, but such a day as none of them had dreamed of. The light was green, very nearly a lime-green, and the shadows were purple. The sky was more lavender than blue. The air was warm and wet.

They stood at the top of a low hill. Before them a tangle of jungle tumbled up at them. So vital, so completely alive, it seemed to move by its own power of growth. Stirring, murmuring, it was too big, too much, too wide and deep and intertwined to assimilate at a glance; the thought, *this is a jungle*, was a pitiable understatement.

To the left, savannah-like grassland rolled gently down to the choked margins of a river – calmfaced, muddy and secretive. It too seemed astir with inner growings. To the right, more jungle. Behind

them, the bland and comforting wall of their compartment.

Above -

It may have been April who saw it first; in any case, Tod always associated the vision with April's scream.

They moved as she screamed, five humans jerked back then like five dolls on a single string, pressed together and to the compartment wall by an overwhelming claustrophobia. They were ants under a descending heel, flies on an anvil ... together their backs struck the wall and they cowered there, looking up.

And it was not descending. It was only - big. It was just that it

was there, over them.

April said, later, that it was like a cloud. Carl would argue that it was cylindrical, with flared ends and a narrow waist. Teague never attempted to describe it, because he disliked inaccuracies, and Moira was too awed to try. To Tod, the object had no shape. It was a luminous opacity between him and the sky, solid, massive as mountains. There was only one thing they agreed on, and that was that it was a ship.

And out of the ship came the golden ones.

They appeared under the ship as speckles of light, and grew in size as they descended, so that the five humans must withstand a second shock: they had known the ship was huge, but had not

known until now how very high above them it hung.

Down they came, dozens, hundreds. They filled the sky over the jungle and around the five, moving to make a spherical quadrant from the horizontal to the zenith, a full hundred and eight degrees from side to side – a radiant floating shell with its concave surface toward, around, above them. They blocked out the sky and the jungle-tops, cut off most of the strange green light, replacing it with their own – for each glowed coolly.

Each individual was distinct and separate. Later, they would argue about the form and shape of the vessel, but the exact shape of these golden things was never even mentioned. Nor did they ever agree on a name for them. To Carl they were an army, to April, angels. Moira called them (secretly) 'the seraphim,' and to Tod they

were masters. Teague never named them.

For measureless time they hung there, with the humans gaping up at them. There was no flutter of wings, no hum of machinery to indicate how they stayed aloft, and if each individual had a device to keep him afloat, it was of a kind the humans could not recognize. They were beautiful, awesome, uncountable.

And nobody was afraid.

Tod looked from side to side, from top to bottom of this incredible formation, and became aware that it did not touch the ground. Its lower edge was exactly horizontal, at his eye level. Since the hill fell away on all sides, he could see under this lower edge, here the jungle, there down across the savannah to the river. In a new amazement he saw eyes, and protruding heads.

In the tall grass at the jungle margin was a scurry and cease,

scurry and cease, as newtlike animals scrambled not quite into the open and froze, watching. Up in the lower branches of the fleshy, hook-leaved trees, the heavy scaly heads of leaf-eaters showed, and here and there was the armed head of a lizard with catlike tearing tusks.

Leather-winged fliers flapped clumsily to rest in the branches, hung for a moment for all the world like broken umbrellas, then achieved balance and folded their pinions. Something slid through the air, almost caught a branch, missed it and tumbled end-overend to the ground, resolving itself into a broad-headed scaly thing with wide membranes between fore and hind legs. And Tod saw his acquaintance of the night before, with its serrated tail and needle fangs.

And though there must have been eater and eaten here, hunter and hunted, they all watched silently, turned like living compass-needles to the airborne mystery surrounding the humans. They crowded together like a nightmare parody of the Lion and the Lamb, making a constellation, a galaxy of bright and wondering eyes; their distance from each other being, in its way, cosmic.

Tod turned his face into the strange light, and saw one of the golden beings separate from the mass and drift down and forward and stop. Had this living shell been a segment of curving mirror, this one creature would have been at its focal point. For a moment there was complete stillness, a silent waiting. Then the creature made a deep ... gesture. Behind it, all the others did the same.

If ten thousand people stand ten thousand meters away, and if, all at once, they kneel, it is hardly possible to see just what it is they have done; yet the aspect of their mass undergoes a definite change. So it was with the radiant shell – it changed, all of it, without moving. There was no mistaking the nature of the change, though its meaning was beyond knowing. It was an obeisance. It was an expression of profound respect, first to the humans themselves, next, and hugely, to something the humans represented. it was unquestionably an act of worship.

And what, thought Tod, could we symbolize to these shining ones? He was a scarab beetle or an Egyptian cat, a Hindu cow or a

Teuton tree, told suddenly that it was sacred.

All the while there flooded down the thing which Carl had tried so ineptly to express: 'We're sorry. But it will be all right. You will be glad. You can be glad now.'

At last there was a change in the mighty formation. The center rose and the wings came in, the left one rising and curling to tighten the curve, the right one bending inward without rising. In a moment the formation was a column, a hollow cylinder. It began to rotate slowly, divided into a series of close-set horizontal rings. Alternate rings slowed and stopped and began a counter-rotation, and with a sudden shift, became two interlocked spirals. Still the over-all formation was a hollow cylinder, but now it was composed of an upward and downward helix.

The individuals spun and swirled down and down, up and up, and kept this motion within the cylinder, and the cylinder quite discrete, as it began to rise. Up and up it lifted, brilliantly, silent, the living original of that which they had found by Alma's body ... up and up, filling the eye and the mind with its complex and controlled ascent, its perfect continuity; for here was a thing with no beginning and no end, all flux and balance where each rising was matched by a fall and each turn by its counterpart.

High, and higher, and at last it was a glowing spot against the hovering shadow of the ship, which swallowed it up. The ship left then, not moving, but fading away like the streamers of an aurora, but faster. In three heartbeats it was there, perhaps it was there, it

was gone.

Tod closed his eyes, seeing that dynamic double helix. The tip of his mind was upon it; he trembled on the edge of revelation. He knew what that form symbolized. He knew it contained the simple answer to his life and their lives, to this planet and its life and the lives which were brought to it. If a cross is more than an instrument of torture, more than the memento of an event; if the crux ansata, the Yin-and-Yang, David's star and all such crystallizations were but symbols of great systems of philosophy, then this dynamic intertwined spiral, this free-flowing, rigidly choreographed symbol was ... was —

Something grunted, something screamed, and the wondrous answer turned and rose spiraling away from him to be gone in three heartbeats. Yet in that moment he knew it was there for him when he had the time, the phasing, the bringing-together of whatever elements were needed. He could not use it yet but he had it. He had it.

Another scream, an immense thrashing all about. The spell was broken and the armistice over. There were chargings and fleeings, cries of death-agony and roaring challenges in and over the jungle, through the grasses to the suddenly boiling river. Life goes on, and death with it, but there must be more death than life when too much life is thrown together.

4

It may be that their five human lives were saved, in that turbulent reawakening, only by their alienness, for the life around them was cheek-and-jowl with its familiar enemy, its familiar quarry, its familiar food, and there need be no experimenting with the five soft containers of new rich juices standing awestruck with their backs to their intrusive shelter.

Then slowly they met one another's eyes. They cared enough for each other so that there was a gladness of sharing. They cared enough for themselves so that there was also a sheepishness, a troubled self-analysis: What did I do while I was out of my mind?

They drew together before the door and watched the chase and slaughter around them as it subsided toward its usual balance of hunting and killing, eating and dying. Their hands began to remember the weapons they held, their minds began to reach for reality.

'They were angels,' April said, so softly that no one but Tod heard her. Tod watched her lips tremble and part, and knew that she was about to speak the thing he had almost grasped, but then Teague spoke again, and Tod could see the comprehension fade from her and be gone. 'Look! Look there!' said Teague, and moved down the wall to the corner.

What had been an inner compartment of their ship was now an isolated cube, and from its back corner, out of sight until now, stretched another long wall. At regular intervals were doors, each fastened by a simple outside latch of parametal.

Teague stepped to the first door, the others crowding close. Teague listened intently, then stepped back and threw the door

open.

Inside was a windowless room, blazing with light. Around the sides, machines were set. Tod instantly recognized their air-cracker, the water-purifiers, the protein-converter and one of the auxiliary powerplants. In the center was a generator coupled to a light-metal fusion motor. The output buses were neatly insulated, coupled through fuseboxes and resistance controls to a 'Christmas tree' multiple outlet. Cables ran through the wall to the Coffin compartment and to the line of unexplored rooms to their left.

'They've left us power, at any rate,' said Teague. 'Let's look

down the line.'

Fish, Tod snarled silently. Dead man! After what you've just seen you should be on your knees with the weight of it, you should put out your eyes to remember better. But all you can do is take

inventory of your nuts and bolts

Tod looked at the others, at their strained faces and their continual upward glances, as if the bright memory had magnetism for them. He could see the dream fading under Teague's untimely urgency. You couldn't let us live with it quietly, even for a moment. Then another inward voice explained to him, But you see, they killed Alma.

Resentfully he followed Teague.

Their ship had been dismantled, strung out along the hilltop like a row of shacks. They were interconnected, wired up, re-stacked, ready and reeking with efficiency – the lab, the library, six chambers full of mixed cargo, then – then the noise Teague made was as near to a shout of glee as Tod had ever heard from the man. The door he had just opened showed their instruments inside, all the reference tapes and tools and manuals. There was even a dome in the roof, and the refractor was mounted and waiting.

'April?' Tod looked, looked again. She was gone. 'April!' She emerged from the library, three doors back. 'Teague!'

Teague pulled himself away from the array of instruments and went to her. 'Teague,' she said, 'every one of the reels has been read.'

'How do you know?'

'None of them are rewound.'

Teague looked up and down the row of doors. 'That doesn't sound like the way they -' The unfinished sentence was enough. Whoever had built this from their ship's substance worked according to function and with a fine efficiency.

Teague entered the library and picked a tape-reel from its rack. He inserted the free end of the film into a slot and pressed a button.

The reel spun and the film disappeared inside the cabinet.

Teague looked up and back. Every single reel was inside out on the clips. 'They could have rewound them,' said Teague, irritated.

'Maybe they did,' Teague murmured. He picked up a reel, looked at it, picked up another and another. 'Music. A play. And here's our personal stuff – behavior film, training records, everything.'

Carl said, 'Whoever read through all this knows a lot about us.'

Teague frowned. 'Just us?'

'Who else?'

'Earth,' said Teague. 'All of it.'

'You mean we were captured and analyzed so that whoever they

are could get a line on Earth? You think they're going to attack Earth?'

"You mean ... You think ..." Teague mimicked coldly. 'I mean nothing and I think nothing! Tod, would you be good enough to explain to this impulsive young man what you learned from me earlier? That we need concern ourselves only with evidence?'

Tod shuffled his feet, wishing not to be made an example for anyone, especially Carl, to follow. Carl flushed and tried to smile. Moira took his hand secretly and squeezed it. Tod heard a slight exhalation beside him and looked quickly at April. She was angry. There were times when he wished she would not be angry.

She pointed. 'Would you call that evidence, Teague?'

They followed her gesture. One of the tape-readers stood open. On its reelshelf stood the counterpart of the strange object they had seen twice before – once, in miniature, found in Alma's Coffin; once again, huge in the sky. This was another of the miniatures.

Teague stared at it, then put out his hand. As his fingers touched it, the pilot-jewel on the tape-reader flashed on, and a soft, clear

voice filled the room.

Tod's eyes stung. He had thought he would never hear that voice again. As he listened, he held to the lifeline of April's presence, and felt his lifeline tremble.

Alma's voice said:

'They made some adjustments yesterday with the needle-clusters in my Coffin, so I think they will put me back into it . . . Teague, oh, Teague, I'm going to die!

'They brought me the recorder just now. I don't know whether it's for their records or for you. If it's for you, then I must tell you

... how can I tell you?

'I've watched them all this time ... how long? Months ... I don't know. I conceived when I awoke, and the babies are coming very soon now; it's been long enough for that; and yet – how can I tell you?

'They boarded us, I don't know how, I don't know why, nor where ... outside, space is strange, wrong. It's all misty, without

stars, crawling with blurs and patches of light.

'They understand me; I'm sure of that – what I say, what I think. I can't understand them at all. They radiate feelings – sorrow, curiosity, confidence, respect. When I began to realize I would die, they gave me a kind of regret. When I broke and cried and said I wanted to be with you, Teague, they reassured me, they said I would. I'm sure that's what they said. But how could that be?

'They are completely dedicated in what they are doing. Their

work is a religion to them, and we are part of it. They ... value us, Teague. They didn't just find us. They chose us. It's as if we were

the best part of something even they consider great.

'The best ...! Among them I feel like an amoeba. They're beautiful, Teague. Important. Very sure of what they are doing. It's that certainty that makes me believe what I have to believe; I am going to die, and you will live, and you and I will be together. How can that be? How can that be?

'Yet it is true, so believe it with me, Teague. But - find out how!

'Teague, every day they have put a machine on me, radiating. It has to do with the babies. It isn't done to harm them. I'm sure of that. I'm their mother and I'm sure of it. They won't die.

'I will. I can feel their sorrow.

'And I will be with you, and they are joyous about that....

'Teague - find out how!'

Tod closed his eyes so that he would not look at Teague, and wished with all his heart that Teague had been alone to hear that ghostly voice. As to what it had said, the words stood as a frame for a picture he could not see, showing him only where it was, not what it meant. Alma's voice had been tremulous and unsure, but he knew it well enough to know that joy and certitude had lived with her as she spoke. There was wonderment, but no fear.

Knowing that it might be her only message to them, should she

not have told them more - facts, figures, measurements?

Then an old, old tale flashed into his mind, an early thing from the ancient Amerenglish, by Hynlen (Henlyne, was it? no matter) about a man who tried to convey to humanity a description of the superbeings who had captured him, with only his body as a tablet and his nails as a stylus. Perhaps he was mad by the time he finished, but his message was clear at least to him: 'Creation took eight days.' How would he, Tod, describe an association with the ones he had seen in the sky outside, if he had been with them for nearly three hundred days?

April tugged gently at his arm. He turned toward her, still avoiding the sight of Teague. April inclined her shining white head to the door. Moira and Carl already stood outside. They joined

them, and waited wordlessly until Teague came out.

When he did, he was grateful, and he need not say so. He came out, a great calm in his face and voice, passed them and let them follow him to his methodical examination of the other compartments, to finish his inventory.

Food stores, cable and conduit, metal and parametal rod and sheet stock, tools and tool-making matrices and dies. A hanger, in which lay their lifeboat, fully equipped.

But there was no long-range communication device, and no parts for one.

And there was no heavy space-drive mechanism, nor tools to make one, nor fuel if they should make the tools.

Back in the instrument room, Carl grunted. 'Somebody means for us to stick around.'

'The boat -'

Teague said, 'I don't think they'd have left us the boat if Earth was in range.'

'We'll build a beacon,' Tod said suddenly. 'We'll get a rescue ship

out to us.'

'Out where?' asked Teague drily.

They followed his gaze. Bland and silent, merciless, the decay chronometer stared back at them. Built around a standard radioactive, it had two dials – one which measured the amount of energy radiated by the material, and one which measured the loss mass. When they checked, the reading was correct. They checked, and the reading was 64.

'Sixty-four years,' said Teague. 'Assuming we averaged as much as one-half light speed, which isn't likely, we must be thirty light-years away from Earth. Thirty years to get a light-beam there, sixty or more to get a ship back, plus time to make the beacon and time for Earth to understand the signal and prepare a ship....' He shook his head.

'Plus the fact,' Tod said in a strained voice, 'that there is no habitable planet in a thirty-year radius from Sol. Except Prime.'

Shocked, they gaped silently at this well-known fact. A thousand years of scrupulous search with the best instruments could not have missed a planet like this at such a distance.

'Then the chronometer's wrong!'

'I'm afraid not,' said Teague. 'It's sixty-four years since we left Earth, and that's that.'

'And this planet doesn't exist,' said Carl with a sour smile, 'and I suppose that is also that.'

'Yes, Teague,' said Tod. 'One of those two facts can't exist with the other.'

'They can because they do,' said Teague. 'There's a missing factor. Can a man breathe under water, Tod?'

'If he has a diving-helmet.'

Teague spread his hands. 'It took sixty-four years to get to this planet *if*. We have to find the figurative diving-helmet.' He paused. 'The evidence in favor of the planet's existence is fairly impressive,'

he said wryly. 'Let's check the other fact.'

'How?'

'The observatory.'

They ran to it. The sky glowed its shimmering green, but through it the stars had begun to twinkle. Carl got to the telescope first, put a big hand on the swing-controls, and said, 'Where first?' He tugged

at the instrument. 'Hey!' He tugged again.

'Don't!' said Teague sharply. Carl let go and backed away. Teague switched on the lights and examined the instrument. 'It's already connected to the compensators,' he said. 'Hmp! Our hosts are most helpful.' He looked at the setting of the small motors which moved the instrument to cancel diurnal rotation effects. 'Twenty-eight hours, thirteen minutes plus. Well, if that's correct for this planet, it's proof that this isn't Earth or Prime – if we needed proof.' He touched the controls lightly. 'Carl, what's the matter here?'

Carl bent to look. There were dabs of dull silver on the threads of the adjusting screws. He touched them. 'Parametal,' he said. 'Unflashed, but it has adhered enough to jam the threads. Take a couple of days to get it off without jarring it. Look here – they've done the same thing with the objective screws!'

'We look at what they want us to see, and like it,' said Tod.

'Maybe it's something we want to see,' said April gently.

Only half-teasing, Tod said. 'Whose side are you on, anyway?'

Teague put his eye to the instrument. His hands, by habit, strayed to the focusing adjustment, but found it locked the same way as the others. 'Is there a Galactic Atlas?'

'Not in the rack,' said Moira a moment later.

'Here,' said April from the chart table. Awed, she added, 'Open.'

Tensely they waited while Teague took his observation and referred to the atlas and to the catalog they found lying under it. When at last he lifted his face from the calculations, it bore the strangest expression Tod had ever seen there.

'Our diving-helmet,' he said at last, very slowly, too evenly, 'that is, the factor which rationalizes our two mutually exclusive
facts – is simply that our captors have a faster-than-light drive.'

'But according to theory -'

'According to our telescope,' Teague interrupted, 'through which I have just seen Sol, and these references so thoughtfully laid out for us ...' Shockingly his voice broke. He took two deep breaths, and said, 'Sol is two-hundred and seventeen light-years away. That sun which set a few minutes ago is Beta Librae.' He studied their shocked faces, one by one. 'I don't know what we shall eventually

call this place,' he said with difficulty, 'but we had better get used to calling it home.'

They called the planet Viridis ('the greenest name I can think of,' Moira said) because none among them had ever seen such a green. It was more than the green of growing, for the sunlight was green-tinged and at night the whole sky glowed green, a green as bright as the brightest silver of Earth's moon, as water molecules, cracked by the star's intense ultraviolet, celebrated their nocturnal reunion.

They called the moons Wynken, Blynken and Nod, and the sun they called – the sun.

They worked like slaves, and then like scientists, which is a change of occupation but not a change of pace. They built a palisade of a cypress-like, straight-grained wood, each piece needle-pointed, double-laced with parametal wire. It had a barred gate and peep-holes with periscopes and permanent swivel-mounts for the needle-guns they were able to fabricate from tube-stock and spare solenoids. They roofed the enclosure with parametal mesh which, at one point, could be rolled back to launch the lifeboat.

They buried Alma.

They tested and analyzed, classified, processed, researched everything in the compound and within easy reach of it – soil, vegetation, fauna. They developed an insect-repellent solution to coat the palisade and an insecticide with an automatic spray to keep the compound clear of the creatures, for they were numerous, large, and occasionally downright dangerous, like the 'flying caterpillar' which kept its pseudopods in its winged form and enthusiastically broke them off in the flesh of whatever attacked them, leaving an angry rash and suppurating sores. They discovered three kinds of edible seed and another which yielded a fine hydrocarbonic oil much like soy, and a flower whose calyces, when dried and then soaked and broiled, tasted precisely like crab-meat.

For a time they were two separate teams, virtually isolated from each other. Moira and Teague collected minerals and put them through the mass spectroscope and the radioanalyzers, and it fell to April to classify the life-forms, with Carl and Tod competing mightily to bring in new ones. Or at least photographs of new ones. Two-ton *Parametrodon*, familiarly known as Dopey – a massive herbivore with just enough intelligence to move its jaws – was hardly the kind of thing to be carried home under one's arm, and *Felodon*, the scaly-carnivore with the catlike tusks, though barely as long as a man, was about as friendly as a half-starved wolverine.

Tetrapodys (Tod called it 'Umbrellabird') turned out to be a rewarding catch. They stumbled across a vine which bore foul-smelling pods; these the clumsy amphibious bats found irresistible. Carl synthesized the evil stuff and improved upon it, and they smeared it on tree-boles by the river. Tetrapodys came there by the hundreds and laid eggs apparently in sheer frustration. These eggs were camouflaged by a frilly green membrane, for all the world like the ground-buds of the giant water-fern. The green shoots tasted like shallots and were fine for salad when raw and excellent as onion soup when stewed. The half-hatched Tetrapodys yielded ligaments which when dried made excellent self-baited fish-hooks. The wing-muscles of the adult tasted like veal cutlet with fish-sauce, and the inner, or main shell of the eggs afforded them an amazing shoe-sole – light, tough, and flexible, which, for some unknown reason, Felodon would not track.

Pteronauchis, or 'flapping frog,' was the gliding newt they had seen on that first day. Largely nocturnal, it was phototropic; a man with a strong light could fill a bushel with the things in minutes. Each specimen yielded twice as many, twice as large, and twice as good frog-legs as a Terran frog.

There were no mammals.

There were flowers in profusion – white (a sticky green in that light), purple, brown, blue, and, of course, the ubiquitous green. No red – as a matter of fact, there was virtually no red anywhere on the planet. April's eyes became a feast for them all. It is impossible to describe the yearning one can feel for an absent color. And so it was that a legend began with them. Twice Tod had seen a bright red growth. The first time he thought it was a mushroom, the second it seemed more of a lichen. The first time it was surrounded by a sea of crusher ants on the move – a fearsome carpet which even *Parametrodon* respected. The second time he had seen it from twenty meters away and had just turned toward it when not one, but three *Felodons* came hurtling through the undergrowth at him.

He came back later, both times, and found nothing. And once Carl swore he saw a brilliant red plant move slowly into a rock crevice as he approached. The thing became their *edelweiss* – very

nearly their Grail.

Rough diamonds lay in the streambeds and emeralds glinted in the night-glow, and for the Terran-oriented mind there was incalcuable treasure to be scratched up just below the steaming humus: iridium, ruthenium, metallic neptunium 237. There was an unaccountable (at first) shift toward the heavier metals. The ruthenium-rhodium-palladium group was as plentiful on Viridis as the iron-nickel-cobalt series on Earth; cadmium was actually more

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plentiful here than its relative, zinc. Technetium was present, though rare, on the crust, while Earth's had long since decayed.

Vulcanism was common on Viridis, as could be expected in the presence of so many radioactives. From the lifeboat they had seen bald-spots where there were particularly high concentrations of 'hot' material. In some of these there was life.

At the price of a bout of radiation sickness, Carl went into one such area briefly for specimens. What he found was extraordinary – a tree which was warm to the touch, which used minerals and water at a profligate pace, and which, when transplanted outside an environment which destroyed cells almost as fast as they developed, went cancerous, grew enormously, and killed itself with its own terrible viability. In the same lethal areas lived a primitive worm which constantly discarded segments to keep pace with its rapid growth, and which also grew visibly and died of living too fast when taken outside.

The inclination of the planet's axis was less than 2°, so that there were virtually no seasons, and very little variation in temperature from one latitude to another. There were two continents and an equatorial sea, no mountains, no plains, and few large lakes. Most of the planet was gently rolling hill-country and meandering rivers, clothed in thick jungle or grass. The spot where they had awakened was as good as any other, so there they stayed, wandering less and less as they amassed information. Nowhere was there an artifact of any kind, nor any slightest trace of previous habitation. Unless, of course, one considered the existence itself of life on this planet. For Permian life can hardly be expected to develop in less than a billion years; yet the irreproachable calendar inherent in the radioactive bones of Viridis insisted that the planet was no more than thirty-five million years old.

5

When Moira's time came, it went hard with her, and Carl forgot to swagger because he could not help. Teague and April took care of her, and Tod stayed with Carl, wishing for the right thing to say and not finding it, wanting to do something for this new strange man with Carl's face, and the unsure hands which twisted each other, clawed the ground, wiped cruelly at the scalp, at the shins, restless, terrified. Through Carl, Tod learned a little more of what he never wanted to know – what it must have been like for Teague when he lost Alma.

Alma's six children were toddlers by then, bright and happy in

the only world they had ever known. They had been named for moons – Wynken, Blynken and Nod, Rhea, Callisto and Titan. Nod and Titan were the boys, and they and Rhea had Alma's eyes and hair and sometimes Alma's odd, brave stillness – a sort of suspension of the body while the mind went out to grapple and conquer instead of fearing. If the turgid air and the radiant ground affected them, they did not show it, except perhaps in their rapid development.

They heard Moira cry out. It was like laughter, but it was pain. Carl sprang to his feet. Tod took his arm and Carl pulled it away.

'Why can't I do something? Do I have to just sit here?'

'Shh. She doesn't feel it. That's a tropism. She'll be all right. Sit down, Carl. Tell you what you can do – you can name them. Think. Think of a nice set of names, all connected in some way. Teague used moons. What are you going to –'

'Time enough for that,' Carl grunted. 'Tod . . . do you know what

I'll ... I'd be if she – if something happened?'

'Nothing's going to happen.'

'I'd just cancel out. I'm not Teague. I couldn't carry it. How does Teague do it? ...' Carl's voice lapsed to a mumble.

'Names,' Tod reminded him. 'Seven, eight of 'em. Come on,

now.'

'Think she'll have eight?'

'Why not? She's normal.' He nudged Carl. 'Think of names. I know! How many of the old signs of the zodiac would make good names?'

'I don't remember 'em.'

'I do. Aries, that's good. Taurus. Gem – no; you wouldn't want to call a child "Twins". Leo – that's *fine!*'

'Libra,' said Carl, 'for a girl. Aquarius, Sagittarius – how many's that?'

Tod counted on his fingers. 'Six. Then, Virgo and Capricorn. And you're all set!' But Carl wasn't listening. In two long bounds he reached April, who was just stepping into the compound. She looked tired. She looked more than tired. In her beautiful eyes was a great pity, the color of a bleeding heart.

'Is she all right? Is she?' They were hardly words, those hoarse,

rushed things.

April smiled with her lips, while her eyes poured pity. 'Yes, yes,

she'll be all right. It wasn't too bad.'

Carl whooped and pushed past her. She caught his arm, and for her frailty, swung him around.

'Not yet, Carl. Teague says to tell you first -'

'The babies? What about them? How many, April?'

April looked over Carl's shoulder at Tod. She said, 'Three.'

Carl's face relaxed, numb, and his eyes went round. 'Th – what? Three so far, you mean. There'll surely be more....'

