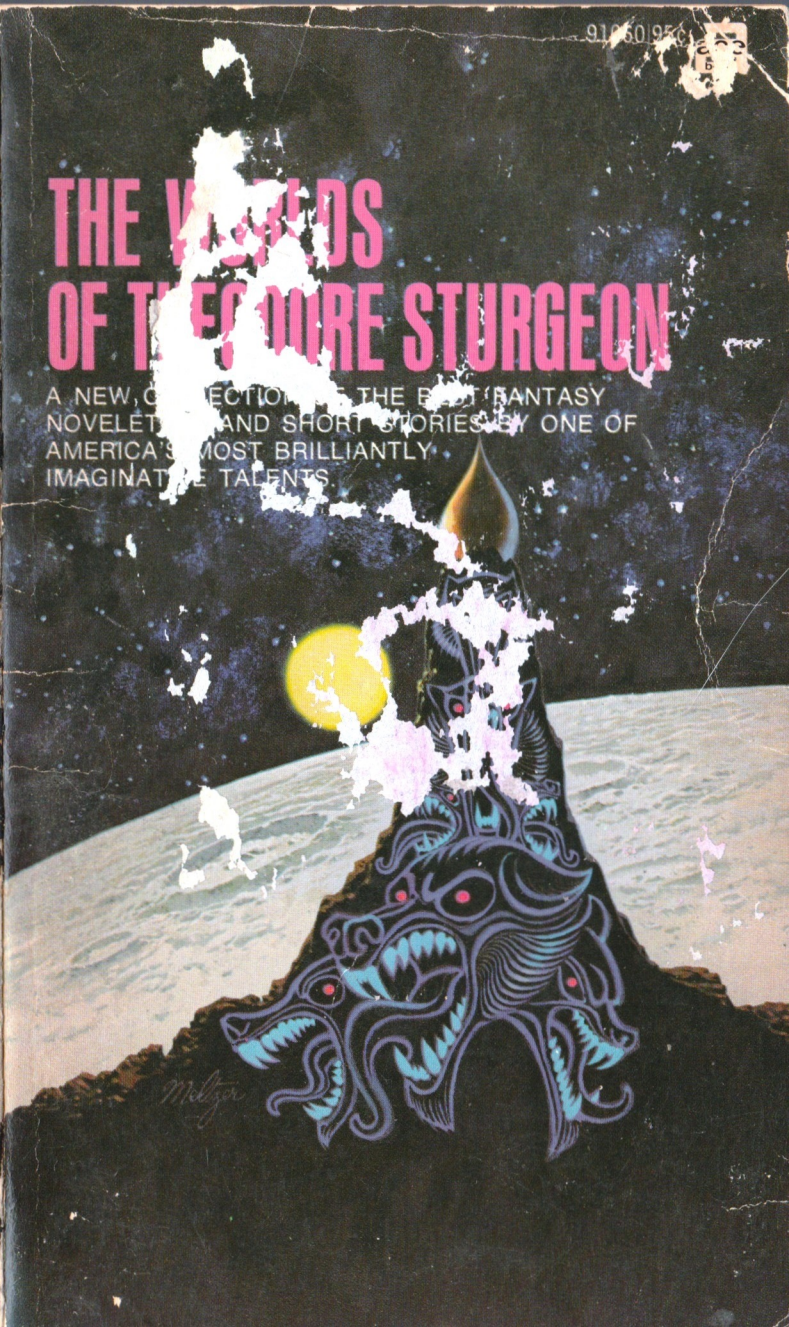
THE WORLDS
OF THEODORE STURGEON
A NEW, COMPLETE COLLECTION OF THE BEST FANTASY
NOVELETS AND SHORT STORIES BY ONE OF
AMERICA'S MOST BRILLIANTLY
IMAGINATIVE TALENTS
Meltzer

The Pit, in A.D. 5000, had changed little over the centuries. Still it was an angry memorial to the misuse of great power; and because of it, organized warfare was a forgotten thing. Because of it, the world was free of the wasteful smoke and dirt of industry. The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace.

To go near The Pit was slow, certain death, and it was respected and feared, and would be for centuries more. Nothing lived there. Nothing could. With such a war memorial, there could only be peace. The earth could never forget the horror loosed by war.

That was Grenfell's dream.

And Grenfell's dream is just one of the unforgettable chimeras, leaping forth to pull the reader into the many worlds of Theodore Sturgeon.

THE WORLDS OF THEODORE STURGEON

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THE WORLDS OF THEODORE STURGEON

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FROM PLYNCK TO PLANCK

An editorial-intróduction by Theodore Sturgeon

FROM San Francisco reader Kirsten Eaves writes to pose a question:

> "Why do people who read Philip Wylie read Theodore Sturgeon? And why do people who read all the Lewis Carroll they can find read both the former? . . . Is there a character type that takes naturally to this symbiosis of ideas? Are there vast crowds of these people? I have never to my knowledge met one. Or if this character type is just a product of your literary imagination, what am I?"

To answer the last question first and work backwards, I can only say that I invented Reader Eaves to about the same degree as (another reader wrote me of this conviction) I wrote *Dianetics*. Reader Eaves must therefore answer her own last question. As to the matter of character types, I usually hold myself against categorizations categorically, because of an early and deep conviction that people who begin sentences with "Redheads are—" or "Hungarians are—" are about to speak nonsense.

Yet as to this matter of character type . . . I think perhaps she has something. I think she is talking about science fiction people—readers, writers, editors. (I purposely don't say *fen* because the field has regular loving readers whom even fen wouldn't call fans: is Gilbert Highet a fan? or Orville Prescott?) I am quite sure, however, that any sf con, whether -ference or -vention, would afford Reader Eaves the experience of—to her knowledge—meeting a large percentage of people who have read what she reads, like what she likes and will listen, as she mentions elsewhere in her letter, to her reciting *The Pobble Who Has No Toes.*

As to the first question, I have evidence that Sturgeon reads Wylie and I have no doubt that Wylie reads Wylie, but I have as yet no evidence that Wylie reads Sturgeon. This is the kind of thing that makes me back off from categorizations.

Reader Eaves isn't through with me yet. Since I frequently mention books read by people in my stories, and music too, she asks, "Perhaps if you can spare the time you can write out a more complete recommended reading list than you include in your stories." I have the time, but not the space; however, I am delighted to be able to mention some of the books which my characters have found influential, and my character as well. Some of them fall into the class of Books That Nobody Has Read But Me, Or So It Seems. It's *hard* to love 'em so much and find them unknown. Others actually do have a certain small readership. There's Wells' *Time Machine.* Dunsany's *The Charwoman's Shadow.* Pangborn's *A Mirror for Observers.* Arthur Eddison's *The Worm Ouroborous.* Hudson's *Green Mansions.* Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris.* Wylie's *Finnley Wren* and Chap. 13 of *The Disappearance.* Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori.* William Morris' *Golden Wings.* De Quincy's *The English Mail-Coach.* Karle Wilson Baker's *The Garden of the Plynck* . . . these aren't all, by any means, but I've reached the one I wanted to talk about.

I have NEVER met anyone who has read the *Plynck.* It was published by Yale University Press in 1924. It is, if you like, a children's book . . . which, if you like, *Alice in Wonderland* also is. A series of adventures of a little girl called Sara who has learned to "go inside her head and shut the doors," it deals with the Garden she finds there, and all its wonders.

Something—and I honestly don't know what—keeps the book from being impossibly cute. To this day I find it full of lovely twists and surprises. There's a curly path just inside the doors (only on a later visit it was pink instead of curly) which led to the Garden itself, a pool in which there is a tree on which there sits the Plynck, a beautiful, somewhat haughty, but very kind bird. She looks down at the water where her Echo lives. Fluttering about among the branches, more often than not, is a Teacup (a widow; her Saucer was broken some time ago). There's the Snimmy's wife, who when indignant unscrews and angrily hems a doorknob, and her pet the Snoodle, whose mother was a snail and whose father was a pedigreed noodle, and who has a

drawback. The drawback is a little isinglass window in his back which, when you pick him up, draws back and releases the odor of castor oil. There are Zizzes, which fly right into dimples unless you remove same and put them in a dimple-holder. And then there's Avrillia.

"Has any mortal but Sara ever seen Avrillia? Certainly there never was another fairy so wan and wild and beautiful . . . she was leaning over the marble balustrade, looking down into Nothing, and one hand still stretched out as if it had just let something fall. She seemed to be still watching its descent. Her body, as she leaned, was like a reed, and her hair was pale-gold and cloudy. But all that was nothing beside Avrillia's eyes.

". . . It didn't stick," she said.

. . ."Do you throw your poems down there?" asked Sara.

"Of course," said Avrillia. "I write them on rose-leaves . . . petals, I mean, all colors, but especially blue. And then I drop them over, and some day one of them may stick to the bottom—"

"But there isn't any!"

". . . But there's an imaginary bottom. One might stick on that, you know. And then, with that to build to, if I drop them in very fast, I may be able to fill it up—"

"But there aren't any sides to it either!"

Avrillia betrayed a faint exasperation (it showed a little around the edges, like a green petticoat under a black dress). "Oh, these literal people," she said, half to herself . . . "Isn't it as easy to imagine sides as a bottom? Well . . . if I write them fast enough to fill it up . . . somebody a hundred years from now may come along and notice one of my poems; and then I shall be Immortal." And at that a lovely smile crossed Avrillia's face.

Now, you either dig this or you don't. Me, I never write my congressman or try a new kind of story or argue with a jingoist but I get a flash of Avrillia leaning raptly over the balustrade . . . and go inside my mind and shut the doors is something I completely understand . . . and outer space, and hydrogen transformations, and Planck's Constant, live there along with Schlorge at the dimplesmithy—in a world of things to marvel at, which need not necessarily be understood.

THE SKILLS OF XANADU

AND THE SUN went nova and humanity fragmented and fled; and such is the self-knowledge of humankind that it knew it must guard its past as it guarded its being, or it would cease to be human; and such was its pride in itself that it made of its traditions a ritual and a standard.

The great dream was that wherever humanity settled, fragment by fragment by fragment, however it lived, it would continue rather than begin again, so that all through the universe and the years, humans would be humans, speaking as humans, thinking as humans, aspiring and progressing as humans; and whenever human met human, no matter how different, how distant, he would come in peace, meet his own kind, speak his own tongue.

Humans, however, being humans—

Bril emerged near the pink star, disliking its light, and found the fourth planet. It hung waiting for him like an exotic fruit. (And was it ripe, and could he ripen it? And what if it were poison?) He left his machine in orbit and descended in a bubble. A young savage watched him come and waited by a waterfall.

"Earth was my mother," said Bril from the bubble. It was the formal greeting of all humankind, spoken in the Old Tongue.

"And my father," said the savage, in an atrocious accent.

Watchfully, Bril emerged from the bubble, but stood very close by it. He completed his part of the ritual. "I respect the disparity of our wants, as individuals, and greet you."

"I respect the identity of our needs, as humans, and greet you. I am Wonyne," said the youth, "son of Tanyne, of the Senate, and Nina. This place is Xanadu, the district, on Xanadu, the fourth planet."

"I am Bril of Kit Carson, second planet of the Sumner

System, and a member of the Sole Authority," said the newcomer, adding, "and I come in peace."

He waited then, to see if the savage would discard any weapons he might have, according to historic protocol. Wonyne did not; he apparently had none. He wore only a cobwebby tunic and a broad belt made of flat, black, brilliantly polished stones and could hardly have concealed so much as a dart. Bril waited yet another moment, watching the untroubled face of the savage, to see if Wonyne suspected anything of the arsenal hidden in the sleek black uniform, the gleaming jackboots, the metal gauntlets.

Wonyne said only, "Then, in peace, welcome." He smiled. "Come with me to Tanyne's house and mine, and be refreshed."

"You say Tanyne, your father, is a Senator? Is he active now? Could he help me to reach your center of government?"

The youth paused, his lips moving slightly, as if he were translating the dead language into another tongue. Then, "Yes. Oh, yes."

Bril flicked his left gauntlet with his right fingertips and the bubble sprang away and up, where at length it would join the ship until it was needed. Wonyne was not amazed—probably, thought Bril, because it was beyond his understanding.

Bril followed the youth up a winding path past a wonderland of flowering plants, most of them purple, some white, a few scarlet, and all jeweled by the waterfall. The higher reaches of the path were flanked by thick soft grass, red as they approached, pale pink as they passed.

Bril's narrow black eyes flicked everywhere, saw and recorded everything: the easy-breathing boy's spring up the slope ahead, and the constant shifts of color in his gossamer garment as the wind touched it; the high trees, some of which might conceal a man or a weapon; the rock outcroppings and what oxides they told of; the birds he could see and the birdsongs he heard which might be something else.

He was a man who missed only the obvious, and there is so little that is obvious.

Yet he was not prepared for the house; he and the boy were halfway across the parklike land which surrounded it before he recognized it as such.

It seemed to have no margins. It was here high and there only a place between flower beds; yonder a room became

a terrace, and elsewhere a lawn was a carpet because there was a roof over it. The house was divided into areas rather than rooms, by open grilles and by arrangements of color. Nowhere was there a wall. There was nothing to hide behind and nothing that could be locked. All the land, all the sky, looked into and through the house, and the house was one great window on the world.

Seeing it, Bril felt a slight shift in his opinion of the natives. His feeling was still one of contempt, but now he added suspicion. A cardinal dictum on humans as he knew them was: *Every man has something to hide.* Seeing a mode of living like this did not make him change his dictum: he simply increased his watchfulness, asking: *How do they hide it?*

"Tan! Tan!" the boy was shouting. "I've brought a friend!"

A man and a woman strolled toward them from a garden. The man was huge, but otherwise so like the youth Wonyne that there could be no question of their relationship. Both had long, narrow, clear gray eyes set very wide apart, and red—almost orange—hair. The noses were strong and delicate at the same time, their mouths thin-lipped but wide and good-natured.

But the woman—

It was a long time before Bril could let himself look, let himself believe that there was such a woman. After his first glance, he made of her only a presence and fed himself small nibbles of belief in his eyes, in the fact that there could be hair like that, face, voice, body. She was dressed, like her husband and the boy, in the smoky kaleidoscope which resolved itself, when the wind permitted, into a black-belted tunic.

"He is Bril of Kit Carson in the Sumner System," babbled the boy, "and he's a member of the Sole Authority and it's the second planet and he knew the greeting and got it right. So did I," he added, laughing. "This is Tanyne, of the Senate, and my mother Nina."

"You are welcome, Bril of Kit Carson," she said to him; and unbelieving in this way that had come upon him, he took away his gaze and inclined his head.

"You must come in," said Tanyne cordially, and led the way through an arbor which was not the separate arch it appeared to be, but an entrance.

The room was wide, wider at one end than the other, though it was hard to determine by how much. The floor was uneven, graded upward toward one corner, where it

was a mossy bank. Scattered here and there were what the eye said were white and striated gray boulders; the hand would say they were flesh. Except for a few shelf- and tablelike niches on these and in the bank, they were the only furniture.

Water ran frothing and gurgling through the room, apparently as an open brook; but Bril saw Nina's bare foot tread on the invisible covering that followed it down to the pool at the other end. The pool was the one he had seen from outside, indeterminately in and out of the house. A large tree grew by the pool and leaned its heavy branches toward the bank, and evidently its wide-flung limbs were webbed and tented between by the same invisible substance which covered the brook, for they formed the only cover overhead yet, to the ear, *felt* like a ceiling.

The whole effect was, to Bril, intensely depressing, and he surprised himself with a flash of homesickness for the tall steel cities of his home planet.

Nina smiled and left them. Bril followed his host's example and sank down on the ground, or floor, where it became a bank, or wall. Inwardly, Bril rebelled at the lack of decisiveness, of discipline, of clear-cut limitation inherent in such haphazard design as this. But he was well trained and quite prepared, at first, to keep his feelings to himself among barbarians.

"Nina will join us in a moment," said Tanyne.

Bril, who had been watching the woman's swift movements across the courtyard through the transparent wall opposite, controlled a start. "I am unused to your ways and wondered what she was doing," he said.

"She is preparing a meal for you," explained Tanyne.

"Herself?"

Tanyne and his son gazed wonderingly. "Does that seem unusual to you?"

"I understood the lady was wife to a Senator," said Bril. It seemed adequate as an explanation, but only to him. He looked from the boy's face to the man's. "Perhaps I understand something different when I use the term 'Senator.' "

"Perhaps you do. Would you tell us what a Senator is on the planet Kit Carson?"

"He is a member of the Senate, subservient to the Sole Authority, and in turn leader of a free Nation."

"And his wife?"

"His wife shares his privileges. She might serve a mem-

ber of the Sole Authority, but hardly anyone else—certainly not an unidentified stranger."

"Interesting," said Tanyne, while the boy murmured the astonishment he had not expressed at Bril's bubble, or Bril himself. "Tell me, have you not identified yourself, then?"

"He did, by the waterfall," the youth insisted.

"I gave you no proof," said Bril stiffly. He watched father and son exchange a glance. "Credentials, written authority." He touched the flat pouch hung on his power belt.

Wonyne asked ingenuously, "Do the credentials say you are *not* Bril of Kit Carson in the Sumner System?"

Bril frowned at him and Tanyne said gently, "Wonyne, take care." To Bril, he said, "Surely there are many differences between us, as there always are between different worlds. But I am certain of this one similarity: the young at times run straight where wisdom has built a winding path."

Bril sat silently and thought this out. It was probably some sort of apology, he decided, and gave a single sharp nod. Youth, he thought, was an attenuated defect here. A boy Wonyne's age would be a soldier on Carson, ready for a soldier's work, and no one would be apologizing for him. Nor would he be making blunders. *None!*

He said, "These credentials are for your officials when I meet with them. By the way, when can that be?"

Tanyne shrugged his wide shoulders. "Whenever you like."

"The sooner the better."

"Very well."

"Is it far?"

Tanyne seemed perplexed. "Is what far?"

"Your capital, or wherever it is your Senate meets."

"Oh, I see. It doesn't meet, in the sense you mean. It is always in session, though, as they used to say. We—"

He compressed his lips and made a liquid, bisyllabic sound. then he laughed. "I do beg your pardon," he said warmly. "The Old Tongue lacks certain words certain concepts. What is your word for—er—the-presence-of-all-in-the-presence-of-one?"

"I think," said Bril carefully, "that we had better go back to the subject at hand. Are you saying that your Senate does not meet in some official place, at some appointed time?"

"I—" Tan hesitated, then nodded. "Yes, that is true as far as it—"

"And there is no possibility of my addressing your Senate in person?"

"I didn't say that." Tan tried twice to express the thought, while Bril's eyes slowly narrowed. Tan suddenly burst into laughter. "Using the Old Tongue to tell old tales and to speak with a friend are two different things," he said ruefully. "I wish you would learn our speech. Would you, do you suppose? It is rational and well based on what you know. Surely you have another language besides the Old Tongue on Kit Carson?"

"I honor the Old Tongue," said Bril stiffly, dodging the question. Speaking very slowly, as if to a retarded child, he said, "I should like to know when I may be taken to those in authority here, in order to discuss certain planetary and interplanetary matters with them."

"Discuss them with me."

"You are a Senator," Bril said, in a tone which meant clearly: *You are only a Senator.*

"True," said Tanyne."

With forceful patience, Bril asked, "And what is a Senator here?"

"A contact point between the people of his district and the people everywhere. One who knows the special problems of a small section of the planet and can relate them to planetary policy."

"And whom does the Senate serve?"

"The people," said Tanyne, as if he had been asked to repeat himself.

"Yes, yes, of course. And who, then, serves the Senate?"

"The Senators."

Bril closed his eyes and barely controlled the salty syllable which welled up inside him. "Who," he inquired steadily, "is your Government?"

The boy had been watching them eagerly, alternately, like a devotee at some favorite fast ball game. Now he asked, "What's a Government?"

Nina's interruption at that point was most welcome to Bril. She came across the terrace from the covered area where she had been doing mysterious things at a long worksurface in the garden. She carried an enormous tray—guided it, rather, as Bril saw when she came closer. She kept three fingers under the tray and one behind it, barely touching it with her palm. Either the transparent wall of the room disappeared as she approached, or she passed through a section where there was none.

"I do hope you find something to your taste among these," she said cheerfully, as she brought the tray down to a hummock near Bril. "This is the flesh of birds, this of small mammals, and, over here, fish. These cakes are made of four kinds of grain, and the white cakes here of just one, the one we call milk-wheat. Here is water, and these two are wines, and this one is a distilled spirit we call warm-ears."

Bril, keeping his eyes on the food, and trying to keep his universe from filling up with the sweet fresh scent of her as she bent over him, so near, said, "This is welcome."

She crossed to her husband and sank down at his feet, leaning back against his legs. He twisted her heavy hair gently in his fingers and she flashed a small smile up at him. Bril looked from the food, colorful as a corsage, here steaming, there gathering frost from the air, to the three smiling, expectant faces and did not know what to do.

"Yes, this is welcome," he said again, and still they sat there, watching him. He picked up the white cake and rose, looked out and around, into the house, through it and beyond. Where could one go in such a place?

Steam from the tray touched his nostrils and saliva filled his mouth. He was hungry, but . . . .

He sighed, sat down, gently replaced the cake. He tried to smile and could not.

"Does none of it please you?" asked Nina, concerned.

"I can't eat here!" said Bril; then, sensing something in the natives that had not been there before, he added, "thank you." Again he looked at their controlled faces. He said to Nina, "It is very well prepared and good to look on."

"Then eat," she invited, smiling again.

This did something that their house, their garments, their appallingly easy ways—sprawling all over the place, letting their young speak up at will, the shameless admission that they had a patois of their own—that none of these things had been able to do. Without losing his implacable dignity by any slightest change of expression, he yet found himself blushing. Then he scowled and let the childish display turn to a flush of anger. He would be glad, he thought furiously, when he had the heart of this culture in the palm of his hand, to squeeze when he willed; then there would be an end to thse hypocritical amenities and they would learn who could be humiliated.

But these three faces, the boy's so open and unconscious of wrong, Tanyne's so strong and anxious for him, Nina's—that face, that face of Nina's—they were all utterly guileless.

He must not let them know of his embarrassment. If they had planned it, he must not let them suspect his vulnerability.

With an immense effort of will, he kept his voice low; still, it was harsh. "I think," he said slowly, "that we on Kit Carson regard the matter of privacy perhaps a little more highly than you do."

They exchanged an astonished look, and then comprehension dawned visibly on Tanyne's ruddy face. "You don't eat together!"

Bril did not shudder, but it was in his word: "No."

"Oh," said Nina, "I'm *so* sorry!"

Bril thought it wise not to discover exactly what she was sorry about. He said, "No matter. Customs differ. I shall eat when I am alone."

"Now that we understand," said Tanyne, "go ahead. Eat."

But they *sat* there!

"Oh," said Nina, "I wish you spoke our other language; it would be so easy to explain!" She leaned forward to him, put out her arms, as if she could draw meaning itself from the air and cast it over him. "Please try to understand, Bril. You are very mistaken about one thing—we honor privacy above almost anything else."

"We don't mean the same thing when we say it," said Bril.

"It means aloneness with oneself, doesn't it? It means to do things, think or make or just *be*, without intrusion."

"So?" replied Wonyne happily, throwing out both hands in a gesture that said *quod erat demonstrandum*. "Go on then—eat! We won't look!" and helped the situation not at all.

"Wonyne's right," chuckled the father, "but, as usual, a little too direct. He means we can't look, Bril. If you want privacy, *we can't see you*."

Angry, reckless, Bril suddenly reached to the tray. He snatched up a goblet, the one she had indicated as water, thumbed a capsule out of his belt, popped it into his mouth, drank and swallowed. He banged the goblet back on the tray and shouted, "Now you've seen all you're going to see."

With an indescribable expression, Nina drifted upward to her feet, bent like a dancer and touched the tray. It lifted and she guided it away across the courtyard.

"All right," said Wonyne. It was precisely as if someone

had spoken and he had acknowledged. He lounged out, following his mother.

What *had* been on her face?

Something she could not contain; something rising to that smooth surface, about to reveal outlines, break through . . . anger? Bril hoped so. Insult? He could, he supposed, understand that. But—laughter? *Don't make it laughter,* something within him pleaded.

"Bril," said Tanyne.

For the second time, he was so lost in contemplation of the woman that Tanyne's voice made him start.

"What is it?"

"If you will tell me what arrangements you would like for eating, I'll see to it that you get them."

"You wouldn't know how," said Bril bluntly. He threw his sharp, cold gaze across the room and back. "You people don't build walls you can't see through, doors you can close."

"Why, no, we don't." As always, the giant left the insult and took only the words.

I bet you don't, Bril said silently, *not even for*—and a horrible suspicion began to grow within him. "We of Kit Carson feel that all human history and development are away from the animal, toward something higher. We are, of course, chained to the animal state, but we do what we can to eliminate every animal act as a public spectacle." Sternly, he waved a shining gauntlet at the great open house. "You have apparently not reached such an idealization. I have seen how you eat; doubtless you perform your other functions so openly."

"Oh, yes," said Tanyne. "But with this—" he pointed—"it's hardly the same thing."

"With what?"

Tanyne again indicated one of the boulderlike objects. He tore off a clump of moss—it was real moss—and tossed it to the soft surface of one of the boulders. He reached down and touched one of the gray streaks. The moss sank into the surface the way a pebble will in quicksand, but much faster.

"It will not accept living animal matter above a certain level of complexity," he explained, "but it instantly absorbs every molecule of anything else, not only on the surface but for a distance above."

"And that's a—a—where you—"

Tan nodded and said that that was exactly what it was.

"But—anyone can see you!"

Tan shrugged and smiled. "How? That's what I meant when I said it's hardly the same thing. Of eating, we make a social occasion. But this—" he threw another clump of moss and watched it vanish—"just isn't observed." His sudden laugh rang out and again he said, "I wish you'd learn the language. Such a thing is so easy to express."

But Bril was concentrating on something else. "I appreciate your hospitality," he said, using the phrase stiltedly, "but I'd like to be moving on." He eyed the boulder distastefully. "And very soon."

"As you wish. You have a message for Xanadu. Deliver it, then."

"To your Government."

"To our Government. I told you before, Bril—when you're ready, proceed."

"I cannot believe that you represent this planet!"

"Neither can I," said Tanyne pleasantly. "I don't. Through me, you can speak to forty-one others, all Senators."

"Is there no other way?"

Tanyne smiled. "Forty-one other ways. Speak to any of the others. It amounts to the same thing."

"And no higher government body?"

Tanyne reached out a long arm and plucked a goblet from a niche in the moss bank. It was chased crystal with a luminous metallic rim.