She shook her head.

Tod felt the laughter explode within him, and he clamped his jaws on it. It surged at him, hammered in the back of his throat. And then he caught April's pleading eyes. He took strength from her, and bottled up a great bray of merriment.

Carl's voice was the last fraying thread of hope. 'The other's

died, then.'

She put a hand on his cheek. 'There were only three. Carl ... don't be mean to Moira.'

'Oh, I won't,' he said with difficulty. 'She couldn't ... I mean it wasn't her doing.' He flashed a quick, defensive look at Tod, who was glad now he had controlled himself. What was in Carl's face meant murder for anyone who dared laugh.

April said, 'Not your doing either, Carl. It's this planet. It must

be.'

'Thanks, April,' Carl muttered. He went to the door, stopped, shook himself like a big dog. He said again, 'Thanks,' but this time his voice didn't work and it was only a whisper. He went inside.

Tod bolted for the corner of the building, whipped around it and sank to the ground, choking. He held both hands over his mouth and laughed until he hurt. When at last he came to a limp silence, he felt April's presence. She stood quietly watching him, waiting.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm sorry. But . . . it is funny.'

She shook her head gravely. 'We're not on Earth, Tod. A new world means new manners, too. That would apply even on Terra Prime if we'd gone there.'

'I suppose,' he said, and then repressed another giggle.

'I always thought it was a silly kind of joke anyway,' she said primly. 'Judging virility by the size of a brood. There isn't any scientific basis for it. Men are silly. They used to think that virility could be measured by the amount of hair on their chests, or how tall they were. There's nothing wrong with having only three.'

'Carl?' grinned Tod. 'The big ol' swashbuckler?' He let the grin fade. 'All right, Ape. I won't let Carl see me laugh. Or you either. All right?' A peculiar expression crossed his face. 'What was that

you said? April! Men never had hair on their chests!'

'Yes they did. Ask Teague.'

'I'll take your word for it.' He shuddered. 'I can't imagine it unless a man had a tail too. And bony ridges over his eyes.'

'It wasn't so long ago that they had. The ridges, anyway. Well – I'm glad you didn't laugh in front of him. You're nice, Tod.'

'You're nice too.' He pulled her down besode him and hugged

her gently. 'Bet you'll have a dozen.'

'I'll try.' She kissed him.

When specimen-hunting had gone as far as it could, classification became the settlement's main enterprise. And gradually, the unique

pattern of Viridian life began to emerge.

Viridis had its primitive fish and several of the mollusca, but the fauna was primarily arthropods and reptiles. The interesting thing about each of the three branches was the close relationship between species. It was almost as if evolution took a major step with each generation, instead of bumbling along as on Earth, where certain stages of development are static for thousands, millions of years. *Pterodon*, for example, existed in three varieties, the simplest of which showed a clear similarity to *pteronauchis*, the gliding newt. A simple salamander could be shown to be the common ancestor of both the flapping frog and massive *Parametrodon*, and there were strong similarities between this salamander and the worm which fathered the arthropods.

They lived close to the truth for a long time without being able to see it, for man is conditioned to think of evolution from simple to complex, from ooze to animalcule to mollusc to ganoid; amphibid to monotreme to primate to thinker... losing the significance of the fact that all these co-exist. Was the vertebrate eel of prehistory a *higher* form of life than his simpler descendent? The whale lost his legs; this men call recidivism, a sort of backsliding in evolution, and

treat it as a kind of illegitimacy.

Men are oriented out of simplicity toward the complex, and make of the latter a goal. Nature treats complex matters as expediencies, and so is never confused. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Viridis colony took so long to discover their error, for the weight of evidence was in error's favor. There was indeed an unbroken line from the lowest forms of life to the highest, and to assume that they had a common ancestor was a beautifully consistent hypothesis, of the order of accuracy an archer might display in hitting dead center, from a thousand paces, a bowstring with the neck of his arrow.

The work fell more and more on the younger ones. Teague isolated himself, not by edict, but by habit. It was assumed that he was working along his own lines; and then it became usual to proceed without him, until finally he was virtually a hermit in their

midst. He was ageing rapidly; perhaps it hurt something in him to be surrounded by so much youth. His six children thrived, and, with Carl's three, ran naked in the jungle armed only with their sticks and speed. They were apparently immune to practically everything Viridis might bring against them, even *Crotalidus*' fangs, which gave them the equivalent of a severe bee-sting (as opposed to what had happened to Moira once, when they had had to reactivate one of the Coffins to keep her alive).

Tod would come and sit with him sometimes, and as long as there was no talk the older man seemed to gain something from the visits. But he preferred to be alone, living as much as he could with memories for which not even a new world could afford a substitute.

Tod said to Carl, 'Teague is going to wither up and blow away if we can't interest him in something.'

'He's interested enough to spend a lot of time with whatever he's thinking about,' Carl said bluntly.

'But I'd like it better if he was interested in something here, now. I wish we could ... I wish –' But he could think of nothing, and it was a constant trouble to him.

Little Titan was killed, crushed under a great clumsy *Parametrodon* which slid down a bank on him while the child was grubbing for the scarlet cap of the strange red mushroom they had glimpsed from time to time. It was in pursuit of one of these that Moira had been bitten by the *Crotalidus*. One of Carl's children was drowned – just how, no one knew. Aside from these tragedies, life was easy and interesting. The compound began to look more like a *kraal* as they acclimated, for although the adults never adapted as well as the children, they did become far less sensitive to insect bites and the poison weeds which first troubled them.

It was Teague's son Nod who found what was needed to bring Teague's interest back, at least for a while. The child came back to the compound one day, trailed by two slinking *Felodons* who did not catch him because they kept pausing and pausing to lap up gouts of blood which marked his path. Nod's ear was torn and he had a green-stick break in his left ulna, and a dislocated wrist. He came weeping, weeping tears of joy. He shouted as he wept, great proud noises. Once in the compound he collapsed, but he would not lose consciousness, nor his grip on his prize, until Teague came. Then he handed Teague the mushroom and fainted.

The mushroom was and was not like anything on Earth. Earth has a fungus called *schizophyllum*, not uncommon but most strange. Though not properly a fungus, the red 'mushroom' of Viridis had many of the functions of *schizophyllum*.

*Schizophyllum* produces spores of four distinct types, each of which grows into a genetically distinct, completely dissimilar plant. Three of these are sterile. The fourth produces *schizophyllum*.

The red mushroom of Viridis also produced four distinct heterokaryons or genetically different types, and the spores of one

of these produced the mushroom.

Teague spent an engrossing earth-year in investigating the other three.

6

Sweating and miserable in his integument of flexskin, Tod hunched in the crotch of a finger-tree. His knees were drawn up and his head was down; his arms clasped his shins and he rocked slightly back and forth. He knew he would be safe here for some time – the fleshy fingers of the tree were clumped at the slender, swaying ends of the branches and never turned back toward the trunk. He wondered what it would be like to be dead. Perhaps he would be dead soon, and then he'd know. He might as well be.

The names he'd chosen were perfect and all of a family: Sol, Mercury, Venus, Terra, Mars, Jupiter ... eleven of them. And he

could think of a twelfth if he had to.

For what?

He let himself sink down again into the blackness wherein nothing lived but the oily turning of what's it like to be dead?

Quiet, he thought. No one would laugh.

Something pale moved on the jungle floor below him. He thought instantly of April, and angrily put the thought out of his mind. April would be sleeping now, having completed the trifling task it had taken her so long to start. Down there, that would be Blynken, or maybe Rhea. They were very alike.

It didn't matter, anyway.

He closed his eyes and stopped rocking. He couldn't see anyone, no one could see him. That was the best way. So he sat, and let time pass, and when a hand lay on his shoulder, he nearly leaped out of the tree. 'Damn it, Blynken -'

'It's me. Rhea.' The child, like all of Alma's daughters, was large for her age and glowing with health. How long had it been? Six,

eight . . . nine Earth years since they had landed.

'Go hunt mushrooms,' Tod growled. 'Leave me alone.'

'Come back,' said the girl.

Tod would not answer. Rhea knelt beside him, her arm around

the primary branch, her back, with his, against the trunk. She bent

her head and put her cheek against his. 'Tod.'

Something inside him flamed. He bared his teeth and swung a heavy fist. The girl doubled up soundlessly and slipped out of the tree. He stared down at the lax body and at first could not see it for the haze of fury which blew and whirled around him. Then his vision cleared and he moaned, tossed his club down and dropped after it. He caught up the club and whacked off the tree-fingers which probed toward them. He swept up the child and leapt clear, and sank to his knees, gathering her close.

'Rhea, I'm sorry, I'm sorry ... I wasn't ... I'm not - Rhea! Don't

be dead!'

She stirred and made a tearing sound with her throat. Her eyelids trembled and opened, uncovering pain-blinded eyes. 'Rhea!'

'It's all right,' she whispered, 'I shouldn't've bothered you. Do

you want me to go away?'

'No,' he said, 'No.' He held her tight. Why not let her go away? a part of him wondered, and another part, frightened and puzzled, cried. No! No! He had an urgent, half-hysterical need to explain. Why explain to her, a child? Say you're sorry, comfort her, heal her, but don't expect her to understand. Yet he said, 'I can't go back. There's nowhere else to go. So what can I do?'

Rhea was quiet, as if waiting. A terrible thing, a wonderful thing, to have someone you have hurt wait patiently like that while you find a way to explain. Even if you only explain it to yourself ... 'What could I do if I went back? They – they'll never – they'll laugh at me. They'll all laugh. They're laughing now.' Angry again, plaintive no more, he blurted, 'April! Damn April! She's made a eunuch out of me!'

'Because she had only one baby?'

'Like a savage.'

'It's a beautiful baby. A boy.'

'A man, a real man, fathers six or eight.'

She met his eyes gravely. 'That's silly.'

'What's happening to us on this crazy planet?' he raged. 'Are we evolving backwards? What comes next – one of you kids hatching out some amphibids?'

She said only, 'Come back, Tod.'

'I can't,' he whispered. 'They'll think I'm ... that I can't ...'
Helplessly, he shrugged. 'They'll laugh.'

'Not until you do, and then they'll laugh with you. Not at you,

Tod.

Finally, he said it, 'April won't love me; she'll never love a weakling.'

She pondered, holding him with her clear gaze. 'You really need to be loved a whole lot.'

Perversely, he became angry again. 'I can get along!' he snapped.

And she smiled and touched the nape of his neck. 'You're loved,' she assured him. 'Gee, you don't have to be mad about that. I love you, don't I? April loves you. Maybe I love you even more than she does. She loves everything you are, Tod. I love everything you ever were and everything you ever will be.'

He closed his eyes and a great music came to him. A long, long time ago he had attacked someone who came to comfort him, and she had let him cry, and at length she had said ... not exactly these

words, but - it was the same.

'Rhea.'

He looked at her. 'You said all that to me before.'

A puzzled small crinkle appeared between her eyes and she put her fingers on it. 'Did I?'

'Yes,' said Tod, 'but it was before you were even born.'

He rose and took her hand, and they went back to the compound, and whether he was laughed at or not he never knew, for he could think of nothing but his full heart and of April. He went straight in to her and kissed her gently and admired his son, whose name was Sol, and who had been born with hair and two tiny incisors, and who had heavy bony ridges over his eyes....

'A fantastic storage capacity,' Teague remarked, touching the top of the scarlet mushroom. 'The spores are almost microscopic. The thing doesn't seem to want them distributed either. It positively hoards them, millions of them.'

'Start over, please,' April said. She shifted the baby in her arms. He was growing prodigiously. 'Slowly. I used to know something

about biology - or so I thought. But this -'

Teague almost smiled. It was good to see. The ageing face had not had so much expression in it in five Earth-years. 'I'll get as basic as I can, then, and start from there. First of all, we call this thing a mushroom, but it isn't. I don't think it's a plant, though you couldn't call it an animal, either.'

'I don't think anybody ever told me the real difference between a

plant and an animal,' said Tod.

'Oh ... well, the most convenient way to put it – it's not strictly accurate, but it will do – is that plants make their own food and animals subsist on what others have made. This thing does both. It has roots, but –' he lifted an edge of the skirted stem of the mushroom – 'it can move them. Not much, not fast; but if it wants to shift itself, it can.'

April smiled, 'Tod, I'll give you basic biology any time. Do go on,

Teague.'

'Good. Now, I explained about the heterokaryons – the ability this thing has to produce spores which grow up into four completely different plants. One is a mushroom just like this. Here are the other three.'

Tod looked at the box of plants. 'Are they really all from the

mushroom spores?'

'Don't blame you,' said Teague, and actually chuckled. 'I didn't believe it myself at first. A sort of pitcher plant, half full of liquid. A thing like a cactus. And this one. It's practically all underground, like a truffle, although it has these cilia. You wouldn't think it was anything but a few horsehairs stuck in the ground.'

'And they're all sterile,' Tod recalled.

'They're not,' said Teague, 'and that's what I called you in here to tell you. They'll yield if they are fertilized.'

'Fertilized how?'

Instead of answering, Teague asked April, 'Do you remember how far back we traced the evolution of Viridian life?'

'Of course. We got the arthropods all the way back to a simple segmented worm. The insects seemed to come from another worm, with pseudopods and a hard carapace.'

'A caterpillar,' Tod interpolated.

'Almost,' said April, with a scientist's nicety. 'And the most primitive reptile we could find was a little gymnoderm you could barely see without a glass.'

'Where did we find it?'

'Swimming around in - oh! In those pitcher plant things!'

'If you won't take my word for this,' said Teague, a huge enjoyment glinting between his words, 'you'll just have to breed these things yourself. It's a lot of work, but this is what you'll discover.

'An adult gymnoderm – a male – finds this pitcher and falls in. There's plenty of nutriment for him, you know, and he's a true amphibian. He fertilizes the pitcher. Nodules grow under the surface of the liquid inside there –' he pointed '– and bud off. The buds are mobile. They grow into wrigglers, miniature tadpoles. Then into lizards. They climb out and go about the business of being – well, lizards.'

'All males?' asked Tod.

'No,' said Teague, 'and that's an angle I haven't yet investigated. But apparently some males breed with females, which lay eggs, which hatch into lizards, and some find plants to fertilize. Anyway, it looks as if this plant is actually the progenitor of all the reptiles

here; you know how clear the evolutionary lines are to all the species.'

'What about the truffle with the horsehairs?' asked Tod.

'A pupa,' said Teague, and to the incredulous expression on April's face, he insisted. 'Really – a pupa. After nine weeks or so of dormance, it hatches out into what you almost called a caterpillar.'

'And then into all the insects here,' said April, and shook her head in wonderment. 'And I suppose that cactus-thing hatches out the nematodes, the segmented ones that evolve into arthropods?'

Teague nodded. 'You're welcome to experiment,' he said again, 'but believe me – you'll only find out I'm right: it really happens.'

'Then this scarlet mushroom is the beginning of everything, here.'

'I can't find another theory,' said Teague.

'I can,' said Tod.

They looked at him questioningly, and he rose and laughed. 'Not yet. I have to think it through.' He scooped up the baby and then

helped April to her feet. 'How do you like our Sol, Teague.'

'Fine,' said Teague. 'A fine boy.' Tod knew he was seeing the heavy occipital ridges, the early teeth, and saying nothing. Tod was aware of a faint inward surprise as the baby reached toward April and he handed him over. He should have resented what might be in Teague's mind, but he did not. The beginnings of an important insight welcomed criticism of the child, recognized its hairiness, its savagery, and found these things good. But as yet the thought was too nebulous to express, except by a smile. He smiled, took April's hand, and left.

'That was a funny thing you said to Teague,' April told him as

they walked toward their quarters.

'Remember, April, the day we landed? Remember -' he made a gesture that took in a quadrant of sky - 'Remember how we all felt ... good?'

'Yes,' she murmured. 'It was like a sort of compliment, and a

reassurance. How could I forget?'

'Yes. Well ...' He spoke with difficulty but his smile stayed. 'I have a thought, and it makes me feel like that. But I can't get it into words,' After a thoughtful pause, he added, 'Yet.'

She shifted the baby. 'He's getting so heavy.'

'I'll take him.' He took the squirming bundle with the deep-set, almost humorous eyes. When he looked up from them, he caught an expression on April's face which he hadn't seen in years. 'What is it, Ape?'

'You - like him.'

'Well, sure.'

'I was afraid. I was afraid for a long time that you ... he's ours, but he isn't exactly a pretty baby.'

'I'm not exactly a pretty father.'

'You know how precious you are to me?' she whispered.

He knew, for this was an old intimacy between them. He laughed

and followed the ritual: 'How precious?'

She cupped her hands and brought them together, to make of them an ivory box. She raised the hands and peeped into them, between the thumbs, as if at a rare jewel, then clasped the magic tight and hugged it to her breast, raising tear-filled eyes to him. 'That precious,' she breathed.

He looked at the sky, seeing somewhere in it the many peak moments of their happiness when she had made that gesture, feeling how each one, meticulously chosen, brought all the others back. 'I used to hate this place,' he said. 'I guess it's changed.'

'You've changed.'

Changed how? he wondered. He felt the same, even though he knew he looked older....

The years passed, and the children grew. When Sol was fifteen Earth-years old, short, heavy-shouldered, powerful, he married Carl's daughter Libra. Teague, turning to parchment, had returned to his hermitage from the temporary stimulation of his researches on what they still called 'the mushroom.' More and more the colony lived off the land and out of the jungle, not because there was any less to be synthesized from their compact machines, but out of preference; it was easier to catch flapping frogs or umbrella-birds and cook them than to bother with machine settings and check-analyses, and, somehow, a lot more fun to eat them, too.

It seemed to them safer, year by year. Felodon, unquestionably the highest form of life on Viridis, was growing scarce, being replaced by a smaller, more timid carnivore April called Vulpidus (once, for it seemed not to matter much any more about keeping records) and everyone ultimately called 'fox,' for all the fact that it was a reptile. Pterodon was disappearing too, as were all the larger forms. More and more they strayed after food, not famine-driven, but purely for variety; more and more they found themselves welcome and comfortable away from the compound. Once Carl and Moira drifted off for nearly a year. When they came back they had another child — a silent, laughing little thing with oddly long arms and heavy teeth.

The warm days and the glowing nights passed comfortably and the stars no longer called. Tod became a grandfather and was proud. The child, a girl, was albino like April, and had exactly April's deep red eyes. Sol and Libra named her Emerald, a green name and a ground-term rather than a sky-term, as if in open expression of the slow spell worked on them all by Viridis. She was mute – but so were almost all the new children, and it seemed not to

matter. They were healthy and happy.

Tod went to tell Teague, thinking it might cheer the old one up a little. He found him lying in what had once been his laboratory, thin and placid and disinterested, absently staring down at one of the arthropodal flying creatures that had once startled them so by zooming into the Coffin chamber. This one had happened to land on Teague's hand, and Teague was laxly waiting for it to fly off again, out through the unscreened window, past the unused sprays, over the faint tumble of rotted spars which had once been a palisade.

'Teague, the baby's come?'

Teague sighed, his tired mind detaching itself from memory episode by episode. His eyes rolled toward Tod and finally he turned his head. 'Which one would that be?'

Tod laughed. 'My grandchild, a girl. Sol's baby.'

Teague let his lids fall. He said nothing.

'Well, aren't you glad?'

Slowly a frown came to the papery brow. 'Glad.' Tod felt he was looking at the word as he had stared at the arthropod, wondering limpy when it might go away. 'What's the matter with it?'

'What?'

Teague sighed, again, a weary, impatient sound. 'What does it look like?' he said slowly, emphasizing each one-syllabled word.

'Like April. Just like April?'

Teague half sat up, and blinked at Tod. 'You don't mean it.'

'Yes, eyes red as —' The image of an Earth sunset flickered near his mind but vanished as too hard to visualize. Tod pointed at the four red-capped 'mushrooms' that had stood for so many years in the test-boxes in the laboratory. 'Red as those.'

'Silver hair,' said Teague.

'Yes, beau -'

'All over,' said Teague flatly.

'Well, yes.'

Teague let himself fall back on the cot and gave a disgusted snort. 'A monkey.'

'Teague!'

'Ah-h-h ... go 'way,' growled the old man. 'I long ago resigned myself to what was happening to us here. A human being just can't

adapt to the kind of radioactive ruin this place is for us. Your monsters'll breed monsters, and the monsters'll do the same if they can, until pretty soon they just won't breed any more. And that will be the end of that, and good riddance....' His voice faded away. His eyes opened, looking on distant things, and gradually found themselves focused on the man who stood over him in shocked silence. 'But the one thing I can't stand is to have somebody come in here saying, "Oh, joy, oh happy day!"

'Teague ...' Tod swallowed heavily.

'Viridis eats ambition; there was going to be a city here,' said the old man indistinctly. 'Viridis eats humanity; there were going to be people here.' He chuckled gruesomely. 'All right, all right, accept it if you have to – and you have to. But don't come around here celebrating.'

Tod backed to the door, his eyes horrow-round, then turned and

fled.

## 7

April held him as he crouched against the wall, rocked him slightly, made soft unspellable mother-noises to him.

'Shh, he's all decayed, all lonesome and mad,' she murmured.

'Shh. Shh.'

Tod felt half-strangled. As a youth he had been easily moved, he recalled; he had that tightness of the throat for sympathy, for empathy, for injustices he felt the Universe was hurling at him out of its capacious store. But recently life had been placid, full of love and togetherness and a widening sense of membership with the earth and the air and all the familiar things which walked and flew and grew and bred in it. And his throat was shaped for laughter now; these feelings hurt him.

'But he's right,' he whispered. 'Don't you see? Right fro the beginning it ... it was ... remember Alma had six children, April? And a little later, Carl and Moira had three? And you, only one ... how long is it since the average human gave birth to only one?'

'They used to say it was humanity's last major mutation,' she admitted, 'Multiple births... these last two thousand years. But -'

'Eyebrow ridges,' he interrupted. 'Hair ... that skull, Emerald's skull, slanting back like that; did you see the tusks on that little ... baboon of Moira's?'

'Tod! Don't!'

He leaped to his feet, sprang across the room and snatched the

golden helix from the shelf where it had gleamed its locked symbolism down on them ever since the landing. 'Around and down!' he shouted. 'Around and down!' He squatted beside her and pointed furiously. 'Down and down into the blackest black there is; down into *nothing*.' He shook his fist at the sky. 'You see what they do? They find the highest form of life they can and plant it here and watch it slide down into the muck!' He hurled the artifact away from him.

'But it goes up too, round and up. Oh, Tod!' she cried. 'Can you remember them, what they looked like, the way they flew, and say these things about them?'

'I can remember Alma,' he gritted, 'conceiving and gestating alone in space, while they turned their rays on her every day. You know why?' With the sudden thought, he stabbed a finger down at her. 'To give her babies a head-start on Viridis, otherwise they'd have been born normal here; it would've taken another couple of generations to start them downhill, and they wanted us all to go together.'

'No, Tod, no!'

'Yes, April, yes. How much proof do you need?' He whirled on her. 'Listen – remember that mushroom Teague analyzed? He had to pry spores out of it to see what it yielded. Remember the three different plants he got? Well, I was just there; I don't know how many times before I've seen it, but only now it makes sense. He's got four mushrooms now; do you see? Do you see? Even back as far as we can trace the bugs and newts on this green hell-pit, Viridis won't let anything climb; it must fall.'

'I don't -'

'You'll give me basic biology any time,' he quoted sarcastically. 'Let me tell you some biology. That mushroom yields three plants, and the plants yield animal life. Well, when the animal life fertilized those heterowhatever—'

'Heterokaryons.'

'Yes. Well, you don't get animals that can evolve and improve. You get one pitiful generation of animals which breeds back into a mushroom, and there is sits hoarding its spores. Viridis wouldn't let one puny newt, one primitive pupa build! It snatches 'em back, locks 'em up. That mushroom isn't the beginning of everything here – it's the end!'

April got to her feet slowly, looking at Tod as if she had never seen him before, not in fear, but with troubled curiosity. She crossed the room and picked up the artifact, stroked its gleaming golden coils. 'You could be right,' she said in a low voice. 'But that can't be all there is to it.' She set the helix back in its place. 'They wouldn't.'

She spoke with such intensity that for a moment that metrical formation, mighty and golden, rose again in Tod's mind, up and up to the measureless cloud which must be a ship. He recalled the sudden shift, like a genuflection, directed at them, at *him*, and for that moment he could find no evil in it. Confused, he tossed his head, found himself looking out the door, seeing Moira's youngest ambling comfortably across the compound.

'They wouldn't?' he snarled. He took April's slender arm and whirled her to the door. 'You know what I'd do before I'd father another one like that?' He told her specifically what he would do.

'A lemur next, hm? A spider, an oyster, a jellyfish!'

April whimpered and ran out. 'Know any lullabies to a tapeworm?' he roared after her. She disappeared into the jungle,

and he fell back, gasping for breath....

Having no stomach for careful thought nor careful choosing, having Teague for an example to follow, Tod too turned hermit. He could have survived the crisis easily perhaps, with April to help, but she did not come back. Moira and Carl were off again, wandering; the children lived their own lives, and he had no wish to see Teague. Once or twice Sol and Libra came to see him, but he snarled at them and they left him alone. It was no sacrifice. Life on Viridis was very full for the contented ones.

He sulked in his room or poked the compound by himself. He activated the protein converter once, but found its products tasteless, and never bothered with it again. Sometimes he would stand near the edge of the hilltop and watch the children playing in

the long grass, and his lip would curl.

Damn Teague! He'd been happy enough with Sol all those years, for all the boy's bulging eyebrow ridges and hairy body. He had been about to accept the silent, silver Emerald, too, when the crotchety old man had dropped his bomb. Once or twice Tod wondered detachedly what it was in him that was so easily reached, so completely insecure, that the suggestion of abnormality should strike so deep.

Somebody once said, 'You really need to be loved, don't you,

Tod?'

No one would love this tainted thing, father of savages who spawned animals. He didn't deserve to be loved.

He had never felt so alone. 'I'm going to die. But I will be with you too.' That had been Alma. Huh! There was old Teague, tanning his brains in his own sour acids. Alma had believed

something or other ... and what had come of it? That wizened old crab lolling his life away in the lab.

Tod spent six months that way. \_

'Tod!' He came out of sleep reluctantly, because in sleep an inner self still lived with April where there was no doubt and no fury; no desertion, no loneliness.

He opened his eyes and stared dully at the slender figure silhouetted against Viridis' glowing sky. 'April?'

'Moira,' said the figure. The voice was cold.

'Moira!' he said, sitting up. 'I haven't seen you for a year. More. Wh –'

'Come,' she said. 'Hurry.'

'Come where?'

'Come by yourself or I'll get Carl and he'll carry you.' She walked swiftly to the door.

He reeled after her. 'You can't come in here and -'

'Come on.' The voice was edged and slid out from between clenched teeth. A miserable part of him twitched in delight and told him that he was important enough to be hated. He despised himself for recognizing the twisted thought, and before he knew what he was doing he was following Moira at a steady trot.

'Where are -' he gasped, and she said over her shoulder, 'If you

don't talk you'll go faster.'

At the jungle margin a shadow detached itself and spoke. 'Got him?'

'Yes, Carl.'

The shadow became Carl. He swung in behind Tod, who suddenly realized that if he did not follow the leader, the one behind would drive. He glanced back at Carl's implacable bulk, and then put down his head and jogged doggedly along as he was told.

They followed a small stream, crossed it on a fallen tree, and climbed a hill. Just as Tod was about to accept the worst these determined people might offer in exchange for a moment to ease his fiery lungs, Moira stopped. He stumbled into her. She caught his arm and kept him on his feet.

'In there,' she said, pointing.

'A finger tree.'

'You know how to get inside,' Carl growled.

Moira said, 'She begged me not to tell you, ever. I think she was wrong.'

'Who? What is -'

'Inside,' said Carl, and shoved him roughly down the slope.

His long conditioning was still with him, and reflexively he sidestepped the fanning fingers which swayed to meet him. He ducked under them, batted aside the inner phalanx, and found himself in the clear space underneath. He stopped there, gasping.

Something moaned.

He bent, fumbled cautiously in the blackness. He touched something smooth and alive, recoiled, touched it again. A foot.

Someone began to cry harshly, hurtfully, the sound exploding as if through clenched hands.

'April!'

'I told them not to ...' and she moaned.

'April, what is it, what's happened?'

'You needn't ... be,' she said, sobbed a while, and went on, '... angry. It didn't live.'

'What didn't ... you mean you ... April, you -'
'It wouldn't've been a tapeworm,' she whispered.

'Who -' he fell to his knees, found her face. 'When did you -'

'I was going to tell you that day, that very same day, and when you came in so angry at what Teague told you. I specially wanted to, I thought you'd . . . be glad.'

'April, why didn't you come back? If I'd known....'

'You said what you'd do if I ever ... if you ever had another ... you meant it, Tod.'

'It's this place, this Viridis,' he said sadly. 'I went crazy.'

He felt her wet hand on his cheek.

'It's all right. I just didn't want to make it worse for you,' April said.

'I'll take you back.'

'No, you can't. I've been ... I've lost a lot of ... just stay with me a little while.'

'Moira should have -'

'She just found me,' said April. 'I've been alone all the – I guess I made a noise. I didn't mean to. Tod... don't quarrel. Don't go into a lot of... It's all right.'

Against her throat he cried. 'All right!'

'When you're by yourself,' she said faintly, 'you think; you think better. Did you ever think of -'

'April!' he cried in anguish, the very sound of her pale,

pain-wracked voice making this whole horror real.

'Shh, sh. Listen,' she said rapidly. 'There isn't time, you know, Tod. Tod, did you ever think of us all, Teague and Alma and Moira and Carl and us, what we are?'

'I know what I am.'

'Shh. Altogether we're a leader and mother; a word and a shield; a doubter, a mystic....' Her voice trailed off. She coughed and he could feel the spastic jolt shoot through her body. She panted lightly for a moment and went on urgently, 'Anger and prejudice and stupidity, courage, laughter, love, music ... it was all aboard that ship and it's all here on Viridis. Our children and theirs – no matter what they look like, Tod, no matter how they live or what they eat – they have that in them. Humanity isn't just a way of walking, merely a kind of skin. It's what we had together and what we gave Sol. It's what the golden ones found in us and wanted for Viridis. You'll see. You'll see.'

'Why Viridis?'

'Because of what Teague said – and what you said.' Her breath puffed out in the ghost of a laugh. 'Basic biology ... ontogeny follows phylogeny. The human foetus is a cell, an animalcule, a gilled amphibian ... all up the line. It's there in us; Viridis makes it go backward.'

'To what?'

'The mushroom. The spores. We'll be spores. Tod. Together ... Alma said she could be dead, and together with Teague! That's why I said ... it's all right. This doesn't matter, what's happened. We live in Sol, we live in Emerald, with Carl and Moira, you see? Closer, nearer than we've ever been.'

Tod took a hard hold on his reason. 'But back to spores - why? What then?'

She sighed. It was unquestionably a happy sound. 'They'll be back for the reaping, and they'll have us, Tod, all we are and all they worship: goodness and generosity and the urge to build; mercy; kindness.'

'They're needed too,' she whispered. 'And the spores make mushrooms, and the mushrooms make the heterokaryons; and from those, away from Viridis, come the life-forms to breed us -us, Tod! into whichever form is dominant. And there we'll be, that flash of old understanding of a new idea ... the special pressure on a painter's hand that makes him a Rembrandt, the sense of architecture that turns a piano-player into a Bach. Three billion extra years of evolution, ready to help where it can be used. On ever Earth-type planet, Tod - millions of us, blowing about in the summer wind, waiting to give....'

'Give! Give what Teague is now, rotten and angry?'

'That isn't Teague. That will die off. Teague lives with Alma in their children, and in theirs . . . she said she'd be with him!'

'Me ... what about me?' he breathed. 'What I did to you....'

'Nothing, you did nothing. You live in Sol, in Emerald. Living, conscious, alive ... with me....'

He said, 'You mean ... you could talk to me from Sol?'

'I think I might.' With his forehead, bent so close to her, he felt her smile. 'But I don't think I would. Lying so close to you, why should I speak to an outsider?'

Her breathing changed and he was suddenly terrified. 'April,

don't die.'

'I won't,' she said. 'Alma didn't.' She kissed him gently and died.

It was a long darkness, with Tod hardly aware of roaming and raging through the jungle, of eating without tasting, of hungering without knowing of it. Then there was a twilight, many months long, soft and still, with restfulness here and a promise soon. Then there was the compound again, found like a dead memory, learned again just a little more readily than something new. Carl and Moira were kind, knowing the nature of justice and the limits of punishment, and at last Tod was alive again.

He found himself one day down near the river, watching it and thinking back without fear of his own thoughts, and a growing wonder came to him. His mind had for so long dwelt on his own evil that it was hard to break new paths. He wondered with an awesome effort what manner of creatures might worship humanity for itself, and what manner of creatures humans were to be so worshipped. It was a totally new concept to him, and he was completely immersed in it, so that when Emerald slid out of the grass and stood watching him, he was frightened and shouted.

She did not move. There was little to fear now on Viridis. All the large reptiles were gone, and there was room for the humans, the humanoids, the primates, the ... children. In his shock the old reflexes played. He stared at her, her square stocky body, the silver hair which covered it all over except for the face, the palms, the soles of the feet. 'A monkey!' he spat, in Teague's tones, and the shock turned to shame. He met her eyes, April's deep glowing

rubies, and they looked back at him without fear.

He let a vision of April grow and fill the world. The child's rare red eyes helped (there was so little, so very little red on Viridis). He saw April at the spaceport, holding him in the dark shadows of the blockhouse while the sky flamed above them. We'll go out like that soon, soon, Tod. Squeeze me, squeeze me ... Ah, he'd said, who needs a ship?

Another April, part of her in a dim light as she sat writing; her hair, a crescent of light loving her cheek, a band of it on her brow; then she had seen him and turned, rising, smothered his first word

with her mouth. Another April wanting to smile, waiting; and April asleep, and once April sobbing because she could not find a special word to tell him what she felt for him... He brought his mind back from her in the past, from her as she was, alive in his mind, back to here, to the bright mute with the grave red eyes who stood before him, and he said, 'How precious?'

The baby kept her eyes on his, and slowly raised her silken hands. She cupped them together to make a closed chamber, looked down at it, opened her hands slightly and swiftly to peer inside, rapt at what she pretended to see; closed her hands again to capture the treasure, whatever it was, and hugged it to her breast. She looked up at him slowly, and her eyes were full of tears, and she was smiling.

He took his grandchild carefully in his arms and held her gently

and strongly. Monkey?

'April,' he gasped. 'Little Ape. Little Ape.'

Viridis, is a young planet which bears (at first glance) old life-forms. Come away and let the green planet roll around its sun; come back in a while – not long, as astronomical time goes.

The jungle is much the same, the sea, the rolling savannahs. But

the life....

Viridis was full of primates. There were blunt-toothed herbivores and long-limbed tree-dwellers, gliders and burrowers. The fisheaters were adapting the way all Viridis life must adapt, becoming more fit by becoming simpler, or go to the wall. Already the sea-apes had rudimentary gills and had lost their hair. Already tiny forms competed with the insects on their own terms.

On the banks of the wandering rivers, monotremes with opposed toes dredged and paddled, and sloths and lemurs crept at night. At first they had stayed together, but they were soon too numerous for that; and a half dozen generations cost them the power of speech, which was, by then, hardly a necessity. Living was good for

primates on Viridis, and became better each generation.

Eating and breeding, hunting and escaping filled the days and the cacophonous nights. It was hard in the beginning to see a friend cut down, to watch a slender silver shape go spinning down a river and know that with it went some of your brother, some of your mate, some of yourself. But as the hundreds became thousands and the thousands millions, winessing death became about as significant was watching your friend get his hair cut. The basic ids each spread through the changing mutating population like a stain, crossed and recrossed by the strains of the others, co-existing, eating each other

and being eaten and all the while passing down through the generations.

There was a cloud over the savannah, high over the ruins of the compound. It was a thing of many colors and of no particular shape, and it was bigger than one might imagine, not knowing how far away it was.

From it dropped a golden spot that became a thread, and down came a golden mass. It spread and swung, exploded into a myriad of individuals. Some descended on the compound, erasing and changing, lifting, breaking – always careful to kill nothing. Others blanketed the planet, streaking silently through the green aisles, flashing unimpeded through the tangled thickets. They combed the riverbanks and the half-light of hill waves, and everywhere they went they found and touched the mushroom and stripped it of its spores, the compaction and multiplication of what had once been the representatives of a very high reptile culture.

Primates climbed and leaped, crawled and crept to the jungle margins to watch. Eater lay by eaten; the hunted stood on the hunter's shoulder, and a platypoid laid an egg in the open which

nobody touched.

Simian forms hung from the trees in loops and ropes, in swarms and beards, and more came all the time, brought by some ineffable magnetism to watch at the hill. It was a fast and a waiting, with no movement but jostling for position, a crowding forward from behind and a pressing back from the slightest chance of interfering with the golden visitors.

Down from the polychrome cloud drifted a mass of the golden beings, carrying with them a huge sleek ship. They held it above the ground, sliced it, lifted it apart, set down this piece and that until a shape began to grow. Into it went bales and bundles, stocks and stores, and then the open tops were covered. It was a much bigger installation than the one before.

Quickly, it was done, and the golden cloud hung waiting.

The jungle was trembling with quiet.

In one curved panel of the new structure, something spun, fell outward, and out of the opening came a procession of stately creatures, long-headed, bright-eyed, three-toed, richly plumed and feathered. They tested their splendid wings, then stopped suddenly, crouched and looking upward.

They were given their obeisance by the golden ones, and after there appeared in the sky the exquisite symbol of a beauty that rides up and up, turns and spirals down again only to rise again; the symbol of that which has no beginning and no end, and the sign of those whose worship and whose work is to bring to all the Universe that which has shown itself worthy in parts of it.

Then they were gone, and the jungle exploded into killing and flight, eating and screaming, so that the feathered ones dove back into their shelter and closed the door....

And again to the green planet (when the time was right) came the cloud-ship, and found a world full of birds, and the birds watched in awe while they harvested their magic dust, and built a new shelter. In this they left four of their own for later harvesting, and this was to make the Viridis a most beautiful place.

From Viridis, the ship vaulted through the galaxies, searching for worlds worthy of what is human in humanity, whatever their manner of being alive. These they seeded, and of these, perhaps one would produce something new, something which could be reduced to the dust of Viridis, and from dust return.

## When You're Smiling

Never tell the truth to humans.

I can't recall having formulated that precept; I do know I've lived under it all my life.

But Henry?

It couldn't matter with Henry.

You might say Henry didn't count.

And who would blame me? Being me, I'd found, was a lonely job. Doing better things than other people – and doing them better to boot – is its own reward, up to a point. But to find out about those murders, those dozens and dozens of beautiful scot-free murders, and then not to be able to tell anyone ... well, I act like a human being in so many other ways –

And besides, it's only Henry.

When I was a kid in school, I had three miles to go and used roller skates except when it was snowing. Sometimes it got pretty cold, occasionally too hot, and often wet; but rain or shine, Henry was there when I got to the building. That was twenty years ago, but all I have to do is close my eyes to bring it all back, him and his homely, doggy face, his odd flexible mouth atwist with laughter and welcome. He'd take my books and set them by the wall and rub one of my hands between his two if it was cold, or toss me a locker-room towel if it was wet or very hot.

I never could figure out why he did it. It was more than just plain hero-worship, yet Lord knows he got little enough from me.

That went on for years, until he graduated. I didn't do so well and it took me longer to get out. I don't think I really tried to graduate until after Henry did; the school suddenly seemed pretty bleak, so I did some work and got clear of it.

After that, I kicked around a whole lot looking for a regular income without specializing in anything, and found it writing features for the Sunday supplement of one of those newspapers whose editorial policies are abhorrent to decent people, but it's all

right; no decent person reads them.

I write about floods, convincingly describing America's certain watery grave, and I write about drought and the vanishing water table, visualizing our grandchildren expiring on barren plains that are as dry as a potato chip. Then there's the perennial collision with a wandering planet, and features about nuts who predict the end of

the world, and biographies of great patriots cut to size so they won't conflict with the editorial page. It's a living, and when you can compartment it away from what you think, none of it bothers you.

So a lot of things happened and twenty years went by, and all of a

sudden I ran into Henry.

The first funny thing about him was that he hadn't changed. I don't think he had even grown much. He still had the coarse hair and the ugly wide mouth and the hot happy eyes. The second funny thing was the way he was dressed, like always, in hand-me-downs: a collar four sizes too large, a baggy suit, a raveled sweater that would have fought bitterly with his old herringbone if both weren't so faded.

He came wagging and panting up to me this early fall day when everyone in sight but Henry was already wearing a topcoat. I knew him right away and I couldn't help myself; I just stood there and laughed at him. He laughed, too, glad to the groveling point, not caring why I was laughing, but simply welcoming laughter for its own sake. He said my name indistinctly, again and again; Henry almost always spoke indistinctly because of that grin he wore half around his head.

'Well, come on!' I bellowed at him, and then cussed at him. It always made him wince, and it did now. 'I'll buy you a drink. I'll buy you nine drinks.'

'No,' he said, smiling, backing away a little, bobbing his head in that funny way, as if he was about to duck. 'I can't right now.'

It seemed to me he was looking at my sharp-creased dacron suit, or maybe the pearl homburg. Or maybe he just caught my eye on his old set of threads. He waggled his hands aimlessly in front of him, like an old woman caught naked and not knowing what to cover up. 'I don't drink.'

'You'll drink,' I said.

I took him by the wrist and marched him down to the corner and into Molson's, while he tugged ineffectually at me and mumbled things from between his solid, crooked teeth. I wanted a drink and I needed a laugh, right *now*, and I wasn't going to drag all the way down to Skid Row just to keep him from feeling conspicuous.

Somebody was sitting in a back booth – someone I especially didn't want to see. Be seen by. I don't think I broke stride when I saw her, though. Hell, the day won't come when I can't handle the likes of her....

'Siddown,' I said, and Henry had to; I pushed him and the edge of the seat hit the backs of his knees. I sat down, too, giving him the hip hard enough to slide those worn old tweeds of his back into the corner where he wouldn't be able to get out unless I moved first. 'Steve!' I roared, just as though I didn't care if anyone in the place knew I was there. Steve was on his way, but I always yelled like that; it bothered him. Steve's also sort of a funny guy.

'Awright, awright,' he complained. 'What'll you have?'

'What are you drinking, Henry?'
'Oh, nothing – nothing for me.'

I snorted at him and said to Steve, 'Two sour-mash an' soda on the side.'

Steve grunted and went away.

'Really,' Henry said, with his maybe-I-better-duck wobble, 'I don't want any. I don't drink.'

'Yes, you do,' I told him. 'Now what's with you? Come on, right from the beginning. From school. I want the story of your life –

trials and triumphs, toil 'n' tragedies.'

'My life?' he asked, and I think he was genuinely puzzled. 'Oh, I haven't done anything. I work in a store,' he added. When I just sat there shaking my head at him, he looked down at his hands and pulled them abruptly down into his lap as if he was ashamed of the nails. 'I know, I know, it's nothing much.' He looked at me with that peculiar hot gaze. 'Not like you, with a piece in the paper every week and all.'

Steve came with the bourbon. I shut up until he'd gone. With Steve, I like to pretend I have big business and don't trust him to listen in. I swear sometimes you can hear him grinding his teeth. He never says anything though. A good customer's got just a little more rights than just anybody else, so there's nothing he can do about it. He just works there.

When he'd gone, I said, 'Here's to the twist that don't exist, and her claim there's a game that can't be played. Here's to the wise old

lies we use -'

'Honest, I don't want any,' said Henry.

'If I'm going to be hospitable, you're going to be house-broke,' I

told him, and picked up his glass and shove it at his face.

He got his lips on it just in time to keep it from falling into that oversize collar. He didn't take but a sip, and that great big mouth snapped down to button-size as if it had a drawstring on it. His eyes got round and filled with tears; he tried to hold the liquor on his tongue, but he sneezed through his nostrils and swallowed and started to cough.

Laugh? I got my breath back just this side of hernia. Some day I'll plant a sound camera and do that again and make an immortal out of old Henry.

'Gosh!' he gasped when he could.

He wiped his eyes with his frayed sleeves. I guess he didn't have a handkerchief. 'That *hurt*.' But he was grinning the old grin all the same. 'You drink that all the time?' he half whimpered.

'All the time, like so,' I said, and drank the rest of his, 'and like so,' and drink mine down. 'Steve!' Steve already had the refills on a tray and I knew it, which is why I yelled at him. 'Now about what you started to say —' and I broke off while Steve got to the table and put down the drinks and picked up the empties and went away again — 'the story of your life. You sit there and tell me "Oh, nothing," and you say you work in a store, period. Now I am going to tell you the story of your life. First of all, I'm going to tell you who you are. You're Henry. Nobody else in God's great gray-green Universe was ever this particular Henry. We start with that. No—'

Henry said, 'But I-'

'No mountain,' I went on, 'no supernova, no collapsing, alpha-splitting nucleus was every more remarkable than the simple fact of you, Henry, just being Henry. Name me an earthquake, an oak tree, a racehorse or a Ph.D. thesis and I will, by God, name you one just like it that happened before. You,' I said, leaning forward and jamming my forefinger into his collarbone, 'you, Henry, are unique and unprecedented on this planet in this galaxy.'

'No. I'm not,' he laughed, backing off from the finger, which did

him no good once I had him pinned to the wall behind him.

'No supernova,' I said again, having just discovered that the phrase is a delightful way of sending the flavor of good bourbon through the nostrils. 'That's what we only begin with,' I went on. 'Just by being, you're a miracle, aside from everything you've ever said or done or dreamed about.' I took away the finger and sat back to beam at him.

'Ah,' he said; I swear he blushed. 'Ah, there's plenty more like me.'

'Not a single one.' I tipped up my glass, found it was empty already, so drank his because I had my mouth all set for it. 'Steve!' I sat silently watching Henry aimlessly rubbing his collarbone while the drinks arrived and the empties left. 'So we start with a miracle. Where do we go from there? How do you cap that?'

He made a sort of giggle. It meant, 'I don't know.'

'You never heard anybody talk like this about you before, did you?'

'No.'

'All right.' I put out the forefinger again, but did not touch him with it because he expected I would.

Over his shoulder, in the wall mirror, I could see that woman

sitting alone in the back booth, crying. Always a great one for

crying, she was.

'I'll tell you why I talk like this, Henry,' I said. 'It's for your own good, because you don't know what you are. Here you walk around the place telling people "Oh, nothing" when they ask for the story of your life, and you're a walking miracle just to start with. Now what do we go on with?'

He shrugged.

'You feel better, now you know what you are?'

'I don't ... I never thought about it.' He looked up at me swiftly,

as if to find out what I wanted him to say. 'I guess I do.'

'All right then. That makes it better. That makes it easier on you, because I am now going to tell you what you are, Henry. Henry, what are you?'

'Well, you said -' he swallowed - 'a miracle.'

I brought down my fist with a bang that made everybody jump, even her in the mirror, but especially Henry. 'No! I'll tell you what you are. You are a nowhere type, a *nud-nick* type *nothing*!' I quickly bent forward. He shrank from the finger like a snail from salt. 'And now you're going to tell me that's a paradox. You're going to say I contradicted myself.'

'I'm not.' His mouth trembled and then he was smiling again.

'Well, all right, but it's what you're thinking. Drink up.' I raised my glass. 'Here's to the eyes, blue brown and brindle, and here's to the fire that those eyes kindle; I don't mean the fires that burn down shanties, I mean the fires that pull down—'

'Gee, no, thanks,' he said.

I drank my drink. 'But I mean,' I said aloud to myself, 'really a nothing.' I took his drink and held it and glared at him. 'You will, by God, stop stepping on my punch-lines.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't even notice.' He pointed vaguely. 'I didn't know that anyone could handle so much of that – that whiskey.'

'I got news for you, boy,' I said, and winked at him. 'Here it is past quitting time and this whiskey is all I had for lunch, and it's what I had for a snack – high tea, wot? – and it's what I'm having for dinner, and well should you envy this mighty capacity. Among other things. Now I will show you why I have uttered no paradox in describing you as a miracle and as a simultaneous, coexistent, concurrent nothing.'

I smelled his drink and lowered it. 'You started out being everything I described – unique, unprecedented. If you thought about it at all, which I doubt, you thought of yourself as having been born naked and defenseless, and having gained constantly

since – the power of speech, the ability to read, an education of sorts (you can see by my calling it that that I'm in a generous mood) and, lately some sort of a job in some sort of a store, the right to vote, and that ... well, unusual suit you're wearing. No matter how modest you are about these achievements – and you are, you really are – they seem to add up to more than you started with.

'Well, they don't. Since the day you were born, you've lost. What

the hell is it that you keep looking at?'

'That girl. She's crying. But I'm listening to what you're saying.'

'You better listen. I'm doing this for you, for your own good. Just let her cry. If she cries long enough, she'll find out crying doesn't help. Then she'll quit.'

'You know why she's crying?'

Did I! 'Yes, and it's a pretty useless procedure. Where was I?'

'I've been losing since I was born,' Henry obediently reminded me.

'Yeah, yeah. What you've lost is potential, Henry. You started out with the capability of doing almost anything and you've come to a point where you can do almost nothing. On the other hand, I started out being able to do practically nothing and now I can do almost anything.'

'That's wonderful!' he said warmly.

'You just don't know,' I told him. 'Now, mind you, we're still talking about you. You'll see the connection. I just want to illustrate a point . . . These days, everybody specializes or doesn't make it, one or the other. If you're lucky enough to have a talent and find work where you use it, you go far. If your work is outside your talent, you can still make out. If you have no talent, hard work in one single line makes for a pretty fair substitute. But in each case, how good you are depends on how closely you specialize and how hard you work inside a speciality. Me, now, I'm different. Steve!'

'None for me,' Henry insisted plaintively.

'Do it again, Steve. Henry, stop interrupting when I'm doing you a favor. What I am, I'm what you might call a specializing nonspecialist. We're few and far between. Henry – guys like me, I mean. Far as work's concerned, I got a big bright red light in here –' I tapped my forehead – 'that lights up if I accidentally stay in one line too long. Any time that happens, I quick wind up what I'm doing and go do something else instead. And far as talents are concerned, talents I got, I guess. Only I don't use 'em. I avoid 'em. They're the only thing that could ever trap me into specializing and I just won't be trapped, not by anybody or anything. Not me!'

'You have a real talent for writing,' Henry said diffidently.

'Well, thanks, Henry, but you're wrong. Writing isn't a talent. It's a skill. Certain kinds of thinking, ways of thinking – you might call them based on talent; but writing's just a verbalization, a knack of putting into an accepted code what's already there in your head. Learning to write is like learning to type, a transformation of a sort of energy into a symbol. It's what you write that counts, not how you do it. What's the matter, did I lose you?'

He was looking out into the room over my shoulder and smiling.

'She's still crying.'

'Forget it. Every day, women lose their husbands. They get over it.'

'Lose - her husband's dead?'

'Altogether.'

He looked again and I watched his wide mouth, the show of strong, uneven teeth. I couldn't blame him. She's a very unusual-looking girl and here the coast was clear. I wondered next what you'd ever say to Henry so he wouldn't smile.

Then he was looking at me again. 'You were talking about your

writing,' he said.

'Oh. Now suppose, Henry, you had the assignment to write a piece every week and you wrote every single one so the man who reads it believes it. And suppose one piece says: "The world will end." And another one says: "The world will not end." One says: "No man is good. He can only struggle against his natural evil." And another says: "No amount of evil can alter the basic goodness of human beings." See what I mean? Yet every single word of every piece comes out like a revelation. The whole series just stinks of truth. Would you say that you, the writer of all this crud, believes or does not believe in what he writes?'

'Well, I guess ... I don't know. I mean I –' He looked into my eyes swiftly, trying again to discover what I wanted him to say. 'Well,' he said clumsily, when I just sat and wouldn't help, 'if you, I mean, I, writing that way, if I said white was white and then it was blue ... well, I guess I couldn't believe 'em both?' His voice put the question mark shyly at the end and he pretended to duck.

'You mean to say that kind of writer doesn't believe anything he writes. Well, I knew you were going to say that, and you're one hundred and three per cent wrong.' And I leaned forward and

glared at him.

He looked into his lap. 'I'm sorry.' Then, 'He believes some of it?' 'No!'

'Oh,' Henry said. Miserably, he moved his glass an inch to the left. I took it away from him.

I said, 'A writer like that learns to believe *everything* he writes about. Sure, white is white. But look: go down as far as you can into the microscopic, and still down, and what do you find? Measurements that can only be approximated; particles that aren't particles at all, but only places where there is the greatest probability of an electric charge ... in other words, an area where nothing is fact, where nothing behaves according to the rules we set up for the proper behavior of facts.

'Now go up in the other direction, out into space, farther than our biggest telescopes can reach, and what do you find? Same thing! The incommensurable, the area of possibility and probability, where the theoretical computation (that's scientese for "wild guess") is acceptable mathematics. So okay: all these years, we've been living as if white was white and a neat a plus b equals a

respectable c.

There might be an excuse for that before we knew that in the microcosm and in the macrocosm all the micrometers are made of rubber and the tapemeasures are printed on wet macaroni. But we do know that now; so by what right do we assume that everything's vague up there and muzzy down yonder, but everything *here* is all neat as a pin and dusted every day? I maintain that nothing is altogether anything; that nothing proves anything, nothing follows from anything; nothing is really real, and that the idea we live in a tidy filling of a mixed-up sandwich is a delusion.

'But you can't go around not believing in reality and at the same time do your work and get your pay. So the only alternative is to believe *everything* you run into, everything you hear, and especially

everything you think.'

Henry said, 'But I-'

'Shut up. Now, belief – faith, if you like – is a peculiar thing. Knowledge helps it along, but at the same time it can only exist in the presence of ignorance. I hold as an axiom that complete – really complete – information on any given subject would destroy belief in it. It's only the gaps between the steppingstones of logic that leave room for the kind of ignorance called intuition, without which the mind can't move. So back we come to where we started: by not specializing in anything, I am guarding my ignorance, and as long as I keep that ignorance at a certain critical level, I can say anything or hear anything and believe it. So living is a lot of fun and I have more fun than anybody.'