"Finding the highest point of the government of Xanadu is like finding the highest point on this," he said. He ran a finger around the inside of the rim and the goblet chimed beautifully.

"Pretty unstable," growled Bril.

Tanyne made it sing again and replaced it; whether that was an answer or not, Bril could not know.

He snorted, "No wonder the boy didn't know what Government was."

"We don't use the term," said Tanyne. "We don't need it. There are few things here that a citizen can't handle for himself; I wish I could show you how few. If you'll live with us a while, I will show you."

He caught Bril's eye squarely as it returned from another disgusted and apprehensive trip to the boulder, and laughed outright. But the kindness in his voice as he went on quenched Bril's upsurge of indignant fury, and a little question curled up: *Is he managing me?* But there wasn't time to look at it.

"Can your business wait until you know us, Bril? I tell you now, there is no centralized Government here, almost no government at all; we of the Senate are advisory. I tell you, too, that to speak to one Senator is to speak to all, and that you may do it now, this minute, or a year from now—whenever you like. I am telling you the truth and you may accept it or you may spend months, years, traveling this planet and checking up on me; you'll always come out with the same answer."

Noncommittally, Bril said, "How do I know that what I tell you is accurately relayed to the others?"

"It isn't relayed," said Tan frankly. "We all hear it simultaneously."

"Some sort of radio?"

Tan hesitated, then nodded. "Some sort of radio."

"I won't learn your language," Bril said abruptly. "I can't live as you do. If you can accept those conditions, I will stay a short while."

"Accept? We *insist!*" Tanyne bounded cheerfully to the niche where the goblet stood and held his palm up. A large, opaque sheet of a shining white material rolled down and stopped. "Draw with your fingers," he said.

"Draw? Draw what?"

"A place of your own. How you would like to live, eat, sleep, everything."

"I require very little. None of us on Kit Carson do."

He pointed the finger of his gauntlet like a weapon, made a couple of dabs in the corner of the screen to test the line, and then dashed off a very creditable parallelepiped. "Taking my height as one unit, I'd want this one-and-a-half long, one-and-a-quarter high. Slit vents at eye level, one at each end, two on each side, screened against insects—"

"We have no preying insects," said Tanyne.

"Screened anyway, and with as near an unbreakable mesh as you have. Here a hook suitable for hanging a garment. Here a bed, flat, hard, with firm padding as thick as my hand, one-and-one-eighth units long, one-third wide. All sides under the bed enclosed and equipped as a locker, impregnable, and to which only I have the key or combination. Here a shelf one-third by one-quarter units, one-half unit off the floor, suitable for eating from a seated posture.

"One of—those, if it's self-contained and reliable," he said edgily, casting a thumb at the boulderlike convenience.

"The whole structure to be separate from all others on high ground and overhung by nothing—no trees, no cliffs, with approaches clear and visible from all sides; as strong as speed permits; and equipped with a light I can turn off and a door that only I can unlock."

"Very well," said Tanyne easily. "Temperature?"

"The same as this spot now."

"Anything else? Music? Pictures? We have some fine moving—"

Bril, from the top of his dignity, snorted his most eloquent snort. "Water, if you can manage it. As to those other things, this is a dwelling, not a pleasure palace."

"I hope you will be comfortable in this—in it," said Tanyne, with barely a trace of sarcasm.

"It is precisely what I am used to," Bril answered loftily.

"Come, then."

"What?"

The big man waved him on and passed through the arbor. Bril, blinking in the late pink sunlight, followed him.

On the gentle slope above the house, halfway between it and the mountaintop beyond, was a meadow of the red grass Bril had noticed on his way from the waterfall. In the center of this meadow was a crowd of people, bustling like moths around a light, their flimsy, colorful clothes flashing and gleaming in a thousand shades. And in the middle of the crowd lay a coffin-shaped object.

Bril could not believe his eyes, then stubbornly would not, and at last, as they came near, yielded and admitted it to himself: this was the structure he had just sketched.

He walked more and more slowly as the wonder of it grew on him. He watched the people—children, even—swarming around and over the little building, sealing the edge between roof and wall with a humming device, laying screen on the slit-vents. A little girl, barely a toddler, came up to him fearlessly and in lisping Old Tongue asked for his hand, which she clapped to a tablet she carried.

"To make your keys," explained Tanyne, watching the child scurry off to a man waiting at the door.

He took the tablet and disappeared inside, and they could see him kneel by the bed. A young boy overtook them and ran past, carrying a sheet of the same material the roof and walls were made of. It seemed light, but its slightly rough, pale-tan surface gave an impression of great toughness. As they drew up at the door, they saw the boy take the material and set it in position between the end

of the bed and the doorway. He aligned it carefully, pressing it against the wall, and struck it once with the heel of his hand, and there was Bril's required table, level, rigid, and that without braces and supports.

"You seemed to like the looks of some of this, anyway." It was Nina, with her tray. She floated it to the new table, waved cheerfully and left.

"With you in a moment," Tan called, adding three singing syllables in the Xanadu tongue which were, Bril concluded, an endearment of some kind; they certainly sounded like it. Tan turned back to him, smiling.

"Well, Bril, how is it?"

Bril could only ask, "Who gave the orders?"

"You did," said Tan, and there didn't seem to be any answer to that.

Already, through the open door, he could see the crowd drifting away, laughing, and singing their sweet language to each other. He saw a young man scoop up scarlet flowers from the pink sward and hand them to a smiling girl, and unaccountably the scene annoyed him. He turned away abruptly and went about the walls, thumping them and peering through the vents. Tanyne knelt by the bed, his big shoulders bulging as he tugged at the locker. It might as well have been solid rock.

"Put your hand there," he said, pointing, and Bril clapped his gauntlet to the plate he indicated.

Sliding panels parted. Bril got down and peered inside. It had its own light, and he could see the buff-colored wall of the structure at the back and the heavy filleted partition which formed the bed uprights. He touched the panel again and the doors slid silently shut, so tight that he could barely see their meeting.

"The door's the same," said Tanyne. "No one but you can open it. Here's water. You didn't say where to put it. If this is inconvenient . . ."

When Bril put his hand near the spigot, water flowed into a catch basin beneath. "No, that is satisfactory. They work like specialists."

"They are," said Tanyne.

"Then they have built such a strange structure before?"

"Never."

Bril looked at him sharply. This ingenuous barbarian surely could not be making a fool of him by design! No, this must be some slip of semantics, some shift in meaning over the years which separated each of them from the common

ancestor. He would not forget it, but he set it aside for future thought.

"Tanyne," he asked suddenly, "how many are you in Xanadu?"

"In the district, three hundred. On the planet, twelve, almost thirteen thousand."

"We are one and a half billion," said Bril. "And what is your largest city?"

"City," said Tanyne, as if searching through the files of his memory. "Oh—city! We have none. There are forty-two districts like this one, some larger, some smaller."

"Your entire planetary population could be housed in one building within one city on Kit Carson. And how many generations have your people been here?"

"Thirty-two, thirty-five, something like that."

"We settled Kit Carson not quite six Earth centuries ago. In point of time, then, it would seem that yours is the older culture. Wouldnn't you be interested in how we have been able to accomplish so much more?"

"Fascinated," said Tanyne.

"You have some clever little handicrafts here," Bril mused, "and a quite admirable cooperative ability. You could make a formidable thing of this world, if you wanted to, and if you had the proper guidance."

"Oh, could we really?" Tanyne seemed very pleased.

"I must think," said Bril somberly. "You are not what I—what I had supposed. Perhaps I shall stay a little longer than I had planned. Perhaps while I am learning about your people, you in turn could be learning about mine."

"Delighted," said Tanyne. "Now is there anything else you need?"

"Nothing. You may leave me."

His autocratic tone gained him only one of the big man's pleasant, open-faced smiles. Tanyne waved his hand and left. Bril heard him calling his wife in ringing baritone notes, and her glad answer. He set his mailed hand against the door plate and it slid shut silently.

Now what, he asked himself, *got me to do all that bragging?* Then the astonishment at the people of Xanadu rose up and answered the question for him. *What manner of people are specialists at something they have never done before?*

He got out his stiff, polished, heavy uniform, his gauntlets, his boots. They were all wired together, power supply in the boots, controls and computers in the trousers

and belt, sensory mechs in the tunic, projectors and field loci in the gloves.

He hung the clothes on the hook provided and set the alarm field for anything larger than a mouse any closer than thirty meters. He dialed a radiation dome to cover his structure and exclude all spy beams or radiation weapons. Then he swung his left gauntlet on its cable over to the table and went to work on one small corner.

In half an hour, he had found a combination of heat and pressure that would destroy the pale brown board, and he sat down on the edge of the bed, limp with amazement. You could build a spaceship with stuff like this.

Now he had to believe that they had it in stock sizes exactly to his specifications, which would mean warehouses and manufacturing facilities capable of making up those and innumerable other sizes; or he had to believe that they had machinery capable of making what his torches had just destroyed, in job lots, right now.

But they didn't have any industrial plant to speak of, and if they had warehouses, they had them where the Kit Carson robot scouts had been unable to detect them in their orbiting for the last fifty years.

Slowly he lay down to think.

To acquire a planet, you locate the central government. If it is an autocracy, organized tightly up to the peak, so much the better; the peak is small and you kill it or control it and use the organization. If there is no government at all, you recruit the people or you exterminate them. If there is a plant, you run it with overseers and make the natives work it until you can train your own people to it and eliminate the natives. If there are skills, you learn them or you control those who have them. All in the book; a rule for every eventuality, every possibility.

But what if, as the robots reported, there was high technology and no plant? Planetwide cultural stability and almost no communications?

Well, nobody ever heard of such a thing, so when the robots report it, you send an investigator. All he has to find out is how they do it. All he has to do is to parcel up what is to be kept and what eliminated when the time comes for an expeditionary force.

There's always one clean way out, thought Bril, putting his hands behind his head and looking up at the tough ceiling. Item, one Earth-normal planet, rich in natural re-

sources, sparsely populated by innocents. You can always simply exterminate them.

But not before you find out how they communicate, how they cooperate, and how they specialize in skills they never tried before. How they manufacture superior materials out of thin air in no time.

He had a sudden heady vision of Kit Carson equipped as these people were, a billion and a half universal specialists with some heretofore unsuspected method of intercommunication, capable of building cities, fighting wars, with the measureless skill and split-second understanding and obedience with which this little house had been built.

No, these people must not be exterminated. They must be used. Kit Carson had to learn their tricks. If the tricks were —he hoped not!—inherent in Xanadu and beyond the Carson abilities, then what would be the next best thing?

Why, a cadre of the Xanadu, scattered through the cities and armies of Kit Carson, instantly obedient, instantly trainable. Instruct one and you teach them all; each could teach a group of Kit Carson's finest. Production, logistics, strategy, tactics—he saw it all in a flash.

Xanadu might be left almost exactly as is, except for its new export—aides de camp.

Dreams, these are only dreams, he told himself sternly. *Wait until you know more. Watch them make impregnable hardboard and anti-grav tea trays . . .*

The thought of the tea tray made his stomach growl. He got up and went to it. The hot food steamed, the cold was still frosty and firm. He picked, he tasted. Then he bit. Then he gobbled.

Nina, that Nina . . .

No, they can't be exterminated, he thought drowsily, not when they can produce such a woman. In all of Kit Carson, there wasn't a cook like that.

He lay down again and dreamed, and dreamed until he fell asleep.

They were completely frank. They showed him everything, and it apparently never occurred to them to ask him why he wanted to know. Asking was strange, because they seemed to lack that special pride of accomplishment one finds in the skilled potter, metalworker, electronician, an attitude of: "Isn't it remarkable that I can do it!" They gave information accurately but impersonally, as if anyone could do it.

And on Xanadu, anyone could.

At first, it seemed to Bril totally disorganized. These attractive people in their indecent garments came and went, mingling play and work and loafing, without apparent plan. But their play would take them through a flower garden just where the weeds were, and they would take the weeds along. There seemed to be a group of girls playing jacks right outside the place where they would suddenly be needed to sort some seeds.

Tanyne tried to explain it: "Say we have a shortage of something—oh, strontium, for example. The shortage itself creates a sort of vacuum. People without anything special to do feel it; they think about strontium. They come, they gather it."

"But I have seen no mines," Bril said puzzledly. "And what about shipping? Suppose the shortage is here and the mines in another district?"

"That never happens any more. Where there are deposits, of course, there are no shortages. Where there are none, we find other ways, either to use something else, or to produce it without mines."

"Transmute it?"

"Too much trouble. No, we breed a freshwater shellfish with a strontium carbonate shell instead of calcium carbonate. The children gather them for us when we need it."

He saw their clothing industry—part shed, part cave, part forest glen. There was a pool there where the young people swam, and a field where they sunned themselves. Between times, they went into the shadows and worked by a huge vessel where chemicals occasionally boiled, turned bright green, and then precipitated. The black precipitate was raised from the bottom of the vessel on screens, dumped into forms and pressed.

Just how the presses—little more than lids for the forms—operated, the Old Tongue couldn't tell him, but in four or five seconds the precipitate had turned into the black stones used in their belts, formed and polished, with a chemical formula in Old Tongue script cut into the back of the left buckle.

"One of our few superstitions," said Tanyne. "It's the formula for the belts—even a primitive chemistry could make them. We would like to see them copied, duplicated all over the Universe. They are what we are. Wear one, Bril. You would be one of us, then."

Bril snorted in embarrassed contempt and went to watch two children deftly making up the belts, as easily, and with

the same idle pleasure, as they might be making flower necklaces in a minute or two. As each was assembled, the child would strike it against his own belt. All the colors there are would appear each time this happened, in a brief, brilliant, cool flare. Then the belt, now with a short trim of vague tongued light, was tossed in a bin.

Probably the only time Bril permitted himself open astonishment on Xanadu was the first time he saw one of the natives put on this garment. It was a young man, come dripping from the pool. He snatched up a belt from the bank and clasped it around his waist, and immediately the color and substance flowed up and down, a flickering changing collar for him, a moving coruscant kilt.

"It's alive, you see," said Tanyne. "Rather, it is not nonliving."

He put his fingers under the hem of his own kilt and forced his fingers up and outward. They penetrated the fabric, which fluttered away, untorn.

"It is not," he said gravely, "altogether material, if you will forgive an Old Tongue pun. The nearest Old Tongue term for it is 'aura.' Anyway, it lives, in its way. It maintains itself for—oh, a year or more. Then dip it in lactic acid and it is refreshed again. And just one of them could activate a million belts or a billion—how many sticks can a fire burn?"

"But why wear such a thing?"

Tanyne laughed. "Modesty." He laughed again. "A scholar of the very old times, on Earth before the Nova, passed on to me the words of one Rudofsky: 'Modesty is not so simple a virtue as honesty.' We wear these because they are warm when we need warmth, and because they conceal some defects some of the time—surely all one can ask of any human affectation."

"They are certainly not modest," said Bril stiffly.

"They express modesty just to the extent that they make us more pleasant to look at with than without them. What more public expression of humility could you want than that?"

Bril turned his back on Tanyne and the discussion. He understood Tanyne's words and ways imperfectly to begin with, and this kind of talk left him bewildered, or unreached, or both.

He found out about the hardboard. Hanging from the limb of a tree was a large vat of milky fluid—the paper, Tan explained, of a wasp they had developed, dissolved in one

of the nucleic acids which they synthesized from a native weed. Under the vat was a flat metal plate and a set of movable fences. These were arranged in the desired shape and thickness of the finished panel, and then a cock was opened and the fluid ran in and filled the enclosure. Thereupon two small children pushed a roller by hand across the top of the fences. The white lake of fluid turned pale brown and solidified, and that was the hardboard.

Tanyne tried his best to explain to Bril about that roller, but the Old Tongue joined forces with Bril's technical ignorance and made the explanation incomprehensible. The coating of the roller was as simple in design, and as complex in theory, as a transistor, and Bril had to let it go at that, as he did with the selective analysis of the boulderlike "plumbing" and the antigrav food trays (which, he discovered, had to be guided outbound, but which "homed" on the kitchen area when empty).

He had less luck, as the days went by, in discovering the nature of the skills of Xanadu. He had been quite ready to discard his own dream as a fantasy, an impossibility—the strange idea that what any could do, all could do. Tanyne tried to explain; at least, he answered every one of Bril's questions.

These wandering, indolent, joyful people could pick up anyone's work at any stage and carry it to any degree. One would pick up a flute and play a few notes, and others would stroll over, some with instruments and some without, and soon another instrument and another would join in, until there were fifty or sixty and the music was like a passion or a storm, or after-love or sleep when you think back on it.

And sometimes a bystander would step forward and take an instrument from the hands of someone who was tiring, and play on with all the rest, pure and harmonious; and, no, Tan would aver, he didn't think they'd ever played that particular piece of music before, those fifty or sixty people.

It always got down to *feeling*, in Tan's explanations.

"It's a *feeling* you get. The violin, now; I've heard one, we'll say, but never held one. I watch someone play and I understand how the notes are made. Then I take it and do the same, and as I concentrate on making the note, and the note that follows, it comes to me not only how it should sound, but how it should *feel*—to the fingers, the bow-

ing arm, the chin and collarbone. Out of those feelings comes the feeling of how it feels to be making such music.

"Of course, there are limitations," he admitted, "and some might do better than others. If my fingertips are soft, I can't play as long as another might. If a child's hands are too small for the instrument, he'll have to drop an octave or skip a note. But the feeling's there, when we think in that certain way.

"It's the same with anything else we do," he summed up. "If I need something in my house, a machine, a device, I won't use iron where copper is better; it wouldn't *feel* right for me. I don't mean feeling the metal with my hands; I mean thinking about the device and its parts and what it's for. When I think of all the things I could make it of, there's only one set of things that feels right to me."

"So," said Bril then. "And that, plus this—this competition between the districts, to find all elements and raw materials in the neighborhood instead of sending for them—that's why you have no commerce. Yet you say you're standardized—at any rate, you all have the same kind of devices, ways of doing things."

"We all have whatever we want and we make it ourselves, yes," Tan agreed.

In the evenings, Bril would sit in Tanyne's house and listen to the drift and swirl of conversation or the floods of music, and wonder; and then he would guide his tray back to his cubicle and lock the door and eat and brood. He felt at times that he was under an attack with weapons he did not understand, on a field which was strange to him.

He remembered something Tanyne had said once, casually, about men and their devices: "Ever since there were human beings, there has been conflict between Man and his machines. They will run him or he them; it's hard to say which is the less disastrous way. But a culture which is composed primarily of men has to destroy one made mostly of machines, or be destroyed. It was always that way. We lost a culture once on Xanadu. Didn't you ever wonder, Bril, why there are so few of us here? And why almost all of us have red hair?"

Bril had, and had secretly blamed the small population on the shameless lack of privacy, without which no human race seems to be able to whip up enough interest in itself to breed readily.

"We were billions once," said Tan surprisingly. "We were wiped out. Know how many were left? *Three!*"

That was a black night for Bril, when he realized how pitiable were his efforts to learn their secret. For if a race were narrowed to a few, and a mutation took place, and it then increased again, the new strain could be present in all the new generations. He might as well, he thought, try to wrest from them the secret of having red hair. That was the night he concluded that these people would have to go; and it hurt him to think that, and he was angry at himself for thinking so. That, too, was the night of the ridiculous disaster.

He lay on his bed, grinding his teeth in helpless fury. It was past noon and he had been there since he awoke, trapped by his own stupidity, and ridiculous, ridiculous. His greastest single possession—his dignity—was stripped from him by his own carelessness, by a fiendish and unsportsmanlike gadget that—

His approach alarm hissed and he sprang to his feet in an agony of embarrassment, in spite of the strong opaque walls and the door which only he could open.

It was Tanyne; his friendly greeting bugled out and mingled with birdsong and the wind. "Bril! You there?"

Bril let him come a little closer and then barked through the vent. "I'm not coming out." Tanyne stopped dead, and even Bril himself was surprised by the harsh, squeezed sound of his voice.

"But Nina asked for you. She's going to weave today; she thought you'd like—"

"No," snapped Bril. "Today I leave. Tonight, that is. I've summoned my bubble. It will be here in two hours. After that, when it's dark, I'm going."

"Bril, you can't. Tomorrow I've set up a sintering for you; show you how we plate—"

"No!"

"Have we offended you, Bril? Have I?"

"No." Bril's voice was surly, but at least not a shout.

"What's happened?"

Bril didn't answer.

Tanyne came closer. Bril's eyes disappeared from the slit. He was cowering against the wall, sweating.

Tanyne said, "Something's happened, something's wrong. I . . . feel it. You know how I feel things, my friend, my good friend, Bril."

The very thought made Bril stiffen in terror. Did Tanyne know? Could he?

He might, at that. Bril damned these people and all their devices, their planet and its sun and the fates which had brought him here.

"There is nothing in my world or in my experience you can't tell me about. You know I'll understand," Tanyne pleaded. He came closer. "Are you ill? I have all the skills of the surgeons who have lived since the Three. Let me in."

"No!" It was hardly a word; it was an explosion.

Tanyne fell back a step. "I beg your pardon, Bril. I won't ask again. But—tell me. Please tell me. I must be able to help you!"

All right, thought Bril, half hysterically, *I'll tell you and you can laugh your fool red head off. It won't matter once we seed your planet with Big Plague.* "I can't come out. I've ruined my clothes."

"Bril! What can that matter? Here, throw them out; we can fix them, no matter what it is."

"No!" He could just see what would happen with these universal talents getting hold of the most compact and deadly armory this side of the Sumner system.

"Then wear mine." Tan put his hands to the belt of his black stones.

"I wouldn't be seen dead in a flimsy thing like that. Do you think I'm an exhibitionist?"

With more heat (it wasn't much) than Bril had ever seen in him, Tanyne said, "You've been a lot more conspicuous in those winding sheets you've been wearing than you ever would be in this."

Bril had never thought of that. He looked longingly at the bright nothing which flowed up and down from the belt, and then at his own black harness, humped up against the wall under its hook. He hadn't been able to bear the thought of putting them back on since the accident happened, and he had not been this long without clothes since he'd been too young to walk.

"What happened to your clothes, anyway?" Tan asked sympathetically.

Laugh, thought Bril, *and I'll kill you right now and you'll never have a chance to see your race die.* "I sat down on the—I've been using it as a chair; there's only room for one seat in here. I must have kicked the switch. I didn't even feel it until I got up. The whole back of my—" Angrily

he blurted, "Why doesn't that ever happen to you people?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Tan said, passing the news item by as if it meant nothing. Well, to him it probably was nothing. "The unit only accepts nonliving matter."

"Leave that thing you call clothes in front of the door," Bril grunted after a strained silence. "Perhaps I'll try it."

Tanyne tossed the belt up against the door and strode away, singing softly. His voice was so big that even his soft singing seemed to go on forever.

But eventually Bril had the field to himself, the birdsong and the wind. He went to the door and away, lifted his seatless breeches sadly and folded them out of sight under the other things on the hook. He looked at the door again and actually whimpered once, very quietly. At last he put the gauntlet against the doorplate, and the door, never designed to open a little way, obediently slid wide. He squeaked, reached out, caught up the belt, scampered back and slapped at the plate.

"No one saw," he told himself urgently.

He pulled the belt around him. The buckle parts knew each other like a pair of hands.

The first thing he was aware of was the warmth. Nothing but the belt touched him anywhere and yet there was a warmth on him, soft, safe, like a bird's breast on eggs. A split second later, he gasped.

How could a mind fill so and not feel pressure? How could so much understanding flood into a brain and not break it?

He understood about the roller which treated the hardboard; it was a certain way and no other, and he could feel the rightness of that sole conjecture.

He understood the ions of the mold press that made the belts, and the life analog he wore as a garment. He understood how his finger might write on a screen, and the vacuum of demand he might send out to have this house built so, and so, and exactly so; and how the natives would hurry to fill it.

He remembered without effort Tanyne's description of the *feel* of playing an instrument, making, building, molding, holding, sharing, and how it must be to play in a milling crowd beside a task, moving randomly and only for pleasure, yet taking someone's place at vat or bench, furrow or fishnet, the very second another laid down a tool.

He stood in his own quiet flame, in his little coffin cubicle, looking at his hands and knowing without question

that they would build him a model of a city on Kit Carson if he liked, or a statue of the soul of the Sole Authority.

He knew without question that he had the skills of this people, and that he could call on any of those skills just by concentrating on a task until it came to him how the right way (for him) would *feel.* He knew without surprise that these resources transcended even death; for a man could have a skill and then it was everyman's, and if the man should die, his skill still lived in everyman.

Just by concentrating—that was the key, the key way, the keystone to the nature of this device. A device, that was all—no mutations, nothing 'extrasensory' (whatever that meant); only a machine like other machines. You have a skill, and a feeling about it; I have a task. Concentration on my task sets up a demand for your skill; through the living flame you wear, you transmit; through mine, I receive. Then I perform; and what bias I put upon that performance depends on my capabilities. Should I add something to that skill, then mine is the higher, the more complete; the *feeling* of it is better, and it is I who will transmit next time there is a demand.

And he understood the authority that lay in this new aura, and it came to him then how his home planet could be welded into a unit such as the universe had never seen. Xanadu had not done it, because Xanadu had grown randomly with its gift, without the preliminary pounding and shaping and milling of authority and discipline.

But Kit Carson! Carson with all skills and all talents shared among all its people, and overall and commanding, creating that vacuum of need and instant fulfillment, the Sole Authority and the State. It must be so (even though, far down, something in him wondered why the State kept so much understanding away from its people), for with this new depth came a solemn new dedication to his home and all it stood for.

Trembling, he unbuckled the belt and turned back its left buckle. Yes, there it was, the formula for the precipitate. And now he understood the pressing process and he had the flame to strike into new belts and make them live—by the millions, Tanyne had said, the billions.

Tanyne had said . . . why had he never said that the garments of Xanadu were the source of all their wonders and perplexities?

But had Bril ever asked?

Hadn't Tanyne begged him to take a garment so he could be one with Xanadu? The poor earnest idiot, to think he could be swayed away from Carson this way! Well, then, Tanyne and his people would have an offer, too, and it would all be even; soon they could, if they would join the shining armies of a new Kit Carson.

From his hanging black suit, a chime sounded. Bril laughed and gathered up his old harness and all the fire and shock and paralysis asleep in its mighty, compact weapons. He slapped open the door and sprang to the bubble which waited outside, and flung his old uniform in to lie crumpled on the floor, a broken chrysalis. Shining and exultant, he leaped in after it and the bubble sprang away skyward.