Henry smiled broadly and shook his head in deep admiration.

'I'm glad if it's so, I mean, you're happy.'

'What do you mean, if? I get what I want, Henry; I always get

what I want. If that isn't being happy, what is?'

'I wouldn't know.' Henry closed his eyes a moment and then said again, 'I wouldn't know... Let me out, would you?'

'You going some place? I'm not through with you, Henry, me boy. I don't begin to be through with you.'

He looked wistfully at the door and, without moving, seemed to

sigh. Then he smiled again. 'I just want to, uh, you know.'

'Oh, that. The used beer department is down those steps over there.' I got up and let him by. There was no way out of Molson's except past me; he wouldn't get away.

Why shouldn't he get away?

Because he made me feel good, that's why. There was something about Henry, a sort of hair-trigger dazzle effect, that was pretty engaging. Recite the alphabet to him and I swear he'd look dazzled. Not that the line I'd been slinging wouldn't dazzle anyone.

It was just then I decided to tell him about the murderer.

The room tilted suddenly and I hung to the edges of the table and stopped it. I recognized the symptom. Better get something to eat before soaking up any more of that sour-mash. I didn't want to get offensive.

Just then I felt, rather than heard, a sort of commotion. I looked up. Henry, that damn fool, was leaning with his palms on the table where what's-her-name sat, the one who cried all the time. I saw her glance up and then her face went all twisted. She sprang up and fetched him one across the chops that half spun him around. Next thing you know, she was through the door, with Henry staring after her and grinning and slowly rubbing his face.

'Henry!'

Turning my way, Henry looked again at the door, then came shambling over.

'Henry, you ol' wolf; you've been holding out on me,' I said. 'Since when have you been chasing tomatoes?'

He just sat down heavily and fondled his cheek. 'Gosh!'

'Whyn't you tell me you wanted to make a pass? I'd have saved you the trouble. She won't be good for anything for weeks yet. She can't think of anything but—'

'It wasn't anything like that. I just asked her if there was anything I could do. She didn't seem to hear me, so I asked her again. Then

she got mad and hit me. That's all.'

I laughed at him. 'Well, you probably did her a favor. She's better off mad at something than sitting there tearing herself apart. What made you think you could get to first base with her, anyway?'

He grinned and shook his head. 'I told you, honest I didn't want

anything, only to see if I could help.' He shrugged. 'She was crying,' he said, as if that explained something.

'So what's in it for you?'

He shook his head.

'I thought so!' I banged him on the shoulder. 'That's where we'll start, Henry. We're going to make you over, that's what we're going to do. We're going to get you out of oversize second-hand shirts and undersize Boy Scouts ideas. We're going to find out what you really want and then we're going to see that you learn how to get it.'

'But I'm all - I mean I don't really -'

'Shut up! And the first and rock-bottom basic and important thing you'll learn till you're blue in the face is, never do nothing for nothing. In other words, always ask "What's in it for me?" and do nothing about anything until the answer comes up "Plenty!" Steve! The check! That way you'll always have a new wallet to put in your new suit and nobody, especially girls, is going to clobber you in a filthy joint like this.'

Actually it wasn't a filthy joint, but Steve came up just then and I wanted him to hear me say it. I gave him what the check said, to the penny, and told him to keep the change. Once in a while, I'd tip Steve - not often - and then I'd make it a twenty or better. What he didn't know was, if you total all the bills and all the tips, the tips came out to exactly nine per cent. Either he'd find that out for himself some day or I'd tell him; one way or the other, it would be fun. The secret of having fun is to pay attention to the details.

Out on the street, Henry stopped and shuffled his feet. 'Well,

good-bye.'

'Good-bye nothing. You're coming home with me.'

'Oh,' he said, 'I can't. I got to -'

'You got to what? Come on now, Henry - whether you know it or not, you need help; whether you like it or not, you're going to get it. Didn't I say I was going to tear you down and make you over?'

He stepped to the right and he stepped to the left. 'I can't be

taking up your time. I'll just go on home.'

I suddenly saw that if I couldn't change his mind, the only way I'd get him to come along would be to carry him. I could do it, but I didn't feel like it. There's always a better way than hard work.

'Henry,' I said, and paused.

He waited, not quite jittering, not exactly standing still. Guys like Henry, they can't fight and they can't run; you can do whatever you want with them. So - think. Think of the right thing to say. I did, and I said it.

'Henry,' I said, real sudden, real soft, sincere, and the change must have hit him harder than a yell. 'I'm in terrible trouble and you're about the only man in the world I can trust.'

'Gosh.' He came a little closer and peered up at me in the

thickening twilight. 'Why didn't you say so?'

Sticking out the marrow of his soul, every man has an eyebolt. All you have to do is find it and drop your hook in. This was Henry's. I almost laughed, but I didn't. I turned away and sighed. 'It's a long story... but I shouldn't bother you with it. Maybe you'd better—'

'No. Oh, no. I'll come.'

'You're a pal, Henry,' I whispered, and swallowed as noisily as I could.

We walked down to the park and started across it. I walked slowly and kept my eyes on the middle distance, like a hired mourner, while Henry trotted alongside, looking anxiously up into my face every once in a while.

'Is it about that girl?' he asked after a while.

'No,' I said. 'She's no trouble.'

'Her husband. What happened to him?'

'Same thing that happened to the ram who didn't see the ewe turn.' I hit him with my elbow. 'U-turn, get it? Anyway, he drove over a cliff.' We were passing under a street light at the time and I saw Henry's face. 'Some day you're going to split your head plumb in two just by grinning. What do you go around showing your teeth for all the time, anyway?'

He said, 'I'm sorry.' And when we were almost through the park,

'Why?'

'Why what?' I asked vacantly.
'The husband... over the cliff.'

'Oh. Well, she had a sort of a roll in the hay with somebody, and when she told him, he up and knocked himself off. Some people take themselves pretty seriously. Here we are.' I led him up the walk and through the herculite doors. In the elevator, he gulped around at the satinwood paneling. 'This is nice.'

'Keeps the rain off,' I said modestly. The doors slid open and I led the way down the hall and kicked open my door. 'Come on in.'

In we went and there, of course, stood Loretta with The Look on her face, the damned anger always expressed as hurt. So I pushed Henry ahead of me and watched The Look be replaced by tight Company Manners.

'My wife,' I told Henry.

He stepped back and I pushed him forward again. He grinned

and bobbed his head and wagged his figurative tail. 'Huh-huh-huh-' he said, swallowed, and tried again. 'Huh-how do?'

'It's Henry, my old school pal Henry that I never told you about, Loretta.' I'd never told her a thing. 'He's hungry. I'm hungry. How's for some food?' Before she could answer, I asked, 'A couple paper plates in the den would be less trouble than setting the table, hm?' and at this she must nod, so I shoved Henry toward the den and said, 'Fine, and thanks, o best of good women,' which made her nod a promise. We went in and I closed the double doors and leaned against them, laughing.

'Gosh,' said Henry, his eyes heating up. 'You never told me you

had a - uh - were married.' The smile flickered, then blazed.

'Guess I didn't. One of those things, Henry. The air you breathe, a post-nasal drip, the way you walk from here to the office – same thing. Part of the picture. Why talk about it?'

'Yes, but maybe she ... maybe it's trouble for her. Why are you

laughing?"

I was laughing because of the change in Loretta's face as we had come in. I was late and dinner was ruined, and I'd been drinking to boot; and primed as she was to parade hurt feelings all over the apartment, she hadn't expected me to bring anyone home. Ah, Loretta; so mannered, so polite! She'd have died rather than show her feelings before a stranger, and to see her change from hostility to hospitality in three point five seconds was, to me, very funny. There's always a way of getting out from under. All you have to do is think of it. In time.

'I'm laughing,' I told Henry, 'at the idea of Loretta's having trouble.'

'You mean I'm no bother?'

'I mean you make everything all right. Sit down.'

He did. 'She's pretty.'

'Wh – oh. Loretta. Yep, nothing but the best. Henry, I am a man different from all other men.'

He fumbled with some facial expressions and came up with a slow grinning puzzlement. 'Isn't everybody?' he asked timidly.

'Yes, you idiot. But by different, I mean really different. Not necessarily better,' I added modestly. 'Just different.'

'How do you mean, different?' Good old Henry. What a straight man!

By way of answering him, I took out my key-case, zipped it open, thumbed out the flat brass key of my filing drawer and dangled it. 'I'll show you, soon as we have something in our stomachs and no interruptions.'

'Is this the ... the trouble you said you were in, you wanted my help?'

'It is, but it's so strictly private and confidential that I don't what you even thinking about it until I can lock that door and go into detail.'

'Oh,' he said. 'All right.' Visibly, he cast about for something else to talk about. 'Can I ask you something about that girl who was... whose husband...'

'Fire away,' I said. 'Not that it matters. You have the damnedest knack, Henry, of combining the gruesome with the trivial.'

'I'm sorry. She seemed so, well, sad. What was it you said, I don't think I understood it?' His voice supplied the question mark to his odd phrasing. 'She and somebody ...' His words trailed off and he went pink. 'And her husband found out -'

'She sure did. And he didn't exactly find out; she *told* him. She was mixed up in some research, see. Field-test of a new drug, a so-called hypnotic. So there she was, awake and aware and absolutely subject to any and all suggestions. And as you saw for yourself, she's not a bad-looking chick, not bad at all. So nature just took its course. *Carpe diem*, as the Romans used to say, which means drill not and ye strike no oil.'

He looked at me foggily, but smiling broadly, too. 'The researcher, the one who gave her the drug. But that wasn't exactly her fault. I mean her husband didn't have to —'

'Her husband did have to,' I mimicked, 'being what he was. One of those idealistic, love-is-sacred characters, who, besides all this, was sensitive about the side of his face he left in Korea. Love,' I said, harpooning Henry's collarbone with my finger again, 'is cornflakes.'

I leaned back. 'Besides, he had no way of knowing how it happened. This drug, it's something like sodium amytal, though chemically unrelated. You know, "truth serum!" Only it doesn't leave the subject groggy or doped. She went straight home, walking and talking just like always, and incapable of concealing what had happened. She didn't even know she'd been – ah – medicated. It was in her coffee. All she could say was that such-and-such had happened to her and it was all so easy that, from now on, she could never know when it might happen again. He chewed on it for most of the night and then got up and got in his car and drove over the cliff.'

Henry smiled twice, one smile right on top of the other. 'Now all she does is drink in bars?'

'She doesn't drink. Ever read that William Irish book, Phantom

Lady, Henry? There's a girl in there who cracks a character just by haunting him – by being there, wherever he is, day and night, for weeks. This chick in the bar, in her goofed-off ineffectual way, is trying to do the same thing to me. She sits where I can see her and hates me. And cries.'

'You?'

I winked at him and made a *giddap* sort of cluck-cluck with my back teeth. 'Research, Henry. A scientific project. It covers a multitude. And covering multitudes is a happy hobby, especially if you do it one by one. Sure, I know chemistry – told you I was a specializing non-specialist. Now wipe that grin off your face or you won't be able to chew: here comes the food.'

Loretta carried in a tray. Butter-fried shrimp with piquant orange sauce, a mixed-greens salad with shallots and grated nuts, and an Arabian honey-cake.

'Oh!' gulped Henry, and bounced to his feet. 'Oh, that's just

beautiful, Mrs. -'

'You didn't bring a drink first, but I guess we can have it along with the food,' I said.

'I don't want any, really,' Henry said.

'He's being polite. We don't let our guests be polite, do we, Lorrie?'

For a moment, she had only one lip because she had sucked in the lower one to bite on. Then she said, 'I'm sorry. I'll mix -'

'Don't mix,' I told her. 'Bring the bottle. We wouldn't think of troubling you any more, would we, Henry?'

'I really don't want -'

'Right away, darling.' Two out of five times when I say darling, I roar at her. She set the tray down on the coffee table and fairly scurried out. I laughed. 'Wonderful, wonderful. She doesn't exactly hide the liquor, but she sure tidies it away. Now, by God, she'll bring it to me.'

I could actually hear the soft sound at the corners of Henry's

mouth as his smile stretched it.

Loretta came back and I took the bottle. 'No chaser; we're men in here. Okay, darling, you can leave the dishes here for the night.'

She wouldn't back to the door and she wouldn't – maybe she was frightened just then – she wouldn't take her eyes off me, so she got out sidewise, not forgetting to flip the crumpled fragment of a hostess's smile to Henry.

Henry was saying, 'Well, thank you very much, Mrs. -' but by the time he got it all stammered out, I had the door closed.

I went to the settee, rubbing my hands. 'Bring the bottle, Henry.'

He brought it, and sat down by me, and we ate. It was very good, which is the least a man can expect. I toyed with the idea of yelling for some tabasco, but I'd had enough fun with Loretta for the time being. Enveloping that food, my stomach felt well pleased with itself. Silent, unsmiling and intent, Henry absorbed what was on his plate.

I poured a slug for Henry, knowing I could afford to be generous, and one for myself. I leaned back and enjoyed a belch, which made Henry jump, threw down the bourbon, poured another and went to

the desk.

On my desk is a typewriter, and under the typewriter is a sound-absorbing mat, and in the mat I keep a sewing-machine needle, the best toothpick Man ever made. It's strong and it's sharp and it has a base you can get a grip on without snapping it. I sat in the swivel chair and leaned my elbows on the typewriter and picked my teeth and watched Henry mopping the honey off his dessert plate with a piece of bread.

'That was - your wife certainly can -'

'Like I said, Henry, nothing but the best. Sit down over here.

Bring your drink.'

He hesitated, then brought it over and put it on the desk where I could reach it. He sat down on the edge of the easy chair. He looked like a worrisome kitten making its first try at sitting on a fence. I

laughed in his face and he smiled right back at me.

'What I'm going to do, Henry,' I told him, I told average, stupid, fearful, dogface Henry, 'I'm going to let you in on some things that no human being on Earth knows. I'm going to tell you at the same time that these things are known to a number of people. Not a large number, but – a number. Could both those statements be true?'

'Well, I -' he said. Then he blushed.

'You're sort of slow, so I'll keep it simple and easy for you. I just got off a paradox. But it isn't a paradox. Don't sit there and smile and shake your head at me. Just listen. You'll catch on. Now you and I – are we different from each other?'

'Oh, yes,' he breathed.

'Right. At the same time, all human beings are alike. And you know what? No paradox there, either.'

'No?'

'No. And here's why. You're like my wife and the bartender and my city editor and all the billions of creepers and crawlers on Earth who call themselves human beings. And as you just so perceptively pointed out, I'm not like you. And for your information, I'm not like Loretta or Steve or the city editor. Now do you see why there's

no paradox?'

Henry shifted unhappily. He absolutely astonished me. How could a guy like that, without bluff, without deftness, without, as far as I could see, even the ability to lie a little – how could he live three consecutive days in a world like this? Look at him, worrying away at my question, wanting so much to get the right answer.

It came like an abject apology: 'No, I don't see. No, I don't.' His eyes flickered, the embarrassed heat stirring and waning. 'Unless what you mean is you're not a human being.' He snickered weakly

and again made that odd warding-off, half-ducking motion.

Leaning back, I beamed at him. 'Now isn't it a relief to know

you're not so dumb, after all?'

'Is that really what you mean? You're not ... but I thought everybody was a human being!' he cried pathetically.

'Don't get all churned up,' I told him gently.

I leaned forward very suddenly to startle him, and I did, too. I stuck my finger in my whiskey, lifted the glass with the other hand, and drew a wet circle on the desk-top, about eight inches in diameter.

'Let's say that anywhere in this circle –' I moved the glass around inside the mark – 'this glass is what you call human. When it's here or here or a little bit forward, it's still human; it's just not the same human – the same kind of human. You're different from Steve the bartender because everything he is is here, and everything you are is over on the other side, here. You're different because you're placed differently in the circle, but you're the same because you're both inside it. Presto – no paradox.' I moved the glass far enough to empty it and set it aside and put my hand in the circle. The wet wood was bleaching slowly, which was okay; Loretta would polish it up in the morning.

'Inside this circle,' I said, 'a man can be smart or stupid, musical, aggressive, tall, effeminate, mechanically apt, Yugoslavian, a mathematical genius or a strudel baker – but he's still human. Now by what Earthly conceit do we conclude that a man just *has* to live within that circle? What about a guy who's born here, on the outside edge? Why can't he be here, right on the line? Who's to say he can't live way out here?' And I banged my hand down a foot

away from the circle.

Henry said, 'I-'
'Shut up. Answer: there *are* people outside this border. Not many, but some. And if you're going to call the ones inside

"human", the ones outside have to be - something else.'

'Is that what you are?' Henry whispered.

'That's me.'

'Is that what they call a moot ... mute ...'

'Mutation? No! Well, damn it, yes; that's as good a name as any. But not in any way you ever thought of. No atom-dust, no cosmic rays, nothing like that. Just normal everyday variation. Look, you have to go farther from one side of this circle to the other than from just inside to just outside – right? Yet the distance across is within the permissible variation; the difference between human beings which leaves them still human beings together. But one small variation this way –' I slid my finger outside the circle – 'and you have something quite new.'

'How-new?'

I shrugged. 'Any one of a zillion ways. Take any species. Take kittens from the same litter. You'll find one has sharper claws, another has sharper eyes. Which is the best kitten?'

'Well, I guess the one with the -'

'No, you mumbling Neanderthal.' That made him smile. 'Neither one is best. They're just different, each in a way that makes him hunt a bit better. Now say another of the litter has functional gills and another has mat-scales like an armadillo, there's your ...'

'Supercat?' he beamed.

'Just call it "uncat."'

'You - you're, uh, un -'

'Unhuman.' I nodded.

'But you look -'

'Yeah, a cat with sweat-glands in its skin would look like a cat, too – most of the time. I'm different, Henry. I've always known I was different.' I poked my finger toward him and he curled from its imaginary touch. 'You, for example – you have, like nobody else I ever met, that stuff called "empathy."

'I have?'

'You're always feeling with other people's fingertips, seeing through other people's eyes. Laugh with 'em, cry with 'em. Empathy.'

'Oh. Yes, I guess -'

'Now me, I have as much of that as my armadillo-cat has fur. It's just not in me. I have other things instead. Do you know I was never angry in my life? That's why I have so much fun. That's why I can push people around. I can make anybody do anything, just because I always have myself under control. I can roar like a lion and beat my fists on the wall and put up a hell of a show, yet always know

exactly what I'm doing. You knew me when, Henry. You've read my stuff. You've seen me operate. You going to call a man like me human?'

He wet his lips, clasped his hands together, blankly made the knuckles crack. Poor Henry! A brand-new idea and it was splitting his skull-seams.

'Couldn't you be,' he ventured at last, 'just sort of – talented, not really different at all?'

'Ah! Now we come to the point. Now we get the big proof. Speaking of proof, where's the bottle? Oh, here.' I poured. 'See I'm a real modest boy, Henry. When I figured this all out, I didn't do the human thing – conclude that I was the only super – uh, unhuman in captivity. There's just too many people being born, too much variation this way and that. Law of averages. There just has to be more like me.'

'You mean just like -'

'No! I mean more unhumans - all kinds, any kind. So, because I can think like an unhuman, I thought my way after others of my kind.'

Trying to heave up out of my chair, I quit and slumped back. 'Damn it. You know, I'm hungry as a ... imagine, a dinner like that. Why can't she cook up something that sticks to a man's ribs? I swear I'm as empty as a paper sack. Henry, check that door for me, see that it's locked.'

He went to the door and tried it. It was locked. As he came back, I picked up the brass key. 'This will open your eyes, Henry, old boy, old boy,' I said.

I unlocked the file drawer. It got heavier all the time, I thought. Well, if you're going to have fun, you've got to take care of the details.

I lifted out the 'Justice' file and banged it down beside the typewriter. 'So I found me another unhuman. Takes one to catch one. Just you listen now and tell me what human being would even start this line of thinking, let alone carry it through.' I opened the file.

'This all started,' I said, 'when I did a piece on unsolved murders. You know that no city releases figures on unsolved murders; well, not easily, anyway. You should see 'em – 69 per cent in one city, 73 in another. Some bring it down to 40 – our town got it to 38 per cent one year. But that's a whole lot of scot-free murderers, hm? All over the country. Imagine!

'So what I did - for the feature story, you know - I dug up

everything I could find on a whole drawerful of these cases. What I wanted was an angle. What's the most obvious? Whodunit, that's what. So threw that out. What next? Who could have done it, but didn't. Throw that out, too.

'So then it occurred to me to see if there wasn't some sort of lowest common denominator to them – here a second-string advertising man with no enemies, there a teen-age hood with a knife in him, yonder a rich boy found floating next to his yacht – all kinds of people get murdered, you know.

'Mind you, I'm still just looking for an angle.

'Next, I threw out all the cases where people had a lot of enemies, and all the cases where a lot of people had an opportunity as well as a motive. This left a pretty strange stack. All of them were, apparently, reasonless, purposeless murders, all done differently at

different places.

'Well, I phoned and I legged and I sat and thought, and I interviewed, God knows how many people. Couple of times, I came pretty close to finding new stuff, too, but who cares whodunit? Not me. I wasn't looking for crimes with a reason behind them. I was looking for killings with no motive. Any time the scent got hot, I threw that case out. By this time, I had a feature shaping up — I'd call it "Murder for What?" Good for a couple spreads — maybe even a series.'

I thumped the file. 'I guess I had the answer for weeks before I even knew it. Then, one night, I sat here and read everything through. And what do you know: in each and every one of these cases, someone was happy because of the murder! Or, anyway, happier. And I'm *not* talking about people who inherited the victims' loot, or poor persecuted wives and children who would no longer have to put up with the old man's payday drunks. Reach me the bottle, Henry.

'Now not a single one of this final stack showed motive or opportunity for the – let's say "beneficiary" of these murders. Like this one, where the old woman, her with a constitution like a buffalo, she'd been lying in bed for eight months pretending to be sick so her daughter wouldn't marry. The girl was nine miles away when someone cut the old biddy's throat.

'And this one here, an engineering student and a good one, working his own way through school and then had to quit and come home because his old man had doubled the size of the ancestral hardware store for no reason but that it had been small enough to handle by himself. So one warm Sunday, the kid is, no

fooling, in church in front of eighty witnesses while, down the road, somebody parts the old man's head with a tire iron. They never did find out who.

'And this one, this is practically the best of all: a little old guy for years ran a flea circus, gluing costumes on 'em and making 'em turn little merry-go-rounds and all that kind of thing. Used to feed 'em off his arm. One fine day, someone swipes one of his pets and replaces it with *pulex cheopis* – a rat flea, to you – loaded to the eyeballs, or cephalothorax, as the case may be, with bubonic plague. First and only case of black plague in these parts in a hundred and eighty years.' I laughed.

'Someone was happier?' Henry asked wonderingly.

'Well, the other fleas were. And besides, the old guy used to get a large charge out of cracking fleas in his tweezers right under the noses of the most squeamish women in the audience. You know how they go – *blip*!'

Henry grinned. 'Blip,' he half-whispered.

'It's hot in here,' I said uncomfortably. 'Well, this is the part I was getting to, I mean about thinking unhumanly. I said to myself, now suppose, just for the sake of argument, that there's this guy, see, a sort of mutant, a slight variation to just outside the circle, and he has this special way of thinking; he goes around killing people who stand in other people's way. He never kills the same way or the same kind of person or in the same place. So how could anyone ever catch up with him?

'Right away, I began looking into other deaths – the "natural causes" ones. Why? Well, here, whoever he is, he might do some murders that look like murders, but he'd also do some that looked like natural causes; he'd have to; there's only just so many ways you can kill people and this busy, busy boy would have to try all of 'em. So I smelled around looking not for a killer, but for happy people, innocent people, who had benefited from these deaths.

'Whenever I found a situation like that, I checked back on the death. Sometimes it was a perfectly genuine croak, but time and again I found what you might find if you knew what you were looking for ... scarlet fever, for instance. People shouldn't die of scarlet fever, but you know what? Feed somebody just enough belladonna and a doctor will write a scarlet fever certificate for the late lamented, nice as you please, as if he has no reason to be suspicious. And in these deaths – my busy boy's work, I mean – there's never any reason to be suspicious. Where's the – you pour it for once, Henry.

'Hey, Henry! I'm getting tighter'n a ticklish tick with an alum stick, haha...

"Course, by this time, the feature story was up the spout: I had better use for the situation than a lousy feature or even a series. Yep. For weeks now. I've been following the meat-wagons and morguing around. All I do, I write 'em up when they look funny to me. I keep it to myself; it's all in the files here, every one of 'em. Oh, man, if the papers or the coroner or somebody got hold of those files, what a *hassle!* They'd dig up the marble orchards around here like potato patches! They'd find more little old embolisms and post-syncopes!

'Say, did you know that Acontium Napellus, which is wolfsbane, which is aconite, has a root that grates up into a specially nippy kind of horseradish for them as likes it strong for a few brief seconds? There's a woman just down the street who curled up and died last Tuesday and they called it heart failure; her daughter's already headed for Hollywood where she won't make anything but

carhop, second class, but anyway it's what she wanted.

'Sooner or later, taking the notes I do the way I do at the deaths I investigate, this boy, this busy, busy fellow who is bringing so much sunshine into so many brutalized innocent lives, this boy will come over to me and say, "Hi, chum, you looking for somebody?"'

'What will you do,' gasped Henry without the question mark.

'What do you think?' I prodded.

'A reward, maybe? Or a big scoop - is that what they call it in

newspapers?'

'Yes, in the movies. Catch it, Hen – hey, thanks. First time I knocked over a bottle in nine years, so help me. Mop up the ol' "Justice" file – I call it the "Justice" file; you like that, boy? Ooo ... ooh. I'm adrift, kid, and you know what? I love it. Pour me another. Do it m'self only I'm not myself if you see what I – mmm. Good.

'So where was I? Oh, yes, you say I'd nab this busy boy and get a reward. Well, there you go thinking like a human being. I, sir Henry, will do no such a thing. Now I don't know exactly why this boy does this bit and I don't much care, long's I can get him to do it for me. He wants to knock off obstacles from the path of poor imprisoned souls. I got just the chore for him. Just some justice is all.

'You see that scared rabbit came in here a while back with the tray, that Loretta? Now that thing with Loretta, it was great while it lasted, and it lasted too long about four months back. All the time

around, oh, please don't drink so much, where have you been, but I was worried . . . you know the routine, Henry. Now I could handle this myself, but even I can't think of a way which wouldn't be either expensive or messy.

'When you come right down to it, I'd just as soon keep her

around.

'Loretta's not much trouble. She leaves me alone pretty much and comes in here about the time I'm bottle dippy every night and gets me into bed, talking on bright and cheery as anything, just as if I wasn't hooked over the desk here, green as a gherkin and just as pickled...

'The reason, the *real* reason I'd like to introduce this other unhuman type to my lovely wife is that I'd get more of a kick than you'd understand, just making him do it. Humans I can handle; this boy would be a real challenge. You can talk anybody into anything, and yourself out of anything, if you can just think of the right thing to say – and I'm the boy who can do it. Was your mother frightened by a keyboard?'