Within a week after Bril's return to Kit Carson in the Sumner System, the garment had been duplicated, and duplicated again, and tested.

Within a month, nearly two hundred thousand had been distributed, and eighty factories were producing round the clock.

Within a year, the whole planet, all the millions, were shining and unified as never before, moving together under their Leader's will like the cells of a hand.

And then, in shocking unison, they all flickered and dimmed, every one, so it was time for the lactic acid dip which Bril had learned of. It was done in panic, without test or hesitation; a small taste of this luminous subjection had created a mighty appetite. All was well for a week—

And then, as the designers in Xanadu had planned, all the other segments of the black belts joined the first meager two in full operation.

A billion and a half human souls, who had been given the techniques of music and the graphic arts, and the theory of technology, now had the others: philosophy and logic and love; sympathy, empathy, forbearance, unity in the idea of their species rather than in their obedience; membership in harmony with all life everywhere.

A people with such feelings and their derived skills cannot be slaves. As the light burst upon them, there was only one concentration possible to each of them—to be free, and the accomplished feeling of being free. As each found it, he was an expert in freedom, and expert succeeded expert, transcended expert, until (in a moment) a billion and a half human souls had no greater skill than the talent of freedom.

So Kit Carson, as a culture, ceased to exist, and something new started there and spread through the stars nearby.

And because Bril knew what a Senator was and wanted to be one, he became one.

In each other's arms, Tanyne and Nina were singing softly, when the goblet in the mossy niche chimed.

"Here comes another one," said Wonyne, crouched at their feet. "I wonder what will make *him* beg, borrow or steal a belt."

"Doesn't matter," said Tanyne, stretching luxuriously, "as long as he gets it. Which one is he, Wo—that noisy mechanism on the other side of the small moon?"

"No," said Wonyne. "That one's still sitting there squalling and thinking we don't know it's there. No, this is the force-field that's been hovering over Fleetwing District for the last two years."

Tanyne laughed. "That'll make conquest number eighteen for us."

"Nineteen," corrected Nina dreamily. "I remember because eighteen was the one that just left and seventeen was that funny little Bril from the Sumner System. Tan, for a time that little man loved me." But that was a small thing and did not matter.

THERE IS NO DEFENSE

CURSING formality, Belter loosened his tunic and slouched back in his chair. He gazed at each of the members of the Joint Solar Military Council in turn, and rasped: "You might as well be comfortable, because, so help me, if I have to chain you to this table from now until the sun freezes, I'll run off this record over and over again until someone figures an angle. I never heard of anything yet, besides The Death, that couldn't be whipped one way or another. There's a weakness somewhere in this thing. It's got to be on the record. So we'll just keep at the record

until we find it. Keep your eyes peeled and the hair out of your eyes. That goes for you too, Leess."

The bottled Jovian shrugged hugely. The infrared sensory organ on its cephalothorax flushed as Belter's words crackled through the translator. Glowering at the creature, Belter quenched a flash of sympathy. The Jovian was a prisoner in other things besides the bottle which supplied its atmosphere and gravity. Leess represented a disgraced and defeated race, and its position at the conference table was a hollow honor—a courtesy backed by heat and steel and The Death. But Belter's glower did not change. There was no time, now, to sympathize with those whose fortunes of war were all bad ones.

Belter turned to the orderly and nodded. A sigh, compounded of worry and weariness, escaped the council as one man. The lights dimmed, and again the record appeared on the only flat wall of the vast chamber.

First the astronomical data from the Plutonian Dome, showing the first traces of the Invader approaching from the direction of the Lyran Ring— Equations, calculations, a sketch, photographs. These were dated three years back, during the closing phases of the Jovian War. The Plutonian Dome was not serviced at the time, due to the emergency. It was a completely automatic observatory, and its information was not needed during the interplanetary trouble. Therefore it was not equipped with instantaneous transmissions, but neatly reeled up its information until it could be visited after the war. There was a perfectly good military observation base on Outpost, the retrograde moon of Neptune, which was regarded as quite adequate to watch the Solar System area. That is, there *had* been a base there—

But, of course, the Invader was well into the System before anyone saw the Pluto records, and by that time—

The wall scene faded into the transcript of the instantaneous message received by Terran HQ, which was rigged to accept any alarm from all of the watch posts.

The transcript showed the interior of the Neptunian military observatory, and cut in apparently just before the Sigmen heard the alarm. One was sprawled in a chair in front of the finder controls; the other, a rangy lieutenant with the burned skin of his Martian Colonial stock, stiffened, looked up at the blinking "General Alarm" light as the muted, insistent note of the "Stations" bell began to thrum from the screen. The sound transmission was very good; the councilmen could distinctly hear the lieutenant's

sharp intake of breath, and his voice was quite clear as he rapped:

"Colin! Alarm. Fix!"

"Fix, sir," said the enlisted man, his fingers flying over the segmented controls. "It's deep space, sir," he reported as he worked. "A Jovian, maybe—flanking us."

"I don't think so. If what's left of their navy could make any long passes at all, you can bet it would be at Earth. How big is it?"

"I haven't got . . . oh, here it is, sir," said the e.m. "An object about the size of a Class III-A Heavy."

"Ship?"

"Don't know, sir. No heat radiation from any kind of jets. And the magnetoscope is zero."

"Get a chaser on him."

Belter's hands tightened on the table edge. Every time he saw this part of the record he wanted to get up and yell, *"No, you idiot! It'll walk down your beam!"* The chaserscope would follow anything it was trained on, and bring in a magnified image. But it took a mess of traceable vhf to do it.

Relaxing was a conscious effort. *Must be slipping,* he thought glumly, *wanting to yell at those guys. Those guys are dead.*

In the picture recording, a projection of the chaserscope's screen was flashed on the observatory screen. Staring fearfully at this shadow picture of a shadow picture, the council saw again the familiar terrible lines of the Invader—squat, unlovely, obviously not designed for atmospheric work; slab-sided, smug behind what must have been foolproof meteor screens, for the ship boldly presented flat side and bottom plates to anything which might be thrown at her.

"It's a ship, sir!" said the e.m. unnecessarily. "Seems to be turning on its short axis. Still no drive emanations."

"Range!" said the lieutenant into a wall mike. Three lights over it winked on, indicating the batteries were manned and ready for ranging information. The lieutenant, his eyes fixed on the large indicators over the enlisted man's head, hesitated a moment, then said "Automatics! Throw your ranging gear to our chaser."

The three lights blinked, once each. The battery reporters lit up, showing automatic control as the medium and heavy launching tubes bore round to the stranger.

The ship was still on the screen, turning slowly. Now a dark patch on her flank could be seen—an open port. There

was a puff of escaping gas, and *something* appeared whirling briefly away from the ship, toward the scanner. They almost saw it clearly—and then it was gone.

"They threw something at us, sir!"

"Track it!"

"Can't sir!"

"You saw the beginning of that trajectory! It was coming this way."

"Yes sir. But the radar doesn't register it. I don't see it on the screen either. Maybe it's a warper?"

"Warpers are all theory, Colin. You don't bend radar impulses around an object and then restore them to their original direction. If this thing is warping at all, it's warping light. It—"

And then all but the Jovian closed their eyes as the screen repeated that horror—the bursting inward of the observatory's bulkhead, the great jagged blade of metal that flicked the lieutenant's head straight into the transmission camera.

The scene faded, and the lights went up.

"Slap in the next re— Hold it!" Belter said. "What's the matter with Hereford?"

The Peace delegate was slumped in his chair, his head on his arms, his arms on the table. The Martian Colonial representative touched him, and Hereford raised his seamed, saintly face:

"Sorry."

"You sick?"

Hereford sat back tiredly. "Sick?" he repeated vaguely. He was not a young man. Next to that of the Jovian, his position was the strangest of all. He represented a group, as did each of the others. But not a planetary group. He represented the amalgamation of all organized pacifistic thought in the System. His chair on the Joint Solar Military Council was a compromise measure, the tentative answer to an apparently unanswerable question—can a people do without the military? Many thought people could. Some thought not. To avoid extremism either way, the head of an unprecedented amalgamation of peace organizations was given a chair on the JSMC. He had the same vote as a planetary representative. "Sick?" he repeated in a whispering baritone. "Yes, I rather think so." He waved a hand at the blank wall. "Why did the Invader do it? So pointless . . . so . . . so stupid." He raised puzzled eyes, and Belter felt a new kind of sympathy. Hereford's hollow-ground

intelligence was famous in four worlds. He was crackling, decisive; but now he could only ask the simplest of questions, like a child too tired to be badly frightened.

"Yeah—why?" asked Belter. "Oh . . . never mind the rest of the record," he added suddenly. "I don't know how the rest of you feel, but at the moment I'm hypnotized by the jet-blasted thing.

"*Why,* Hereford wants to know. If we knew that, maybe we could plan something. Defenses, anyway."

Somebody murmured: "It's not a campaign. It's murder."

"That's it. The Invader reaches out with some sort of a short-range disrupting bomb and wipes out the base on Outpost. Then it wanders into the System, washes out an uninhabited asteroid beacon, drifts down through the shield screening of Titan and kills off half the population with a cyanogen synthesizing catalyst. It captures three different scanner-scouts, holding them with some sort of a tractor beam, whirling them around like a stone on a string, and letting them go straight at the nearest planet. Earth ships, Martian, Jovian—doesn't matter. It can outfly and outfight anything we have so far, except—"

"Except The Death," whispered Hereford. "Go on, Belter. I knew it was coming to this."

"Well, it's true! And then the cities. If it ever drops a disrupter like that"—he waved at the wall, indicating the portion of the record they had just seen—"on a large city, there wouldn't be any point in even looking for it, let alone rebuilding it. We can't communicate with the Invader—if we send out a general signal it ignores us, and if we send out a beam it charges us or sends one of those warping disrupter bombs. We can't even surrender to it! It just wanders through the System, changing course and speed from moment to moment, and every once in a while taking a crack at something."

The Martian member glanced at Hereford, and then away. "I don't see why we've waited so long. I saw Titan, Belter. In another century it'll be dead as Luna." He shook his head. "No pre-Peace agreement can stand in the way of the defense of the System no matter how solemn the agreement was. I voted to outlaw The Death, too. I don't like the idea of it any more than . . . than Hereford there. But circumstances alter cases. Are we going to sacrifice everything the race has built just for an outdated principle? Are we going to sit smugly behind an idealistic scrap of

paper while some secret weapon chops us down bit by bit?"

"Scrap of paper," said Hereford. "Son, have you read your ancient history?"

The translator hissed. Through it, Leess spoke. The flat, unaccented words were the barest framework for the anger which those who knew Jovians could detect by the sudden paling of the creature's sensory organ. "Leess object phrase secret weapon. Man from Mars suggest Invader Jovian work."

"Cool down, Leess," Belter said, reaching over and firmly putting the Martian back in his seat. "Hey you—watch your language or you'll go back to the canals to blow the rust off supersoy. Now, Leess; I rather think the delegate from Mars let his emotions get the better of him. No one thinks that the Invader is Jovian. It's from deep space somewhere. It has a drive far superior to anything we've got, and the armament . . . well, if Jupiter had anything like that, you wouldn't have lost the war. And then there was Titan. I don't think Jovians would kill off so many of their own just to camouflage a new secret weapon."

The Martian's eyebrows lifted a trifle. Belter frowned, and the Martian's face went forcibly blank. The Jovian relaxed.

Addressing the Council generally, but looking at the Martian, Belter gritted: "The war is over. We're all Solarians, and the Invader is a menace to our System. After we get rid of the Invader we'll have time to tangle with each other. Not before. Is that clear?"

"No human trust Jupiter. No man trust Leess," sulked the Jovian. "Leess no think. Leess no help. Jupiter better off dead than not trusted."

Belter threw up his hands in disgust. The sensitivity and stubbornness of the Jovian were well known. "If there's a clumsy, flat-footed way of doing things, a Martian'll find it," he growled. "Here we need every convolution of every brain here. The Jovian has a way of thinking different enough so he might help us crack this thing, and you have to go and run him out on strike."

The Martian bit his lips. Belter turned to the Jovian. "Leess, please—come off your high horse. Maybe the Solar System is a little crowded these days, but we all have to live in it. Are you going to cooperate?"

"No. Martian man no trust Jupiter. Mars die, Jupiter die, Earth die. Good. Nobody not trust Jupiter." The creature

creased inward upon itself a movement as indicative as the thrusting out of a lower lip.

"Leess is in this with the rest of us," said the Martian. "We ought to—"

"That'll do!" barked Belter. "You've said enough chum. Concentrate on the Invader and leave Leess alone. He has a vote on this council and by the same token, he has the right to refrain from voting."

"Whose side are you on?" flashed the Martian, rising.

Belter came up with him, but Hereford's soft, deep voice came between them like a barrier. The Peace delegate said: "He's on the side of the System. All of us must be. We have no choice. You Martians are fighting men. Do you think you can separate yourselves from the rest of us and stop the Invader?"

Flushed, the Martian opened his mouth, closed it again, sat down. Hereford looked at Belter, and he sat down, too. The tension in the chamber lessened, but the matter obviously relegated itself to the "For Further Action" files in at least two men's minds.

Belter gazed at his fingers until they would be still without effort, and then said quietly: "Well, gentlemen, we've tried everything. There is no defense. We've lost ships, and men, and bases. We will lose more. If the Invader can be destroyed, we can be sure of a little time, at least, for preparation."

"Preparation?" asked Hereford.

"Certainly! You don't think for a minute that that ship isn't, or won't soon be, in communication with its own kind? Suppose we can't destroy it. It will be able to go back where it came from, with the news that there's a culture here for the taking, with no weapon powerful enough to touch them. You can't be so naïve as to believe that this one ship is the only one they have, or the only one we'll ever see! Our only course is to wipe out this ship and then prepare for a full-scale invasion. If it doesn't come before we're prepared, our only safe course will be to carry the invasion to them, wherever they may be!"

Hereford shook his head sadly. "The old story."

Belter's fist came down with a crash. "Hereford. I *know* that Peace Amalgamated is a great cultural stride forward. I *know* that to de-condition the public on three planets and a hundred colonies from the peaceful way of life is a destructive move. But—can you suggest a way of keeping the peaceful way and saving our System? Can you?"

"Yes . . . if . . . if the Invaders can be persuaded to follow the peaceful way."

"When they won't communicate? When they commit warlike acts for nothing—without plan, without conquest, apparently for the sheer joy of destruction? Hereford—we're not dealing with anything Solarian. This is some life-form that is so different in its aims and its logic that the only thing we can do is reciprocate. Fire with fire! You talk of your ancient history. Wasn't fascism conquered when the democratic nations went all but fascist to fight them?"

"No," said Hereford firmly. "The fruits of fascism were conquered. Fascism itself was conquered only by democracy."

Belter shook his head in puzzlement. "That's irrelevant. I . . . think," he added, because he was an honest man. "To get back to the Invader: we have a weapon with which we can destroy him. We can't use it now because of Peace Amalgamated; because the Solarian peoples have determined to outlaw it forever. The law is specific: The Death is not to be used for any purposes, under any circumstances. We, the military, can say we want it until our arteries harden, but our chances of getting it are negligible unless we have public support in repealing the law. The Invader has been with us for eighteen months or more, and in spite of his depredations, there is still no sign that the public would support repeal. Why?" He stabbed out a stumpy forefinger. "Because they follow *you*, Hereford. They have completely absorbed your quasi-religious attitude of . . . what was your phrase?"

" 'Moral Assay.' "

"Yeah—Moral Assay. The test of cultural stamina. The will power to stand up for a principle in spite of emergencies, in spite of drastic changes in circumstances. A good line, Hereford, but unless you retract it, the public won't. We could bulldoze 'em into it, maybe; and maybe we'd have a revolution on our hands, get a lot of people killed, and wind up with a bunch of dewy-eyed idealists coming out on top, ready to defend the principles of peace with guns if they have to draft every able-bodied Solarian in the System. Meanwhile, the Invader—and perhaps, by that time, his pals—will continue to circulate around, taking a crack at any target he happens to admire. Already the crackpots are beginning to yell about the Invader being sent to test their love of peace, and calling this the second year of the Moral Assay."

"He won't back down," said the Martian suddenly. "Why should he? The way he is, he's set for life."

"You have a lousy way of putting things!" snapped Belter, wondering *How much does personal power mean to the old saint?*

"Why this pressure?" asked Hereford gently. "You, Belter, with your martial rationalizing, and our Martian colleague here, with his personal insults—why not put it to a vote?"

Belter studied him. Was there a chance that the old man would accept the wishes of the majority here? The majority opinion of the Council was not necessarily the majority opinion of the System. And besides—how many of the Council would go along with Hereford if he chose to vote against it?

He took a deep breath. "We've got to know where we stand," he said. "Informally, now—shall we use The Death on the Invader? Let's have a show of hands."

There was a shuffling of feet. All the men looked at Hereford, who sat still with his eyes downcast. The Martian raised his hand defiantly. The Phoebe-Titan Colonial delegate followed suit. Earth. The Belt. Five, six—eight. Nine.

"Nine," said Belter. He looked at the Jovian, who looked back, unblinking. Not voting. Hereford's hands were on the table.

"That's three-quarters," Belter said.

"Not enough," answered Hereford. "The law stipulates *over* three-quarters."

"You know what my vote is."

"Sorry, Belter. You can't vote. As chairman, you are powerless unless all members vote, and then all you can do is establish a tie so that the matter can be referred for further discussion. The regulations purposely keep a deciding vote out of the Chair, and with the membership. I . . . frankly, Belter, I can't be expected to go further than this. I have refrained from voting. I have kept you from voting. If that keeps The Death from being used—"

Belter's knuckles cracked. He thought of the horror at Outpost, and the choking death on Titan, and what had happened to their asteroid. It and its abandoned mine workings had flared up like a baby nova, and what was left wouldn't dirty a handkerchief. It was a fine thing for every Solarian that at long last a terrible instrument of war had been outlawed, this time by the unquestionable wish of the people. It would be a bad thing for civilization if an

exception should be made to this great rule. It was conceivable that, once the precedent was established, the long-run effects on civilization would be worse than anything the Invader could do. And yet—all his life Belter had operated under a philosophy which dictated action. Do something. It may be wrong, but—*do* something.

"May I speak with you alone?" he asked Hereford.

"If it is a matter which concerns the Council—"

"It concerns you only. A matter of ideology."

Hereford inclined his head and rose. "This won't take long," said Belter over his shoulder, as he let the peace delegate precede him into an antechamber.

"Beat it, Jerry," he said to the guard. The man saluted and left.

Belter leaned back against a desk, folded his arms and said: "Hereford, I'm going to tear this thing right down to essentials. If I don't, we can spend the rest of our lives in arguing about social necessities and cultural evolution and the laws of probability as applied to the intentions of the Invader. I am going to ask you some questions. Simple ones. Please try to keep the answers simple."

"You know I prefer that."

"You do. All right—the whole basis of the Peace movement is to prevent fighting, on the grounds that there is always a better way. Right?"

"That is right."

"And the Peace movement recognizes no need for violence in any form, and no conceivable exception to that idea."

"That is right."

"Hereford—pay close attention. You and I are in here because of the Invader, and because of the refusal of Peace Amalgamated to allow the use of the only known countermeasure."

"Obviously."

"Good. Just one more thing. I hold you in higher regard than any other man I know. And the same goes for the work you have done. Do you believe that?"

Hereford smiled slowly and nodded. "I believe it."

"Well, it's true," said Belter, and with all his strength brought his open hand across Hereford's mouth.

The older man staggered back and stood, his fingers straying up to his face. In his eyes was utter disbelief as he stared at Belter, who stood again with his arms folded, his face impassive. The disbelief was slowly clouded over by puzzlement, and then hurt began to show. "Why—"

But before he could say another word, Belter was on him again. He crossed to Hereford's chest, and when the Peace delegate's hands came down, he struck him twice more on the mouth. Hereford made an inarticulate sound and covered his face. Belter hit him in the stomach.

Hereford moaned, turned, and made for the door. Belter dove, tackled him. They slid into a thrashing heap on the soft carpeting. Belter rolled clear, pulled the other to his feet and hit him again. Hereford shook his head and began to sink down, his arms over his head. Belter lifted him again, waited for just the right opening, and his hand flashed through for still another stinging slap across the mouth. Hereford grunted, and before Belter quite knew what was happening, he came up with one great blasting right that landed half on Belter's dropped chin, half on his collar bone. Belter came up off the floor in a cloud of sparks and fell heavily six feet away. He looked up to see Hereford standing over him, big fists bunched.

"Get up," said the Peace delegate hoarsely.

Belter lay back, put his hands under his head, spat out some blood, and began to laugh.

"Get up!"

Belter rolled over and got slowly to his feet. "It's all over, Hereford. No more rough stuff, I promise you."

Hereford backed off, his face working. "Did you think," he spat, "that you could resort to such childish, insane measures to force me into condoning murder?"

"Yup," said Belter.

"You're mad," said Hereford, and went to the door.

"Stop!"

There was a note of complete command in Belter's voice. It was that note, and the man behind it which had put Belter where he was. Equally startling was the softness of his voice as he said: "Please come here, Hereford. It isn't like you to leave a thing half understood."

If he had said "Half finished," he would have lost the play. Hereford came slowly back, saying ruefully: "I know you, Belter. I know there's a reason for this. But it better be good."

Belter stood where he had been, leaning against the desk, and he folded his arms. "Hereford," he said, "one more simple question. The Peace movement recognizes no need for violence in any form, and no conceivable exception to that idea." It sounded like a recording of the same words, said a

few minutes before, except for his carefully controlled breathing.

Hereford touched his bruised mouth. "Yes."

"Then," Belter grinned, "why did you hit me?"

"Why? Why did you hit *me*?"

"I didn't ask you that. Please keep it simple. Why did you hit me?"

"It was . . . I don't know. It happened. It was the only way to make you stop,"

Belter grinned. Hereford stumbled on. "I see what you're doing. You're trying to make some parallel between the Invader and your attack on me. But you attacked me unexpectedly, apparently without reason—"

Belter grinned more widely.

Hereford was frankly floundering now. "But I . . . I had to strike you, or I . . . I—"

"Hereford," said Belter gently, "shall we go back now, and vote before that eye of yours blackens?"

The three Death ships, each with its cover of destroyer escorts, slipped into the Asteroid Belt. *Delta*, the keying unit, was flanked on each side by the opposed twins *Epsilon* and *Sigma*, which maintained a rough thousand-mile separation from the key. Behind them, on Earth, they had left a froth of controversy. Editorial comment on the air and in print, both on facsimile and the distributed press, was pulling and hauling on the age-old question of the actions of duly elected administrators. We are the people. We choose these men to represent us. What must we do when their actions run contrary to our interest?

And—do they run contrary? How much change can there be in a man's attitude, and in the man himself, between the time he is elected and the time he votes on a vital measure? Can we hark back to our original judgment of the man and trust his action as we trusted him at election time?

And again—the old bugaboo of security. When a legislative body makes a decision on a military matter, there must be news restrictions. The Death was the supreme weapon. Despite the will of the majority, there were still those who wanted it for their own purposes; people who felt it had not been used enough in the war; others who felt it should be kept assembled and ready, as the teeth in a dictatorial peace. As of old, the mass of the people had to curb its speech and sometimes its thought, to protect itself against the megalomaniac minorities.

But there was one man who suffered. Elsewhere was anger and intellectual discourse, ethical delvings and even fear. But in one man, supremely, existed the struggle between ethics and expediency. Hereford alone had the power to undo his own work. His following would believe and accept when he asked them to make this exception. Having made it, they would follow no more, and there was no place for him on Earth.

His speech had been simple, delivered without a single flickering of his torture on the fine old face. Once the thing was done, he left Earth in a way foreign to everything he had ever believed, or spoken, or recommended. He, the leader of Peace Amalgamated, who regarded with insistent disfavor the very existence of weapons, left Earth with Belter, and shared the officer's quarters of a warship. Not only was it a warship, but it was the keying unit *Delta*, under the command of "Butcher" Osgood, trigger man of The Death.

For months they tracked the Invader, using their own instruments and information relayed to them by various outposts. Under no circumstances did they use tracers. One observation post and seven warships had been crushed because of that. The Invader's reaction to a tight beam was instant and terrible. Therefore, they were limited to light reflection—what there was of it, even from the bold, bright flanks of the marauder—and the detection of the four types of drive radiations used the ship at different accelerations.

The body of descriptive matter on the Invader increased, and there were certain irrefutable conclusions. The crew of the Invader were colloidal life, like all known life, and would be subject to The Death. This was deduced by the fact that the ship was enclosed, pressurized and contained an atmosphere of some sort, which precluded the theoretically suggested "energy" and "crystalline" life-forms. The random nature of the enemy's vicious and casual attacks caused more controversy than almost any other factor; but as time went on, it became obvious that what the ship was doing was calling forth any attack of which the System might be capable. It had been bombed, rayed, and attempts had been made to ram. It was impervious. How long would it stay? When would its commanders conclude that they had seen the worst, and laughing go back into the depths to bring reinforcements? And was there anything—anything at all—besides The Death that could reach the Invader, or stop him, or destroy him, or even let him know fear?

Right up until D-day—Death-day—the billions who had fol-

lowed Hereford hoped that some alternative could be found, so that at least their earlier resolutions would be followed in letter if not in spirit. Many of them worked like slaves to this end, and that was the greatest anomaly of all, for all the forces of Peace were engaged in devising deadly methods and engines for use as alternative to The Death. They failed. Of course they failed.

There came a day when they had to strike. The Invader had all but vanished into the celestial north, only to come hurtling back in a great curve which would pass through the plane of the ecliptic just beyond the orbit of Jupiter. The Invader's trajectory was predictable despite his almost unbelievable maneuverability—even for him there were limits of checking and turning, which was another fact indicating colloidal life. There was no way of knowing whether he was coming back to harass the planets, or whether he was making one last observation before swinging through the System and away from Sol, back to the unknown hell which had spawned him. But whether it was attack or withdrawal, he had to be smashed. There might never be another chance.

The three Death ships moved out from the Belt, where they had lain quiet amongst the other masses floating in that great ring of detritus. Still keeping their formation, they blasted away with a crushing acceleration, their crews dopey with *momentomine*. Their courses were set to intersect that of the Invader, or close enough to bring them well within range of The Death—twelve to twenty thousand miles. Delicate, beamless scanners checked the enemy's course moment by moment, making automatic corrections and maintaining the formation of the three ships.

Delta was Earth-manned, *Epsilon* a Martian ship, and *Sigma* belonged to the Colonials. Originally, the plan had been to scatter Colonials through the three ships, and use a Jovian craft. But Leess, as the Jovian representative, had vetoed any Jovian participation, an action which had brought about a violent reawakening of antipathies toward the major planet. Public feeling was so loaded against the use of The Death that the responsibility must be shared. Jupiter's stubborn and suicidal refusal to share it was inflexible; the Jovian solidarity was as thorough as ever.

Four days out, the master controls dropped the acceleration to 1 G, and the air conditioners blasted out enough superoxygen to counteract the acceleration drug. Personnel came to full life again, and the command gathered on the bridge of *Delta*. Hereford was there too, standing well back,

his face misleadingly calm, his eyes flicking from the forward screen to the tactical chart, from Belter's absorbed face to the undershot countenance of Commander Osgood.

Osgood looked over his shoulder at the Peace leader. His voice was gravel in a wire sieve as he said: "I still don't like that guy hanging around here. You sure he won't be better off in his quarters?"

"We've been over that," said Belter tiredly. "Commander, maybe I'm out of order, but would it be too much trouble for you to speak directly to him once in a while?"

"I am satisfied," smiled Hereford. "I quite understand his attitude. I have little to say to him, and much to say about him, which is essentially his position as far as I am concerned. It is no more remarkable that he is unfamiliar with politeness than that I should be ignorant of spatial ballistics."

Belter grinned. "O.K., O.K.—don't mind me I'm just a poor military man trying to make peace. I'll shut up and let you and the Butcher have your inimical *status quo*."

"I'll need a little quiet here for a while, if it's all the same to you, Councilman," said Osgood. He was watching the tactical chart. The red spot representing *Epsilon* was at the far right, the blur of *Sigma* at the left, and down at the bottom was *Delta's* green spark. A golden bar in the center of the chart showed the area on the ecliptical plane at which the Invader could be expected to pass through, and just above it was a white spot showing the Invader himself.

Osgood touched a toggle which added a diagram to the chart—a positioning diagram showing the placement of the three Death ships in relation to the target. *Sigma* and *Epsilon* were exactly in the centers of their white positioning circles; *Delta* was at the lower edge of the third circle. Osgood made a slight adjustment in the drive circuit.

"Positioning is everything," Belter explained to Hereford. "The Death field is a resultant—a violent node of vibrations centering on the contiguous focal points of the opposed fields from *Sigma* and *Epsilon*. The beam from *Delta*—that's us—kicks it off. There's an enormous stress set up at that focal point, and our beam tears into it. The vibration changes frequency at random and with violence. It had been said that the fabric of space itself vibrates. That's learned nonsense. But fluids do, and gases, of course, and colloids worst of all."

"What would happen if the positions were not taken exactly?"

"Nothing. The two focal points of the concentrated fields from *Epsilon* and *Sigma* would not coincide, and *Delta*'s beam would be useless. And it *might* have the unhappy result of calling the Invader down on us. Not right away—he's going too fast at right angles to our course—but I'm not crazy about the idea of being hunted down by that executioner."

Hereford listened gravely, watching Osgood, watching the chart. "Just how great is the danger of The Death's spreading like ripples in a pool—out in every direction from the node?"

"Very little, the way it's set up. The node moves outward away from our three ships—again a resultant, strictly according to the parallelogram of force. How long it lasts, how intense it gets, how far it will go—we never know. It changes with what it encounters. Mass intensifies it and slows it down. Energy of almost any kind accelerates and gradually seems to dissipate it. And it varies for other reasons we don't understand yet. Setting it up is a very complicated business, as you have seen. We don't dare kick it off in such a way that it might encounter any of the planets, if it should happen to last long enough. We have to clear space between us and Outside of all shipping."

Hereford shook his head slowly. "The final separation between death and destruction," he mused. "In ancient times, armies met on battlefields and used death alone to determine the winner. Then, gradually, destruction became the most important factor—how much of the enemy's material could you destroy? And then, with the Atomic Wars, and the Dust, death alone became the end of combat again. Now it has come full circle, and we have found a way to kill, to punish and torture, to dissolve, slowly and insistently, colloidal cells, and still leave machines unharmed. This surpasses the barbarism of jellied gasoline. It takes longer, and—"

"It's complete," Belter finished.

"Stations!"

Osgood's voice sliced raggedly through the quiet bridge. The screen-studded bulkhead beside him winked and flickered with acknowledgments, as tacticians, technicians, astrogators, ballistics men, and crewmen reported in. All three ships were represented, and a master screen collected and summarized the information, automatically framing the laggards' screen with luminous red. There was little of the red showing, and in seconds it disappeared. Osgood stepped back, glanced at the master screen and then at the chart.

On it, the ship symbols were centered in their tactical circles.

The commander turned away and for the first time in these weary months he spoke directly to Hereford: "Would you like the honor of triggering?"

Hereford's nostrils dilated, but his voice was controlled. He put his hands behind his back. "Thank you, no."

"I thought not," said the Butcher, and there was a world of insult in his scraping voice.

Before him was a triangular housing from which projected three small levers with round grips. One was red, one blue. The third was set between and in front of the others, and was green. He pulled the two nearest him. Immediately a red line appeared on the chart, running from *Epsilon*'s symbol to the golden patch, and a blue line raced out from *Sigma* to meet it. Just above the gold hovered the white spot representing the Invader. Osgood watched it narrowly as it dipped toward the gold and the junction of the red and blue lines. He rested his hand on the green lever, made one last check of the screens, and snatched it back. Obediently, a thin, bright green line appeared on the chart. A purple haze clouded the gold.

"That's it!" breathed Belter. "The purple, there—The Death!"

Hereford, shaking, leaned back against the bulkhead. He folded his arms, holding tightly to his elbows, obviously trying to get a grip on much more.

"Scan him!" spat Osgood. "This I've got to see!"

Belter leapt forward. "Commander! You don't . . . you *can't* beam him! Remember what happened at Outpost?"

Osgood swore. "We've got so much stuff between here and there already that a scanning beam isn't going to make that much difference. He's done, anyway!" he added exultantly.

The large scanning screen flicked into colors which swirled and fused into the sharp image of the Invader. Since the beam tracked him exactly, there was no sign of motion. "Get me a diagrammatic!" bellowed Osgood. His small eyes were wide, his cheeks puffed out, his lips wet.

The lower quarter of the screen faded, went black, then suddenly bore a reduced image of the Invader. Apparently creeping toward him was a faint, ever-brightening purple mist.

"Right on the nose!" gritted Belter. "He's sailing right into it!"

Startlingly, the large actual image showed signs of life. A stream of blue white fire poured out of the ship side.

"What do you know!" whistled Osgood. "He's got jets after all! He knows there's something ahead of him, doesn't know what it is, and is going to duck it if he has to smear his crew all up and down the bulkheads!"

"Look!" cried Belter, pointing at the chart. "Why, he's pulling into a curve that . . . that— Man, oh man, he's killing off all hands! He can't turn like that!"

"Maybe he wants to get it over with quickly. Maybe he's run into The Death somewhere before," crowed Osgood. "Afraid to face it. Hey, Belter, the inside of that ship's going to be a pretty sight. The Death'll make jelly of 'em, and that high-G turn'll lay the jelly like paint out of an airbrush!"

"Ex . . . ex—" was as much as Hereford could say as he turned and tottered out. Belter took a step after him, hesitated, and then went back to stand before the chart.

Purple and gold and white, red and green and blue coruscated together. Slowly, then, the white spot moved toward the edge of the puddle of color.

"Commander! He's still side-jetting!"

"Why not?" said the Butcher gleefully. "That's the way his controls were set when his command got emulsified. He'll blow off his fuel in a while, and we can board him."

There was a soft click from the master communications screen and a face appeared on it. "*Epsilon,*" the man said.

"Good work, Hoster," said Osgood, rubbing his hands.

"Thank you, sir," said the captain of the Martian vessel. "Commander, my astrogators report an extrapolation of the derelict's change of course. If he keeps jetting, he's going to come mighty close."

"Watch him then," said Osgood. "If he comes too close, get out of his way. I'll stake my shoulder boards on your safety." He laughed. "He's a dead duck. You'll be able to clear him. I don't care if it's only by fifty meters."

The Martian saluted. Osgood checked him before he could fade. "Hoster!"

"Yes sir."

"I know you Martians. Trigger happy. Whatever happens, Hoster, you are not to bomb or ray that derelict. Understand?"

"Roger, sir," said the Martian stiffly, and faded.

"Those Martians," said Osgood. "Bloodthirsty bunch."

Belter said: "Commander, sometimes I understand how Hereford feels about you."

"I'll take that as a compliment," said the Butcher.

They spent the next two hours watching the tactical chart. The Death generators had long ago been cut out, and The Death itself showed on the chart as a dwindling purple stain, headed straight Outside and already fading. But the derelict was still blasting from its side jets, and coming about in an impossible curve. The Martian astrogators had been uncomfortably right, and Captain Hoster had been instructed to take evasive action.

Closer and closer came the white spot to the red one that was *Epsilon*. Viewers were clamped on both ships: the Martian had begun to decelerate powerfully to get out of that ratiocinated curve.

"Doesn't look so good," said Belter, after a careful study of the derelict's trajectory.

"Nonsense," said Osgood worriedly. "But it'd be more than a little silly to lose a ship after we've whipped the enemy. "He turned to the control bulkhead. "Get me *Epsilon*."

He had started his famous monotone of profanity before the screen finally lit up. Hoster's face was flushed—blotched, really. "What's the matter?" snapped Osgood. "You take your own sweet time answering. Why haven't you taken any *momentomine*?"

Captain Hoster clutched the rim of his communicator. "Lissen," he said thickly. " 'Nvader out t' get us, see. Nobody push Martian around. 'S dirty Jovian trick."

"Acceleration disease," said Belter quietly. "He must've had some crazy idea of keeping away from the drug so he'd be able to keep on the alert."

"Hoster! You're hopped up. You can't take *momentomine* for as many years as you have and stay sober under deceleration without it. You're relieved. Take a dose and turn in. Put your second on."

"Lissen, Butch, ol' horse," mouthed the Martian. "I know what I'm doin', see? I don't want trouble with *you*. Busy, see? Now, you jus' handle your boat an' I'll handle mine. I'm gonna give that Jovian a case of Titanitis 'f 'e gets wise with me." And the screen went blank.

"Hoster!" the commander roared. "Sparks! Put that maniac on again!"

A speaker answered promptly: "Sorry, sir. Can't raise him."

In helpless fury Osgood turned to Belter. "If he so much

as throws a dirty look at that derelict, I'll break him to an ammo passer and put him on the sun side of Mercury. We *need* that derelict!"

"What for?" asked Belter, and then wondered why he had asked, for he knew the answer. Hereford's influence, probably. It would be Hereford's question, if he were still here.

"Four drives we don't know anything about. A warp-camouflaged disrupter bomb. A chain-instigating ray, that blew up the asteroid last year. And probably lots more. Man, that's a *war*ship!"

"It sure is," said Belter. "It certainly is." *Peace Amalgamated,* he thought. *A great step forward.*

"Get 'em both on a screen," Osgood rapped. "They're close enough— Hey, Belter, look at the way that ship is designed. See how it can check and turn that way?"

"No, I— Oh! I see what you mean. Uses lateral jets—but what laterals!"

"Functional stuff," said Osgood. "We could've had that a hundred years ago, but for naval tradition. We put all our drive back aft. We get a good in-line thrust, sure. But look what he's got! The equivalent of ten or twelve of our stern-tube assemblies. What kind of people were they, that could stand that kind of thing?"

Belter shook his head. "If they built it that way, they could stand it." He looked thoughtfully up at the derelict's trajectory. "Commander, you don't suppose—"

Apparently struck by the same awful thought, Osgood said uneasily, "Certainly not. The Death. They went through The Death."

"Yes," said Belter. He sounded relieved, but he did not feel relieved. He watched the screen, and then clutched Osgood's arm.

Osgood swore and sprang to the control bulkhead. "Get *Epsilon!* Tell him to cease fire and then report to me! Blast the hub-forted fun of a plistener! I'll pry him loose from his—"

Belter grunted and threw his arm over his eyes as the screen blazed. The automatic shields went up, and when he could see again, the screen showed him the Invader. *Epsilon* wasn't there at all.

After the excitement had died down a little, Osgood slumped into a chair. "I wish we'd had a Jovian ship out there instead," he rasped. "I don't care what they did to us during the war, or anything else. They could obey orders. When they say they'll do a thing, you can bet on it. What's

the score on that business of the Jovians' electing themselves out, anyhow?"

Belter told him how the Jovian delegate had been insulted at the Council.

"Those hot-headed, irresponsible Martians!" said the Butcher. "Why in time did that drunken cretin have to fire on the derelict?"

"What derelict?" Belter asked dryly.

Osgood stared at him. Belter pointed at the chart. The white spot was slowly swinging toward the green—toward *Delta.* On the screen, the Invader still gleamed. It was not blasting any more.

One of the technician's screens flashed. "Detection reporting, sir."

"Report."

"Invader's Type Two drive radiation showing strong, sir."

"R-Roger."

The screen winked out. Commander Osgood opened his mouth, held it open silently for an unbearably long moment, and then carefully closed it again. Belter bit the insides of his cheeks to keep from roaring with hysterical laughter. He knew that the Butcher was trying to swear, and that he had met a situation for which no swearing would be adequate. He had shot his vituperative bolt. Finally, weakly, he said the worst thing he could think of—a thing that until then had been unthinkable.

He said: "They're not dead."

Belter did not feel like laughing any more. He said: "They went through The Death, and they're not dead."

"There is no defense against The Death," said the commander authoritatively. Belter nodded.

One of the screens flashed, and a voice said impersonally: "Mathematics."

"Go on," said the Butcher.

"The derelict's course will intersect ours, sir, unless—"

"Don't say 'derelict,' " whispered Osgood. "Say 'Invader.' " He lay back and, closing his eyes, swabbed his face with a tissue. Then the muscles in his jaw clenched and he rose and stood erect before the control bulkhead, pulling the wrinkles out of his tunic. "Batteries. Train around to the Invader. Tech! Put the batteries on auto. Everything—torpedoes, rays, artillery. Now give me all hands. All hands! Prepare to abandon ship. *Delta* will engage the enemy on automatics. Life craft to scatter. Take your direction from your launching port and maintain it until you observe some de-

cisive action between *Delta* and the Invader. Fill up with *momentomine* and give your craft everything they can take. Over." He swung to Belter.

"Councilman! Don't argue with me. What I want to do is stay here and fight. What I *will* do is abandon ship with the rest of you. My only reason is so I can have another chance to take a poke at a Martian. Of all the blundering, stupid, childish things for Hoster to do, taking a pot shot at that killer out there was the most—"

Belter very nearly reminded the commander that Hoster had been instructed to let the "derelict" pass within fifty meters if necessary. He swallowed the comment. It didn't matter, anyway. Hoster and his crew had been good men, and *Epsilon* a good ship. All dead now, all smashed, all gone to lengthen the list that had started on Outpost.

"You know your abandon-ship station, don't you, Belter? Go to your quarters and haul out that white-livered old pantywaist and take him with you. I'll join you as soon as everyone else is off the ship. Jump!"

Belter jumped. Things were happening too fast for him, and he found it almost pleasant to use someone else's intelligence rather than hunt for his own.

Hereford was sitting on the edge of his bunk. "What's the matter, Belter?"

"Abandon ship!"

"I know that," said the older man patiently. "When they have an 'all hands' call on one of these ships there's no mistaking it. I want to know what's the matter."

"We're under attack. Invader."

"Ah." Hereford was very calm. "It didn't work."

"No," said Belter. "It didn't."

"I'll stay here, I think."

"You'll *what*?"

Hereford shrugged. "What's the use? What do you think will happen to the peaceful philosophy when news gets out that there is a defense against The Death? Even if a thousand or a million Invader ships come, nothing will keep us from fighting each other. I'm—tired."

"Hereford." He waited until the old man lifted his head, met his eyes. "Remember that day in the anteroom? Do we have to go through that again?"

Hereford smiled slowly. "Don't bother, friend. You are going to have trouble enough after you leave. As for me—well, the most useful thing I can be now is a martyr."

Belter went to the bulkhead and pressed into his personal

storage. He got his papers and a bottle of viski. "All right," he said, "let's have a quick one before I go." Hereford smiled and accepted. Belter put all the *momentomine* in Hereford's drink, so that when they left the ship he, Belter, passed out cold. From what he heard later he missed quite a show. *Delta* slugged it out with the Invader. She fought until there was nothing but a top turret left, and it kept spitting away at the enemy until a disrupter big enough for half a planet wiped it out. She was a good ship too. The Invader went screaming up into the celestial north again, leaving the terrified *Sigma* alone. Belter regained consciousness in the life craft along with the commander and Hereford. Hereford looked like an illustration in the Old Testament which Belter had seen when he was a child. It was captioned "And Moses Threw Down and Broke the Two Tablets of Stone."

Sigma picked them up. She was a huge old Logistics vessel, twice reconverted—once from the Colonial Trade, once as the negative plant of The Death. She had a main hold in her like a convention hall, and a third of it was still empty in spite of the vast pile plant she carried. Her cargo port was open, and *Delta's* life craft were being warped in and stacked inside, along with what wreckage could be salvaged for study.

The place was a hive. Spacesuited crews floated the boats in, handling them with telescoping rods equipped with a magnetic grapple at each end. One end would be placed on the hull of a boat, the other on the deck or bulkhead or on a stanchion; and then by contracting or expanding the rod by means of its self-contained power unit, the boat would be pushed or pulled to its stack.

The boats had completed their rendezvous after two days of signaling and careful jetting. All were accounted for but two, which had probably tangled with debris. The escape of so many was largely due to the fact that there was very little wreckage large enough to do any damage after the last explosion.

Osgood's boat hovered outside until the last, and by the time it was warped in all the others had unloaded and their crews were inboard, getting refreshment and treatment. By the time the little "Blister" had been racked, the cargo port was sealed and the compartment refilled with air. *Sigma's* captain opened the boat's hatch with his own hands, and Osgood crawled out, followed by a dazed Belter and a sullen Hereford.

"Your ship, sir," said the captain of *Sigma*, formally, in the traditional presentation of a ship and its facilities to a superior.

"Yeah. I need one at the moment," said the Butcher wryly. He stretched, looked around. "Get any parts of the Martian?"

"No, sir," said the captain. He was a worried-looking, gangly specimen from the Venusian Dome. His name had so many syllables that only the first three were used. They were Holovik. "And little enough from *Delta*, I'm sorry to say. Wh . . . what happened?"

"You saw it, didn't you? What do you think?"

"I'll say it, if you can't get it out," said Osgood bluntly. "He has a defense against The Death. Isn't that fine?"

"Yes sir." The horizontal lines across Captain Holovik's forehead deepened, and the corners of his mouth turned down. "Fine."

"Don't burst into tears!" snapped the commander. He looked around taking stock of the salvage. "Get all available techs on that scrap. Find out if any of it is radioactive, and if so how much of what type. What's that?"

"That" was a thirty-foot tapered cylinder with three short mast antennae projecting at right angles to the long axis, near each rounded end.

"I don't know for sure, sir," said Holovik. "I knew that there were . . . ah . . . weapons, new ones. We don't get information the way we used to during the war—"

"Stop mumbling, man! If that's a secret weapon, it isn't from *Delta*."

Belter put in, "It isn't from *Epsilon* either. I went over the specs of everything aboard all of these vessels."

"Then where did—Oh!" His "Oh!" was echoed by Belter and two junior officers who had overheard the conversation. It was a most respectful sound. Also respectful was the unconscious retreat all hands took to the inboard bulkhead.

Hereford, who had not spoken a word for nearly a day, asked: "What's the matter? What is it?"

"Don't know," breathed Belter. "but I'd like to see it out of here. Way out. It's the Invader's."

"G-get it out of here. *Jump!*"

They piled into the inboard section and sealed the cargo inspection hatch behind them, leaving three spacesuited e.m. and an officer to worry the object tenderly out of the port.

"You're a cretin," Osgood told the captain. "You're a drool-

ing incompetent. Whatever possessed you to bring in an unidentified object?"

"I . . . it was . . . I don't know," stammered Holovik. Belter marveled at the degree of worriment the man's face could register.

A junior officer with communication pips spoke up. "That was the object which didn't register on the detectors until it was within a mile, sir," he reminded. "I still can't understand it, commander. Our detectors—all of 'em—are sensitive to fifty thousand at the very least. I'm ready to swear our equipment was in order, and yet we had no sign of this thing until it was right on top of us."

"Somebody in Detection asleep," growled the Butcher.

"Wait, commander," Belter turned toward the young sigman. "How was this thing bearing?"

"Right on the ship, sir. An intersection course from down left forrad, as I remember. We deflected it and then brought it about with the short tractors."

"It just appeared out of nowhere, eh?" rasped Osgood. "And so you invited it in."

"There was a good deal of debris in that sector, commander," said Holovik faintly. "We were busy . . . tracers sometimes give resultant indications when they pick up two separated objects simultaneously—"

"Yeah, and then they indicate something where nothing is. They *don't* indicate nothing where there is something. Why, I'll break you to—"

"It seems to me," said Belter, who had been pursuing his own line of reasoning, "that what we have here is mighty similar to what hit Outpost. Remember? They put a tracer on it as they saw it leave the Invader. It blanked out. They got no radiation or radar reflection at all. But it came in and wiped out the base."

"The nonexistent, hypothetical 'warper,' " said Hereford, with a wisp of his old smile.

Osgood glanced at him coldly. "If you're trying to tell me that the Invader used a warper to protect himself from The Death, you're showing your ignorance. The Death is a vibration, *not* a radiation. It's a physical effect, not an energy phenomenon."

"Blast The Death!" spat Belter. "Don't you see what we've got here? It's one of their disrupters. Short range—always short range. Don't you see? It *is* a warper, and for some reason it can only carry a limited amount of power. The Invader started popping away at *Delta,* and when she fought back,

he let loose with everything he had. This must've been one of his disrupters which was launched while *Delta* was in one piece and arrived after she'd been blasted. Then it went right on seeking, but ran out of fuel before it reached *Sigma.* That's why it suddenly appeared to the detectors."

"Now, that makes sense," said the Butcher, looking at Belter as if he were seeing him for the first time. He creased his lower lip sharply with his thumb and forefinger. "Warp camouflage, eh? H-m-m-m. I wonder if we could get a look at that unit. Maybe we could build something like it and get close enough to that devil to do some good." He turned to the fretful Holovik. "Captain! See if you can get a couple of techs to volunteer to de-fuse that thing. If you can't get volunteers—"

"I'll get them, sir," said Holovik, for the first time looking a little happier. It made him appear wistful instead of mournful.

It was easier to count those not volunteering, once the proposition went out over the intercom. In a few minutes *Sigma* lay off a couple of hundred miles to stand by while a crack squad worked over the drifting bomb. They carried three viewers, and the control bridge of the Death ship was mobbed with experts. Every move was carefully discussed; every possibility was carefully explored before a move was made.

They did it. It was slow, and suspense reached an agonized pitch; but once it was done and could be reviewed, it was unbelievably simple. The warhead was clamped to the main hull of the bomb. The activators were in the head, controlled simply by a couple of rods. The seeking gear, proximity circuits, power source, drive, and what was apparently the camouflage unit were all packed into the hull.

A torch was clamped to the warhead, which was cast adrift. The precious hull was towed a few miles with reaction-pistols and picked up by the ship, which then got clear and rayed the virulent little warhead into shocking, flaring extinction.

In shops and laboratories throughout the System, feverish work was carried on over plans and mock-ups of the alien weapon. One of the first things discovered about it was that the highly theoretical and very popular term "warper" was a misnomer. The camouflage was an ingenious complexity of wiring in concentric "skins" in the hull. Each impinging radiation caused the dielectric constant of the hull to change

so that it reradiated that exact frequency, at the same intensity as received, but a hundred and eighty degrees out of phase. The heart of the device was what might have been the thousandth generation descended from a TR tube. It hunted so constantly, and triggered radiations with so little lag, that the device could handle several frequencies almost simultaneously.

What used most of the power was the drive. It involved a magnetic gnerator and a coil which carried magnetic flux. Induced in this was an extremely intense gravitic field, self-canceling forward and on all sides. The intensified "reverse" gravity pressure was, therefore, at the stern. Maneuvering was accomplished by variations in field strength by inductance-coupling of the mag-flux coils.

The hull was a totally absorbent black, and the missile was made of an alloy which was transparent to hard radiation.

All information was pooled, and sub-projects were constantly assigned from Science Center. Etherfac transmission was full of last-minute reports on phases of the problem, interspersed with frequent communiqués on the last known position of the Invader. He had indulged in an apparently aimless series of convolutions for several weeks following D-Day, evidently to assess his damage. After that he had maintained a great circular course, parallel in plane to the Solar ecliptic, and the assumption was that he was undergoing repairs and engaging in reconnaissance. Both were certainly indicated, for he must have undergone an incredible strain in that wild curve on D-Day. And as before, he was the symbol of terror. If he struck, where would he strike? If not, he would leave. Then, would he be back? Alone, or with a fleet?

Belter's life was a continuous flurry of detail, but he found time to wonder about several things. The Jovians, for example. They had been a great help in the duplication of the camouflage device, particularly in their modification of the fission power plant it carried. The Jovian improvement was a disruption motor using boron, an element which appeared nowhere in the original. It gave vastly more range to the Solarian device. And yet—there was something about the Jovian willingness that was not quite in harmony with their established behavior patterns. The slight which Leess had suffered from the Martian was not, after all, a large thing in itself, but the fact that Leess had led his planet into a policy of noncooperation made it large. The sudden reversal of this policy since D-Day was more than puzzling. A hun-

dred times Belter shrugged the question off, grunting "Jovians are funny people," and a hundred times it returned to him.

There was another unprecedented worry. The Martian delegate called Belter aside one afternoon and presented it to him. "It's that Hereford," the man said, scratching his sunburned neck. "He's too quiet. I know he lost a mess of 'face' over his vote on The Death, but he still has a following. More than I like to think about."

"So?"

"Well, when the big day comes, when we send a formation of the new camouflaged boats out there, what's to keep him from opening his trap and making trouble for us?"

"Why should he?"

"You know what the pacifists are after. If we fitted out a bunch of these new gadgets with disrupters and wiped the Invader out, they'd have no kick. They don't want that Death-defense to get back to the System. You know that."

"Hm-m-m. And how would you handle this on Mars?"

The Martian grinned. "Why, I reckon Brother Hereford would have a little accident. Enough to keep him quiet, anyhow—maybe for a little while, maybe for—"

"I thought as much." Belter let himself burn for a luxurious second before replying. "Forget it. Supposing what you say is true—and I don't grant that it is—what else can you think of?"