'What?' he asked, startled.

'That grin. What I'd like to know, I'd like to know how that busy boy covers so much territory. First he has to find 'em, then he has to plan how to knock 'em off, then he has to wait his chance ... so many, Henny! Five already this week and here it's only Thursday!'

'Maybe there's more than one,' Henry suggested tentatively.

'Say, I never thought of that!' I exclaimed. 'I guess it's because there's only one of me. Gosh, what a lovely idea – squads of unhumans thinking unhumanly, doing whatever they unhumanly want all over the lot. But why should the likes of them take chances just to make some humans happy?'

'They don't care if anyone gets happy,' said Henry. 'Why are you

whispering?'

'Must be getting pretty tight, I guess; can't seem to do much better. Whee-ooo! Such a gorgeous load! What? What's that you said about the unhumans, that they don't care about making people happy? Listen, son, don't go telling me about unhumans. Who's the expert around here? I tell you, every time they knock somebody off, someone around stops getting mistreated. Those files there—'

'Right files, wrong conclusion. You keep worrying about what

you are; we don't. We just are.'

'We? Are you classifying yourself with me?'

'I wasn't,' said Henry, not smiling. 'Just what you are, human or not, I don't know and I don't care. You're a blowhard, though.'

I snarled and heaved myself upward. But a whispered snarl

doesn't amount to much and you can heave all you like and get nowhere when your arms are deadwood and your legs are about as responsive as those old inner tubes in your neighbor's back yard.

'What's the matter with me?' I rasped.
'You're about nine-tenths dead, that's all.'

'Nine – what do you mean, Henry? What are you talking about? I'm just drunk, not –'

'Dicoumarin,' he said. 'You know what that is?'

'Sure I know what it is. Capillary poison. All the smallest blood vessels rupture and you bleed to death internally before you even know you're sick. Henry, you've poisoned me!'

'Well, yes.'

I tried to struggle up, but I couldn't. 'You weren't supposed to kill me, Henry! It was Loretta! That's why I brought you home – I guessed that the killer would be the opposite of the likes of me and you're about as opposite as anybody could be. And you know I can't stand her and killing her would make me happier. It's her you're supposed to kill, Henry!'

'No,' he answered stubbornly. 'It couldn't be her. I told you we

don't care if somebody's made happier. It had to be you.'

'Why? Why?'

'To stop the noise.'

I looked at him, frowned foggily, shook my head.

'Self-defense,' he explained patiently. 'I'm a – I suppose you'd call it a telepath, though it isn't telepathy like you read about. No words, no pictures. Just a *noise*, I guess is the best word. There's a certain kind of mind – human or not, who cares? – it can't get angry, and it enjoys degrading other people and humiliating them, and when it's enjoying these things, it sets up ... that noise. We can't stand the noise. You – you're special. Hear you for miles. When we get rid of one of you, of course it makes a human happy – whoever it was you were humiliating.' Then he said again. 'We can't stand the noise.'

I whispered, 'Help me, Henry. Whatever it is, I'll stop. I promise

I'll stop.'

'You can't stop,' he said. 'Not while you're alive ... Oh, damn you, damn you, you're even enjoying dying!' He put forearms over his head – not over his ears – and rocked back and forth, and smiled and smiled.

'You smile all the time,' I hissed. 'Even now. You enjoy killing.'

'It isn't a smile and I kill only to stop the noise.' He was breathing hard. 'How can I explain to anything like you? The noise – it's – some people can't stand the screek of a fingernail on a blackboard,

some hate the scrape of a shovel on a cement sidewalk, most can't take the rasp of a file on metal.'

'They don't bother me a bit,' I said.

'Here, damn you, look here!' He snatched my sewing-machine needle and plunged it under his thumbnail. His lips spread wider. 'It's pain ... pain! Only, with you, it's agony! I can't stand your noise! It puts all my teeth on edge, it hurts my head, it deafens me!'

I remembered all the times he had smiled since I brought him home. And each time like the nail on the blackboard, like the shovel, like the rasp of the file, like the needle under the nail . . .

I made a sort of laugh. 'You'll come with me. They'll find the

poison in me.'

'Dicoumarin? You know better than that. And there won't be any in the whiskey glass, if that's what you're thinking. I gave it to you three hours ago, in Molson's, in the drink I didn't want and you took.'

'I'll hang on and tell Lorrie.'

'Tell me,' he jeered, leaning toward me, his smile that wasn't a smile as huge as a boa's about to bite.

My tongue was thick, numb and wobbly. 'Don't!' I gasped.

'Don't ... jump me ... now, Henry.'

Again he clutched his head. 'Get mad! If you could get mad, it would go away, that noise! Argh, you snakes, you freaks ... all of you who enjoy hating! The girl, remember her, in the bar? She was making that noise until I got her angry ... she's going to get better now that you're dead.'

I was going to say I wasn't dead, I wasn't yet, but my mouth

wouldn't work.

'I'll take these,' Henry said. I watched him stack the files right under my nose. 'Everything's nice and tidy,' he told me. 'You were due to drink yourself to death, anyway, and here you are just like always. Only you won't sleep this one off... I wish I could have got you sore.'

I watched him unlock the door, saw him go, heard him talking to

Lorrie briefly. Then the outer door banged.

Loretta came into the room and stopped. She sighed. 'Oh, dear, we're in a *special* mess tonight, aren't we?' she said brightly.

I tried, how I tried to yell, to scream at her, but I couldn't, and it

was growing dark.

Loretta bent and pulled my arm around her neck. 'You'll have to help just a little now. *Upsy*-daisy!' Strong shoulders and a practiced hip hauled me upright, lolling. 'You know, I do like your friend Henry. The way he smiled when he left – why, it made me feel that everything's going to be all right.'

## And Now the News ...

The man's name was MacLyle, which by looking at you can tell wasn't his real name, but let's say this is fiction, shall we? MacLyle had a good job in — well — a soap concern. He worked hard and made good money and got married to a girl called Esther. He bought a house in the suburbs and after it was paid for he rented it to some people and bought a home a little farther out and a second car and a freezer and a power-mower and a book on landscaping, and settled down to the worthy task of giving his kids all the things he never had.

He had habits and he had hobbies, like everybody else, and (like everybody else) his were a little different from anybody's. The one that annoyed his wife the most, until she got used to it, was the news habit, or maybe hobby. MacLyle read a morning paper on the 8:14 and an evening paper on the 6:10, and the local paper his suburb used for its lost dogs and auction sales took up .40 after-dinner minutes. And when he read a paper he read it, he didn't mess with it. He read Page 1 first and Page 2 next, and so on all the way through. He didn't care too much for books but he respected them in a mystical sort of way, and he used to say a newspaper was a kind of book, and so would raise particular hell if a section was missing or in upside down, or if the pages were out of line. He also heard the news on the radio. There were three stations in town with hourly broadcasts, one on the hour, one on the half-hour, and one five minutes before the hour, and he was usually able to catch them all. During these five-minute periods he would look you right in the eve while you talked to him and you'd swear he was listening to you, but he wasn't. This was a particular trial to his wife, but only for five years or so. Then she stopped trying to be heard while the radio talked about floods and murders and scandal and suicide. Five more years, and she went back to talking right through the broadcasts, but by the time people are married ten years, things like that don't matter; they talk in code anyway, and nine tenths of their speech can be picked up anytime like ticker-tape. He also caught the 7:30 news on Channel 2 and the 7:45 news on Channel 4 on television.

Now it might be imagined from all this that MacLyle was a crotchety character with fixed habits and a neurotic neatness, but this was far from the case. MacLyle was basically a reasonable guy who loved his wife and children and liked his work and pretty

much enjoyed being alive. He laughed easily and talked well and paid his bills. He justified his preoccupation with the news in a number of ways. He would quote Donne: '... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind ...' which is pretty solid stuff and hard to argue down. He would point out that he made his trains and his trains made him punctual, but that because of them he saw the same faces at the same time day after endless day, before, during, and after he rode those trains, so that his immediate world was pretty circumscribed, and only a constant awareness of what was happening all over the earth kept him conscious of the fact that he lived in a bigger place than a thin straight universe with his house at one end, his office at the other, and a railway track in between.

It's hard to say just when MacLyle started to go to pieces, or even why, though it obviously had something to do with all that news he exposed himself to. He began to react, very slightly at first; that is, you could tell he was listening. He'd *shh!* you, and if you tried to finish what you were saying he'd run and stick his head in the speaker grille. His wife and kids learned to shut up when the news came on, five minutes before the hour until five after (with MacLyle switching stations) and every hour on the half-hour, and from 7:30 to 8 for the TV, and during the 40 minutes it took him to read the local paper. He was not so obvious about it when he read his paper, because all he did was freeze over the pages like a catatonic, gripping the top corners until the sheets shivered, knotting his jaw and breathing from his nostrils with a strangled whistle.

Naturally all this was a weight on his wife Esther, who tried her best to reason with him. At first he answered her, saying mildly that a man has to keep in touch, you know; but very quickly he stopped responding altogether, giving her the treatment a practiced suburbanite gets so expert in, as when someone mentions a lawnmower just too damn early on Sunday morning. You don't say yes and you don't say no, you don't even grunt, and you don't move your head or even your eyebrows. After a while your interlocutor goes away. Pretty soon you don't hear these ill-timed annoyances any more than you appear to.

It needs to be said again here that MacLyle was, outside his peculiarity, a friendly and easy-going character. He liked people and invited them and visited them, and he was one of those adults who can really listen to a first-grade child's interminable adventures and really care. He never forgot things like the slow leak in the spare tire or antifreeze or anniversaries, and he always got the stormwindows up in time, but he didn't rub anyone's nose in his

reliability. The first thing in his whole life he didn't take as a matter of course was this news thing that started so small and grew so

quickly.

So after a few weeks of it his wife took the bull by the horns and spent the afternoon hamstringing every receiver in the house. There were three radios and two TV sets, and she didn't understand the first thing about them, but she had a good head and she went to work with a will and the can-opening limb of a pocket knife. From each receiver she removed one tube, and one at a time, so as not to get them mixed up, she carried them into the kitchen and meticulously banged their bases against the edge of the sink, being careful to crack no glass and bend no pins, until she could see the guts of the tube rolling around loose inside. Then she replaced them and got the back panels on the sets again.

MacLyle came home and put the car away and kissed her and turned on the living-room radio and then went to hang up his hat. When he returned the radio should have been warmed up but it wasn't. He twisted the knobs a while and bumped it and rocked it back and forth a little, grunting, and then noticed the time. He began to feel a little frantic, and raced back to the kitchen and turned on the little ivory radio on the shelf. It warmed up quickly and cheerfully and gave him a clear 60–cycle hum, but that was all. He behaved badly from then on, roaring out the information that the sets didn't work, either of them, as if that wasn't pretty evident by that time, and flew upstairs to the boys' room, waking them explosively. He turned on their radio and got another 60–cycle note, this time with a shattering microphonic when he rapped the case, which he did four times, whereupon the set went dead altogether.

Esther had planned the thing up to this point, but no further, which was the way her mind worked. She figured she could handle it, but she figured wrong. MacLyle came downstairs like a pall-bearer, and he was silent and shaken until 7:30, time for the news on TV. The living room set wouldn't peep, so up he went to the boys' room again, waking them just as they were nodding off again, and this time the little guy started to cry. MacLyle didn't care. When he found out there was no picture on the set, he almost started to cry too, but then he heard the sound come in. A TV set has an awful lot of tubes in it and Esther didn't know audio from video. MacLyle sat down in front of the dark screen and listened to the news. 'Everything seemed to be under control in the riot-ridden border country in India,' said the TV set. Crowd noises and a background of Beethoven's 'Turkish March.' 'And then -' Cut

music. Crowd noise up: gabble-wurra and a scream. Announcer over: 'Six hours later, this was the scene.' Dead silence, going on so long that MacLyle reached out and thumped the TV set with the heel of his hand. Then, slow swell, Ketelbey's 'In a Monastery Garden.' 'On a more cheerful note, here are the six finalists in the Miss Continuum contest.' Background music, 'Blue Moon,' interminably, interrupted only once, when the announcer said through a childish chuckle, '... and she meant it!' MacLyle pounded himself on the temples. The little guy continued to sob. Esther stood at the foot of the stairs wringing her hands. It went on for 30 minutes like this. All MacLyle said when he came downstairs was that he wanted the paper – that would be the local one. So Esther faced the great unknown and told him frankly she hadn't ordered it and wouldn't again, which of course led to a full and righteous confession of her activities of the afternoon.

Only a woman married better than fourteen years can know a man well enough to handle him so badly. She was aware that she was wrong but that was quite overridden by the fact that she was logical. It would not be logical to continue her patience, so patience was at an end. That which offendeth thee, cast it out, yea, even thine eye and thy right hand. She realized too late that the news was so inextricably part of her husband that in casting it out she cast him out too. And out he went, while whitely she listened to the rumble of the garage door, the car door speaking its sharp syllables, clear as *Exit* in a play script; the keen of a starter, the mourn of a motor. She said she was glad and went in the kitchen and tipped the useless ivory radio off the shelf and retired, weeping.

And yet, because true life offers few clean cuts, she saw him once more. At seven minutes to three in the morning she became aware of faint music from somewhere; unaccountably it frightened her, and she tiptoed about the house looking for it. It wasn't in the house, so she pulled on MacLyle's trench coat and crept down the steps into the garage. And there, just outside in the driveway, where steel beams couldn't interfere with radio reception, the car stood where it had been all along, and MacLyle was in the driver's seat dozing over the wheel. The music came from the car radio. She drew the coat tighter around her and went to the car and opened the door and spoke his name. At just that moment the radio said ' ... and now the news' and MacLyle sat bolt upright and shh'd furiously. She fell back and stood a moment in a strange transition from unconditional surrender to total defeat. Then he shut the car door and bent forward, his hand on the volume control, and she went back into the house.

After the news report was over and he had recovered himself from the stab wounds of a juvenile delinquent, the grinding agonies of a derailed train, the terrors of the near-crash of a C-119, and the fascination of a cabinet officer, charter member of the We Don't Trust Nobody Club, saying in exactly these words that there's a little bit of good in the worst of us and a little bit of bad in the best of us, all of which he felt keenly, he started the car (by rolling it down the drive because the battery was almost dead) and drove as

slowly as possible into town.

At an all-night garage he had the car washed and greased while he waited, after which the automat was open and he sat in it for three hours drinking coffee, holding his jaw set until his back teeth ached, and making occasional, almost inaudible noises in the back of his throat. At 9:00 he pulled himself together. He spent the entire day with his astonished attorney, going through all his assets, selling, converting, establishing, until when he was finished he had a modest packet of cash and his wife would have an adequate income until the children went to college, at which time the house would be sold, the tenants in the older house evicted, and Esther would be free to move to the smaller home with the price of the larger one added to the basic capital. The lawyer might have entertained fears for MacLyle except for the fact that he was jovial and loquacious throughout, behaving like a happy man - a rare form of insanity, but acceptable. It was hard work but they did it in a day, after which MacLyle wrung the lawyer's hand and thanked him profusely and checked into a hotel.

When he awoke the following morning he sprang out of bed, feeling years younger, opened the door, scooped up the morning

paper and glanced at the headlines.

He couldn't read them.

He grunted in surprise, closed the door gently, and sat on the bed with the paper in his lap. His hands moved restlessly on it, smoothing and smoothing until the palms were shadowed and the type hazed. The shouting symbols marched across the page like a parade of strangers in some unrecognized lodge uniform, origins unknown, destination unknown, and the occasion for marching only to be guessed at. He traced the letters with his little finger, he measured the length of a word between his index finger and thumb and lifted them up to hold them before his wondering eyes. Suddenly he got up and crossed to the desk, where signs and placards and printed notes were trapped like a butterfly collection under glass — the breakfast menu, something about valet service, something about checking out. He remembered them all and had an

idea of their significance – but he couldn't read them. In the drawer was stationery, with a picture of the building and no other buildings around it, which just wasn't so, and an inscription which might have been in Cyrillic for all he knew. Telegram blanks, a bus schedule, a blotter, all bearing hieroglyphs and runes, as far as he was concerned. A phone book full of strangers' names in strange symbols.

He requested of himself that he recite the alphabet. 'A,' he said clearly, and 'Eh?' because it didn't sound right and he couldn't imagine what would. He made a small foolish grin and shook his head slightly and rapidly, but grin or no, he felt frightened. He felt glad, or relieved – mostly happy anyway, but still a little frightened.

He called the desk and told them to get his bill ready, and dressed and went downstairs. He gave the doorman his parking check and waited while they brought the car round. He got in and turned the radio on and started to drive west.

He drove for some days, in a state of perpetual, cold, and (for all that) happy fright - roller-coaster fright, horror-movie fright remembering the significance of a stop-sign without being able to read the word STOP across it, taking caution from the shape of a railroad-crossing notice. Restaurants look like restaurants, gas stations like gas stations; if Washington's picture denotes a dollar and Lincoln's five, one doesn't need to read them. MacLyle made out just fine. He drove until he was well into one of those square states with all the mountains and cruised until he recognized the section where, years before he was married, he had spent a hunting vacation. Avoiding the lodge he had used, he took back roads until, sure enough, he came to that deserted cabin in which he had sheltered one night, standing yet, rotting a bit but only around the edges. He wandered in and out of it for a long time, memorizing details because he could not make a list, and then got back into the car and drove to the nearest town, not very near and not very much of a town. At the general store he bought shingles and flour and nails and paint - all sorts of paint, in little cans, as well as big containers of house-paint - and canned goods and tools. He ordered a knockdown windmill and a generator, eighty pounds of modeling clay, two loaf pans and a mixing bowl, and a war-surplus jungle hammock. He paid cash and promised to be back in two weeks for the things the store didn't stock, and wired (because it could be done over the phone) his lawyer to arrange for the predetermined \$80 a month which was all he cared to take for himself from his assets. Before he left he stood in wonder before a monstrous piece of musical plumbing called an ophicleide which

stood, dusty and majestic, in a corner. (While it might be easier on the reader to make this a French horn or a sousaphone - which would answer narrative purposes quite as well - we're done telling lies here. MacLyle's real name is concealed, his home town cloaked, and his occupation disguised, and dammit it really was a twelve-keyed, 1824, 50-inch, obsolete brass ophicleide.) The storekeeper explained how his great-grandfather had brought it over from the old country and nobody had played it for two generations except an itinerant tuba-player who had turned pale green on the first three notes and put it down as if it was full of percussion caps. MacLyle asked how it sounded and the man told him, terrible. Two weeks later MacLyle was back to pick up the rest of his stuff, nodding and smiling and saying not a word. He still couldn't read, and now he couldn't speak. Even more, he had lost the power to understand speech. He paid for the purchases with a \$100 bill and a wistful expression, and then another \$100 bill, and the storekeeper, thinking he had turned deaf and dumb, cheated him roundly but at the same time felt so sorry for him that he gave him the ophicleide. MacLyle loaded up his car happily and left. And that's the first part of the story about MacLyle's being in a bad way.

MacLyle's wife Esther found herself in a peculiar position. Friends and neighbors off-handedly asked her questions to which she did not know the answers, and the only person who had any information at all - MacLyle's attorney - was under bond not to tell her anything. She had not, in the full and legal sense, been deserted, since she and the children were provided for. She missed MacLyle, but in a specialized way; she missed the old reliable MacLyle, and he had, in effect, left her long before that perplexing night when he had driven away. She wanted the old MacLyle back again, not this untrolleyed stranger with the grim and spastic preoccupation with the news. Of the many unpleasant facets of this stranger's personality, one glowed brightest, and that was that he was the sort of man who would walk out the way he did and stay away as long as he had. Ergo, he was that undesirable person just as long as he stayed away, and tracking him down would, if it returned him against his will, return to her only a person who was not the person she missed.

Yet she was dissatisfied with herself, for all that she was the injured party and had wounds less painful than the pangs of conscience. She had always prided herself on being a good wife, and had done many things in the past which were counter to her reason and her desires purely because they were consistent with being a

good wife. So as time when on she gravitated away from the 'what shall I do?' area into the 'what ought a good wife to do?' spectrum, and after a great deal of careful thought, went to see a psychiatrist.

He was a fairly intelligent psychiatrist, which is to say he caught on to the obvious a little faster than most people. For example, he became aware in only four minutes of conversation that MacLyle's wife Esther had not come to him on her own behalf, and further decided to hear her out completely before resolving to treat her. When she had quite finished and he had dug out enough corroborative detail to get the picture, he went into a long silence and cogitated. He matched the broad pattern of MacLyle's case with his reading and his experience, recognized the challenge, the clinical worth of the case, the probable value of the heirloom diamond pendant worn by his visitor. He placed his fingertips together, lowered his fine young head, gazed through his eyebrows at MacLyle's wife Esther, and took up the gauntlet. At the prospect of getting her husband back safe and sane, she thanked him quietly and left the office with mixed emotions. The fairly intelligent psychiatrist drew a deep breath and began making arrangements with another head-shrinker to take over his other patients, both of them, while he was away, because he figured to be away quite a while.

It was appallingly easy for him to trace MacLyle. He did not go near the lawyer. The solid foundation of all skip tracers and Bureaus of Missing Person, in their modus operandi, is a piece of applied psychology which dictates that a man might change his name and his address, but he will seldom - can seldom - change the things he does, particularly the things he does to amuse himself. The ski addict doesn't skip to Florida, though he might make Banff instead of an habitual Mont Tremblant. A philatelist is not likely to mount butterflies. Hence when the psychiatrist found, among MacLyle's papers, some snapshots and brochures, dating from college days, of the towering Rockies, of bears feeding by the roadside, and especially of season after season's souvenirs of a particular resort to which he had never brought his wife and which he had not visited since he married her, it was worth a feeler, which went out in the form of a request to that state's police for information on a man of such-and-such a description driving so-and-so with out-of-state plates, plus a request that the man not be detained nor warned, but only that he, the fairly intelligent psychiatrist, be notified. He threw out other lines, too, but this is the one that hooked his fish. It was a matter of weeks before a state patrol car happened by MacLyle's favorite general store: after that it was a matter of minutes before the information was in the hands of the psychiatrist. He said nothing to MacLyle's wife Esther except goodbye for a while, and this bill is payable now, and then took off, bearing with him a bag of tricks.

He rented a car at the airport nearest MacLyle's hideout and drove a long, thirsty, climbing way until he came to the general store. There he interviewed the proprietor, learning some eighteen hundred items about how bad business could get, how hot it was, how much rain hadn't fallen and how much was needed, the tragedy of being blamed for high mark-ups when anyone with brains God gave a goose ought to know it cost plenty to ship things out here, especially in the small quantities necessitated by business being so bad and all; and betwixt and between, he learned eight or ten items about MacLyle – the exact location of his cabin, the fact that he seemed to have turned into a deaf-mute who was also unable to read, and that he must be crazy because who but a crazy man would want 84 different half-pint cans of house paint or, for that matter, live out here when he didn't have to?

The psychiatrist got loose after a while and drove off, and the country got higher and dustier and more lost every mile, until he began to pray that nothing would go wrong with the car, and sure enough, ten minutes later he thought something had. Any car that made a noise like the one he began to hear was strictly a shotrod, and he pulled over to the side to worry about it. He turned off the motor and the noise went right on, and he began to realize that the sound was not in the car or even near it, but came from somewhere uphill. There was a mile and a half more of the hill to go, and he drove it in increasing amazement, because that sound got louder and more impossible all the time. It was sort of like music, but like no music currently heard on this or any other planet. It was a solo voice, brass, with muscles. The upper notes, of which there seemed to be about two octaves, were wild and unmusical, the middle was rough, but the low tones were like the speech of these mountains themselves, big up to the sky, hot, and more natural than anything ought to be, basic as a bear's fang. Yet all the notes were perfect their intervals were perfect - this awful noise was tuned like an electronic organ. The psychiatrist had a good ear, though for a while he wondered how long he'd have any ears at all, and he realized all these things about the sound, as well as the fact that it was rendering one of the more primitive fingering studies from Czerny, Book One, the droning little horror that goes: do mi fa sol la sol fa mi, re fa sol la ti la sol fa, mi sol la ... etcetera, inchworming up the scale and then descending hand over hand.

He saw blue sky almost under his front tires and wrenched the wheel hard over, and found himself in the grassy yard of a made-over prospector's cabin, but that he didn't notice right away because sitting in front of it was what he described to himself, startled as he was out of his professional detachment, as the craziest-looking man he had ever seen.

He was sitting under a parched, wind-warped Engelmann spruce. He was barefoot up to the armpits. He wore the top half of a skivvy shirt and a hat the shape of one of those conical Boy Scout tents when one of the Boy Scouts has left the pole home. And he was playing, or anyway practicing, the ophicleide, and on his shoulders was a little moss of spruce-needles, a small shower of which descended from the tree every time he hit on or under the low B-flat. Only a mouse trapped inside a tuba during band practice can know precisely what it's like to stand that close to an operating ophicleide.

It was MacLyle all right, looming well-fed and filled-out. When he saw the psychiatrist's car he went right on playing, but, catching the psychiatrist's eye, he winked, smiled with the small corner of lip which showed from behind the large cup of the mouthpiece, and twiddled three fingers of his right hand, all he could manage of a wave without stopping. And he didn't stop, either, until he had scaled the particular octave he was working on and let himself down the other side. Then he put the ophicleide down carefully and let it lean against the spruce tree, and got up. The psychiatrist had become aware, as the last stupendous notes rolled away down the mountain, of his extreme isolation with this offbeat patient, of the unconcealed health and vigor of the man, and of the presence of the precipice over which he had almost driven his car a moment before, and had rolled up his window and buttoned the doorlock and was feeling grateful for them. But the warm good humor and genuine welcome on MacLyle's sunburned face drove away fright and even caution, and almost before he knew what he was doing the psychiatrist had the door open and was stooping up out of the car, thinking, merry is a disused word but that's what he is, by God, a merry man. He called him by name but either MacLyle did not hear him or didn't care; he just put out a big warm hand and the psychiatrist took it. He could feel hard flat calluses in MacLyle's hand, and the controlled strength an elephant uses to lift a bespangled child in its trunk; he smiled at the image, because after all MacLyle was not a particularly large man, there was just that feeling about him. And once the smile found itself there it wouldn't go away.

He told MacLyle that he was a writer trying to soak up some of this magnificent country and had just been driving wherever the turn of the road led him, and here he was; but before he was half through he became conscious of MacLyle's eyes, which were in some indescribable way very much on him but not at all on anything he said; it was precisely as if he had stood there and hummed a tune. MacLyle seemed to be willing to listen to the sound until it was finished, and even to enjoy it, but that enjoyment was going to be all he got out of it. The psychiatrist finished anyway and MacLyle waited a moment as if to see if there would be any more, and when there wasn't he gave out more of that luminous smile and cocked his head toward the cabin. MacLyle led the way, with his visitor bringing up the rear with some platitudes about nice place you got here. As they entered, he suddenly barked at that unresponsive back, 'Can't you hear me?' and MacLyle, without turning, only waved him on.