"Well, now, I think it would be a bright idea to send a camouflage force out without consulting the Council. That way, if Hereford is waiting for the psychological moment to blow his mouth off, we'll get what we're after before he knows what's happening. *If* we can keep the lid on it, that is."

Belter shook his head. "Sorry friend. No can do. We can stretch a point of security and take a military action without informing the people, but there's no loophole in the charter which will let any of us take military action without the knowledge of the Council. Sorry. Anyway, thanks for the tip."

This, like the Jovian matter, was a thing he shrugged off and forgot—five or six times a day. He knew the case-hardened character which lived behind Hereford's dignified mien, and he respected it for what it was and for what it could do.

There was a solution to these problems. He laughed when it occurred to him, smiled when it recurred; but he frowned

when he realized that he had already decided. He must have, for he found himself slipping Addison's report into a private drawer of his desk. Addison was the Tech in charge of the local camouflage project. It was top secret and had been delivered, sealed, by an orderly. It invited him to inspect a two-place craft which had been finished and tested, fueled and equipped. The report should have gone to the Agenda.

He called Hereford, and when they were alone he asked, without preliminary: "Are you interested in heading off a war?"

"A rhetorical question, certainly."

"Nope. Question two. Have you anything special to do the next few weeks?"

"Why I—nothing out of the ordinary," said Hereford, sadly. Since his historic "Exception" speech, he had had little enough to do.

"Well, clear your social calendar, then. No, I'm not kidding. This is hot. How soon can you be ready for a little trip?"

Hereford studied him. "In about thirty minutes. I can tell by the way you act that you'd want it that soon."

"You're psychic. Right here, then, in thirty minutes."

Within two hours they were in space, aboard a swift scoutship. Behind him Belter left a bewildered deputy-chairman with a brief authorization in his hands, and an equally astonished Master-Tech, both of whom were sworn to silence. In the scoutship were a sworn-in crew and the black hulk of the camouflaged lifeboat.

For the first two days out he left Hereford to twiddle his thumbs in the cramped recreation room of the ship, while he closeted himself with the skipper to work out an approach course. It took him half of the first day to convince the young man that he was in his right mind and that he wanted to board the Invader—two facts that had been regarded, during the past three years, as mutual incompatibilities.

The approach was plotted to permit the boat to overtake the Invader using a minimum of power. The little craft was to be launched from the scout at high speed on a course which would put it in an elliptical orbit in respect to the sun. This ellipse was at right angles to the plane of the circular course the Invader had been maintaining for the past few weeks. The ellipse intersected this circle in two places,

and the launching time was set to synchronize these points of intersection with the predicted position of the Invader on its own course. The big *if*, naturally, was whether or not the Invader would maintain course and speed. He might. He had, twice before, once for nine months and once for over a year. If Belter watched his tables, and spent enough time with his tetrant and calculex, it would require only an occasional nudge of power to follow his course, or to correct it for any variations of the Invader's predicted position.

After the matter was settled, and he had slept, he rejoined Hereford. The old man was apparently staring right through the open book on his knee, for his eyes were wide and unmoving. Belter slumped down beside him and expelled an expressive breath. "What a way to make a living!"

Amusement quirked the corners of Hereford's mouth. "What?"

"Finding tough ways to die," grinned the chairman. "I'm ready to tell you about this thing, if you want me to."

Hereford closed his book and put it by.

"It's the Jovians, first of all," said Belter, without preliminary. "Those critters think so well, so fast, and so differently that it scares me. It's tough . . . no, it's downright foolish to try to judge their actions on a human basis. However, they pulled one stunt that was so very human that it completely escaped me. If Mars had tried it, I'd have been on to it instantly. It's taken a long time for it to percolate, since it concerns the Jovians. Do you remember how ready they were to help out after D-Day? Why do you suppose that was?"

"I would judge," said Hereford thoughtfully, "that they had awakened to their responsibility as members of the System. The Invader had a defense against the ultimate weapon, the emergency was intensified, and they pitched in to help for the common good."

"That's what I thought, too. Has it occurred to you at all what would probably happen if Jupiter—and only Jupiter—had a defense against The Death?"

"Why, I don't think they would—"

Belter broke in roughly. "Never mind what you would like to believe. What would happen?"

"I see what you mean," said Hereford. His face was white. "We came up from almost certain defeat and won the war

when we developed The Death. If Jupiter had a defense, we would be no match for them."

"That's way understated," said Belter.

"But . . . but they signed a peace treaty! They're disarming! They won't break their word!" cried Hereford.

"Of course they won't! If they get their hands on that defense, they'll calmly announce the fact, give us time to prepare, even, and then declare war and wipe us out. There's a great deal of pride involved, of course. I'll venture to say that they'd even help us arm if we'd let them, to make the struggle equal to begin with. They're bugs for that kind of fairness. But the whole System knows that machine for machine, unit for unit, Jovian for man, there is no equality. They're too much for us. It is only our crazy, ingrained ability to manufacture suicidal weapons which gives us the upper hand. The Jovians are too wise to try to conquer a race which insists on introducing murder-machines without any due regard for their future significance. Remember what Leess said when the Martian insulted him? 'Earth dead, Jupiter dead, Mars dead. Good.' They know that unless we as a race are let alone, we will certainly find a way to kill off our neighbors, because as a race we don't care if we get killed in the process."

Hereford shuddered. "I'd hate to think you were right. It makes Peace Amalgamated look so very useless, for all its billions of members."

Belter cracked his knuckles. "I'm not trying to tell you that humans are basically rotten, or that they are fated to be what they always have been. Humanity has come very close to extinction at least four times that I know of, through some such kind of mass suicide. But the existence of Peace Amalgamated does indicate that it believes there is a way out, although I can't help thinking that it'll be a long haul to get us 'cured.' "

"Thank you," said Hereford sincerely. "Sometimes I think you might be a more effective peace worker than I can ever hope to be. Tell me—what made you suspect that the Jovians might be after the defense device for themselves?"

"A very recent development. You must know that the one thing which makes our use of the camouflage unit practicable is the new power plant. With it we can run up to the Invader and get inside his detectors, starting from far out of his range. Now, that was a Jovian design. They built it, ergo they had it first.

"In other words, between the time of its invention and

the time they turned it over to us, they had the edge on us. That being the case, there would be only one reason why, in their supreme self-confidence, they would turn it over to us; namely, they didn't need that edge any more!"

"It fits," said Hereford sorrowfully.

"Good. Now, knowing Jovians—and learning more every day, by the way—I conclude that they gave us the drive, not because they had something better, but because it had already served its purpose for them. I am convinced that Jovian camouflage boats are on the way to the Invader now—and perhaps they have even . . . but I'd rather not think about that." He spread his arms, dropped them. "Hence our little jaunt. We've got to get there first. If we're not first, we have to do what we can when we get there."

The boat, lightless, undriven, drifted toward the Invader. At this arc of the chosen ellipse, its velocity was low, and suspense was as ubiquitous a thing as the susurrus of the camouflage unit which whispered away back aft. Hereford and Belter found themselves talking in whispers too, as if their tense voices could carry through those insulated bulkheads, across the dim void to the mysterious crew of the metal murderer which hung before them.

"We're well inside his meteor deflectors," gritted Belter. "I don't know what to think. Are we really going to be able to get to him, or is he playing with us?"

"He doesn't play," said Hereford grimly. "You will excuse the layman's question, but I don't understand how there can be a possibility of his having no detector for just this kind of approach. Since he uses bombs camouflaged the way we are, he must have some defense against them."

"His defense seems to be in the range of his deflectors," answered the chairman. "Those bombs were hunters. That is, they followed the target wherever it moved. The defense would be to sfall off the bomb by maneuvering until it ran out of fuel, like the one we picked up. Then his meteor-repellers would take care of it."

"It was obviously the most effective weapon in his arsenal," said Hereford hopefully.

"As far as we know," said Belter from the other end of the emotional spectrum. Then, "I can't stand this. I'm going to try a little drive. I feel as if we'd been hanging here since nuclear power was discovered."

Hereford tensed, then nodded in the dark. The boat was hardly the last word in comfort. The two men could lie prone, or get up to a cramped all-four position. Sitting

was possible if the cheekbones were kept between the knees and the occipital bones tight against the overhead. They had been in that prison for more days than they cared to recall.

Belter palmed the drive control and moved it forward. There was no additional sound from the power unit, but the slight accelerative surge was distinctly felt.

"I'm going to circle him. No point being too careful. If he hasn't taken a crack at us by this time, I don't think he's going to." He took the steering lever in his other hand and the boat's nose pulled "up" in relation to the Invader's keel-plane. There was no fear of momentum-damage; the controls would not respond to anything greater than a 5-G turn without a special adjustment.

Within four hours the craft was "over" the alien. The ugly, blind-looking shape, portless and jetless, was infuriating. It went its way completely unheeding, completely confident. Belter had a mad flashback to a childish romance. She hadn't been a very pretty girl, but to have her near him drove him nearly insane. It was because of her perfect poise, her mask. He did not want her. He wanted only to break that calm, to smash his way into the citadel of her *savoir faire*. He had felt like that, and she was not evil. This ship, now—it was completely so. There was something unalive, implacable, inescapable about this great murderous vessel.

Something clutched his arm. He started violently, bumped his head on the overhead, his hand closing on the velocity control. The craft checked itself and he bumped his head again on the forward port. He swore more violently than Hereford's grip on his arm called for, and said in irritation: "What?"

"A—hole. A hatch or something. Look."

It was a black shadow on the curve of the gray-shadowed hull. "Yes . . . yes. Shall we—" Belter swallowed and tried again. "Shall we walk into his parlor?"

"Yes. Ah . . . Belter—"

"Hm-m-m?"

"Before we do—you might as well tell me. Why did you want me to come?"

"Because you're a fighting man."

"That's an odd joke."

"It is not. You have had to fight every inch of the way, Hereford."

"Perhaps so. But don't tell me you brought me along for the potential use of my mislaid pugnacities."

"Not *for* them, friend. Because of them. You want the Invader destroyed, for the good of the System. I want it saved, for the good of the System, as I see it. You could achieve your end in one of two ways. You could do it through Peace Amalgamated, back at Central. It would only need a few words to obstruct this whole program. *Or,* you could achieve it yourself, here. I brought you to keep you from speaking to Peace Amalgamated. I think having you here where I can watch you is less of a risk to the procurement of the Death defense."

"You're a calculating devil," said Hereford, his voice registering something between anger and admiration. "And suppose I try to destroy the ship—given, of course, the chance?"

"I'd kill you first," said Belter with utter sincerity.

"Has it occurred to you that I might try the same thing, with the same amount of conviction?"

"It has," Belter replied promptly. "Only you wouldn't do it. You could not be driven to killing. Hereford, you pick the oddest times to indulge in dialectics."

"Not at all," said Hereford good-humoredly. "One likes to know where one stands."

Belter gave himself over to his controls. In the back of his mind was a whirling ball of panic. Suppose the power plant should fail, for example. Or suppose the Invader should send out a questing beam of a frequency which the camouflage unit could not handle. How about the meteor deflector? Would they be crushed if the ship located them and hurled them away with a repeller? He thought with sudden horror of the close-set wiring in the boat. Shorts do happen, and sometimes oxidation and vibration play strange tricks with wiring. *Do something,* his inner voice shouted. *Right or wrong, do something.*

They drifted up to the great silver hull, and the hole seemed to open hungrily to them as they neared it. Belter all but stopped the craft in relation to the ship, and nosed it forward with a view to entering the hatch without touching the sides.

"In the visirecord, didn't the camouflage disrupter at Outpost show up for a moment on the screen as it left the ship?" Hereford whispered.

"Yeah. So what? Oh! You mean the cam unit was shut off until the bomb was clear of the ship. You have something there, Hereford. Maybe we'd better shut it off be-

fore we go in. I can see where it would act like something less than camouflage, enclosed in a metal chamber and re-radiating all the stray stuff in there plus the reflections of its own output." He put his hand out to the camouflage control. "But I'm going to wait until we're practically inside. I don't relish the idea of being flung off like a meteorite."

Handling the controls with infinite care, touching them briefly and swiftly with his fingertips, Belter tooled the boat through the hatch. He switched off the camouflage effect and had the boat fully inboard of the Invader before he realized he was biting his tongue.

Surprisingly, the chamber they entered was illuminated. The light was dim, shadowless, and a sickly green. The overhead and bulkheads themselves, or a coating on them, accounted for the light. There was a large rack on the forward partition containing row on row of the disruption bombs, minus their warheads. Above each ended a monorail device which ran to a track ending in a solid-looking square door—obviously the storage space for the warheads. Another hoist and monorail system connected the hulls themselves with the open hatch. This trackage, and the fact that the chamber was otherwise untenanted, indicated that the bomb assembly, fuse setting, and dispatching were completely automatic.

"Camouflage again," gritted Belter. "This boat is enough like those bombs to fit sort of cozily in one of those racks. In this crazy light no one would notice it."

"This light is probably not crazy to those on board," said Hereford.

"We'll worry about that later. Slip into your suit."

From the after locker they drew the light pressure suits around themselves and secured them. Belter demonstrated the few controls—oxygen, humidity, temperature, magnetism, and gravity, to be quite sure the old man was familiar with them all. "And this is the radio. I think it will be safe to use the receivers. But don't transmit unless it's absolutely necessary. If we stick close together we can talk by conduction—touching our helmets."

It was the work of only a few minutes to grapple the weightless craft into the rack. It was a fair fit. When they had finished, Belter reached in and took out two blasters. He secured the escape hatch and turned to Hereford, handing him one of the guns. Hereford took it, but leaned for-

ward to touch his transparent helmet to Belter's. His voice came through hollowly but clearly.

"What's this for?"

"Morale," said Belter briefly. "You don't have to use it. If we're watched, 'Two armed men' sounds better than 'Two men, one armed.'"

They groped to the inboard partition and followed it cautiously aft. The touch of the metal under his gloves brought a shocking realization to Belter of where he actually was, and for a moment his knees threatened to give way. Deep inside him, his objective self watched, shaking its figment of a head in amazement. Because he had secured a lifeboat equipped for the job, he had come. Because he had gotten inside the Invader's screens, he had approached the ship itself. Because he was close enough and a hatch was open, he had come in. *Just the way I got into the Army, and the way I got into politics,* he grinned.

They found a ladder. It led upward through a diamond-shaped opening in the overhead. The rungs were welded to the bulkhead. They were too narrow and too close together. There were dragging scuffmarks on each side, about eighteen or twenty centimeters on each side of the rungs. What manner of creature ambulated on its centerline, dragging its sides?

A Jovian.

He looked at Hereford, who was pointing at the marks, so he knew that Hereford understood, too. He shrugged and pointed upward, beckoning. They went up, Belter leading.

They found themselves in a corridor, too low to allow them to stand upright. It was triangular in cross-section, with the point down and widened to a narrow catwalk. A wear-plate was set into each side and bore the same smooth scuffs. The deck, what there was of it between the sharply sloping sides, was composed of transverse rods. A creature which could grip with claws and steady itself with the sides of a carapace could move quite freely in such a corridor regardless of gravitic or accelerative effects, within reason.

"Damn!"

Belter jumped as if stabbed. Hereford tottered on his magna-grips and clutched at the slanted bulkhead for support. The single syllable had roared at them from inside their helmets. The effect was such that Belter all but swallowed his tongue. He pointed at himself in the dim green light

and shook his head. Hereford weakly followed suit. Neither of them had spoken.

"Lousy Jovians—"

Belter, following a sudden hunch, laid his hand on Hereford's shoulder to suggest that he stay put, and crept back to the bomb bay opening. He lay down, and cautiously put his head over the lip.

A long, impossibly black *something* was edging across the deck down there. Belter squeezed his eyes tightly closed and opened them wide, trying to see through the foggy green radiance. At last he discerned a small figure pulling and hauling at the shadow, the bomb, the . . . the lifeboat.

A human figure. A man. A man who must have come through the Invader's defenses, even as he had. A man with a camouflaged boat.

But no one except a few Techs even knew that the boats had been completed. And the Council, of course.

The man below reached inside his boat and touched a control. It sank down to the deck next to the bomb rack as its magnetic anchors were activated. The man shut the escape hatch and shuffled toward the inboard partition, his blaster in hand, his head turning as he came.

Belter watched him until he discovered the ladder. Then he scrambled to his feet and, as fast as the peculiar footing would allow him, he scurried back to Hereford. His helmet receiver registered an angry gust of breath as the man below saw the short-paced ladder and the scuff-marks.

Belter slammed his helmet against Hereford's. "It's a Martian," he gritted. "You might know it'd be a blasted Martian. Only a Martian'd be stupid enough to try to climb aboard this wagon."

He saw Hereford's eyebrow go up at this, but the peaceman did not make the obvious comment. He was silent as he followed Belter forward to the nearest turn in the corridor. They slipped around it, Belter conning its extension carefully. There was still, incredibly, no sign of life.

Just around the turn there was a triangular door, set flush into the slanted wall. Belter hesitated, then pressed it. It did not yield. He scrabbled frantically over its surface, found no control of any kind. Hereford grasped his arm, checked him, and when Belter stepped back, the old man went to his knees and began feeling around on the catwalk floor. The door slid silently back.

Belter slipped in, glanced around. But for a huddled,

unmoving mass of some tattered matter in the corridor, there was nothing in the room, which was small. Belter waved the old man in. Hereford hopped over the sill, felt on the floor again, and the panel slid shut.

"How did you know how to open that door?" he asked when their helmets touched.

"Their feet . . . claws . . . what-have-you . . . are obviously prehensile, or they wouldn't have floors that are nothing more than close-set rungs. Obviously their door handles would be in the floor."

Belter shook his head admiringly. "See what happens when a man thinks for a living?" He turned to the door, set his head against it. Very faintly, he could hear the cautious steps of the Martian. He turned back to Hereford. "I suppose I ought to go out there and pin his ears back. Martians have nothing in their heads but muscles. He'll walk right up to the skipper of this ship if he has to wade through the crew to do it. But I'm mighty interested in just what he's up to. We couldn't be much worse off than we are. Do you suppose we could follow him close enough to keep him out of trouble?"

"There is no need for caution," said Hereford, and his voice, distorted by the helmets, was like a distant tolling bell.

"What do you mean?"

Hereford pointed to the huddled mass in the corner. Belter crossed to it, knelt, and put out a hand. Frozen substance crumbled under his touch in a way which was familiar to him. He shrank back in horror.

"It's—dead," he whispered.

Hereford touched helmets. "What?"

"It's dead," said Belter dully. "It's—homogenized, and frozen."

"I know. Remember the three Jovian capital ships?"

"They couldn't stand The Death," Belter murmured. "They opened all the locks."

He stood up. "Let's go get that fool of a Martian."

They left the room and followed the corridor to its end. There was another ladder there. They climbed it, and at the top Belter paused. "I think we'd better try for the control central. That'll be the first thing he'll go after."

They found it, eventually, before the Martian did, possibly because they were not being as cautious. They must have passed him en route, but such was the maze of corridors and connecting rooms that that was not surprising.

They still eschewed the use of their transmitters, since Belter preferred to find out exactly what the Martian was up to.

They had just opened a sliding door at the end of a passageway, and Belter was half through it when he stopped so suddenly that Hereford collided with him.

The room which spread before them was unexpectedly large. The bulkheads were studded with diamond-shaped indicators, and above them and over the ceiling were softly colored murals. They glowed and shimmered, and since they were the first departure from the ubiquitous dim green, their immediate effect was shocking.

In the center of the chamber was a pair of control desks, a V pointing forward and a V pointing aft, forming another of the repeated diamond forms. There was a passage space, however, between the two V's. In their enclosure was a creature, crouching over the controls.

It was alive.

It stirred, heaving itself up off the raised portion of the deck on which it lay. It was completely enclosed in a transparent, obviously pressurized garment. As it rose, Belter and Hereford shrank back out of sight. Belter drew his blaster.

But the creature was apparently not aware of them. It turned slowly to face the opposite corner of the room, and the sensory organ on its cephalothorax blushed pink.

There was a bold clanking from the corner of the room, which Belter felt through his shoes. Then the wall began to glow. A small section of it shone red which paled into white. It bellied momentarily, and then sagged molten. The Martian, blaster in hand, leapt through the opening. *And he could have opened that door,* thought Belter disgustedly. *Why does a Martian always have to do it the hard way?*

The Martian stopped dead when he was clear of the simmering entrance. He visibly recoiled from the sudden apparition of color, and stood awed before those magnificent murals. His gaze dropped to the center of the room.

"So there is a defense," he snarled. His transmitter was still blatantly operating. "Come on, Jupiter. I was wise to this whole stunt. Who did you think you fooled by poisoning your own forces on Titan? Invader, huh? Some stuff! Get out of there. Move now! I know you can understand me. I want to see that Death defense and the controls. And there's no sense trying to call your buddies. I've seen

them all over the ship. All dead. Something saved you, and I mean to find out what it is."

He raised his blaster. The Jovian quivered. Belter crossed his left arm across his body and grasped the edge of the door. He rested his blaster across his left forearm and squinted down the barrel. Hereford reached over his shoulder and drew the muzzle upward.

Belter turned furiously to him, but the old man shook his head and, astonishingly, smiled. His hand went to his belt. He threw his transmitter switch and said in his deep, quiet voice:

"Drop that blaster, son."

The effect on the Martian was absolutely devastating. He went rod stiff, dropping his weapon so quickly that he all but threw it. Then he staggered backward, and they could hear his frightened gasping as he tried to regain his breath.

Belter strode out into the room and backed to the left bulkhead, stopping where he could cover both the Martian and the Jovian. Hereford shuffled over and picked up the blaster.

"P-peace Amalgamated!" puffed the Martian. "What in time are *you* doing here?"

Belter answered. "Keeping you from using your muscles instead of your brains. What do you think you're doing?"

"Recon," said the Martian sullenly.

"For who?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you're doing it for Mars," said Belter bluntly. "It would be just dandy if Mars had the Death defense now, wouldn't it? You guys have been chafing at the bit for a long time."

"We're not crazy," flashed the Martian. "We never did make peace with Jupiter, remember? We knew better. And now look." He gestured at the Jovian. "What a pretty way to knock slices out of all the Solarian defenses. Just play Invader for a few years and scare the bedizens out of humanity. Wipe out what looks tough, and take advantage of the panic. Heh! Treaties with Jupiter! Why in blazes didn't you exterminate them when you had the chance? Now, if Mars gets the Defense, we'll handle the thing right. And maybe when the smoke clears away we'll be magnanimous enough to let Earth and the Colonies work for us."

"All blast and brawn," marveled Belter. "The famous Martian mouth."

"Don't you brag about brains. I know for a fact that our councilman tipped off that camouflage boats were being made in secret. If you didn't act on it, it's your hard luck."

"In a way he did," said Belter. "Enough I imagine, to keep his little conscience clear. I'm here, for all that."

"Not for long," snapped the Martian, making a long sliding step.

"Look out, Hereford!"

Belter snapped a fine-focus shot at the Martian but he was late. The Martian was behind Hereford, grapping for the blaster which the Peace delegate still held in his hand. Hereford tried to spin away but was unsure of his footing in the gravitic shoes and succeeded only in floundering. The Martian suddenly shifted his attack to the blaster at Hereford's hip. He got it and danced clear. "I know the pantywaist won't shoot," he said, and laughed. "So it's you first, Belter, and then old 'Peace-in-our-Time.' Then I'll get the Death defense with or without the aid of the spider yonder."

He swung the weapon on Belter, and the chairman knew that this was it. He closed his eyes. The blaster-flash beat on the lids. He felt nothing. He tried to open his eyes again and was astounded to discover that he could. He stood there staring at Hereford, who had just shot the Martian through the head. The man's magnagrips held him upright as the air in his suit whiffed out, to hang in a mist like a frozen soul over his tattered head.

"I killed him, didn't I?" asked Hereford plaintively.

"To keep the peace," said Belter in a shaking voice. He skated over to the old man and took the blaster, which was still held stiffly out toward the dead man. "Killing's a comparative crime, Hereford. You've saved lives."

He went to the control table and put his hands on it, steadying himself against the broken sounds Hereford was making. He stared across the table at the great jelly-and-bone mass that was a Jovian. He would have given a lot for a translator, but such a machine had never yet been made portable.

"You. Jovian. Will you communicate? Spread that membrane for 'yes.' Contract it for 'no.' "

Yes. The creature was perfectly telepathic, but with humans it had to be one way. A translator could convert its emanations into minute electronic impulses and arrange them into idea-patterns for which words were selected.

"Is there anything on this ship which can resist The Death?"

Yes.

"You understand it?"

Yes.

"Will you share your knowledge with the Council?"

Yes.

"Can you deactivate all automatics on this ship?"

In answer the Jovian extended one of its fourth pseudo-claws, and placed it next to a control on th table. It was a small square housing, set so as to repeat the diamond motif. An orange pilot light glowed in its center, and next to it was a toggle. On the forward side of the toggle was an extremely simple symbol—two dots connected by two lines, each two-thirds of the distance between the dots, so that for the middle third they lay parallel, contiguous. On the after side of the toggle, the symbol differed. The dots were the same, but the lines were separated. It was obviously an indication of "open" and "closed" positions. The toggle slanted forward. Belter put his hand on it, looked at the Jovian.

The membrane spread affirmatively. Jovians did not lie. He pulled the toggle back and the pilot went out.

"This General Assembly has been called," Belter said quietly into the mike, "to clear up, once and for all, the matter of the Invader and the contingent wild and conflicting rumors about a defense against The Death, about interstellar drives, about potential war between members of the Solar Federation, and a number of other fantasies." He spoke carefully, conscious of the transmission of his voice and image to government gatherings on all the worlds, in all the domes, and on ships.

"You know the story of my arrival, with Hereford, aboard the Invader, and the later arrival of the Martian, and his"—Belter cleared his throat—"his accidental death. Let me make it clear right now that there is no evidence that this man was representing the Martian General Government or any part of it. We have concluded that he was acting as an individual, probably because of what might be termed an excess of patriotism.

"Now, as to the presence of the Jovian on the ship—that is a perfectly understandable episode. Jupiter is a defeated nation. I venture to say that any group of us in the same

situation would commit acts similar to that of this Jovian. I can say here, too, that there is no evidence of its representing any part of the Jovian Government. What it might have done with, say, a Death defense had it found one aboard is conjecture, and need not enter into this discussion.