They walked into such a clutter and clabber of colors that the psychiatrist stopped dead, blinking. One wall had been removed and replaced with glass panes; it overlooked the precipice and put the little building afloat on haze. All the walls were hung with plain white chenille bedspreads, and the floor was white, and there seemed to be much more light indoors here than outside. Opposite the large window was an oversized easel made of peeled poles, notched and lashed together with baling wire, and on it was a huge canvas, most non-objective, in the purest and most uncompromising colors. Part of it was unquestionably this room, or at least its air of colored confusion here and all infinity yonder. The ophicleide was in the picture, painstakingly reproduced, looking like the hopper of some giant infernal machine, and in the foreground some flowers; but the central figure repulsed him - more, it repulsed everything which surrounded it. It did not look exactly like anything familiar and, in a disturbed way, he was happy about that.

Stacked on the floor on each side of the easel were other paintings, some daubs, some full of ruled lines and overlapping planes, but all in this achingly pure color. He realized what was being done with the dozens of colors of house paint in little cans

which had so intrigued the storekeeper.

In odd places around the room were clay sculptures, most mounted on pedestals made of sections of tree-trunks large enough to stand firmly on their sawed ends. Some of the pedestals were peeled, some painted, and in some the bark texture or the bulges or clefts in the wood had been carried right up into the model, and in others clay had been knived or pressed into the bark all the way

down to the floor. Some of the clay was painted, some not, some ought to have been. There were free-forms and gollywogs, a marsupial woman and a guitar with legs, and some, but not an overweening number, of the syml olisms which preoccupy even fairly intelligent psychiatrists. Nowhere was there any furniture per se. There were shelves at all levels and of varying lengths, bearing nail-kegs, bolts of cloth, canned goods, tools and cooking utensils. There was a sort of table but it was mostly a work-bench, with a vise at one end and at the other, half-finished, a crude but

exceedingly ingenious foot-powered potter's wheel.

He wondered where MacLyle slept, so he asked him, and again MacLyle reacted as if the words were not words, but a series of pleasant sounds, cocking his head and waiting to see if there would be any more. So the psychiatrist resorted to sign language, making a pillow of his two hands, laying his head on it, closing his eyes. He opened them to see MacLyle nodding eagerly, then going to the white-draped wall. From behind the chenille he brought a hammock, one end of which was fastened to the wall. The other end he carried to the big window and hung on a hook screwed to a heavy stud between the panes. To lie in that hammock would be to swing between heaven and earth like Mahomet's tomb, with all that sky and scenery virtually surrounding the sleeper. His admiration for this idea ceased as MacLyle began making urgent indications for him to get into the hammock. He backed off warily, expostulating, trying to convey to MacLyle that he only wondered, he just wanted to know; no, no, he wasn't tired, dammit; but MacLyle became so insistent that he picked the psychiatrist up like a child sulking at bed-time and carried him to the hammock. Any impulse to kick and guarrel was guenched by the nature of this and all other hammocks to be intolerant of shifting burdens, and by the proximity of the large window, which he now saw was built leaning outward, enabling one to look out of the hammock straight down a minimum of four hundred and eighty feet. So all right, he concluded, if you say so. I'm sleepy.

So for the next two hours he lay in the hammock watching MacLyle putter about the place, thinking more or less professional

thoughts.

He doesn't or can't speak (he diagnosed): aphasia, motor. He doesn't or can't understand speech: aphasia, sensory. He won't or can't read and write: alexia. And what else?

He looked at all that art – if it was art, and any that was, was art by accident – and the gadgetry: the chuntering windmill outside, the sash-weight door-closer. He let his eyes follow a length of

clothesline dangling unobtrusively down the leaning centerpost to which his hammock was fastened, and the pulley and fittings from which it hung, and its extension clear across the ceiling to the back wall, and understood finally that it would, when pulled, open two long, narrow horizontal hatches for through ventilation. A small door behind the chenille led to what he correctly surmised was a primitive powder room, built to overhang the precipice, the most perfect no-plumbing solution for that convenience he had ever seen.

He watched MacLyle putter. That was the only word for it, and his actions were the best example of puttering he had ever seen. MacLyle lifted, shifted, and put things down, backed off to judge, returned to lay an approving hand on the thing he had moved. Net effect, nothing tangible - yet one could not say there was no effect, because of the intense satisfaction the man radiated. For minutes he would stand, head cocked, smiling slightly, regarding the halffinished potter's wheel, then explode into activity, sawing, planing, drilling. He would add the finished piece to the cranks and connecting rods already completed, pat it as if it were an obedient child, and walk away, leaving the rest of the job for some other time. With a woodrasp he carefully removed the nose from one of his dried clay figures, and meticulously put on a new one. Always there was this absorption in his own products and processes, and the air of total reward in everything. And there was time, there seemed to be time enough for everything, and always would be.

Here is a man, thought the fairly intelligent psychiatrist, in retreat, but in a retreat the like of which my science has not yet described. For observe: he has reacted toward the primitive in terms of supplying himself with his needs with his own hands and by his own ingenuity, and yet there is nothing primitive in those needs themselves. He works constantly to achieve the comforts which his history has conditioned him to in the past – electric lights, cross-ventilation, trouble-free waste disposal. He exhibits a profound humility in the low rates he pays himself for his labor: he is building a potter's wheel apparently in order to make his own cooking vessels, and, since wood is cheap and clay free, his vessel can only cost him less than engine-turned aluminum by a very low evaluation of his own efforts.

His skills are less than his energy (mused the psychiatrist). His carpentry, like his painting and sculpture, shows considerable intelligence, but only moderate training; he can construct but not beautify, draw but not draft, and reach the artistically pleasing only by not erasing the random shake, the accidental cut; so that real creation in his work is, like any random effect, rare and

unpredictable. Therefore his reward is in the area of satisfaction – about as wide a generalization as one can make.

What satisfaction? Not in possessions themselves, for this man could have bought better for less. Not in excellence in itself, for he obviously could be satisfied with less than perfection. Freedom, perhaps, from routine, from dominations of work? Hardly, because for all the complexity of this cluttered cottage, it had its order and its system; the presence of an alarm clock conveyed a good deal in this area. He wasn't dominated by regularity – he used it. And his satisfaction? Why, it must lie in this closed circle, himself to himself, and in the very fact of non-communication!

Retreat ... retreat. Retreat to savagery and you don't engineer your cross-ventilation or adjust a 500-foot gravity flush for your john. Retreat into infancy and you don't design and build a potter's wheel. Retreat from people and you don't greet a stranger like ...

Wait.

Maybe a stranger who had something to communicate, or some way of communication, wouldn't be so welcome. An unsettling thought, that. Running the risk of doing something MacLyle didn't like would be, possibly, a little more unselfish than the challenge warranted.

MacLyle began to cook.

Watching him, the psychiatrist reflected suddenly that this withdrawn and wordless individual was a happy one, in his own matrix; further, he had fulfilled all his obligations and responsibilities and was bothering no one.

It was intolerable.

It was intolerable because it was a violation of the prime directive of psychiatry — at least, of that school of psychiatry which he professed, and he was not going to confuse himself by considerations of other, less-tired theories — It is the function of psychiatry to adjust the aberrate to society, and to restore or increase his usefulness to it. To yield, to rationalize this man's behavior as balance, would be to fly in the face of science itself; for this particular psychiatry finds its most successful approaches in the scientific method, and it is unprofitable to debate whether or not it is or is not a science. To its practitioner it is, and that's that; it has to be. Operationally speaking, what has been found true, even statistically, must be Truth, and all other things, even Possible, kept the hell out of the tool-box. No known Truth allowed a social entity to secede this way, and, for one, this fairly intelligent psychiatrist was not going to give this — this suicide his blessing.

He must, then, find a way to communicate with MacLyle, and

when he had found it, he must communicate to him the error of his

ways. Without getting thrown over the cliff.

He became aware that MacLyle was looking at him, twinkling. He smiled back before he knew what he was doing, and obeyed MacLyle's beckoning gesture. He eased himself out of the hammock and went to the workbench, where a steaming stew was set out in earthenware bowls. The bowls stood on large plates and were surrounded by a band of carefully sliced tomatoes. He tasted them. They were obviously vine-ripened and had been speckled with a dark-green paste which, after studious attention to its aftertaste, he identified as fresh basil mashed with fresh garlic and salt. The effect was symphonic.

He followed suit when MacLyle picked up his own bowl and they went outside and squatted under the old Engelmann spruce to eat. It was a quiet and pleasant occasion, and during it the psychiatrist had plenty of opportunity to size up his man and place his campaign. He was quite sure now how to proceed, and all he needed was opportunity, which presented itself when MacLyle rose, stretched, smiled, and went indoors. The psychiatrist followed him to the door and saw him crawl into the hammock and fall

almost instantly asleep.

The psychiatrist went to his car and got out his bag of cricks. And so it was that late in the afternoon, when MacLyle emerged stretching and yawning from his nap, he found his visitor under the spruce tree, hefting the ophicleide and twiddling its keys in a perplexed and investigatory fashion. MacLyle strode over to him and lifted the ophicleide away with a pleasant I'll-show-you smile, got the monstrous contraption into position, and ran his tongue around the inside of the mouthpiece, large as a demitasse. He had barely time to pucker up his lips at the strange taste there before his irises rolled up completely out of sight and he collapsed like a grounded parachute. The psychiatrist was able only to snatch away the ophicleide in time to keep the mouthpiece from knocking out MacLyle's front teeth.

He set the ophicleide carefully against the tree and straightened MacLyle's limbs. He concentrated for a moment on the pulse, and turned the head to one side so saliva would not drain down the flaccid throat, and then went back to his bag of tricks. He came back and knelt, and MacLyle did not even twitch at the bite of the hypodermics: a careful blend of the non-soporific tranquilizers Frenquel, chlorpromazine and Reserpine, and a judicious dose of

scopolamine, a hypnotic.

The psychiatrist got water and carefully sponged out the man's

mouth, not caring to wait out another collapse the next time he swallowed. Then there was nothing to do but wait, and plan.

Exactly on schedule, according to the psychiatrist's wristwatch, MacLyle groaned and coughed weakly. The psychiatrist immediately and in a firm quiet voice told him not to move. Also not to think. He stayed out of the immediate range of MacLyle's unfocused eyes and explained that MacLyle must trust him, because he was there to help, and not to worry about feeling mixed-up or disoriented. 'You don't know where you are or how you got here,' he informed MacLyle. He also told MacLyle, who was past 40, that he was 37 years old, but he knew what he was doing.

MacLyle just lay there obediently and thought these things over and waited for more information. He knew he must trust this voice, the owner of which was here to help him; that he was 37 years old; and his name. In these things he lay and marinated. The drugs kept him conscious, docile, submissive and without guile. The psychiatrist observed and exulted: oh you azacyclonol, he chanted silently to himself, you pretty piperidyl, handsome hydrochloride, subtle Serpasil ... Confidently he left MacLyle and went into the cabin where, after due search, he found some decent clothes and some socks and shoes and brought them out and wrapped the supine patient in them. He helped MacLyle across the clearing and into his car, humming as he did so, for there is none so happy as an expert faced with excellence in his speciality. MacLyle sank back into the cushions and gave one wondering glance at the cabin and at the blare of late light from the bell of the ophicleide; but the psychiatrist told him firmly that these things had nothing to do with him, nothing at all, and MacLyle smiled relievedly and fell to watching the scenery. As they passed the general store MacLyle stirred, but said nothing about it. Instead he asked the psychiatrist if the Ardsmere station was open yet, whereupon the psychiatrist could barely answer him for the impulse to purr like a cat: the Ardsmere station, two stops before MacLyle's suburban town, had burned down and been rebuilt almost six years ago; so now he knew for sure that MacLyle was living in a time preceding his difficulties - a time during which, of course, MacLyle had been able to talk. All of this the psychiatrist kept to himself, and answered gravely that yes, they had the Ardsmere station operating again. And did he have anything else on his mind?

MacLyle considered this carefully, but since all the immediate questions were answered – unswervingly, he *knew* he was safe in the hands of this man, whoever he was; he knew (he thought) his

correct age and that he was expected to feel disoriented; he was also under a command not to think – he placidly shook his head and went back to watching the road unroll under their wheels. 'Fallen Rock Zone,' he murmured as they passed a sign. The psychiatrist drove happily down the mountain and across the flats, back to the city where he had hired the car. He left it at the railroad station ('Rail Crossing Road,' murmured MacLyle) and made reservations for a compartment on the train, aircraft being too open and public for his purposes and far too fast for the hourly rate he suddenly decided to apply.

They had time for a silent and companionable dinner before train

time, and then at last they were aboard.

The psychiatrist turned off all but one reading lamp and leaned forward. MacLyle's eyes dilated readily to the dimmer light, and the psychiatrist leaned back comfortably and asked him how he felt. He felt fine and said so. The psychiatrist asked him how old he was and MacLyle told him, 37, but he sounded doubtful.

Knowing that the scopolamine was wearing off but the other drugs, the tranquilizers, would hang on for a bit, the psychiatrist drew a deep breath and removed the suggestion; he told MacLyle the truth about his age, and brought him up to the here and now. MacLyle just looked puzzled for a few minutes and then his features settled into an expression that can only be described as not unhappy. 'Porter,' was all he said, gazing at the push-button, and announced that he could read now.

The psychiatrist nodded sagely and offered no comment, being quite willing to let a patient stew as long as he produced essence.

MacLyle abruptly demanded to know why he had lost the powers of speech and reading. The psychiatrist raised his eyebrows a little, smiled one of those 'You-tell-me' smiles, and then got up and suggested they sleep on it. He got the porter in to fix the beds and as an afterthought told the man to come back with the evening papers. Nothing can orient a cultural expatriate better than the evening papers. The man did. MacLyle paid no attention to this, one way or the other. He just climbed into the psychiatrist's spare pajamas thoughtfully and they went to bed.

The psychiatrist didn't know if MacLyle had awakened him on purpose or whether the train's slowing had done it, anyway he awoke about three in the morning to find MacLyle standing beside his bunk looking at him fixedly. He noticed, too, that MacLyle's reading lamp was lit and the papers were scattered all over the floor. MacLyle said, 'You're some kind of a doctor,' in a flat voice.

The psychiatrist admitted it.

MacLyle said, 'Well, this ought to make some sense to you. I was skiing out here years ago when I was a college kid. Accident, fellow I was with broke his leg. Compound. Made him comfortable as I could and went for help. Came back, he'd slid down the mountain, thrashing around, I guess. Crevasse, down in the bottom; took two days to find him, three days to get him out. Frostbite. Gangrene.'

The psychiatrist tried to look as if he was following this.

MacLyle said, 'The one thing I always remember, him pulling back the bandages all the time to look at his leg. Knew it was gone, couldn't keep himself from watching the stuff spread around and upward. Didn't like to; *had* to. Tried to stop him, finally had to help him or he'd hurt himself. Every ten, fifteen minutes all the way down to the lodge, fifteen hours, looking under the bandages.'

The psychiatrist tried to think of something to say and couldn't.

MacLyle said, 'That Donne, that John Donne I used to spout, I always believed that.'

The psychiatrist began to misquote the thing about send not to ask for whom the bell ...

'Yeah, that, but especially "any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind." I believed that,' MacLyle repeated. 'I believed more than that. Not only death. Damn foolishness diminishes me because I am involved. People all the time pushing people around diminishes me. Everybody hungry for a fast buck diminishes me.' He picked up a sheet of newspaper and let it slip away; it flapped off to the corner of the compartment like a huge gravemoth. 'I was getting diminished to death and I had to watch it happening to me like that kid with the gangrene, so that's why.' The train, crawling now, lurched suddenly and yielded. MacLyle's eyes flicked to the window, where neon beer signs and a traffic light were reluctantly being framed. MacLyle leaned close to the psychiatrist. 'I just had to get un-involved with mankind before I got diminished altogether, everything mankind did was my fault. So I did and now here I am involved again.' MacLyle abruptly went to the door. 'And for that, thanks.'

The psychiatrist asked him what he was going to do.

'Do?' asked MacLyle cheerfully. 'Why, I'm going out there and diminish mankind right back.' He was out in the corridor with the door closed before the psychiatrist so much as sat up. He banged it open again and leaned in. He said in the sanest of all possible voices. 'Now mind you, doctor, this is only one man's opinion,' and was gone. He killed four people before they got him.

## The Other Celia

If you live in a cheap enough rooming house and the doors are made of cheap enough pine, and the locks are old-fashioned single-action jobs and the hinges are loose, and if you have a hundred and ninety lean pounds to operate with, you can grasp the knob, press the door sidewise against its hinges, and slip the latch. Further, you can lock the door the same way when you come out.

Slim Walsh lived in, and was, and had, and did these things partly because he was bored. The company doctors had laid him up – not off, up – for three weeks (after his helper had hit him just over the temple with a fourteen-inch crescent wrench) pending some more X-rays. If he was going to get sick-leave pay, he wanted to make it stretch. If he was going to get a big fat settlement – all to the good; what he saved by living in this firetrap would make the money look even better. Meanwhile, he felt fine and had nothing to do all day.

'Slim isn't dishonest,' his mother used to tell Children's Court

some years back. 'He's just curious.'

She was perfectly right.

Slim was constitutionally incapable of borrowing your bathroom without looking into your medicine chest. Send him into your kitchen for a saucer and when he came out a minute later, he'd have inventoried your refrigerator, your vegetable bin, and (since he was six feet three inches tall) he would know about a moldering jar of maraschino cherries in the back of the top shelf that you'd forgotten about.

Perhaps Slim, who was not impressed by his impressive size and build, felt that a knowledge that you secretly use hair-restorer, or are one of those strange people who keeps a little mound of unmated socks in your second drawer, gave him a kind of superiority. Or maybe security is a better word. Or maybe it was an odd compensation for one of the most advanced cases of gawking,

gasping shyness ever recorded.

Whatever it was, Slim liked you better if, while talking to you, he knew how many jackets hung in your closet, how old that unpaid phone bill was, and just where you'd hidden those photographs. On the other hand, Slim didn't insist on knowing bad or even embarrassing things about you. He just wanted to know things about you, period.

His current situation was therefore a near-paradise. Flimsy doors stood in rows, barely sustaining vacuum on aching vacuum of knowledge; and one by one they imploded at the nudge of his curiosity. He touched nothing (or if he did, he replaced it carefully) and removed nothing, and within a week he knew Mrs. Koyper's roomers far better than she could, or cared to. Each secret visit to the rooms gave him a starting point; subsequent ones taught him more. He knew not only what these people had, but what they did, where, how much, *for* how much, and how often. In almost every case, he knew why as well.

Almost every case. Celia Sarton came.

Now, at various times, in various places, Slim had found strange things in other people's rooms. There was an old lady in one shabby place who had an electric train under her bed; used it, too. There was an old spinster in this very building who collected bottles, large and small, of any value or capacity, providing they were round and squat and with long necks. A man on the second floor secretly guarded his desirables with the unloaded .25 automatic in his top bureau drawer, for which he had a half-box of .38 cartridges.

There was a (to be chivalrous) girl in one of the rooms who kept fresh cut flowers before a photograph on her night table – or, rather, before a frame in which were stacked eight photographs, one of which held the stage each day. Seven days, eight photographs: Slim admired the system. A new love every day and, predictably, a different love on successive Wednesdays. And all of them movie stars.

Dozens of rooms, dozens of imprints, marks, impressions, overlays, atmospheres of people. And they needn't be odd ones. A woman moves into a room, however standardized; the instant she puts down her dusting powder on top of the flush tank, the room is *hers*. Something stuck in the ill-fitting frame of a mirror, something draped over the long-dead gas jet, and the samest of rooms begins to shrink toward its occupant as if it wished, one day, to be a close-knit, form-fitting, individual integument as intimate as a skin.

But not Celia Sarton's room.

Slim Walsh got a glimpse of her as she followed Mrs. Koyper up the stairs to the third floor. Mrs. Koyper, who hobbled, slowed any follower sufficiently to afford the most disinterested witness a good look, and Slim was anything but disinterested. Yet for days he could not recall her clearly. It was as if Celia Sarton had been – not invisible, for that would have been memorable in itself – but translucent or, chameleonlike, drably re-radiating the drab wall color, carpet color, woodwork color.

She was – how old? Old enough to pay taxes. How tall? Tall enough. Dressed in ... whatever women cover themselves with in their statistical thousands. Shoes, hose, skirt, jacket, hat.

She carried a bag. When you go to the baggage window at a big terminal, you notice a suitcase here, a steamer-trunk there; and all around, high up, far back, there are rows and ranks and racks of luggage not individually noticed but just *there*. This bag, Celia Sarton's bag, was one of them.

And to Mrs. Koyper, she said – she said – She said whatever is necessary when one takes a cheap room; and to find her voice,

divide the sound of a crowd by the number of people in it.

So anonymous, so unnoticeable was she that, aside from being aware that she left in the morning and returned in the evening, Slim let two days go by before he entered her room; he simply could not remind himself about her. And when he did, and had inspected it to his satisfaction, he had his hand on the knob, about to leave, before he recalled that the room was, after all occupied. Until that second, he had thought he was giving one of the vacancies the once-over. (He did this regularly; it gave him a reference-point.)

He grunted and turned back, flicking his gaze over the room. First he had to assure himself that he was in the right room, which, for a man of his instinctive orientations, was extraordinary. Then he had to spend a moment of disbelief in his own eyes, which was all but unthinkable. When that passed, he stood in astonishment, staring at the refutation of everything his – hobby – had taught him

about people and the places they live in.

The bureau drawers were empty. The ashtray was clean. No toothbrush, toothpaste, soap. In the closet, two wire hangers and one wooden one covered with dirty quilted silk, and nothing else. Under the grime-gray dresser scarf, nothing. In the shower stall, the medicine chest, nothing and nothing again, except what Mrs. Koyper had grudgingly installed.

Slim went to the bed and carefully turned back the faded coverlet. Maybe she had slept in it, but very possibly not; Mrs. Koyper specialized in unironed sheets of such a ground-in gray that it wasn't easy to tell. Frowning, Slim put up the coverlet again and

smoothed it.

Suddenly he struck his forehead, which yielded him a flash of

pain from his injury. He ignored it. 'The bag!'

It was under the bed, shoved there, not hidden there. He looked at it without touching it for a moment, so that it could be returned exactly. Then he hauled it out.

It was a black gladstone, neither new nor expensive, of that

nondescript rusty color acquired by untended leatherette. It had a worn zipper closure and was not locked. Slim opened it. It contained a cardboard box, crisp and new, for a thousand virgin sheets of cheap white typewriter paper surrounded by a glossy bright blue band bearing a white diamond with the legend: Nonpareil the writers friend 15% cotton fiber trade mark registered.

Slim lifted the paper out of the box, looked under it, riffled a thumbful of the sheets at the top and the same from the bottom, shook his head, replaced the paper, closed the box, put it back into the bag and restored everything precisely as he had found it. He paused again in the middle of the room, turning slowly once, but there was simply nothing else to look at. He let himself out, locked

the door, and went silently back to his room.

He sat down on the edge of his bed and at last protested, 'Nobody *lives* like that!'

His room was on the fourth and topmost floor of the old house. Anyone else would have called it the worst room in the place. It was small, dark, shabby and remote and it suited him beautifully.

Its door had a transom, the glass of which had many times been painted over. By standing on the foot of his bed, Slim could apply one eye to the peephole he had scratched in the paint and look straight down the stairs to the third-floor landing. On this landing, hanging to the stub of one of the ancient gas jets, was a cloudy mirror surmounted by a dust-mantled gilt eagle and surrounded by a great many rococo carved flowers. By careful propping with folded cigarette wrappers, innumerable tests and a great deal of silent mileage up and down the stairs, Slim had arranged the exact tilt necessary in the mirror so that it covered the second floor landing as well. And just as a radar operator leans to translate glowing pips and masses into aircraft and weather, so Slim became expert at the interpretation of the fogged and distant image it afforded him. Thus he had the comings and goings of half the tenants under surveillance without having to leave his room.

It was in this mirror, at twelve minutes past six, that he saw Celia Sarton next, and as he watched her climb the stairs, his eyes

glowed.

The anonymity was gone. She came up the stairs two at a time, with a gait like bounding. She reached the landing and whirled into her corridor and was gone, and while a part of Slim's mind listened for the way she opened the door (hurriedly, rattling the key against the lock-plate, banging the door open, slamming it shut), another part studied a mental photograph of her face.

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What raised its veil of the statistical ordinary was its set purpose. Here were eyes only superficially interested in cars, curbs, stairs, doors. It was as if she had projected every important part of herself into that empty room of hers and waited there impatiently for her body to catch up. There was something in the room, or something she had to do there, which she could not, would not, wait for. One goes this way to a beloved after a long parting, or to a deathbed in the last, precipitous moments. This was not the arrival of one who wants, but of one who needs.

Slim buttoned his shirt, eased his door open and sidled through it. He poised a moment on his landing like a great moose sensing the air before descending to a waterhole, and then moved downstairs.

Celia Sarton's only neighbor in the north corridor – the spinster with the bottles – was settled for the evening; she was of very regular habits and Slim knew them well.

Completely confident that he would not be seen, he drifted to the

girl's door and paused.

She was there, all right. He could see the light around the edge of the ill-fitting door, could sense that difference between an occupied room and an empty one, which exists however silent the occupant might be. And this one *was* silent. Whatever it was that had driven her into the room with such headlong urgency, whatever it was she was doing (*had*to do) was being done with no sound or motion that he could detect.

For a long time – six minutes, seven – Slim hung there, open-throated to conceal the sound of his breath. At last, shaking his head, he withdrew, climbed the stairs, let himself into his own room and lay down on the bed, frowning.

He could only wait. Yet he *could* wait. No one does any single thing for very long. Especially a thing not involving movement. In

an hour, in two -

It was five. At half-past eleven, some faint sound from the floor below brought Slim, half-dozing, twisting up from the bed and to his high peephole in the transom. He saw the Sarton girl come out of the corridor slowly, and stop, and look around at nothing in particular, like someone confined too long in a ship's cabin who has emerged on deck, not so much for the lungs' sake, but for the eyes'. And when she went down the stairs, it was easily and without hurry, as if (again) the important part of her was in the room. But the something was finished with for now and what was ahead of her wasn't important and could wait.

Standing with his hand on his own doorknob, Slim decided that

he, too, could wait. The temptation to go straight to her room was, of course, large, but caution also loomed. What he had tentatively established as her habit patterns did not include midnight exits. He could not know when she might come back and it would be foolish indeed to jeopardize his hobby – not only where it included her, but all of it – by being caught. He sighed, mixing resignation with anticipatory pleasure, and went to bed.

Less than fifteen minutes later, he congratulated himself with a sleepy smile as he heard her slow footsteps mount the stairs below.

He slept.

There was nothing in the closet, there was nothing in the ashtray, there was nothing in the medicine chest nor under the dresser scarf. The bed was made, the dresser drawers were empty, and under the bed was the cheap gladstone. In it was a box containing a thousand sheets of typing paper surrounded by a glossy blue band. Without disturbing this, Slim riffled the sheets, once at the top, once at the bottom. He grunted, shook his head and then proceeded, automatically but meticulously, to put everything back as he had found it.

'Whatever it is this girl does at night,' he said glumly, 'it leaves

tracks like it makes noise.'

He left.

The rest of the day was unusually busy for Slim. In the morning he had a doctor's appointment, and in the afternoon he spent hours with a company lawyer who seemed determind to (a) deny the existence of any head injury and (b) to prove to Slim and the world that the injury must have occurred years ago. He got absolutely nowhere. If Slim had another characteristic as consuming and complusive as his curiosity, it was his shyness; these two could stand on one another's shoulders, though, and still look upward at Slim's stubbornness. It served its purpose. It took hours, however, and it was after seven when he got home.

He paused at the third-floor landing and glanced down the corridor. Celia Sarton's room was occupied and silent. If she emerged around midnight, exhausted and relieved, then he would know she had again raced up the stairs to her urgent, motionless task, whatever it was ... and here he checked himself. He had long ago learned the uselessness of cluttering up his busy head with conjectures. A thousand things might happen; in each case, only one would. He would wait, then, and could.

And again, some hours later, he saw her come out of her corridor. She looked about, but he knew she saw very little; her face was withdrawn and her eyes wide and unguarded. Then, instead of going out, she went back into her room.

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He slipped downstairs half an hour later and listened at her door, and smiled. She was washing her lingerie at the handbasin. It was a small thing to learn, but he felt he was making progress. It did not explain why she lived as she did, but indicted how she could manage without so much as a spare handkerchief.

Oh, well, maybe in the morning.

In the morning, there was no maybe. He found it, he found it, though he could not know what it was he'd found. He laughed at first, not in triumph but wryly, calling himself a clown. Then he squatted on his heels in the middle of the floor (he would not sit on the bed, for fear of leaving wrinkles of his own on those Mrs. Koyper supplied) and carefully lifted the box of paper out of the suitcase and put it on the floor in front of him.

Up to now, he had contented himself with a quick riffle of the blank paper, a little at the top, a little at the bottom. He had done just this again, without removing the box from the suitcase, but only taking the top off and tilting up the banded ream of Nonpareil-the-writers-friend. And almost in spite of itself, his quick

eye had caught the briefest flash of pale blue.

Gently, he removed the band, sliding it off the pack of paper, being careful not to slit the glossy finish. Now he could freely riffle the pages, and when he did, he discovered that all of them except a hundred or so, top and bottom, had the same rectanglar cut-out, leaving only a narrow margin all the way around. In the hollow space thus formed, something was packed.

He could not tell what the something was, except that it was pale tan, with a ting of pink, and felt like smooth untextured leather. There was a lot of it, neatly folded so that it exactly fitted the hole

in the ream of paper.

He puzzled over it for some minutes without touching it again, and then, scrubbing his fingertips against his shirt until he felt that they were quite free of moisture and grease, he gently worked loose the top corner of the substance and unfolded a layer. All he found was more of the same.

He folded it down flat again to be sure he could, and then brought more of it out. He soon realized that the material was of an irregular shape and almost certainly of one piece, so that folding it into a tight rectangle required care and great skill. Therefore he proceeded very slowly, stopping every now and then to fold it up again, and it took him more than an hour to get enough of it out so that he could identify it.

Identify? It was completely unlike anything he had ever seen

before.

It was a human skin, done in some substance very like the real thing. The first fold, the one which had been revealed at first, was an area of the back, which was why it showed no features. One might liken it to a balloon, except that a deflated balloon is smaller in every dimension than an inflated one. As far as Slim could judge, this was life-sized – a little over five feet long and proportioned accordingly. The hair was peculiar, looking exactly like the real thing until flexed, and then revealing itself to be one piece.

It had Celia Sarton's face.

Slim closed his eyes and opened them, and found that it was still true. He held his breath and put forth a careful, steady forefinger and gently pressed the left eyelid upward. There was an eye under it, all right, light blue and seemingly moist, but flat.

Slim released the breath, closed the eye and sat back on his heels. His feet were beginning to tingle from his having knelt on the floor

for so long.

He looked all around the room once, to clear his head of strangeness, and then began to fold the thing up again. It took a while, but when he was finshed, he knew he had it right. He replaced the typewriter paper in the box and the box in the bag, put the bag away and at last stood in the middle of the room in the suspension which overcame him when he was deep in thought.

After a moment of this, he began to inspect the ceiling. It was made of stamped tin, like those of many old-fashioned houses. It was grimy and flaked and stained; here and there, rust showed through, and in one or two places, edges of the tin sheets had sagged. Slim nodded to himself in profound satisfaction, listened for a while at the door, let himself out, locked it and went upstairs.

He stood in his own corridor for a minute, checking the position of doors, the hall window, and his accurate orientation of the same

things on the floor below. Then he went into his own room.

His room, though smaller than most, was one of the few in the house which was blessed with a real closet instead of a rickety off-the-floor wardrobe. He went into it and knelt, and grunted in satisfaction when he found how loose the ancient, unpainted floorboards were. By removing the side baseboard, he found it possible to get to the air-space between the fourth floor and third-floor ceiling.

He took out boards until he had an opening perhaps fourteen inches wide, and then, working in almost total silence, he began cleaning away dirt and old plaster. He did this meticulously, because when he finally pierced the tin sheeting, he wanted not one grain of dirt to fall into the room below. He took his time and it

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was late in the afternoon when he was satisfied with his preparations and began, with his knife, on the tin.

It was thinner and softer than he had dared to hope; he almost overcut on the first try. Carefully he squeezed the sharp steel into the little slot he had cut, lengthening it. When it was somewhat less than an inch long, he withdrew all but the point of the knife and twisted it slightly, moved it a sixteenth of an inch and twisted again, repeating this all down the cut until he had widened it enough for his purposes.

He checked the time, then returned to Celia Sarton's room for just long enough to check the appearance of his work from that side. He was very pleased with it. The little cut had come through a foot away from the wall over the bed and was a mere pencil line lost in the baroque design with which the tin was stamped and the dirt and rust that marred it. He returned to his room and sat down to

wait.

He heard the old house coming to its evening surge of life, a voice here, a door there, footsteps on the stairs. He ignored them all as he sat on the edge of his bed, hands folded between his knees, eyes half closed, immobile like a machine fueled, oiled, tuned and ready, lacking only the right touch on the right control. And like that touch, the faint sound of Celia Sarton's footsteps moved him.

To use his new peephole, he had to lie on the floor half in and half out of the closet, with his head in the hole, actually below floor level. With this, he was perfectly content, any amount of discomfort being well worth his trouble — an attitude he shared with many another ardent hobbyist, mountain-climber or speleologist, duck-hunter or bird-watcher.

When she turned on the light, he could see her splendidly, as well as most of the floor, the lower third of the door and part of the washbasin in the bathroom.

She had come in hurriedly, with that same agonized haste he had observed before. At the same second she turned on the light, she had apparently flung her handbag toward the bed; it was in mid-air as the light appeared. She did not even glance its way, but hastily fumbled the old gladstone from under the bed, opened it, removed the box, opened it, took out the paper, slipped off the blue band and removed the blank sheets of paper which covered the hollowed-out ream.

She scooped out the thing hidden there, shaking it once like a grocery clerk with a folded paper sack, so that the long limp thing straightened itself out. She arranged it carefully on the worn linoleum of the floor, arms down at the side, legs slightly apart, face

up, neck straight. Then she lay down on the floor, too, head-to-head with the deflated thing. She reached up over her head, took hold of the collapsed image of herself about the region of the ears, and for a moment did some sort of manipulations of it against the top of her own head.

Slim heard faintly a sharp, chitinous click, like the sound one makes by snapping the edge of a thumbnail against the edge of a

fingernail.

Her hands slipped to the cheeks of the figure and she pulled at the empty head as if testing a connection. The head seemed now to have adhered to hers.

Then she assumed the same pose she had arranged for this other, letting her hands fall wearily to her sides on the floor, closing her

eyes.

For a long while, nothing seemed to be happening, except for the odd way she was breathing, very deeply but very slowly, like the slow-motion picture of someone panting, gasping for breath after a long hard run. After perhaps ten minutes of this, the breathing became shallower and even slower, until, at the end of half hour, he could detect none at all.

Slim lay there immobile for more than an hour, until his body shrieked protest and his head ached from eyestrain. He hated to move, but move he must. Silently he backed out of the closet, stood up and stretched. It was a great luxury and he deeply enjoyed it. He felt moved to think over what he had just seen, but clearly and consciously decided not to – not yet, anyway.

When he was unkinked, again, he crept back into the closet, put

his head in the hole and his eye to the slot.

Nothing had changed. She still lay quiet, utterly relaxed, so much

so that her hands had turned palm upward.

Slim watched and he watched. Just as he was about to conclude that this was the way the girl spent her entire nights and that there would be nothing more to see, he saw a slight and sudden contraction about the region of her solar plexus, and then another. For a time, there was nothing more, and then the empty thing attached to the top of her head began to fill.

And Celia Sarton began to empty.

Slim stopped breathing until it hurt and watched in total astonishment.

Once it had started, the process progressed swiftly. It was as if something passed from the clothed body of the girl to this naked empty thing. The something, whatever it might be, had to be fluid, for nothing but a fluid would fill a flexible container in just this

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way, or make a flexible container slowly and evenly flatten out like this. Slim could see the fingers, which had been folded flat against the palms, inflate and move until they took on the normal relaxed curl of a normal hand. The elbows shifted a little to lie more normally against the body, and yes, it was a body now.

The other one was not a body any more. It lay foolishly limp in its garments, its sleeping face slightly distorted by its flattening. The fingers fell against the palms by their own limp weight. The shoes thumped quietly on their sides, heels together, toes pointing in opposite directions.

The exchange was done in less than ten minutes and then the new

filled body moved.

It flexed its hands tentatively, drew up its knees and stretched its legs out again, arched its back against the floor. Its eyes flickered open. It put up its arms and made some deft manipulation at the top of its head. Slim heard another version of the soft hard click and the now-empty head fell flat to the floor.

The new Celia Sarton sat up and sighed and rubbed her hands lightly over her body, as if restoring circulation and sensation to a chilled skin. She stretched as comfortingly and luxuriously as Slim had as few minutes earlier. She looked rested and refreshed.

At the top of her head, Slim caught a glimpse of a slit through which a wet whiteness showed, but it seemed to be closing. In a brief time, nothing showed there but a small valley in the hair, like a

normal parting.

She sighed again and got up. She took the clothed thing on the floor by the neck, raised it and shook it twice to make the clothes fall away. She tossed it to the bed and carefully picked up the clothes and deployed them about the room, the undergarments in the washbasin, the dress and slip on a hanger in the wardrobe.

Moving leisurely but with purpose, she went into the bathroom and, except from her shins down, out of Slim's range of vision. There he heard the same faint domestic sounds he had once detected outside the door, as she washed her underclothes. She emerged in due course, went to the wardrobe for some wire hangers and took them into the bathroom. Back she came with the underwear folded on the hangers, which she hooked to the top of the open wardrobe door. Then she took the deflated integument which lay crumpled on the bed, shook it again, rolled it up into a ball and took it into the bathroom.

Slim heard more water-running and sudsing noises, and, by ear, followed the operation through a soaping and two rinses. Then she came out again, shaking out the object, which had apparently just

been wrung, pulled it through a wooden clothes-hanger, arranged it creaselessly depending from the crossbar of the hanger with the bar about at its waistline, and hung it with the others on the wardrobe door.

Then she lay down on the bed, not to sleep or to read or even to rest – she seemed very rested – but merely to wait until it was time to do something else.

By now, Slim's bones were complaining again, so he wormed noiselessly backward out of his lookout point, got into his shoes and a jacket, and went out to get something to eat. When he came home an hour later and looked, her light was out and he could see nothing. He spread his overcoat carefully over the hole in the closet so no stray light from his room would appear in the little slot in ceiling, closed the door, read a comic book for a while, and went to bed.

The next day, he followed her. What strange occupation she might have, what weird vampiric duties she might disclose, he did not speculate on. He was doggedly determined to gather information first and think later.

What he found out about her daytime activities was, if anything, more surprising than any wild surmise. She was a clerk in a small five-and-ten on the East Side. She ate in the store's lunch bar at lunchtime – a green salad and a surprising amount of milk – and in the evening she stopped at a hot-dog stand and drank a small container of milk, though she ate nothing.

Her steps were slowed by then and she moved wearily, speeding up only when she was close to the rooming house, and then apparently all but overcome with eagerness to get home and ... into something more comfortable. She was watched in this process, and Slim, had he disbelieved his own eyes the first time, must believe them now.

So it went for a week, three days of which Slim spent in shadowing her, every evening in watching her make her strange toilet. Every twenty-four hours, she changed bodies, carefully washing, drying, folding and putting away the one she was not using.

Twice during the week, she went out for what was apparently a constitutional and nothing more – a half-hour around midnight, when she would stand on the walk in front of the rooming house, or wander around the block.

At work, she was silent but not unnaturally so; she spoke, when spoken to, in a small, unmusical voice. She seemed to have no friends; she maintained her aloofness by being uninteresting and by

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seeking no one out and by needing no one. She evinced no outside interests, never going to the movies or to the park. She had no dates, not even with girls. Slim thought she did not sleep, but lay quietly in the dark waiting for it to be time to get up and go to

And when he came to think about it, as ultimately he did, it occurred to Slim that within the anthill in which we all live and have our being, enough privacy can be exacted to allow for all sorts of strangeness in the members of society, providing the strangeness is not permitted to show. If it is a man's pleasure to sleep upsidedown like a bat, and if he so arranges his life that no one ever sees him sleeping, or his sleeping-place, why, batlike he may sleep all the days of his life.

One need not, by these rules, even be a human being. Not if the mimicry is good enough. It is a measure of Slim's odd personality to report that Celia Sarton's ways did not frighten him. He was, if anything, less disturbed by her now than he'd been before he had begun to spy on her. He knew what she did in her room and how she lived. Before, he had not known. Now he did. This made him much happier.

He was, however, still curious.

His curiosity would never drive him to do what another man might - to speak to her on the stairs or on the street, get to know her and more about her. He was too shy for that. Nor was he moved to report to anyone the odd practice he watched each evening. It wasn't his business to report. She was doing no harm as far as he could see. In his cosmos, everybody had a right to live and make a buck if they could.

Yet his curiosity, its immediacy taken care of, did undergo a change. It was not in him to wonder what sort of being this was and whether its ancestors had grown up among human beings, living with them in caves and in tents, developing and evolving along with homo sap until it could assume the uniform of the smallest and most invisible of wage-workers. He would never reach the conclusion that, in the fight for survival, a species might discover that a most excellent characteristic for survival among human beings might be not to fight them but to join them.

No, Slim's curiosity was far simpler, more basic and less informed than any of these conjectures. He simply changed the field

of his wonderment from what to what if?

So it was that on the eighth day of his survey, a Tuesday, he went again to her room, got the bag, opened it, removed the box, opened it, removed the ream of paper, slid the blue band off, removed the covering sheets, took out the second Celia Sarton, put her on the bed and then replaced paper, blue band, box-cover, box, and bag just as he had found them. He put the folded thing under his shirt and went out, carefully locking the door behind him in his special way, and went upstairs to his room. He put his prize under the four clean shirts in his bottom drawer and sat down to await Celia Sarton's homecoming.

She was a little late that night – twenty minutes, perhaps. The delay seemed to have increased both her fatigue and her eagerness; she burst in feverishly, moved with the rapidity of near-panic. She looked drawn and pale and her hands shook. She fumbled the bag from under the bed, snatched out the box and opened it, contrary to her usual measured movements, by inverting it over the bed and

dumping out its contents.

When she saw nothing there but sheets of paper, some with a wide rectangle cut from them and some without, she froze. She crouched over the bed without moving for an interminable two minutes. Then she straightened up slowly and glanced about the room. Once she fumbled through the paper, but resignedly, without hope. She made one sound, a high, sad whimper, and, from that moment on, was silent.

She went to the window slowly, her feet dragging, her shoulders slumped. For a long time, she stood looking out at the city, its growing darkness, its growing colonies of lights, each a symbol of life and life's usages. Then she drew down the blind and went back to the bed.

She stacked the papers there with loose uncaring fingers and put the heap of them on the dresser. She took off her shoes and placed them neatly side by side on the floor by the bed. She lay down in the same utterly relaxed pose she affected when she made her change, hands down and open, legs a little apart.

Her face looked like a death-mask, its tissues sunken and sagging. It was flushed and sick-looking. There was a little of the deep regular breathing, but only a little. There was a bit of the fluttering contractions at the midriff, but only a bit. Then –

nothing.

Slim backed away from the peephole and sat up. He felt very bad about this. He had been only curious; he hadn't wanted her to get sick, to die. For he was sure she had died. How could he know what sort of sleep-surrogate an organism like this might require, or what might be the results of a delay in changing? What could he know of the chemistry of such a being? He had thought vaguely of slipping

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down the next day while she was out and returning her property. Just to see. Just to know what if. Just out of curiosity.

Should he call a doctor?

She hadn't. She hadn't even tried, though she must have know much better than he did how serious her predicament was. [Yet if a species depended for its existence on secrecy, it would be species-survival to let an individual die undetected.) Well, maybe not calling a doctor meant that she'd be all right, after all. Doctors would have a lot of silly questions to ask. She might even tell the doctor about her other skin, and if Slim was the one who had fetched the doctor, Slim might be questioned about that.

Slim didn't want to get involved with anything. He just wanted to

know things.

He thought, 'I'll take another look.'

He crawled back into the closet and put his head in the hole. Celia Sarton, he knew instantly, would not survive this. Her face was swollen, her eyes protruded, and her purpled tongue lolled far – too far – from the corner of her mouth. Even as he watched, her face darkened still more and the skin of it crinkled until it looked like carbon paper which has been balled up tight and then smoothed out.

The very beginnings of an impulse to snatch the thing she needed out of his shirt drawer and rush it down to her died within him, for he saw a wisp of smoke emerge from her nostrils and them –

Slim cried out, snatched his head from the hole, bumping it cruelly, and clapped his hands over his eyes. Put the biggest size flash-bulb an inch from your nose, and fire it, and you might get a flare approaching the one he got through his little slot in the tin ceiling.

He sat grunting in pain and watching, on the insides of his eyelids, migrations of flaming worms. At last they faded and he tentatively opened his eyes. They hurt and the after-image of the slot hung before him, but at least he could see.

Feet pounded on the stairs. He smelled smoke and a burned, oily unpleasant something which he could not identify. Someone shouted. Someone hammered on a door. Then someone screamed and screamed.

It was in the papers next day. Mysterious, the story said. Charles Fort, in *Lo!*, had reported many such cases and there had been others since – people burned to a crisp by a fierce heat which had nevertheless not destroyed clothes or bedding, while leaving nothing for autopsy. This was, said the paper, either an unknown

kind of heat or heat of such intensity and such brevity that it would do such a thing. No known relatives, it said. Police mystified - no clues or suspects.

Slim didn't say anything to anybody. He wasn't curious about the matter any more. He closed up the hole in the closet that same night, and next day, after he read the story, he used the newspaper to wrap up the thing in his shirt drawer. It smelled pretty bad and, even that early, was too far gone to be unfolded. He dropped it into a garbage can on the way to the lawyer's office on Wednesday. They settled his lawsuit that afternoon and he moved.

## Slow Sculpture

She didn't know who he was when she met him; well, not many people did. He was in the high orchard doing something under a pear tree. The land smelled of late summer and wind: bronze, it smelled bronze. He looked up at a compact girl in her mid-twenties, with a fearless face and eyes the same color as her hair, which was extraordinary because her hair was red-gold. She looked down at a leather-skinned man in his forties with a goldleaf electroscope in his hand, and felt she was an intruder. She said, 'Oh' in what was apparently the right way, because he nodded once and said, 'Hold this,' and there could then be no thought of intrusion. She knelt down by him and took the instrument, holding it just where he positioned her hand, and then he moved a little away and struck a tuning fork against his kneecap. 'What's it doing?' He had a good voice, the kind of voice strangers notice and listen to.

She looked at the delicate leaves of gold in the glass shield of the

electroscope. 'They're moving apart.'

He struck the tuning fork again and the leaves pressed away from one another. 'Much?'

'About forty-five degrees when you hit the fork.'

'Good – that's about the most we'll get.' From a pocket of his bush jacket he drew a sack of chalk-dust and dropped a small handful on the ground. 'I'll move now. You stay right there and tell me how much the leaves separate.'

He traveled around the pear tree in a zigzag course, striking his tuning fork while she called out numbers – ten degrees, thirty, five, twenty, nothing. Whenever the gold foil pressed apart to maximum, forty degrees or more, he dropped more chalk. When he was finished the tree was surrounded, in a rough oval, by the white dots of chalk. He took out a notebook and diagrammed them and the tree, and put away the book, and took the electroscope out of her hands. 'Were you looking for something?' he asked her.

'No,' she said. 'Yes.'

He could smile. Though it did not last long, she found it very surprising in a face like that. 'That's not what is called, in a court of law, a responsive answer.'

She glanced across the hillside, metallic in that late light. There wasn't much on it – rocks, weeds the summer was done with, a tree or so, and then the orchard. Anyone present had come a long way

to get here. 'It wasn't a simple question,' she said, tried to smile, and burst into tears.

She was sorry and said so.

'Why?' he asked. This was the first time she was to experience this ask-the-next-question thing of his. It was unsettling. It always would be – never less, sometimes a great deal more. 'Well – one doesn't have emotional explosions in public.'

'You do. I don't know this "one" your talking about.'
'I – guess I don't either, now that you mention it.'

'Tell the truth then. No sense in going round and round about it, "he'll think that I -" and the like. I'll think what I think, whatever you say. Or - go on down the mountain and just don't say any more.' She did not turn to go, so he added, 'Try the truth, then. If it's important, it's simple, and if its simple it's easy to say.'

'I'm going to die!' she cried.

'So am I.'

'I have a lump in my breast.'

'Come up to the house and I'll fix it.'

Without another word he turned away and started through the orchard. Startled half out of her wits, indignant and full of insane hope, experiencing, even, a quick curl of astonished laughter, she stood for a moment watching him go, and then found herself (at what point did I decide?) running after him.

She caught up with him on the uphill margin of the orchard. 'Are

you a doctor?'

He appeared not to notice that she had waited, had run. 'No,' he said, and, walking on, appeared not to see her stand again pulling

at her lower lip, then run again to catch up.

'I must be out of my mind,' she said, joining him on a garden path. She said it to herself, which he must have known because he did not answer. The garden was alive with defiant chrysanthemums and a pond in which she saw the flicker of a pair of redcap imperials – silver, not gold fish – which were the largest she had ever seen. Then – the house.

First it was part of the garden, with its colonnaded terrace, and then, with its rock walls (too big to be called fieldstone) part of the mountain. It was on and in the hillside, and its roofs paralleled the skylines, front and sides, and part of it was backed against an outjutting cliff face. The door, beamed and studded and with two archers' slits, was opened for them (but there was no one there) and when it closed it was silent, a far more solid exclusion of things outside than any click or clang of latch or bolt. She stood with her back against it, watching him cross what seemed to be the central

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well of the house, or at least this part of it. It was a kind of small court in the center of which was an atrium, glazed on all of its five sides and open to the sky at the top. In it was a tree, a cypress or juniper, gnarled and twisted and with the turned-back, paralleled, sculptured appearance of what the Japanese call bonsai.

'Aren't you coming? he called, holding open a door behind the

atrium.

'Bonsai just aren't fifteen feet tall,' she said.

'This one is.'

She came by it slowly, looking. 'How long have you had it?'

His tone of voice said he was immensely pleased. It is a clumsiness to ask the owner of a bonsai how old it is; you are then demanding to know if it is his work or if he has acquired and continued the concept of another; you are tempting him to claim for his own the concept and the meticulous labor of someone else, and it becomes rude to tell a man he is being tested. Hence 'How long have you had it?' is polite, forbearing, profoundly courteous. He answered, 'Half my life.' She looked at the tree. Trees can be found, sometimes, not quite discarded, not quite forgotten, potted in rusty gallon cans in not quite successful nurseries, unsold because they are shaped oddly or have dead branches here and there, or because they have grown too slowly in whole or part. These are the ones which develop interesting trunks and a resistance to misfortune that makes them flourish if given the least excuse for living. This one was far older than half this man's life, or all of it. Looking at it, she was terrified by the unbidden thought that a fire, a family of squirrels, some subterranean worm or termite could end this beauty - something working outside any concept of rightness or justice or ... or respect. She looked at the tree. She looked at the man.

'Coming?'

'Yes,' she said and went with him into his laboratory. 'Sit down over there and relax,' he told her. 'This might take a little while.'

'Over there' was a big leather chair by the bookcase. The books were right across the spectrum – reference works in medicine and engineering, nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, psychiatry. Also tennis, gymnastics, chess, the oriental war game Go, and golf. And then drama, the techiques of fiction, *Modern English Usage*, *The American Language* and supplement, Wood's and Walker's rhyming dictionaries and an array of other dictionaries and encyclopedias. A whole long shelf of biographies. 'You have quite a library.'

He answered her rather shortly: clearly he did not want to talk

just now, for he was very busy. He said only, 'Yes I have – perhaps you'll see it some time,' which left her to pick away at his words to find out what on earth he meant by them. He could only have meant, she decided, that the books beside her chair were what he kept handy for his work – that his real library was elsewhere. She looked at him with a certain awe.

And she watched him. She liked the way he moved – swiftly, decisively. Clearly he knew what he was doing. He used some equipment that she recognized – a glass still, titration equipment, a centrifuge. There were two refrigerators, one of which was not a refrigerator at all, for she could see the large indicator on the door: it stood at 70°F. It came to her that a modern refrigerator is perfectly adaptable to the demand for controlled environment, even a warm one.

But all that, and the equipment she did not recognize, was only furniture. It was the man who was worth watching, the man who kept her occupied so that not once in all the long time she sat there was she tempted toward the bookshelves.

At last he finished a long sequence at the bench, threw some switches, picked up a tall stool and came over to her. He perched on the stool, hung his heels on the crosspoke, and lay a pair of long brown hands over his knees. 'Scared?'

'I s'pose I am.'

'You don't have to stay.'

'Considering the alternative,' she began bravely, but the couragesound somehow oozed out, 'it can't matter much.'

'Very sound,' he said, almost cheerfully. 'I remember when I was a kid there was a fire scare in the apartment house where we lived. It was a wild scramble to get out, and my ten-year-old brother found himself outside in the street with an alarm clock in his hand. It was an old one and it didn't work – but of all the things in the place he might have snatched up at a time like that, it turned out to be the clock. He's never been able to figure out why.'

'Have you?'

'Not why he picked that particular thing, no. But I think I know why he did something obviously irrational. You see, panic is a very special state. Like fear and flight, or fury and attack, it's a pretty primitive reaction to extreme danger. It's one of the expressions of the will to survive. What makes it so special is that it's irrational. Now, why would the abandonment of reason be a survival mechanism?'

She thought about this seriously. There was that about this man which made serious thought imperative. 'I can't imagine,' she said

finally. 'Unless it's because, in some situations, reason just doesn't work.'