"I have before me a transcript of this Jovian's statement. You may rest assured that all facts have been checked; that fatigue and crystalline tests and examinations have been made of metallic samples taken from the vessel; that the half-lives of radioactive by-products in certain fission and disruption machinery have been checked and substantiate this statement. This is the transcript:

" 'For reasons consistent with Jovian philosophy, I took a Jovian-built camouflaged boat and departed with it before the improved drive had been submitted to the Joint Solar Military Council. I approached the Invader cautiously and found the camouflage successful. I boarded him. I put my boat in the Invader's bomb rack, where it was well hidden in plain sight, being the same size and general shape as the Invader's bombs. I went inboard, expecting a great deal of trouble. There was none. Every port and hatch was open to space except the warhead storage, which was naturally no hiding place due to radioactivity. I proceeded to the control chamber. I found the master control to all the ship's armament.

" 'But my most important discovery was a thought record. The Invaders were, like Jovians, of an arthropodal type, and their image patterns were quite understandable after a little concentration. I shall quote from that record:

" *'We are of Sygon, greater of the two planets of Sykor, a star in Symak. The smaller planet, known to us as Gith, is peopled by a mad race, a mistake of nature—a race which fights and kills itself and wars on its neighbors; a race which aspires to conquer purely for the sake of conquest, which hunts for hunting's sake and kills for pleasure. While it progresses, while it cooperates, it bites itself and fights itself and is never done with its viciousness.*

" *'Its planet was large enough to support it, but it was not satisfied. Sygon was no place for these vicious animals, for they had to bring their atmosphere in bubbles for breathing, and Sygon's mass crushed them and made them sicken. Not needing Sygon still they were willing to fight us for it.*

" *'We killed them by the hundreds of thousands, and still they kept coming. They devised incredible weapons to use against us, and we improved on them and hurled them back. They improved on these, completely ignoring the inevitability of their end.*

" *'The ultimate weapon was theirs—a terrible thing which emulsified the very cells of our bodies, and there was no defense against it. The first time it was used it killed off most of our race. The rest of us threw all our resources into this, the Eternal Vengeance—this ship. It is designed to attack anything which radiates, as long as the radiations exhibit the characteristics of those produced by intelligent life. It will stay in Sykor's system, and it will attack anything which might be Gith or of Gith. Gith will strike back with its terrible weapon, and all of us on the ship will die. But the ship will go on. Gtih will loose its horror and agony on Sygon, and our race will be dead. But the ship will go on. It will attack and attack, and ultimately will destroy Gith.*

" *'And if Gith should die and be born again and evolve a new race, and if that race shall reach a stage of culture approaching that of its cursed forebears, the ship will attack again until it has destroyed them. It will attack all the more powerfully for having rested, for between attacks it will circle Sykor, drinking and storing its energy.*

" *'Perhaps there will come a time when Sykor will cool, or flare up and explode, or become subject to the influence of a wandering star. Perhaps then the ship will cease to be, but it is possible that it will go wandering off into the dark, never to be active again. But if it should wander into a similar system to that which bore it, then it will bring death and horror to that system's inhabitants. If this should be, it will be unjust; but it will be only an extension of the illimitable evil of Gith.'* "

Belter raised his head. "That is what we were up against. What passed in that Jovian's mind when we burst in on it, with our quarreling and our blasters and our death-dealing, I can only imagine. It made no move to harm us, though it was armed. I think that it may have been leaving us to the same inevitable end which overcame Gith. Apparently a Jovian is capable of thinking beyond immediate advantage.

"I have one more thing to tell you. According to star photographs found in a huge file on the Invader, and the tests and examinations I mentioned, the Invader is slightly over fourteen million years old.

"There is a defense against The Death. You can't kill a dead man. Now, in more ways than one, I give you over to Hereford."

THE PERFECT HOST

I

As Told By

RONNIE DANIELS

I WAS FOURTEEN then. I was sitting in the car waiting for dad to come out of the hospital. Dad was in there seeing mother. It was the day after dad told me I had a little sister.

It was July, warm, and I suppose about four in the afternoon. It was almost time for dad to come out. I half opened the car door and looked for him.

Someone called, "Mister! Mister!"

There was a red squirrel arcing across the thick green lawn, and a man with balloons far down the block. I looked at him. Nobody would call me mister. Nobody ever had, yet. I was too young.

"Mister!"

It was a woman's voice, but rough; rough and nasty. It was strong, and horrible for the pleading in it. No strong thing should beg. The sun was warm and the red of the brick buildings was warm, too. The squirrel was not afraid.

The grass was as green and smooth as a jelly bean.

Mother was all right, dad said, and dad felt fine. We would go to the movies, dad and I, close together with a closeness that never happened when things were regular, meals at home, mother up making breakfast every morning, and all that. This week it would be raids on the icebox and

staying up late sometimes, because dad forgot about bedtime and anyway wanted to talk.

"Mister!"

Her voice was like a dirty mark on a new collar. I looked up.

She was hanging out of a window on the second floor of a near ell of the hospital. Her hair was dank and stringy, her eyes had mud in them, and her teeth were beautiful.

She was naked, at least to the waist. She was saying "Mister!" and she was saying it to me.

I was afraid, then. I got in the car and slammed the door.

"Mister! Mister! Mister!"

They were syllables that meant nothing. A "mis," a "ter"—sounds that rasped across the very wound they opened. I put my hands over my ears, but by then the sounds were inside my head, and my hands just seemed to keep them there. I think I sobbed. I jumped out of the car and screamed, "What? What?"

"I got to get out of here," she moaned.

I thought, why tell me? I thought, what can I do? I had heard of crazy people, but I had never seen one. Grown-up people were sensible, mostly. It was only kids who did crazy things, without caring how much sense they made. I was only fourteen.

"Mister," she said. "Go to—to. . . . Let me think, now. . . . Where I live. Where I live."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Homeland," she said.

She sank down with her forehead on the sill, slowly, as if some big slow weight were on her shoulderblades. I could see only the top of her head, the two dank feathers of her hair, and the point of an elbow. Homeland was a new residential suburb.

"Where in Homeland?" It seemed to be important. To me, I mean, as much as to her.

"Twenty," she mumbled. "I have to remember it . . ." and her voice trailed off. Suddenly she stood bolt upright, looking back into the room as if something had happened there. Then she leaned far out.

"Twenty sixty-five," she snarled. "You hear? Twenty sixty-five. That's the one."

"Ron! Ronnie!"

It was dad, coming down the path, looking at me, looking at the woman.

"That's the one," said the woman again.

There was a flurry of white behind her. She put one foot on the sill and sprang out at me. I closed my eyes. I heard her hit the pavement.

When I opened my eyes they were still looking up at the window. There was a starched white nurse up there with her fingers in her mouth, all of them, and eyes as round and blank as a trout's. I looked down.

I felt dad's hand on my upper arm. "Ronnie!"

I looked down. There was blood, just a little, on the cuff of my trousers. There was nothing else.

"Dad. . . ."

Dad looked all around, on the ground.

He looked up at the window and at the nurse. The nurse looked at dad and at me, and then put her hands on the sill and leaned out and looked all around on the ground. I could see, in the sunlight, where her fingers were wet from being in her mouth.

Dad looked at me and again at the nurse, and I heard him draw a deep quivering breath as if he'd forgotten to breathe for a while and had only just realized it. The nurse straightened up, put her hands over her eyes and twisted back into the room.

Dad and I looked at each other. He said, "Ronnie—what was—what . . ." and then licked his lips.

I was not as tall as my father, though he was not a tall man. He had thin, fine obedient hair, straight and starting high. He had blue eyes and a big nose and his mouth was quiet. He was broad and gentle and close to the ground, close to the earth.

I said, "How's mother?"

Dad gestured at the ground where something should be, and looked at me. Then he said, "We'd better go, Ron."

I got into the car. He walked around it and got in and started it, and then sat holding the wheel, looking back at where we had been standing. There was still nothing there. The red squirrel, with one cheek puffed out, came bounding and freezing across the path.

I asked again how mother was.

"She's fine. Just fine. Be out soon. And the baby. Just fine." He looked back carefully for traffic, shifted and let in the clutch. "Good as new," he said.

I looked back again. The squirrel hopped and arched and stopped, sitting on something. It sat on something so that it was perhaps ten inches off the ground, but the thing it sat

on couldn't be seen. The squirrel put up its paws and popped a chestnut into them from its cheek, and put its tail along its back with the big tip curled over like a fern frond, and began to nibble. Then I couldn't see any more.

After a time dad said, "What happened there just as I came up?"

I said, "What happened? Nothing. There was a squirrel."

"I mean, uh, up at the window."

"Oh, I saw a nurse up there."

"Yes, the nurse." He thought for a minute. "Anything else?"

"No. What are you going to call the baby?"

He looked at me strangely. I had to ask him again about the baby's name.

"I don't know yet," he said distantly. "Any ideas?"

"No, dad."

We rode along for quite a while without saying anything. A little frown came and went between dad's eyes, the way it did when he was figuring something out, whether it was a definition at charades, or an income tax report, or a problem of my school algebra.

"Dad. You know Homeland pretty well, don't you?"

"I should. Our outfit agented most of those sites. Why?"

"Is there a Homeland Street, or a Homeland Avenue out there?"

"Not a one. The north and south ones are streets, and are named after trees. The east and west ones are avenues, and are named after flowers. All alphabetical. Why?"

"I just wondered. Is there a number as high as twenty sixty-five?"

"Not yet, though I hope there will be some day . . . unless it's a telephone number. Why, Ron? Where did you get that number?"

"I dunno. Just thought of it. Just wondered. Where are we going to eat?"

We went to the Bluebird.

I suppose I knew then what had gotten into me when the woman jumped; but I didn't think of it, any more than a redhead goes around thinking to himself "I have red hair" or a taxi-driver says to himself "I drive a cab."

I knew, that's all. I just knew. I knew the *purpose*, too, but didn't think of it, any more than a man thinks and thinks of the place where he works, when he's on his way to work in the morning.

II

As Told By

BENTON DANIELS

RONNIE'S not an unusual boy. Oh, maybe a little quier than most, but it takes all kinds. He's good in school, but not brilliant; averages in the low eighties, good in music and English and history, weak in math, worse in science than he could be if he cared a little bit more about it.

That day when we left the hospital grounds, though, there was something unusual going on. Yes, sir. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, and I must say I still can't.

Sometimes I think it's Ronnie, and sometimes I think it was something temporarily wrong with me. I'm trying to get it all straight in my mind, right from the start.

I had just seen Clee and the baby. Clee looked a little tired, but her color was wonderful. The baby looked like a baby—that is, like a little pink old man, but I told Clee she was beautiful and takes after her mother, which she will be and do, of course, when she gets some meat on her bones.

I came along the side path from the main entrance, toward where the car was parked. Ronnie was waiting for me there. I saw him as I turned toward the road, just by the north building.

Ronnie was standing by the car, with one foot on the running board, and he seemed to be talking with somebody in the second-floor window. I called out to him, but he didn't hear. Or he paid no attention. I looked up, and saw someone in the window. It was a woman, with a crazy face. I remember an impression of very regular white teeth, and scraggly hair. I don't think she had any clothes on.

I was shocked, and then I was very angry. I thought, here's some poor sick person gone out of her mind, and she'll maybe mark Ronnie for life, standing up there like that and maybe saying all sorts of things.

I ran to the boy, and just as I reached him, the woman jumped. I think someone came into the room behind her.

Now, look. I distinctly heard that woman's body hit. It was a terrible sound. And I remember feeling a wave of nausea just then, but for some reason I was sure then, and I'm sure now, that it had nothing to do with the thing I

saw. That kind of shock-nausea only hits a person after the shock, not before or during. I don't even know why I think of this at all. It's just something I feel sure about, that's all.

I heard her body hit. I don't know whether I followed her body down with my eyes or not. There wasn't much time for that; she didn't fall more than twenty-five, maybe twenty-eight feet.

I heard the noise, and when I looked down—*there wasn't anything there!*

I don't know what I thought then. I don't know if a man does actually *think* at a time like that. I know I looked all around, looking for a hole in the ground or maybe a sheet of camouflage or something which might be covering the body. It was too hard to accept that disappearance. They say that a dog doesn't bother with his reflection in a mirror because he can't smell it, and he believes his nose rather than his eyes. Humans aren't like that, I guess. When your brain tells you one thing and your eyes another, you just don't know what to believe.

I looked back up at the window, perhaps thinking I'd been mistaken, that the woman would still be up there.

She was gone, all right. There was a nurse up there instead, looking down, terrified.

I returned to Ronnie and started to ask him what had happened. I stopped when I saw his face. It wasn't shocked, or surprised, or anything. Just relaxed. He asked me how his mother was.

I said she was fine. I looked at his face and marveled that it showed nothing of this horrible thing that had happened. It wasn't blank, mind you. It was just as if nothing had occurred at all, or as if the thing had been wiped clean out of his memory.

I thought at the moment that that was a blessing, and, with one more glance at the window—the nurse had gone—I went to the car and got in. Ronnie sat next to me. I started the car, then looked back at the path. There was nothing there.

I suppose the reaction hit me then—that, or the thought that I had had a hallucination. If I had, I was naturally worried. If I had not, what had happened to Ronnie?

I drove off, finally. Ronnie made some casual small talk; I questioned him about the thing, carefully, but he seemed honestly to know nothing about it. I decided to let well enough alone, at least for the time being. . . .

We had a quick dinner at the Bluebird, and then went home. I suppose I was poor company for the boy, because I kept finding myself mulling over the thing. We went to the Criterion, and I don't believe I heard or saw a bit of it. Then we picked up an evening paper and went home. He went to bed while I sat up with the headlines.

I found it down at the bottom of the third page. This is the item:

WOMAN DIES IN HOSPITAL LEAP

Mrs. Helmuth Stoye, of Homeland, was found yesterday afternoon under her window at Memorial Hospital, Carstairs. Dr. R. B. Knapp, head physician at the hospital, made a statement to the press in which he absolved the hospital and staff from any charges of negligence. A nurse, whose name is withheld, had just entered Mrs. Stoye's room when the woman leaped to her death.

"There was no way to stop her," said Dr. Knapp. "It happened too fast."

Dr. Knapp said that Mrs. Stoye had shown no signs of depression or suicidal intent on admission to the hospital four days ago. Her specific illness was not divulged.

Mrs. Stoye, the former Grace Korshak of Ferntree, is survived by her husband, a well-known printer here.

I went straight to the telephone and dialed the hospital. I heard the ringing signal once, twice, and then, before the hospital could answer, I hung up again. What could I ask them, or tell them? "I saw Mrs. Stoye jump." They'd be interested in that, all right. Then what? "She disappeared when she hit the ground." I can imagine what they'd say to that. "But my son saw it too!" And the question from hospital officials, a psychiatrist or two. . . . Ronnie being questioned, after he had mercifully forgotten about the whole thing . . . no. No; better let well enough alone.

The newspaper said Mrs. Stoye was found under her window. Whoever found her must have been able to see her.

I wonder what the nurse saw?

I went into the kitchen and heated some coffee, poured it, sweetened it, stirred it, and then left it untasted on the table while I put on my hat and got my car keys.

I had to see that nurse. First I tore out the newspaper article—I didn't want Ronnie ever to see it.

III

As Told By

LUCILLE HOLDER

I HAVE seen a lot of ugly things as a trainee and as a nurse, but they don't bother me very much. It's not that the familiarity hardens one; it is rather that one learns the knack of channeling one's emotions around the ugly thing.

When I was a child in England I learned how to use this knack. I lived in Coventry, and though Herr Hitler's treatment of the city seems to have faded from the news and from fiction, the story is still vividly written on the memories of us who were there, and is read and reread more often than we care to say.

You can't know what this means until you know the grim happiness that the chap you've dug out of the ruins is a dead 'un, for the ones who still live horrify you so.

So—one gets accustomed to the worst. Further, one is prepared when a worse "worst" presents itself.

And I suppose that it was this very preparation which found me jolly well unprepared for what happened when Mrs. Stoye jumped out of her window.

There were two things happening from the instant I opened her door. One thing was what I did, and the other thing is what I felt.

These are the things I did:

I stepped into the room, carrying a washing tray on my arm. Everything seemed in order, except, of course, that Mrs. Stoye was out of bed. That didn't surprise me; she was ambulant. She was over by the window; I suppose I glanced around the room before I looked directly at her.

When I saw her pajama top lying on the bedclothes I looked at her, though.

She straightened up suddenly as she heard me, barked something about "That's the one!" and jumped—dived, rather —right out. It wasn't too much of a drop, really—less than thirty feet, I'd say, but she went down head first, and I knew instantly that she hadn't a chance.

I can't remember setting down the washing tray; I saw it

later on the bed. I must have spun around and set it there and rushed to the window.

I looked down, quite prepared for the worst, as I've said. But what I saw was so terribly much worse than it should have been. I mean, an ill person is a bad thing to see, and an accident case can be worse, and burn cases, I think, are worst of all. The thing is, these all get worse in one direction. One simply cannot be prepared for something which is bad in a totally unexpected, impossible way.

There was nothing down there at all. Nothing. I saw Mrs. Stoye jump out, ran to the window, it couldn't have been more than three seconds later; and there was nothing there.

But I'm saying now how I felt. I mean to say first what I did, because the two are so different, from this point on.

I looked down; there was no underbrush, no flowerbed, nothing which could have concealed her had she rolled. There were some people—a stocky man and a young boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen—standing nearby. The man seemed to be searching the ground as I was; I don't remember what the boy was doing. Just standing there. The man looked up at me; he looked badly frightened. He spoke to the boy, who answered quietly, and then they moved off together to the road.

I looked down once more, still could not see Mrs. Stoye, and turned and ran to the signal-button.

I rang it and then rushed out into the hall. I must have looked very distraught.

I ran right into Dr. Knapp, all but knocking him over, and gasped out that Mrs. Stoye had jumped.

Dr. Knapp was terribly decent. He led me back into the room and told me to sit down. Then he went to the window, looked down and grunted. Miss Flaggon came in just then. I was crying.

Dr. Knapp told her to get a stretcher and a couple of orderlies and take them outside, under this window. She asked no questions, but fled; when Dr. Knapp gives orders in that voice, people jump to it. Dr. Knapp ran out, calling to me to stay where I was until he came back. In spite of the excitement, he actually managed to make his voice gentle.

I went to the window after a moment and looked down. Two medical students were running across the lawn from the south building, and the orderlies with their stretcher, still rolled, were pelting down the path. Dr. Knapp, bag in hand, was close behind them.

Dr. Carstairs and Dr. Greenberg were under the window and already shunting away the few curious visitors who had appeared as if from out of the ground, the way people do after an accident anywhere. But most important of all, I saw Mrs. Stoye's body. It was lying crumpled up, directly below me, and there was no doubt of it that her neck was broken and her skull badly fractured. I went and sat down again.

Afterward Dr. Knapp questioned me closely and, I must say, very kindly. I told him nothing about the strange disappearance of the body. I expect he thought I was crying because I felt responsible for the death. He assured me that my record was in my favor, and it was perfectly understandable that I was helpless to stop Mrs. Stoye.

I apparently went quite to pieces then, and Dr. Knapp suggested that I take my two weeks' leave—it was due in another twenty days in any case—immediately, and rest up and forget this thing.

I said, "Perhaps I will."

I went out to the Quarters to bathe and change. And now I had better say how I *felt* during all this. . . .

I was terrified when Mrs. Stoye jumped. When I reached the window right afterward, I was exactly as excited as one might expect.

But the instant I looked down, something happened. It wasn't anything I can describe, except to say that there was a change of attitude. That doesn't seem to mean much, does it? Well, I can only say this; that from that moment I was no longer frightened nor shocked nor horrified nor anything else. I remember putting my hands up to my mouth, and I must have given a perfect picture of a terrified nurse.

I was actually quite calm. I was quite cool as I ran to the bell and then out onto the hall. I collapsed, I cried, I sobbed, I produced a flood of tears and streaks for my face. But during every minute of it I was completely calm.

Now, I knew that was strange, but I felt no surprise at it. I knew that it could be called dishonest. I don't know how to analyze it. I am a nurse, and a profound sense of duty has been drilled into me for years. I felt that it was my duty to cry, to say nothing about the disappearance of the body, to get the two weeks' leave immediately, and to do the other things which I have done and must do.

While I bathed I thought. I was still calm, and I suppose I behaved calmly; it didn't matter, for there was no one to see.

Two people had seen Mrs. Stoye jump besides myself. I realized that I must see them. I didn't think about the disappearing body. I didn't feel I had to, somehow, any more than one thinks consciously of the water in the pipes and heaters as one draws a bath. The thing was there, and needed no investigation.

But it was necessary to see that man and the boy. What I must do when I saw them required no thought either. That seemed all arranged, unquestionable, so evident that it needed no thought or definition.

I put away the white stockings and shoes with a feeling of relief, and slipped into underthings with a bit of lace on them, and sheer hose. I put on my wine rayon with the gored skirt, and the matching shoes. I combed my hair out and put it up in a roll around the back, cool and out of the way. Money, keys, cigarette case, knife, lighter, compact. All ready.

I went round by the administration offices, thinking hard. A man visits the hospital with his boy—it was probably his boy—and leaves the boy outside while he goes in. He would be seeing a wife, in all probability. He'd leave the boy outside only if the woman's condition were serious or if she were immediately post-operative or post-partem.

So many patients go in and out that I naturally don't remember too many of them; on the other hand, I can almost always tell a new patient or visitor . . . marvelous the way the mind, unbidden, clocks and catalogs, to some degree, all that passes before it. . . .

The chances were that these people, the man and the boy, were visiting a new patient. Maternity would be as good a guess as any, to start with.

It was well after nine o'clock, the evening of Mrs. Stoye's death, and the administration offices were deserted except for Miss Kaye, the night registrar. It was not unusual for nurses to check up occasionally on patients. I nodded to Miss Kaye and went back to the files. The maternity admission file gave me five names for the previous two days. I got the five cards out of the patients alphabetical and glanced over them. Two of these new mothers had other children; a Mrs. Korff, with three sons and a daughter at home, and a Mrs. Daniels who had one son. Here: "Previous children: One. Age this date: 14 yrs. 3 months." And further down: "Father age: 41."

It looked like a bull's eye. I remember feeling inordinately pleased with myself, as if I had assisted particularly well in

an operation, or had done a bang-up job of critical first-aid.

I copied down the address of the Daniels family, and, carefully replacing all the cards, made my vacation check-out and left the building.

It seemed late to go calling, but I knew that I must. There had been a telephone number on the card, but I had ignored it. What I must do could not be done over the phone.

I found the place fairly easily, although it was a long way out in the suburbs on the other side of the town. It was a small, comfortable-looking place, set well back from the road, and with wide lawns and its own garage. I stepped up on the porch and quite shamelessly looked inside.

The outer door opened directly into the living room, without a foyer. There was a plate-glass panel in the door with a sheer curtain on the inside. I could see quite clearly. The room was not too large—fireplace, wainscoting, stairway in the left corner, big easy chairs, a studio couch—that sort of thing. There was a torn newspaper tossed on the arm of one fireside chair. Two end table lamps were lit. There was no one in the room.

I rang the bell, waited, rang again, peering in. Soon I saw a movement on the stairs. It was the boy, thin-looking and tousled, thumping down the carpeted steps, tying the cord of a dark-red dressing gown as he came. On the landing he stopped.

I could just hear him call "Dad!" He leaned over the banister, looking up and back. He called again, shrugged a shrug which turned into a stretch, and, yawning, came to the door. I hid the knife in my sleeve.

"Oh!" he said, startled, as he opened the door. Unaccountably, I felt a wave of nausea. Getting a grip on myself, I stepped inside before I spoke. He stood looking at me, flushing, a bit conscious, I think, of his bare feet, for he stood on one of them, trying to curl the toes of the other one out of sight.

"Daniels. . . ." I murmured.

"Yes," he said. "I'm Ronald Daniels." He glanced quickly into the room. "Dad doesn't seem to be . . . I don't . . . I was asleep."

"I'm so sorry."

"Gosh, that's all right," he said. He was a sweet little chap, not a man yet, not a child—less and less of a child as he woke up, which he was doing slowly. He smiled.

"Come in. Let me have your coat. Dad ought to be here now. Maybe he went for cigarettes or something."

It was as if a switch had been thrown and a little sign had lit up within him— "Remember your manners."

Abruptly I felt the strangest compulsion—a yearning, a warming toward this lad. It was completely a sexual thing, mind you—completely. But it was as if a part of me belonged to a part of him . . . no; more the other way round. I don't know. It can't be described. And with the feeling, I suddenly knew that it was all right, it was all quite all right.

I did not have to see Mr. Daniels after all. That business would be well taken care of when the time came, and not by me. Better—much better—for him to do it.

He extended his hand for my coat. "Thank you *so* much," I said, smiling, liking him—more than liking him, in this indefinable way—"but I really must go. I—if your father—" How could I say it? How could I let him know that it was different now; that everything might be spoiled if his father knew I had come here? "I mean, when your father comes back. . . ."

Startlingly, he laughed. "Please don't worry," he said. "I won't tell him you were here."

I looked at his face, his round, bland face, so odd with his short slender frame. That thing like a sense of duty told me not to ask, but I violated it. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. But it doesn't matter. I won't tell dad."

"Good." I smiled, and left.

IV

As Told By

JENNIE BEAUFORT

YOU NEVER know what you're going to run up against when you're an information operator, I mean really, people seem to have the craziest idea of what we're there for. Like the man called up the other day and wanted to know how you spell conscientious—"Just conscientious," he says, "I know how to spell objector" and I gave him the singsong, you know, the voice with a smile, "I'm soreee! We haven't that infor-

may—shun!" and keyed him out, thinking to myself, what a schmoe. (I told Mr. Parker, he's my super, and he grinned and said it was a sign of the times; Mr. Parker's always making jokes.) And like the other man wants to know if he gets a busy signal and hangs on to the line, will the signal stop and the bell ring when the party he is calling hangs up.

I want to say to him, what do you think I am, Alexander Graham Bell or something, maybe Don Ameche, instead of which I tell him "One moment, sir, and I will get that information for you?" (not that I'm asking a question, you raise your voice that way because it leaves the customers breathless) and I nudge Sue and she tells me, Sue knows everything.

Not that everything like that comes over the wire, anything is liable to happen right there in the office or in the halls to say nothing of the stage-door Johnnies with hair oil and cellophane boxes who ask all the girls if they are Operator 23, she has such a nice voice.

Like the kid that was in here yesterday, not that he was on the prowl, he was too young, though five years from now he'll be just dreamy, with his cute round face and his long legs. Mr. Parker brought him in to me and told me the kid was getting up a talk on telephones for his civics class in high school, and tells the kid to just ask Miss Beaufort anything he wants to know and walks off rubbing his hands, which I can understand because he has made me feel good and made the kid feel good and has me doing all the work while he gets all the credit.