'You can imagine,' he said, again radiating that huge approval, making her glow. 'And you just did. If you are in danger and you try reason, and reason doesn't work, you abandon it. You can't say it's unintelligent to abandon what doesn't work, right? So then you are in panic; then you start to perform random acts. Most of them – far and away most – will be useless; some might even be dangerous, but that doesn't matter – you're in danger already. Where the survival factor comes in is that away down deep you know that one chance in a million is better than no chance at all. So – here you sit – you're scared and you could run; something says you should run; but you won't.'

She nodded.

He went on: 'You found a lump. You went to a doctor and he made some tests and gave you the bad news. Maybe you went to another doctor and he confirmed it. You then did some research and found out what was to happen next — the exploratory, the radical, the questionable recovery, the whole, long agonizing procedure of being what they call a terminal case. You then flipped out. Did some things you hope I won't ask you about. Took a trip somewhere, anywhere, wound up in my orchard for no reason.' He spread the good hands and let them go back to their kind of sleep. 'Panic. The reason for little boys in their pajamas standing at midnight with a broken alarm clock in their arms, and for the existence of quacks.' Something chimed over on the bench and he gave her a quick smile and went back to work, saying over his shoulder: 'I'm not a quack, by the way. To qualify as a quack you have to claim to be a doctor. I don't.'

She watched him switch off, switch on, stir, measure and calculate. A little orchestra of equipment chorused and soloed around him as he conducted, whirring, hissing, clicking, flickering. She wanted to laugh, to cry, and to scream. She did no one of these things for fear of not stopping, ever.

When he came over again, the conflict was not raging within her, but exerting steady and opposed tensions; the result was a terrible stasis, and all she could do when she saw the instrument in his hand

was to widen her eyes. She quite forgot to breathe.

'Yes, it's a needle,' he said, his tone almost bantering. 'A long shiny sharp needle. Don't tell me you are one of those needle-shy people.' He flipped the long power-cord which trailed from the black housing around the hypodermic, to get some slack, and straddled the stool. 'Want something to steady your nerves?'

She was afraid to speak; the membrane containing her sane self was very thin, stretched very tight.

He said, 'I'd rather you didn't, because this pharmaceutical stew

is complex enough as it is. But if you need it ...'

She managed to shake her head a little, and again she felt the wave of approval from him. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask – had meant to ask – needed to ask: What was in the needle? How many treatments must she have? What would they be like? How long must she stay, and where? And most of all – oh, could she live, could she live?

He seemed concerned with the answer to only one of these. 'It's mostly built around an isotope of potassium. If I told you all I know about it and how I came on it in the first place, it would take - well, more time than we've got. But here's the general idea: theoretically, every atom is electrically balanced (never mind ordinary exceptions). Likewise all electrical charges in the molecule are supposed to be balanced - so much plus, so much minus, total zero. I happened on the fact that the balance of charges in a wild cell is not zero - not quite. It's as if there was a submicroscopic thunderstorm going on at the molecular level, with little lightning bolts flashing back and forth and changing the signs. Interfering with communications - static - and that,' he said, gesturing with the shielded hypo in his hand, 'is what this is all about. When something interferes with communications - especially the RNA mechanism, which says, Read this blueprint and build accordingly, and stop when it's done - when that message gets garbled, lopsided things get built, off-balance things, things which do almost what they should, do it almost right: they're wild cells, and the messages they pass on are even worse.

'Okay. Whether these thunderstorms are caused by viruses or chemicals or radiation or physical trauma or even anxiety – and don't think anxiety can't do it – that's secondary. The important thing is to fix it so the thunderstorm can't happen. If you can do that, the cells have plenty of ability all by themselves to repair and replace what's gone wrong. And biological systems aren't like ping-pong balls with static charges waiting for the charge to leak away or to discharge into as grounded wire. They have a kind of resilience – I call it forgiveness – which enables them to take on a little more charge, or a little less, and do all right. Well then: say a certain clump of cells is wild and say it carries an aggregate of a hundred units extra on the positive side. Cells immediately around

it are affected, but not the next layer or the next.

'If they could be opened to the extra charge, if they could help to

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drain it off, they would, well, *cure* the wild cells of the surplus, you see what I mean? And they would be able to handle that little overage themselves, or pass it on to other cells and still others who could deal with it. In other words, if I can flood your body with some medium which can drain off and distribute a concentration of this unbalanced charge, the ordinary bodily processes will be free to move in and clear up the wild-cell damage. And that's what I have here.'

He held the shielded needle between his knees and from a side pocket of his lab coat he took a plastic box, opened it and drew out an alcohol swab. Still cheerfully talking, he took her terror-numbed arm and scrubbed at the inside of her elbow. 'I am not for one second implying that nuclear charges in the atom are the same thing as static electric. They're in a different league altogether. But the analogy holds. I could use another analogy. I could liken the charge on the wild cells to accumulations of fat, and this gunk of mine to a detergent, which would break it up and spread it so far it couldn't be detected any more. But I'm led to the static analogy by an odd side effect - organisms injected with this stuff do build up one hell of a static charge. It's a by-product, and for reasons I can only theorize about at the moment, it seems to be keyed to the audio spectrum. Tuning forks and the like. That's what I was playing with when I met you. That tree is drenched with this stuff. It used to have a whorl of wildcell growth. It hasn't any more.' He gave her the quick surprising smile and let it click away as he held the needle point upward and squirted it. With his other hand wrapped around her left biceps, he squeezed gently and firmly. The needle was lowered and placed and slid into the big vein so deftly that she gasped - not because it hurt, but because it did not. Attentively he watched the bit of glass barrel protruding from a black housing as he withdrew the plunger a fraction and saw the puff of red into the colorless fluid inside, and then he bore steadily on the plunger again.

'Please don't move ... I'm sorry; this will take a little time. I have to get quite a lot of this into you. Which is fine, you know,' he said, resuming the tone of his previous remarks about audio spectra, 'because side effect or no, it's consistent. Healthy bio systems develop a strong electrostatic field, unhealthy ones a weak one or none at all. With an instrument as primitive and simple as that little electroscope you can'tell if any part of the organism has a community of wild cells, and if so, where it is and how big and how wild.' Deftly he shifted his grip on the encased hypodermic without moving the point or varying the amount of plunger pressure. It was

beginning to be uncomfortable, an ache turning into a bruise. 'And if you're wondering why this mosquito has a housing on it with a wire attached (although I'll bet you're not and that you know as well as I do that I'm doing all this talking just to keep your mind occupied!) I'll tell you. It's nothing but a coil carrying a high-frequency alternating current. The alternating field sees to it that the fluid is magnetically and electrostatically neutral right from the start.' He withdrew the needle suddenly and smoothly, bent her arm, and trapped in the inside of her elbow a cotton swab.

'Nobody ever told me that before after a treatment,' she said.

'What?'

'No charge,' she said.

Again that wave of approval, this time with words: 'I like your style. How do you feel?'

She cast about for accurate phrases. 'Like the owner of a large

sleeping hysteria begging someone not to wake it up.'

He laughed. 'In a little while you are going to feel so weird you won't have time for hysteria.' He got up and returned the needle to the bench, looping up the cable as he went. He turned off the AC field and returned with a large glass bowl and a square of plywood. He inverted the bowl on the floor near her and placed the wood on its broad base.

'I remember something like that,' she said. 'When I was in – in junior high school. They were generating artificial lightning with a ... let me see ... well, it had a long endless belt running over pulleys and some little wires scraping on it and a big copper ball on top.'

'Van de Graaf generator.'

'Right! And they did all sorts of things with it, but what I specially remember is standing on a piece of wood on a bowl like that and they charged me up with the generator, and I didn't feel much of anything except all my hair stood out from my head. Everyone laughed. I looked like a golliwog. They said I was carrying forty thousand volts.'

'Good! I'm glad you remember that. This'll be a little different,

though. By roughly another forty thousand.'

'Oh!'

'Don't worry. Long as you're insulated, and as long as grounded, or comparatively grounded objects – me, for example – stay well away from you, there won't be any fireworks.'

'Are you going to use a generator like that?'

'Not like that, and I already did. You're the generator.'

'I'm -oh?' She had raised her hand from the upholstered chair arm and there was a crackle of sparks and the faint smell of ozone.

'Oh you sure are, and more than I though, and quicker. Get up!'

She started up slowly; she finished the maneuver with speed. As her body separated from the chair she was, for a fractional second, seated in a tangle of spitting blue-white threads. They, or she, propelled her a yard and a half away, standing. Literally shocked half out of her wits, she almost fell.

'Stay on your feet!' he snapped, and she recovered, gasping. He

stepped back a pace. 'Get up on the board. Quick, now!'

She did as she was told, leaving, for the two paces she travelled, two brief footprints of fire. She teetered on the board. Visibly, her hair began to stir. 'Whats happening to me?' she cried.

'You're getting charged after all,' he said jovially, but at this point she failed to appreciate the extension of even her own

witticism. She cried again, 'What's happening to me?'

'It's all right,' he said consolingly. He went to the bench and turned on a tone generator. It moaned deep in the one to three hundred cycle range. He increased the volume and turned the pitch control. It howled upward and as it did so her red-gold hair shivered and swept up and out, each hair attempting frantically to get away from all the others. He ran the tone up above ten thousand cycles and all the way back to a bell-bumping inaudible eleven; at the extremes her hair slumped, but at around eleven hundred it stood out in (as she had described it) golliwog style.

He turned down the gain to a more or less bearable level and picked up the electroscope. He came toward her, smiling. 'You *are* an electroscope, you know that? And a living Van de Graaf generator as well. And a golliwog.'

'Let me down,' was all she could say.

'Not yet. Please hang tight. The differential between you and everything else here is so high that if you get near any of it you'd discharge into it. It wouldn't harm you – it isn't current electricity – but you might get a burn and a nervous shock out of it.' He held out the electroscope; even at that distance, and in her distress, she could see the gold leaves writhe apart. He circled her, watching the leaves attentively, moving the instrument forward and back and from side to side. Once he went to the tone generator and turned it down some more. 'You're sending such a strong field I can't pick up the variations,' he explained, and returned to her, closer now.

'I can't, much more ... I can't she murmured; he did not hear, or he did not care. He moved the electroscope near her abdomen, up

and from side to side.

'Yup. There you are!' he said cheerfully, moving the instrument close to her right breast.

'What?' she whimpered.

'Your cancer. Right breast, low, around toward the armpit.' He

whistled. 'A mean one, too. Malignant as hell.'

She swayed and then collapsed forward and down. A sick blackness swept down on her, receded explosively in a glare of agonizing blue-white, and then crashed down on her like a mountain falling.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Another wall, another ceiling. Hadn't seen it before. Didn't matter. Don't care.

Sleep.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Something in the way. His face, close, drawn, tired; eyes awake though and penetrating. Doesn't matter. Don't care.

Sleep.

Place where wall meets ceiling. Down a bit, late sunlight. Over little rusty-gold chrysanthemums in a goldgreen glass cornucopia. Something in the way again: his face.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes, but don't answer. Don't move. Don't speak.

Sleep.

It's a room, a wall, a table, a man pacing; a night-time window and mums you'd think were alive, but don't you know they're cut right off and dying?

Do they know that?

'How are you?' Urgent, urgent.

'Thirsty.'

Cold and a bite to it that aches the hinges of the jaws. Grapefruit juice. Lying back on his arm while he holds the glass in the other hand, oh no, that's not . . . 'Thank you. Thanks very –' Try to sit up, the sheet – my clothes!

'Sorry about that,' he said, the mindreader-almost. 'Some things that have to be done just aren't consistent with panty-hose and a mini-dress. All washed and dried and ready for you, though – any time. Over there.'

The brown wool and the panty-hose and the shoes, on the chair. He's respectful, standing back, putting the glass next to an insulated carafe on the night-table.

'What things?'

'Throwing up. Bedpans,' he said candidly.

Protective with the sheet, which can hide bodies but oh not embarrassment. 'Oh I'm sorry .... Oh, I must've—' Shakes head and he slides back and forth in the vision.

'You went into shock, and then you just didn't come out of it.' He hesitated. It was the first time she had ever seen him hesitate over anything. She became for a moment an almost-mind-reader. Should I tell her what's in my mind? Sure he should, and he did: 'You didn't want to come out of it.'

'It's all gone out of my head.'

'The pear tree, the electroscope. The injection, the electrostatic response.'

'No,' she said, not knowing, then, knowing. 'No!'

'Hang on!' he rapped, and next thing she knew he was by the bed, over her, his two hands hard on her cheeks. 'Don't slip off again. You can handle it. You can handle it because it's all right now, do you understand that? You're all right!'

'You told me I had cancer.' It sounded pouty, accusing. He

laughed at her, actually laughed.

'You told *me* you had it.'
'Oh, but I didn't *know*.'

'That explains it, then,' he said in a load-off-my-back tone. 'There wasn't anything in what I did that could cause a three-day withdrawal like that; it had to be something in you.'

'Three days!'

He simply nodded in response to that and went on with what he was saying. 'I get a little pompous once in a while,' he said engagingly. 'Comes from being right so much of the time. Took a bit more for granted than I should have, didn't I? when I assumed you'd been to a doctor, maybe even had a biopsy. You didn't, did you?'

'I was afraid,' she admitted. She looked at him. 'My mother died of it, and my aunt, and my sister had a radical mastectomy. I

couldn't bear it. And when you-'

'When I told you what you already knew, and what you never wanted to hear, you couldn't take it. You blacked right out, you know. Fainted away, and it had nothing to do with the seventy-odd thousand volts of static you were carrying. I caught you.' He put out his arms and instinctively she shrank back, but he held the arms where they were, on display, until she looked at them and saw the angry red scorch marks on his forearms and the heavy biceps, as much of them as she could see from under his short-sleeved shirt.

'About nine-tenths knocked me out too,' he said, 'but at least you didn't crack your head or anything.'

'Thank you,' she said reflexively, and then began to cry. 'What am I going to do?'

'Do? Go back home, wherever that is - pick up you life again, whatever that might mean.'

'But you said -'

'When are you going to get it into your head that what I did was not a diagnostic?'

'Are you - did you - you mean you cured it?'

'I mean you're curing it right now. I explained it all to you before – you remember that now, don't you?'

'Not altogether, but – yes.' Surreptitiously (but not enough, because he saw her) she felt under the sheet for the lump. 'It's still there.'

'If I bopped you over the head with a bat,' he said with slightly exaggerated simplicity, 'there would be a lump on it. It would be there tomorrow and the next day. The day after that it might be smaller, and in a week you'd still be able to feel it, but it would be gone. Same thing here.'

At last she let the enormity of it touch her. 'A one-shot cure for cancer....'

'Oh God,' he said harshly, 'I can tell by looking at you that I am going to have to listen to that speech again. Well, I won't.'

Startled, she said, 'What speech?'

'The one about my duty to humanity. It comes in two phases and many textures. Phase one has to do with my duty to humanity and really means we could make a classic buck with it. Phase two deals solely with my duty to humanity, and I don't hear that one very often. Phase two utterly overlooks the reluctance humanity has to accept good things unless they arrive from accepted and respectable sources. Phase one is fully aware of this but gets very rat-shrewd in figuring ways around it.'

She said, 'I don't-' but could get no farther.

'The textures,' he overrode her, 'are accompanied by the light of revelation, with or without religion and/or mysticism; or they are cast sternly in the ethical-philosophy mold and aim to force me to surrender through guilt mixed, to some degree all the way up to total, with compassion.'

'But I only-'

'You, he said, aiming a long index finger at her, 'have robbed yourself of the choicest example of everything I have just said. If my assumptions had been right and you had gone to your friendly local sawbones, and he had diagnosed cancer and referred you to a specialist, and he had done likewise and sent you to a colleague for

consultation, and in random panic you had fallen into my hands and been cured, and had gone back to your various doctors to report a miracle, do you know what you'd have gotten from them? "Spontaneous remission," that's what you'd have gotten. And it wouldn't be only doctors,' he went on with a sudden renewal of passion, under which she quailed in her bed. 'Everybody has his own commercial. Your nutritionist would have nodded over his wheat germ or his macrobiotic rice cakes, your priest would have dropped to his knees and looked at the sky, your geneticist would have a pet theory about generation skipping and would assure you that your grandparents probably had spontaneous remissions too and never knew it.'

'Please!' she cried, but he shouted at her. 'Do you know what I am? I am an engineer twice over, mechanical and electrical, and I have a law degree. If you were foolish enough to tell anyone about what has happened here (which I hope you aren't, but if you are I know how to protect myself) I could be jailed for practicing medicine without a license, you could have me up for assault because I stuck a needle into you and even for kidnapping if you could prove I carried you in here from the lab. Nobody would give a damn that I had cured your cancer. You don't know who I am, do you?'

'No, I don't even know your name.'

'And I won't tell you. I don't know you name, either-'

'Oh! It's-'

'Don't tell me! Don't tell me! I don't want to hear it! I wanted to be involved with your lump and I was. I want it and you to be gone as soon as you're both up to it. Have I made myself absolutely clear?'

'Just let me get dressed,' she said tightly, 'and I'll leave right now!'

'Without making a speech?'

'Without making a speech.' And in a flash her anger turned to misery and she added, 'I was going to say I was grateful. Would

that have been all right?'

And his anger underwent a change too, for he came close to the bed and sat down on his heel, bringing their faces to a level, and said quite gently, 'That would be fine. Although ... you won't really be grateful for another ten days, when you get your "spontaneous remission" reports, or maybe for six months or a year or two or five, when examinations keep on testing out negative.'

She detected such a a wealth of sadness behind this that she

found herself reaching for the hand with which he steadied himself against the edge of the bed. He did not recoil, but he didn't seem to welcome it either. 'Why can't I be grateful right now?'

'That would be an act of faith,' he said bitterly, 'and that just doesn't happen any more - if it ever did.' He rose and went toward the door. 'Please don't go tonight,' he said. 'It's dark and you don't know the way. I'll see you in the morning.'

When he came back in the morning the door was open. The bed was made and the sheets were folded neatly on the chair, together with the pillow slips and the towels she had used. She wasn't there.

He came out into the entrance court and contemplated his bonsai.

Early sun gold-frosted the horizontal upper foliage of the old tree and brought its gnarled limbs into sharp relief, tough brown-gray and crevices of velvet. Only the companion of a bonsai (there are owners of bonsai, but they are a lesser breed) fully understands the relationship. There is an exclusive and individual treeness to the tree because it is a living thing, and living things change, and there are definite ways in which the tree desires to change. A man sees the tree and in his mind makes certain extensions and extrapolations of what he sees, and sets about making them happen. The tree in turn will do only what a tree can do, will resist to the death any attempt to do what it cannot do, or to do it in less time than it needs. The shaping of a bonsai is therefore always a compromise and always a co-operation. A man cannot create bonsai, nor can a tree; it takes both, and they must understand each other. It takes a long time to do that. One memorizes one's bonsai, every twig, the angle of every crevice and needle, and, lying awake at night or in a pause a thousand miles away, one recalls this or that line or mass, one makes one's plans. With wire and water and light, with tilting and with the planting of water-robbing weeds or heavy root-shading ground cover, one explains to the tree what one wants, and if the explanation is well enough made, and there is great enough understanding, the tree will respond and obey - almost. Always there will be its own self-respecting, highly individual variation: Very well, I shall do what you want, but I will do it my way. And for these variations, the tree is always willing to present a clear and logical explanation, and more often than not (almost smiling) it will make clear to the man that he could have avoided it if his understanding had been better.

It is the slowest sculpture in the world, and there is, at times, doubt as to which is being sculpted, man or tree.

So he stood for perhaps ten minutes watching the flow of gold

over the upper branches, and then went to a carved wooden chest, opened it, shook out a length of disreputable cotton duck, opened the hinged glass at one side of the atrium, and spread the canvas over the roots and all the earth to one side of the trunk, leaving the rest open to wind and water. Perhaps in a while – a month or two – a certain shoot in the topmost branch would take the hint, and the uneven flow of moisture up through the cambium layer would nudge it away from that upward reach and persuade it to continue this horizontal passage. And perhaps not, and it would need the harsher language of binding and wire. But then it might have something to say, too, about the rightness of an upward trend, and would perhaps say it persuasively enough to convince the man; altogether, a patient, meaningful, and rewarding dialogue.

'Good morning.'

'Oh, goddam!' he barked, 'you made me bite my tongue. I

thought you'd gone.'

'I did.' She knelt in the shadows with her back against the inner wall, facing the atrium. 'But then I stopped to be with the tree for a while.'

'Then what?'

'I thought a lot.'

'What about?'

'You.'

'Did you now!'

'Look,' she said firmly, 'I'm not going to any doctor to get this thing checked out. I didn't want to leave until I had told you that, and until I was sure you believed me.'

'Come on in and we'll get something to eat.'

Foolishly, she giggled. 'I can't. My feet are asleep.'

Without hesitation he scooped her up in his arms and carried her around the atrium. She said, her arm around his shoulders and their faces close, 'Do you believe me?'

He continued around until they reached the wooden chest, then stopped and looked into her eyes. 'I believe you. I don't know why you decided that, but I'm willing to believe you.' He set her down on the chest and stood back.

'It's the act of faith you mentioned,' she said gravely. 'I thought you ought to have it, at least once in your life, so you can never say such a thing again.' She tapped her heels gingerly against the slate floor. 'Ow.' She made a pained smile. 'Pins and needles.'

'You must have been thinking for a long time.'

'Yes. Want more?'

'Sure.'

'You are an angry, frightened man.'

He seemed delighted. 'Tell me about all that!'

'No,' she said quietly, 'you tell me. I'm very serious about this. Why are you angry?'

'I'm not!'

'Why are you so angry?

'I tell you I'm not! Although,' he added goodnaturedly, 'you're pushing me in that direction.'

'Well then, why?'

He gazed at her, for what, to her, seemed a very long time indeed.

'You really want to know, don't you?'

She nodded.

He waved a sudden hand, up and out. 'Where do you suppose all this came from – the house, the land, the equipment?'

She waited.

'An exhaust system,' he said, with a thickening of the voice she was coming to know. 'A way of guiding exhaust gases out of combustion engines in such a way that they are given a spin. Unburned solids are embedded in the walls of the muffler in a glass-wool liner that slips out in one piece and can be replaced by a clean one every couple of thousand miles. The rest of the exhaust is fired by its own spark plug and what will burn, burns. The heat is used to preheat the fuel; the rest is spun again through a five-thousand mile cartridge. What finally gets out is, by today's standards at least, pretty clean; and because of the preheating, it actually gets better mileage out of the engine.'

'So you've made a lot of money.'

'I made a lot of money,' he echoed. 'But not because the thing is being used to cut down air pollution. I got the money because an automobile company bought it and buried it in a lock-box. They don't like it because it costs something to install in new cars. Some friends of theirs in the refining business don't like it because it gets high performance out of crude fuels. Well all right – I didn't know any better and I won't make the same mistake again. But yes – I'm angry. I was angry when I was a kid on a tankship and we were set to washing down bulkhead with chipped brown-soap and canvas, and I went ashore and bought a detergent and tried it and it was better, faster and cheaper so I took it to the bos'n, who gave me a punch in the mouth for pretending to know his job better than he did... well, he was drunk at the time, but the rough part was when the old shellbacks in the crew got wind of it and ganged up on me for being what they call a "company man" – that's a dirty name in

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a ship. I just couldn't understand why people got in the way of something better.

'I've been up against that all my life. I have something in my head that just won't quit: it's a way I have of asking the next question: Why is so-and-so the way it is? Why can't it be such-and-such instead? There is always another question to be asked about any thing or any situation; especially you shouldn't quit when you like an answer because there's always another one after it. And we live in a world where people just don't want to ask the next question!

'I've been paid all my stomach will take for things people won't use, and if I'm mad all the time it's really my fault – I admit it; because I just can't stop asking that next question and coming up with answers. There's a half-dozen real blockbusters in that lab that nobody will ever see, and half a hundred more in my head; but what can you do in a world where people would rather kill each other in a desert even when they're shown it can turn green and bloom, where they'll fall all over themselves to pour billions into developing a new oil strike when it's been proved over and over again that the fossil fuels will kill us all?

'Yes, I'm angry. Shouldn't I be?'

She let the echoes of his voice swirl around the court and out through the hole in the top of the atrium, and waited a little longer to let him know he was here with her and not beside himself and his fury. He grinned at her sheepishly when he came to this, and she said:

'Maybe you're asking the next question instead of asking the right question. I think people who live by wise old sayings are trying not to think, but I know one worth paying some attention to. It's this: If you ask a question the right way you've just given the answer.' She paused to see if he was paying real attention. He was. She went on, 'I mean, if you put your hand on a hot stove you might ask yourself, how can I stop my hand from burning? And the answer is pretty clear, isn't it? If the world keeps rejecting what you have to give, there's some way of asking why that contains the answer.'

'Its a simple answer,' he said shortly. 'People are stupid.'

'That isn't the answer and you know it,' she said.

'What is?'

'Oh, I can't tell you that! All I know is that the way you do something, when people are concerned, is more important than what you do, if you want results. I mean ... you already know how to get what you want with the tree, don't you?'

'I'll be damned.'

'People are living growing things too. I don't know a hundredth part of what you do about bonsai, but I do know this: when you start one, it isn't often the strong straight healthy ones you take. It's the twisted sick ones that can be made the most beautiful. When you get to shaping humanity, you might remember that.'

'Of all the - I don't know whether to laugh in your face or punch

you right in the mouth!'

She rose. He hadn't realized she was quite this tall. 'I'd better go.' 'Come on now. You know a figure of speech when you hear one.' 'Oh, I didn't feel threatened. But – I'd better go, all the same.'

Shrewdly, he asked her, 'Are you afraid to ask the next question?'

'Terrified.'

'Ask it anyway.'

'No!'

'Then I'll do it for you. You said I was angry – and afraid. You want to know what I'm afraid of.'

'Yes.'

'You. I am scared to death of you.'

'Are you really?'

'You have a way of provoking honesty,' he said with some difficulty. 'I'll say what I know you're thinking: I'm afraid of any close human relationship. I'm afraid of something I can't take apart with a screwdriver or a mass spectroscope or a table of cosines and tangents.' His voice was jocular but his hands were shaking.

'You do it by watering one side,' she said softly, 'or by turning it just so in the sun. You handle it as if it were a living thing, like a species or a woman or a bonsai. It will be what you want it to be if

you let it be itself and take the time and the care.'

'I think,' he said, 'that you are making me some kind of offer.

Why?'

'Sitting there most of the night,' she said, 'I had a crazy kind of image. Do you think two sick twisted trees ever made bonsai out of one another?'

'What's your name?' he asked her.

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Theodore Sturgeon was born Edward Hamilton Waldo on Staten Island, New York, on 26 February 1918; Sturgeon was his stepfather's name. He published his first story in 1939 and 25 further stories over the next three years, all in Astounding and Unknown. The decade after World War II was his most prolific, and at his peak in the 1950s he contributed stories to a wider range of anthologies and magazines than any other American SF writer apart from Ray Bradbury. In 1953 he published his masterpiece, More Than Human, a collection of three linked stories which won the 1954 International Fantasy Award. His many other books include Venus Plus X (1960) and A Touch of Strange (1958). He died on 8 May 1985.

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