Not that I felt good just at that particular moment, my stomach did a small flip-flop but that has nothing to do with it; it must have been the marshmallow cake I had for my lunch, I should remember to keep away from the marshmallow when I have gravy-and-mashed, at least on weekdays.

Anyway this kid was cute, with his pleases and his thank you's and his little almost-bows-from-the-waist like a regular Lord Calvert. He asked me all sorts of questions and all smart too, but he never asked them right out, I mean, he would say, "Please tell me how you can find a number so *fast?*" and then listen to every word I said and squiggle something down in his notebook. I showed him the alphabeticals and the central indexes and the assonance file (and you can bet I called it by its full name to that nice youngster) where we find out that a number for Meyer, say,

is listed as Maior. And he wanted to know why it was that we never give a street address to someone who has the phone number, but only the other way around, and how we found out the phone number from just the street address.

So I showed him the street index and the checking index, which has the numbers all in order by exchanges with the street addresses, which is what we use to trace calls when we have to. And lots more. And finally he said he wanted to pretend he was me for a minute, to see if he understood everything. He even blushed when he said it. I told him to go ahead and got up and let him sit down. He sat there all serious and bright-eyed, and said, "Now, suppose I am you, and someone wants to know the number of—uh—Fred Zimmerman, who lives out at Bell Hill, but they have no street number."

And I showed him how to flip out the alphabetical, and how to ask the customer which one he wants if there should be more than one Fred Zimmerman. He listened so carefully and politely, and made a note in his book. Then he asked me what happens if the police or somebody has a phone number and wants the address, we'll say, out in Homeland, like Homeland 2050. I showed him the numerical index, and he whipped it out and opened it like an old hand. My, he caught on quickly. He made another note in his book . . . well, it went on like that, and all in twenty minutes.

I bet he could take over from me any time and not give Mr. Parker a minute's worry, which is more than I can say for some of the girls who have been working here for years, like that Patty Mawson with her blonde hair and her awful New Look.

Well, that boy picked my brains dry in short order, and he got up and for a moment I thought he was going to kiss my hand like a Frenchman or a European, but he didn't. He just thanked me as if I had given him the crown jewels or my hand in marriage, and went out to do the same for Mr. Parker, and all I can say is, I wish one-tenth of the customers showed as much good house breaking.

V

As Told By

HELMUTH STOYE

GRACE . . . Grace . . . *Grace!*

Oh, my little darling, my gentle, my soft little bird with the husky voice. Miss Funny-Brows. Little Miss Teeth. You used to laugh such a special laugh when I made up new names for you, Coral-cache, Cadenza, Viola-voice . . . and you'll never laugh again, because I killed you.

I killed you, I killed you.

Yesterday I stopped all the clocks.

I couldn't stand it. It was wrong; it was a violation. You were dead. I drew the blinds and sat in the dark, not really believing that it had happened—how *could* it happen? You're *Grace,* you're the humming in the kitchen, the quick footfalls in the foyer as I come up the porch steps.

I think for a while I believed that your coming back was the most real, the most obvious thing; in a moment, any moment, you would come in and kiss the nape of my neck; you would be smelling of vanilla and cut flowers, and you'd laugh at me and together we'd fling up the blinds and let in the light.

And then Tinkle struck—Tinkle, the eight-foot grandfather's clock with the *basso profundo* chime. That was when I knew what was real. It was real that you were dead, it was real. . . .

I got angry at that violation, that sacrilege, that clock. What right had the clock to strike, the hands to move? How could it go on? It was wrong. I got up and stopped it. I think I spoke to it, not harshly, angry as I was; I said, "You don't know, do you, Tinkle? No one's told you yet," and I caught it by its swinging neck and held it until its ticking brain was quiet.

I told all the clocks, one by one, that you were dead—the glowing Seth Thomas ship's clock, with its heavy threads and its paired syllables, and Drowsy the alarm, and the cuckoo with the cleft palate who couldn't say anything but "hook-who!"

A truck roared by outside, and I remember the new surge of fury because of it, and then the thought that the driver

hadn't been told yet . . . and then the mad thought that the news would spread from these silent clocks, from these drawn blinds, spread like a cloud-shadow over the world, and when it touched birds, they would glide to the ground and crouch motionless, with no movement in their jeweled eyes; when it touched machines, they would slow and stop; when it touched flowers they would close themselves into little soft fists and bend to knuckle the earth; when it touched people they would finish that stride, end that sentence, slowing, softening, and would sink down and be still.

There would be no noise or confusion as the world slipped into its stasis, and nothing would grow but silence. And the sun would hang on the horizon with its face thickly veiled, and there would be eternal dusk.

That was yesterday, and I was angry. I am not angry today. It was better, yesterday, the sitting in turmoil and uselessness, the useless raging up and down rooms so hollow, yet still so full of you they would not echo. It got dark, you see, and in good time the blinds were brighter than the walls around them again. I looked out, squinting through grainy eyelids, and saw a man walking by, walking easily, his hands in his pockets, and he was whistling.

After that I could not be angry any more, not at the man, not at the morning. I knew only the great cruel pressure of a fact, a fact worse than the fact of emptiness or of death—the fact that nothing ever stops, that things must go on.

It was better to be angry, and to lose myself in uselessness. Now I am not angry and I have no choice but to think usefully. I have lived a useful life and have built it all on useful thinking, and if I had not thought so much and so carefully Grace would be here with me now, with her voice like a large soft breeze in some springtime place, and perhaps tickling the side of my neck with feather-touches of her moving lips . . . it was my useful, questing, thirsty thought which killed her, killed her.

The accident was all of two years ago—almost two years anyway. We had driven all the way back from Springfield without stopping, and we were very tired. Grace and Mr. Share and I were squeezed into the front seat.

Mr. Share was a man Grace had invented long before, even before we were married. He was a big invisible fat man who always sat by the right-hand window, and always looked out to the side so that he never watched us.

But since he was so fat, Grace had to press up close to me as we drove.

There was a stake-bodied truck bowling along ahead of us, and in the back of it was a spry old man, or perhaps a weatherbeaten young man—you couldn't tell—in blue dungarees and a red shirt. He had a yellow woolen muffler tied around his waist, and the simple strip of material made all the difference between "clothes" and "costume."

Behind him, lashed to the bed of the truck just back of the cab, was a large bundle of burlap. It would have made an adequate seat for him, cushioned and out of the wind. But the man seemed to take the wind as a heady beverage and the leaping floor as a challenge.

He stood with his arms away from his sides and his knees slightly flexed, and rode the truck as if it were a live thing. He yielded himself to each lurch and bump, brought himself back with each recession, guarding his equilibrium with an easy virtuosity.

Grace was, I think, dozing; my shout of delighted laughter at the performance on the bounding stage before us brought her upright. She laughed with me for the laugh alone, for she had not looked through the windshield yet, and she kissed my cheek.

He saw her do it, the man on the truck, and he laughed with us.

"He's *our* kind of people," Grace said.

"A pixie," I agreed, and we laughed again.

The man took off an imaginary plumed hat, swung it low toward us, but very obviously toward Grace. She nodded back to him, with a slight sidewise turn of her face as it went down that symbolized a curtsey.

Then he held out his elbow, and the pose, the slightly raised shoulder over which he looked fondly at the air over his bent arm, showed that he had given his arm to a lady. The lady was Grace, who, of course, would be charmed to join him in the dance . . . she clapped her hands and crowed with delight, as she watched her imaginary self with the courtly, colorful figure ahead.

The man stepped with dainty dignity to the middle of the truck and bowed again, and you could all but hear the muted minuet as it began. It was a truly wonderful thing to watch, this pantomime; the man knew the ancient stately steps to perfection, and they were unflawed by the careening surface on which they were performed. There was no mockery in the miming, but simply the fullness of good, the sheer, unspoiled sharing of a happy magic.

He bowed, he took her hand, smiled back into her eyes

as she pirouetted behind him. He stood back to the line waiting his turn, nodding slightly to the music; he dipped ever so little, twice, as his turn came, and stepped gracefully out to meet her, smiling again.

I don't know what made me look up. We were nearing the Speedway Viaduct, and the truck ahead was just about to pass under it. High up over our heads was the great span, and as my eyes followed its curve, to see the late afternoon sun on the square guard posts which bounded the elevated road, three of the posts exploded outward, and the blunt nose of a heavy truck plowed through and over the edge, to slip and catch and slip again, finally to teeter to a precarious stop.

Apparently its trailer was loaded with light steel girders; one of them slipped over the tractor's crumpled shoulder and speared down toward us.

Our companion of the minuet, on the truck ahead, had finished his dance, and, turned to us, was bowing low, smiling, looking up through his eyebrows at us. The girder's end took him on the back of the head. It did not take the head off; it obliterated it. The body struck flat and lay still, as still as wet paper stuck to glass. The girder bit a large piece out of the tailgate and somersaulted to the right, while I braked and swerved dangerously away from it. Fortunately there were no cars coming toward us.

There was, of course, a long, mixed-up, horrified sequence of the two truck drivers, the one ahead and the one who came down later from the viaduct and was sick. Ambulances and bystanders and a lot of talk . . . none of it matters, really.

No one ever found out who the dead man was. He had no luggage and no identification; he had over ninety dollars in his pocket. He might have been anybody—someone from show business, or a writer perhaps, on a haywire vacation of his own wild devising. I suppose that doesn't matter either. What does matter is that he died while Grace was in a very close communion with what he was doing, and her mind was wide open for his fantasy. Mine is, generally, I suppose; but at that particular moment, when I had seen the smash above and the descending girder, I was wide awake, on guard. I think that had a lot to do with what has happened since. I think it has everything to do with Grace's—with Grace's—

There is no word for it. I can say this, though. Grace and

I were never alone together again until the day she died. Died, died, Grace is dead.

Grace!

I can go on with my accursed useful thinking now, I suppose.

Grace was, of course, badly shaken, and I did what I could for her over the next few weeks. I tried my best to understand how it was affecting her. (That's what I mean by useful thinking—trying to understand. Trying and trying—prying and prying. Arranging, probing, finding out. Getting a glimpse, a scent of danger, rooting it out—bringing it out into the open where it can get at you.) Rest and new clothes and alcohol rubdowns; the theater, music and music, always music, for she could lose herself in it, riding its flux, feeling and folding herself in it, following it, sometimes, with her hushed, true voice, sometimes lying open to it, letting it play its colors and touches over her.

There is always an end to patience, however. After two months, knowing her as I did, I knew that there was more here than simple shock. If I had known her less well—if I had cared less, even, it couldn't have mattered.

It began with small things. There were abstractions which were unusual in so vibrant a person. In a quiet room, her face would listen to music; sometimes I had to speak twice and then repeat what I had said.

Once I came home and found supper not started, the bed not made. Those things were not important—I am not a fusspot nor an autocrat; but I was shaken when, after calling her repeatedly I found her in the guest room, sitting on the bed without lights. I had no idea she was in there; I just walked in and snapped on the light in the beginnings of panic because she seemed not to be in the house; she had not answered me.

And at first it was as if she had not noticed the sudden yellow blaze from the paired lamps; she was gazing at the wall, and on her face was an expression of perfect peace. She was wide awake—at least her eyes were. I called her: "Grace!"

"Hello, darling," she said quietly. Her head turned casually toward me and she smiled—oh, those perfect teeth of hers!—and her smile was only partly for me; the rest of it was inside, with the nameless things with which she had been communing.

I sat beside her, amazed, and took her hands. I suppose I spluttered a bit, "Grace, are you all right? Why didn't

you answer? The bed's not—have you been out? What's happened? Here—let me see if you have a fever."

Her eyes were awake, yes; but not awake to me, to here and now. They were awake and open to some *elsewhere* matters. . . . She acquiesced as I felt her forehead and cheeks for fever, and while I was doing it I could see the attention of those warm, pleased, living eyes shifting from the things they had been seeing, to me. It was as if they were watching a scene fade out while another was brought in on a screen, so that for a second all focusing points on the first picture were lost, and there was a search for a focusing point on the second.

And then, apparently, the picture of Helmuth Stoye sitting next to her, holding one of her hands, running his right palm across her forehead and down her cheek, came into sharp, true value, and she said, "Darling! You're home! What happened? Holiday or strike? You're not sick?"

I said, "Sweetheart, it's after seven."

"No!" She rose, smoothed her hair in front of the mirror. Hers was a large face and her appeal had none of the doll qualities, the candy-and-peaches qualities of the four-color ads. Her brow and cheekbones were wide and strong, and the hinges of her jaw were well-marked, hollowed underneath. Her nostrils were flared and sensuously tilted and her shoulders too wide to be suitable for fashion plates or pinups. But clothes hung from those shoulders with the graceful majesty of royal capes, and her breasts were large, high, separated and firm.

Yet for all her width and flatness and strength, for all her powerfully-set features, she was woman all through; and with clothes or without, she looked it.

She said, "I had no idea . . . after seven! Oh, darling, I'm sorry. You poor thing, and no dinner yet. Come help me," and she dashed out of the room, leaving me flapping my lips, calling, "But Grace! Wait! Tell me first what's the mat—"

And when I got to the kitchen she was whipping up a dinner, efficiently, deftly, and all my questions could wait, could be interrupted with "Helmuth, honey, open these, will you?" "I don't know, b'loved; we'll dig it out after supper. Will you see if there're any French fries in the freezer?"

And afterward she remembered that "The Pearl" was playing at the Ascot Theater, and we'd missed it when it first came to town, and this was the best night . . . we went,

and the picture was fine, and we talked of nothing else that night.

I could have forgotten about that episode, I suppose. I could have forgotten about any one of them—the time she turned her gaze so strangely inward when she was whipping cream, and turned it to butter because she simply forgot to stop whipping it when it was ready; the times she had the strong, uncharacteristic urges to do and feel things which had never interested her before—to lose herself in distances from high buildings and tall hills, to swim underwater for long, frightening minutes; to hear new and ever new kinds of music—saccharine fox-trots and atonal string quartets, arrangements for percussion alone and Oriental modes.

And foods—rattlesnake ribs, moo goo gai pan, curried salmon with green rice, *Paella*, with its chicken and clams, headcheese, *canolas*, sweet-and-pungent pork; all these Grace made herself, and well.

But in food as in music, in new sensualities as in new activities, there was no basic change in Grace. These were additions only; for all the exoticism of the dishes, for example, we still had and enjoyed the things she had always made—the gingered leg of lamb, the acorn squash filled with creamed onions, the crêpes suzettes.

She could still be lost in the architecture of Bach's "Passacaglia and Fugue" and in the raw heartbeat of the Haggard-Bauduc "Big Noise from Winnetka." Because she had this new passion for underwater swimming, she did not let it take from her enjoyment of high-board diving. Her occasional lapses from efficiency, as in the whipped cream episode, were rare and temporary. Her sometime dreaminess, when she would forget appointments and arrangements and time itself, happened so seldom, that in all justice, they could have been forgotten, or put down, with all my vaunted understanding, to some obscure desire for privacy, for aloneness.

So—she had everything she had always had, and now more. She was everything she always had been, and now more. She did everything she had always done, and now more. Then what, what on earth and in heaven, was I bothered, worried, and—and afraid of?

I know now. It was jealousy. It was—one of the jealousies.

There wasn't Another Man. That kind of poison springs from insecurity—from the knowledge that there's enough wrong with you that the chances are high that another man—

any other man—could do a better job than you in some department of your woman's needs. Besides, that kind of thing can never be done by the Other Man alone; your woman must cooperate, willfully and consciously, or it can't happen. And Grace was incapable of that.

No; it was because of the sharing we had had. My marriage was a magic one because of what we shared; because of our ability to see a red gold leaf, exchange a glance and say never a word, for we knew so well each other's pleasure, its causes and expressions and associations. The pleasures were not the magic; the sharing was.

A poor analogy: you have a roommate who is a very dear friend, and together you have completely redecorated your room. The colors, the lighting, the concealed shelves and drapes, all are a glad communion of your separated tastes. You are both proud and fond of your beautiful room . . . and one day you come home and find a new television set. Your roommate has acquired it and brought it in to surprise you. You are surprised, and you are happy, too.

But slowly an ugly thing creeps into your mind. The set is a big thing, an important, dominating thing in the room and in the things for which you use the room. And it is *his*—not mine or ours, but *his*. There is his unspoken, undemanded authority in the choice of programs in the evenings; and where are the chess games, the folk singing with your guitar, the long hours of phonograph music?

They are there, of course, ready for you every moment; no one has taken them away. But now the room is different. It can continue to be a happy room; only a petty mind would resent the new shared riches; but the fact that the source of the riches is not shared, was not planned by you both. This changes the room and everything in it, the colors, the people, the shape and warmth.

So with my marriage. A thing had come to Grace which made us both richer but I did not share that source; and damn, damn my selfishness, I could not bear it; if I could not share it I wanted her deprived of it. I was gentle; beginning with, "How do you feel, sweetheart? But you aren't all right; what were you thinking of? It couldn't be 'nothing' . . . you were giving more attention to it than you are to me right now!"

I was firm; beginning with, "Now look, darling; there's something here that we have to face. Please help. Now, exactly why are you so interested in hearing that Hindemith sketch? You never used to be interested in music like that.

It has no melody, no key, no rhythm; it's unpredictable and ugly. I'm quoting you, darling; that's what you used to say about it. And now you want to soak yourself in it. Why? Why? What has changed you? Yes—people must grow and change; I know that. But—growing so fast, so quickly, in so many different directions! Tell me, now. Tell me exactly why you feel moved to hear this thing at this time."

And—I was angry, beginning with, "Grace! Why didn't you answer me? Oh, you heard me, did you? What did I say? Yes; that's right; you did . . . then why didn't you answer? Well? Not important? You'll have to realize that it's important to me to be answered when I speak to you!"

She tried. I could see her trying. I wouldn't stop. I began to watch her every minute. I stopped waiting for openings, and made them myself. I trapped her. I put on music in which I knew she would be lost, and spoke softly, and when she did not answer, I would kick over my chair with a shout and demand that she speak up. She tried. . . . Sometimes she was indignant, and demanded the peace that should be her right. Once I struck her.

That did it. Oh, the poor, brutalized beloved!

Now I can see it; *now!*

She never could answer me, until the one time. What could she have said? Her "I don't know!" was the truth. Her patience went too far, her anger not far enough, and I know that her hurt was without limits.

I struck her, and she answered my questions. I was even angrier after she had than I had been before, for I felt that she had known all along, that until now she had withheld what she knew; and I cursed myself for not using force earlier and more often. I did. For not hitting *Grace* before!

I came home that night tired, for there was trouble at the shop; I suppose I was irascible with the compositors, but that was only because I had not slept well the night before, which was because—anyway, when I got home, I slammed the door, which was not usual, and, standing there with my raincoat draped over one shoulder, looking at the beautiful spread on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, I demanded, "What's that for?"

There were canapes and dainty round and rolled and triangular sandwiches; a frosty bluish beverage twinkling with effervescence in its slender pitcher; there were stars and flowers of tiny pickles, pastes and dressings, a lovely coral potato chip, and covered dishes full of delicate mysteries.

There were also two small and vivid bowls of cut blooms, beautifully arranged.

"Why, for us. Just for us two," she said.

I said, "Good God. Is there anything the matter with sitting up to a table and eating like a human being?" Then I went to hang up the coat.

She had not moved when I came back; she was still standing facing the door, and perhaps a quarter of her welcoming smile was frozen on her face.

No, I said to myself, no you don't. Don't go soft, now. You have her on the run; let's break this thing up now, all at once, all over the place. The healing can come later. I said, "Well?"

She turned to me, her eyes full of tears. "Helmuth . . ." she said weakly. I waited. "Why did you . . . it was only a surprise. A pretty surprise for you. We haven't been together for so long . . . you've been . . ."

"You haven't been yourself since that accident," I said coldly. "I think you like being different. Turn off the tears, honey. They'll do you no good."

"I'm *not* different!" she wailed; and then she began to cry in earnest. "I can't stand it!" she moaned, "I can't, I can't . . . Helmuth, you're losing your mind. I'm going to leave you. Leave you . . . maybe for just a while, maybe for . ."

"You're going to *what?*" I whispered, going very close to her.

She made a supreme effort and answered, flatly, looking me in the eye, "I'm going, Helmuth. I've got to."

I think if she'd seen it coming she would have stood back; perhaps I'd have missed her. I think that if she'd expected it, she would have fled after I hit her once. Instead she stood still, unutterably shocked, unmoving, so it was easy to hit her again.

She stood watching me, her face dead, her eyes, and, increasingly, the flames of the fingermarks on her bleached cheeks burning. In that instant I knew how she felt, what her mind was trying frantically to do.

She was trying to think of a way to make this a dream, to explain it as an accident, to find some excuse for me; and the growing sting in her beaten cheeks slowly proved and reproved that it was true. I know this, because the tingling sting of my hands was proving it to me.

Finally she put one hand up to her face. She said, "*Why?*"

I said, "Because you have kept a secret from me."

She closed her eyes, swayed. I did not touch her. Still with her eyes closed, she said:

"It wants to be left alone. It feeds on vital substance, but there is always an excess . . . there is in a healthy person, anyway. It only takes a small part of that excess, not enough to matter, not enough for anyone but a jealous maniac like you to notice. It lives happily in a happy person, it lives richly in a mind rich with the experiences of the senses, feeding only on what is spare and extra. And you have made me unfit, forever and ever, with your prodding and scarring, and because you have found it out it can never be left alone again, it can never be safe again, it can never be safe while you live, it can never be content, it can never leave me while I live, it can never, it can never, it can never."

Her voice did not trail off—it simply stopped, without a rise or fall in pitch or volume, without any normal human aural punctuation. What she said made no sense to me.

I snarled at her—I don't think it was a word—and turned my back. I heard her fall, and when I looked she was crumpled up like a castoff, empty, trodden-on white paper box.

I fought my battle between fury and tenderness that night, and met the morning with the dull conclusion that Grace was possessed, and that what had possessed her had gone mad . . . that I didn't know where I was, what to do; that I must save her if I could, but in any case relentlessly track down and destroy the—thé— No, it hadn't a name . . .

Grace was conscious, docile, and had nothing to say. She was not angry or resentful; she was nothing but—obedient. She did what she was told, and when she finished she stopped until she was told to do something else.

I called in Doc Knapp. He said that what was mostly wrong with her was outside the field of a medical doctor, but he didn't think a little regimented rest and high-powered food therapy would hurt.

I let him take her to the hospital. I think I was almost glad to see her go. No I wasn't. I couldn't be glad. How could I be glad about anything? Anyway, Knapp would have her rested and fed and quieted down and fattened up and supplied with two alcohol rubs a day, until she was fit to start some sort of psychotherapy. She always liked alcohol rubs. She killed her—she died just before the second alcohol rub, on the fourth day . . . Knapp said, when he took her away, "I can't understand it, Helmuth. It's like

shock, but in Grace that doesn't seem right at all. She's too strong, too alive."

Not any more, she isn't.

My mind's wandering. Hold on tight, you . . . Hold. . . .

Where am I? I am at home. I am sitting in the chair. I am getting up. Uh! I have fallen down. Why did I fall down? Because my leg was asleep. Why was it asleep? Because I have been sitting here all day and most of the night without moving. The doorbell is ringing. Why is the doorbell ringing? Because someone wants to come in. Who is it? Someone who comes visiting at two o' eight in the morning, I know that because I started the clock again and Tinkle says what time it is. Who visits at two o' eight in the morning? Drunks and police and death. There is a small person's shadow on the frosted door, which I open. "Hello, small person, Grace is dead."

It is not a drunk it is not the police it is Death who has a child's long lashes and small hands, one to hold up a blank piece of paper for me to stare at, one to slide the knife between my ribs, feel it scrape on my breastbone . . . a drama, Enter Knife Left Center, and I fall back away from the door, my blood leaping lingering after the withdrawn blade, Grace, Grace, treasure me in your cupped hands—

VI

As Told By

LAWRENCE DELEHANTY

I GOT THE call on the car radio just before half-past two. Headquarters had a phone tip of some funny business out on Poplar Street in Homeland. The fellow who phoned was a milk truck dispatcher on his way to work. He says he thought he saw someone at the door of this house stab the guy who came to the door, close the door and beat it.

I didn't see anyone around. There were lights on in the house—in what seemed to be the living room, and in the hallway just inside the door. I could see how anyone passing by could get a look at such a thing if it had happened.

I told Sam to stay in the prowl car and ran up the path to the house.

I knocked on the door, figuring maybe there'd be prints

on the bell push. There was no answer. I tried again, and finally opened the door, turning the knob by the shaft, which was long enough for me to get hold of without touching the knob.

It had happened all right. The stiff was just inside the door. The guy was on his back, arms and legs spread out, with the happiest look on his face I ever saw. No kidding—that guy looked as if he'd just been given a million dollars. He had blood all over his front.

I took one look and went back and called Sam. He came up asking questions and stopped asking when he saw the stiff. "Go phone," I told him, "and be careful. Don't touch nothin'."

While he was phoning I took a quick squint around. There was a few dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and on the table, and half a bottle of some liqueur on an end table in the living room, sitting right on the polished wood, where it'd sure leave a ring. I'd say this guy had been in there some time without trying to clean up any.

I inched open the drawer in the big sideboard in the dining room and all the silver was there. None of the drawers in the two bedrooms were open; it looked like a grudge killing of some kind; there wasn't no robbery I could see.

Just as I came back down the stairs the doorbell rang. Sam came out of the front room and I waved him back. "There goes our prints on the bell," I said. "I'll get it." I pussyfooted to the door and pulled it wide open, real sudden.

"Mr. Stoye?" says a kid standing there. He's about fourteen, maybe, small for his age. He's standing out there, three o'clock in the morning, mind you, smiling real polite, just like it was afternoon and he'd come around to sell raffle tickets. I felt a retch starting in my stomach just then—don't know why. The sight of the stiff hadn't bothered me none. Maybe something I ate. I swallowed it down and said, "Who are you?"

He said, "I would like to see Mr. Stoye."

"Bub," I said, "Mr. Stoye isn't seeing anybody just now. What do you want?"

He squinted around me and saw the stiff. I guess I should've stopped him but he had me off guard. And you know, he didn't gasp or jump back or any of the things you expect anyone to do. He just straightened up, and he smiled.

"Well," he says, sort of patting his jacket pocket, "I don't

s'pose there's anything I can do now," and he smiles at me, real bright. "Well, good night," he says, and turns to go.

I nabbed him and spun him inside and shut the door. "What do you know about this?" I asked him.

He looked at the stiff, where I nodded, and he looked at me. The stiff didn't bother him.

"Why, nothing," he said. "I don't know anything at all. Is that really Mr. Stoye?"

"You know it is."

"I think I did know, all right," he said. "Well, can I go home now? Dad doesn't know I'm out."

"I bet he doesn't. Let's see what you got in your pockets."

He didn't seem to mind. I frisked him. Inside the jacket pocket was a jump knife—one of those Army issue paratrooper's clasp knives with a spring; touch the button and *click!* you've got four and a half inches of razor steel sticking out of your fist, ready for business. A lot of 'em got out in war surplus. Too many. We're always finding 'em in carcasses.

I told him he'd have to stick around. He frowned a little bit and said he was worried about his father, but I didn't let that make no difference. He gave his name without any trouble. His name was Ronnie Daniels. He was a clean-cut little fellow, just as nice and polite as I ever saw.

Well, I asked him all kinds of questions. His answers just didn't make no sense. He said he couldn't recall just what it was he wanted to see Stoye about. He said he had never met Stoye and had never been out here before. He said he got the address from knowing the phone number; went right up to the telephone company and wormed it out of one of the girls there. He said he didn't remember at all where he got the number from. I looked at the number just out of curiosity; it was Homeland 2065, which didn't mean nothing to me.

After that there wasn't anything to do until the homicide squad got there. I knew the kid's old man, this Daniels, would have to get dragged into it, but that wasn't for me to do; that would be up to the detective looey. I turned the kid over to Sam.

I remember Sam's face just then; it turned pale. I asked him what was the matter but he just swallowed hard and said he didn't know; maybe it was the pickles he had with his midnight munch. He took the kid into the front room and they got into a fine conversation about cops and murders. He sure seemed to be a nice, healthy, normal kid.

Quiet and obedient—you know. I can't really blame Sam for what happened.

The squad arrived—two carloads, sirens and all, making so much noise I thought sure Stoye would get up and tell 'em to let him rest in peace—and in they came—photogs, print men, and the usual bunch of cocky plainclothesmen. They swarmed all over.

Flick was the man in charge, stocky, tough, mad at everybody all the time, especially on the night detail. Man, how he hated killers that worked at night and dragged him away from his pinochle!

I told the whole story to him and his little book.

"His name's Tommy," I said, "and he says he lives at—"

"His name's Ronnie," says Sam, from behind me.

"Hey," I says. "I thought I told you to stay with him."

"I had to go powder my nose," says Sam. "My stomach done a flip-flop a while back that had me worried. It's okay. Brown was dusting in the room there when I went out. And besides, that's a nice little kid. He wouldn't—"

"Brown!" Flick roared.

Brown came out of the living room. "Yeah, chief."

"You done in the front room?"

"Yeah; everything I could think of. No prints except Stoye's, except on the phone. I guess they'd be Sam's."

"The kid's all right?"

"Was when I left," said Brown, and went back into the living room. Flick and me and Sam went into the front room.

The kid was gone.

Sam turned pale.

"Ronnie!" he bellows. "Hey you, Ronnie!"

No answer.

"You hadda go powder your big fat nose," says Flick to Sammy. Sam looked bad. The soft seats in a radio car feel good to a harness bull, and I think Sam decided right then that he'd be doing his job on foot for quite a while.

It was easy to see what had happened. Sammy left the room, and then Brown got finished and went out, and in those few seconds he was alone the kid had stepped through the short hall into the kitchen and out the side door.

Sam looked even worse when I suddenly noticed that the ten-inch ham slicer was gone from the knife rack; that was one of the first things I looked at after I saw Stoye had been stabbed. You always look for the kitchen knives in a home stabbing.

Flick turned to Sam and opened his mouth, and in that

moment, believe me, I was glad I was me and not him. I thought fast.

"Flick," I said, "I know where that kid's going. He was all worried about what his old man would think. Here—I got his address in my book."

Flick snapped, "Okay. Get down there right away. I'll call what's-his-name—Daniels—from here and tell him to wait for the kid and hold him if he shows up before you do. Get down there, now, and hurry. Keep your eyes peeled on the way; you might see him on the street. Look out for that knife. Kelly, get a general alarm out for that kid soon's I'm off the phone. Or send it from your car."

He turned back to me, thumbed at Sam. "Take him with you," he says, "I want him out of my sight. And if his hot damned nose gets shiny again see he don't use your summons book."

We ran out and piled into the car and took off. We didn't go straight to Daniels' address. Sam hoped we would see the kid on the way; I think he had some idea of a heroic hand-to-hand grapple with the kid in which maybe he'd get a little bit stabbed in line of duty, which might quiet Flick down some.

So we cut back and forth between Myrtle Avenue and Varick; the kid could've taken a trolley on one or a bus on the other. We found out soon enough that he'd done neither; he'd found a cab; and I'd like to know who it was drove that hack.

He must've been a jet pilot.

It was real dark on Daniels' street. The nearest streetlight was a couple hundred feet away, and there was a big maple tree in Daniels' yard that cast thick black shadow all over the front of the house. I missed the number in the dark and pulled over to the curb; I knew it must be somewhere around here.

Me and Sam got out and Sam went up on the nearest porch to see the house number; Daniels was two doors away. That's how it was we happened to be far to the left of the house when the killer rang Daniels' bell.

We both saw it, Sam and me, that small dark shadow up against Daniels' front door. The door had a glass panel and there was some sort of a night light on inside, so all we saw was the dark blob waiting there, ringing on the bell. I guess Daniels was awake, after Flick's phone call.

I grabbed Sam's arm, and he shook me free. He had his

gun out. I said, "What are you gonna do?" He was all hopped up, I guess.

He wanted to make an arrest or something. He wanted to be The Man here. He didn't want to go back on a beat. He said, "You know how Stoye was killed. Just like that."

That made sense, but I said, "Sam! You're not going to shoot a kid!"

"Just wing him, if it looks—"

Just then the door opened. There wasn't much light. I saw Daniels, a stocky, balding man with a very mild face, peering out. I saw an arm come up from that small shadowy blob. Then Sam fired twice. There was a shrill scream, and the clatter of a knife on the porch. I heard Ronnie yell, "Dad! Dad!"

Then Sam and I were pounding over to the house. Daniels was frozen there, staring down onto the porch and the porch steps.

At the foot of the steps the kid was huddled. He was unconscious. The ham slicer gleamed wickedly on the steps near his hand.

I called out, "Mr. Daniels! We're the police. Better get back inside."

And together Sam and I lifted up the kid. He didn't weigh much. Going inside, Sam tripped over his big flat feet and I swore at him.

We put the kid down on the couch. I didn't see any blood. Daniels was dithering around like an old lady. I pushed him into a chair and told him to stay there and try to take it easy.

Sam went to phone Flick. I started going over the kid.

There was no blood.

There were no holes in him, either; not a nick, not a graze. I stood back and scratched my head.

Daniels said, "What's wrong with him? What happened?"

Inside, I heard Sam at the phone. "Yeah, we got 'im. It was the kid all right. Tried to stab his old man. I winged him. Huh? I don't know. We're looking him over now. Yeah."

"Take it easy," I said again to Daniels. He looked rough. "Stay right there."

I went to the door, which was standing open. Over by the porch rail I saw something shining green and steel blue. I started over to it, tripped on something yielding, and went flat on my face. Sam came running out. "What's the—*uh!*" and he came sailing out and landed on top of me. He's a big boy.

I said, "My goodness, Sam, that was careless of you," or words to that effect, and some other things amounting to maybe Flick had the right idea about him.

"Damn it, Delehanty," he says, "I tripped on something. What are you doing sprawled out here, anyway?"

"I was looking for—" and I picked it up, the green and steel blue thing. It was a Finnish sheath knife, long and pointed, double razor edges, scrollwork up near the hilt. Blood, still a bit tacky, in the scrollwork.

"Where'd that come from?" grunted Sam, and took it. "Hey! Flick just told me the medic says Stoye was stabbed with a two-edged knife. You don't suppose—"

"I don't suppose nothin'," I said, getting up. "On your feet, Sam. Flick finds us like this, he'll think we're playing mumblety-peg . . . tell you what, Sam; I took a jump knife off the kid out there, and it only had a single edge."

I went down the steps and picked it up. Sam pointed out that the kid had never had a chance to use the ham slicer.

I shrugged that off. Flick was paid the most for thinking—let him do most of the thinking. I went to the side of the door and looked at the bell push to get an idea as to how it might take prints, and then went inside. Sam came straight in and tripped again.

"Pick up ya feet!"

Sam had fallen to his knees this time. He growled something and, swinging around, went to feeling around the porch floor with his hands. "Now it's patty-cake," I said. "For Pete's sake, Sam—"

Inside Daniels was on the floor by the couch, rubbing the kid's hands, saying, real scared like, "Ronnie! Ronnie!"

"Delehanty!"

Half across the room, I turned. Sam was still on his knees just outside the door, and his face was something to see. "Delehanty, just come here, will you?"

There was something in his voice that left no room for a wisecrack. I went right to him. He motioned me down beside him, took my wrist and pushed my hand downward.

It touched something, but—*there was nothing there.*

We looked at each other, and I wish I could write down what that look said.

I touched it again, felt it. It was like cloth, then like flesh, yielding, then bony.

"It's the Invisible Man!" breathed Sam, bug-eyed.

"Stop talking nonsense," I said thickly. "And besides, it's a woman. Look here."

"I'll take your word for it," said Sam, backing away. "Anyhow, I'm a married man."

Cars came, screaming as usual. "Here's Flick."

Flick and his mob came streaming up the steps.

"What's going on here? Where's the killer?"

Sam stood in front of the doorway, holding his hands out like he was unsnarling traffic. He was shaking. "Walk over this side," he said, "or you'll step on her."

"What are you gibbering about? Step on who?"

Sam flapped his hands and pointed at the floor. Flick and Brown and the others all looked down, then up again. I don't know what got into me. I just couldn't help it. I said, "He found a lady-bug and he don't want you to step on it."

Flick got so mad, so quick, he didn't even swear.

We went inside. The medic was working over the boy, who was still unconscious. Flick was demanding, "Well! Well? What's the matter with him?"

"Not a thing I can find out, not without a fluoroscope and some blood tests. Shock, maybe."

"Shot?" gasped Daniels.

"Definitely not," said the M.O.

Flick said, very, very quietly, "Sam told me over the phone that he had shot the boy. What about this, Delehanty? Can you talk sense, or is Sam contagious?"

I told him what we had seen from the side of the house. I told him that we couldn't be sure who it was that rang the bell, but that we saw whoever it was raise a knife to strike, and then Sam fired, and then we ran up and found the kid lying at the bottom of the steps. We heard a knife fall.

"Did you hear him fall down the steps?"

"No," said Sam.

"Shut up, you," said Flick, not looking at him. "Well, Delehanty?"

"I don't think so," I said, thinking hard. "It all happened so fast."

"It was a girl."

"What was a girl? Who said that?"

Daniels shuffled forward. "I answered the door. A girl was there. She had a knife. A long one, pointed. I think it was double-edged."

"Here it is," said Sam brightly.

Flick raised his eyes to heaven, moved his lips silently, and took the knife.

"That's it," said Daniels. "Then there was a gunshot, and she screamed and fell."

"She did, huh? Where is she?"

"I—I don't know," said Daniels in puzzlement.

"She's still there," said Sam smugly. I thought, oh-oh. This is it.

"Thank you, Sam," said Flick icily. "Would you be good enough to point her out to me?"

Sam nodded. "There. Right there," and he pointed.

"See her, lying there in the doorway," I piped up.

Flick looked at Sam, and he looked at me. "Are you guys trying to—*uk!*" His eyes bulged, and his jaw went slack.

Everyone in the room froze. There, in plain sight on the porch, lay the body of a girl. She was quite a pretty girl, small and dark. She had a bullet hole on each side of her neck, a little one here and a great big one over here.

VII

Told by the Author

THEODORE STURGEON

I DON'T much care for the way this story's going.

You want to write a story, see, and you sit down in front of the mill, wait until that certain feeling comes to you, hold off a second longer just to be quite sure that you know exactly what you want to do, take a deep breath, and get up and make a pot of coffee.

This sort of thing is likely to go for days, until you are out of coffee and can't get more until you can pay for same, which you can do by writing a story and selling it; or until you get tired of messing around and sit down and write a yarn purely by means of knowing how to do it and applying the knowledge.

But this story's different. It's coming out as if it were being dictated to me, and I'm not used to that. It's a haywire sort of yarn; I have no excuses for it, and can think of no reasons for such a plot having unfolded itself to me. It isn't that I can't finish it up; far from it—all the plot factors tie themselves neatly together at the end, and this with no effort on my part at all.

This can be demonstrated; it's the last chapter that bothers me. You see, I didn't write it. Either someone's playing

a practical joke on me, or— No. I prefer to believe someone's playing a practical joke on me.

Otherwise, this thing is just too horrible.

But about that demonstration, here's what happened:

Flick never quite recovered from the shock of seeing that sudden corpse. The careful services of the doctor were not required to show that the young lady was dead, and Flick recovered himself enough to start asking questions.

It was Daniels who belatedly identified her as the nurse he had seen at the hospital the day Mrs. Stoye killed herself. The nurse's name was Lucille Holder. She had come from England as a girl; she had a flawless record abroad and in this country. The head doctor told the police on later investigation, that he had always been amazed at the tremendous amount of work Miss Holder could turn out, and had felt that inevitably some sort of a breakdown must come. She went all to pieces on Mrs. Stoye's death, and he sent her on an immediate vacation.

Her movements were not difficult to trace, after she left the administrative office, where she ascertained Mr. Daniels' address. She went first to his house, and the only conclusion the police could come to was that she had done so on purpose to kill him. But he was not there: he, it seems, had been trying to find her at the hospital at the time! So she left. The following night she went out to Stoye's, rang the bell, and killed him.

Ronnie followed her, apparently filled with the same unaccountable impulse, and was late. Miss Holder went then to Daniels' house and tried to kill him, but was shot by the policeman, just as Ronnie, late again, arrived.

Ronnie lay in a coma for eight weeks. The diagnosis was brain fever, which served as well as anything else. He remembered little, and that confused. He did, however, vouch for the nurse's visit to his home the night of Mrs. Stoye's death. He could not explain why he had kept it a secret from his father, nor why he had had the impulse to kill Mr. Stoye (he admitted this impulse freely and without any horror), nor how he had happened to think of finding Stoye's address through the information operator at the telephone company.

He simply said that he wanted to get it without asking any traceable questions. He also admitted that when he found that Mr. Stoye had already been kil'ed, he felt that he must secure another weapon and go and kill his father.

He says he remembers thinking of it without any emotion whatsoever at the time, though he was appalled at the thought after he came out of the coma.

"It's all like a story I read a long time ago," he said. "I don't remember doing these things at all; I remember seeing them done."

When the policeman shot Miss Holder, Ronnie felt nothing; the lights went out, and he knew nothing until eight weeks later.

These things remained unexplained to the participants:

Mrs. Stoye's disappearing body. The witnesses were the two Daniels and Miss Holder. Miss Holder could not report it; Ronnie did not remember it; Mr. Daniels kept his own counsel.

Lucille Holder's disappearing body. Daniels said nothing about this either, and for the rest of his life tried to forget it. The members of the homicide detail and the two prowl car men tried to forget it, too. It was not entered in the records of the case. It seemed to have no bearing, and all concerned were happy to erase it as much as possible. If they spoke of it at all, it was in terms of mass hypnosis—which was reasonably accurate, at that. . . .

Lucille Holder's motive in killing Mr. Stoye and in trying to kill Mr. Daniels. This could only be guessed at; it was simple to put it down to the result of a nervous breakdown after overwork.

Mrs. Stoye's suicide. This, too, was attributed to a mounting mental depression and was forgotten as quickly as possible.

And two other items must be mentioned. The radio patrolman Sam was called on the carpet by Detective Lieutenant Flick for inefficiency in letting the boy Ronnie go. He was not punished, oddly enough. He barely mentioned the corpse of Lucille Holder, and that there were witnesses to the fact that *apparently* the lieutenant had not seen it, though he had stepped right over it on the way into Daniels' house. Flick swore that he was being framed, but let Sam alone thereafter.

The other item has to do with Miss Jennie Beaufort, an operator in the Information Office of the telephone company. Miss Beaufort won a prize on a radio quiz—a car, a plane, two stoves, a fur coat, a diamond ring, a set of SwingFree Shoulder pads, and a 38-day South American cruise. She quit her job the following day, took the cruise, enjoyed it mightily, learned on her return that income tax

was due on the valuation of all her prizes, sold enough to pay the tax, and was so frightened at the money it took that she went back to work at her old job.

So, you see, these tangled deaths, these mad actions, were all explained, forgotten, rationalized—made to fit familiar patterns, as were Charles Fort's strange lights and shapes in the night, as were the Flying Discs, the disappearance of Lord Bathhurst, the teleportation of Kaspar Hauser, and the disappearance of the crew of the *Mary Celeste*.

I leave it to the reader to explain the following chapter. I found it by and in my typewriter yesterday afternoon (I'd been writing this story all the previous night). Physically, it was the most extraordinary looking manuscript I have ever seen.

In the first place the paper bails had apparently been released most of the time, and letters ran into each other and lines crossed and recrossed each other with wild abandon. In the second place there were very few capital letters; I was reminded of Don Marquis's heroic Archy the cockroach, who used to write long effusions while Mr. Marquis was asleep, by jumping from one key to the other.

But Archy was not heavy enough to operate the shift key, and so he eschewed the upper case characters. In the third place, the spelling was indescribable. It was a mixture of phonetics and something like Speed-writing, or ABC shorthand. It begins this way:

i mm a thngg wch livz n fantsy whr tru fantsy z fond n th mynz v mn.

I couldn't possibly inflict it all on you in its original form. It took me the better part of two hours just to get the pages in order—they weren't numbered, of course.

After I plowed through it myself, I understook a free translation. I have rewritten it twice since, finding more rhythm, more fluidity, each time, as I become familiar with the extraordinary idiom in which it was written. I think that as it now stands it closely follows the intent and mood of the original. The punctuation is entirely mine; I regard punctuation as inflection in print, and have treated this accordingly, as if it were read aloud.

I must say this: there are three other people who could conceivably have had access to this machine while I was asleep. They are Jeff and Les and Mary.

I know for a fact that Jeff, who is an artist, was busy the entire time with a nonobjective painting of unusual vividness and detail; I know how he works, and I know what the picture looked like when I quit writing for the night, and what it looked like when I woke up, and believe me, he must have been painting like mad the entire time—he and no one else.

As for Les, he works in the advertising department of a book publisher and obviously has not the literary command indicated by this manuscript.

And Mary—I am lucky enough to be able to say that Mary is very fond of me, and would be the last person in the world to present me with such a nasty jolt as is innate in this final chapter. Here it is; and please forgive me for this lengthy but necessary introduction to it, and for my intrusion; this sort of thing is strictly against the rules.

VIII

"?"

I AM a Thing which lives in fantasy, where true fantasy lives in the minds of men.

What fumbling is this, what clumsiness, what pain. . . . I who never was a weight, who never turned, coerced, nor pressed a person, never ordered, never forced—I who live with laughter, die with weeping, rise and hope and cheer with man's achievements, yet with failure and despair go numb and cold and silent and unnoticeable—what have I to do with agony?

Know me, mankind, know me now and let me be.

Know the worst. I feed on you. I eat and breathe no substance but a precious ether. No, not souls (but where a soul is strong and clean I live my best). I take this guarded essence where I can, and thrive on it; and when I choose a host I am imprisoned, for I may not leave him while he lives, and when he dies I must locate another to inhabit. And I have . . . powers.

But know this too: The thing that I take is the essence of joy—and in joy is created an excess of that which I need. I drink in your reservoir, yes; but when there is drought and the level is low, and your needs are increased, and the water turns bitter with flavors of worry, and anger, and fear, then I shrink and I soften, and lose all my hunger; and

then if you grieve, if your spirit is broken, if you should forget all the pleasure and glory and wonder of being a man—then I die. . . .

Such a death is not death as you know it. It is more a waiting unmoving within a soul's winter, to wake with the spring of the heart. But where people grieve over years, or let fear share their souls with me, then I must wait for the walls of my prison to crumble.

Then, after the death of my host I go drifting, seeking another. That is my Search, and in it, for me, is the ultimate cold. No human can know such a thing, for death, for a human, is kinder.

I am and I am not a parasite. I feed on your substance; yet what living thing in the world does not feed on the substance of others? And I take only excess—take only that which you radiate gaily when you feel joy.

When you feel otherwise, then I must wait, or must sleep, or must die. Where is the evil in being a parasite, when I take only a product which you never need? I demand only sustenance; that is the right of all living things. I ask in addition a thing which is simple enough—I ask to be left to myself, to encyst or to flower or sleep or be joyful, without any devilish probing.

I do not know how old I am; I do not know if there are others like me. I do not know how many hosts I have inhabited, or whether I was born or hatched, or whether, like a human, I must one day truly die. I shall, no doubt; I am alive, and nothing lives forever. I know my years are thousands, and my hosts have been in scores of hundreds. I have no interest in statistics.

Yet you must know me. . . . I think my origins were like a plant's—an accidental seed of sensuality perhaps. My infancy was passed in dreams, in sightless stirrings when the stimulation merited, and blacknesses between. I think that when my hosts passed on, my knotted insubstantial cyst just drifted like a petal on a roiling stream, it bumped and nuzzled and at last slipped in when chance presented hosts which qualified.

To qualify, in those uncaring phases, men had but to show an openness and nothing more. And when I gained experience and consciousness increased, and realization came to me, and I was grown and had ability to choose, I gained as well the power of rejection.

And after that I was no longer bound to sickly children, open to me through their thirst for colors, senses, odors, viv-

id to them through unsaid convictions that the end was near. I became increasingly meticulous in choosing; I became an expert in detecting signs of whimsy-richness in its earliest potential. I have powers. . . .

You have powers too, you human ones. You can change the color of a life by vicious striking at a stranger-child. You can give away a thing you treasure, making memories which later might compose a symphony. You can do a thousand thousand things you never do; you never try; there is no reason to depart from paths you have established. When, however, circumstances force you into it, you do the "superhuman."

Once my host was Annabelle, a woman on a farm. (She loved the birds!) In a blizzard she was lost; she was old and had a crippled knee, and could not find the road, and could not last the night. She stumbled on a post which stood erect and lonesome on the prairie, and, without a conscious thought of bravery, or what mankind might say to her, she put a hand upon the weathered wood, and in the blowing snow and bitter cold, she walked around the post—around and around, in spite of age and pain and growing numbness, walked around the post until the sun came up in blowing gray, then growing cold.

They found her and they saved her, when in truth she saved herself. There was about her such a cloud of pure achievement, such a joy at having cheated wind and cold! (I fed that day; I still possess the energies she radiated!) . . . I have powers; all have powers, when we're forced to use them. I have powers, you have too, which you have never cataloged.

I have powers—now I use them!

I have no host. Such bitterness and agony as I have just experienced I never want again. My Search, this time, will be a thorough one and for it, now, I make my sacrifice. I am unknown; but with this script, these purposely hypnotic words, *I shall be known!* I sacrifice my privacy, my yearning for the pleasant weightless dark where I have dwelt. I challenge mankind's probing, for, through these bright words and burnished continuities, I shall locate a host who will defend me!

I had a man—he had me, possibly—who would have fought for me. And after him I dwelt within a woman's mind—the richest and most magical to all. The man was one of those who, on maturing, never lost the colorful ability to wonder like a child. And one day, miming, imitating a precise and

dainty minuet in joyful incongruity (he danced alone upon the bouncing platform of a truck) a falling girder struck him and he died. I had no warning and no way to make a Search; I flung myself into the mind of one who was nearby in close communion with my dead host's whimsy.

Grace had a mind that was magic throughout. Never in thousands of years have I seen such a shimmering jewel; never in thousands of pages of words found in thousands of languages could such a trove be described. All that she saw was transmuted in sibilant subleties; all that she heard was in breath-taking colors and shapes. What she touched, what she said, what she saw, what she felt, what she thought —these were all blended in joy.

She was the pinnacle; she was the source of the heady exuberant food which in flavor eclipsed my most radiant memories. She, like the blizzard of Annabelle—she was the suitable circumstance, bringing about the release of the powers I held all untried.

I stirred in her mind. I found I could reach out and touch certain sources of hunger—sights that she never had seen and sensations she never had turned to, things which should surely delight such a sensitive soul.

I found to my joy that with care I controlled them, the hungers for things I remembered in hosts less responsive. I practiced this skill as she broadened her life, and I led her to music and poems and thoughts which she never, perhaps, could have found by herself. She had every reason for happiness with all these riches, and I—oh, I gloried in bringing things to her, as many a gifted composer has brought a new music to some virtuoso.

But her husband was Stove.

Stove was a devil. He hated me for what I was, before he could define it. His mind was quite as rich as hers, but something curbed it. Growing with her was impossible; he sensed with rare perception that a Thing had come to her, and since that Thing was not of him, he hated it. It mattered not to him that she was better for it. Brutally he turned away from sharing what I brought into his home.

And she—I could not take her from him. How I tried! Poor treasure trove, she was at last a battleground between that questing creature and myself. He hounded me through her, and I struck back by taking her to rare enchantments in which he could not share.

He was the first—the very first—of all the humans I have known, to recognize me and to seek me out. This recogni-

tion was intolerable; all my life I have avoided it, and lived in war and secret joyfulness. He goaded me until I evidenced myself; I never realized I could make a human speak, but Grace spoke for me when she said that "It wants only to be let alone."

She might as well have died, right then and there, for all the sustenance I got from here thereafter. I knew that she would kill herself; between us, her and me, there was a madness caught from Stoye.

Stoye put her, numb and docile, in the hospital. I started to encyst, for Grace's well was dry to me. I found a likely subject in the nurse, who seemed as sensitive as Grace (but lacked that fine capacity for whimsy) and I poised myself to make the change. While waiting, then, I thought of Stoye—and realized that, with Grace's death, he would not rest until he found me and destroyed me, either by attacking all my hosts, or if he learned the way of it, by closing minds against me by his printed propaganda. He had to be destroyed.

Grace killed herself; her one blind foolishness, her love for Stoye, and all her stupid thoughts that she had lost it, made her do it. I might have stopped her; but why should I, when I needed a release from all her bitterness? Believe me, it was just as strong as all her joys had been . . . before she leaped she tried to warn him, tried to send some crazy message to him through a youngster standing down below.

My connection with her was not close just then; I am not sure; she still was set on death as an escape but wished her husband to be watchful and protect himself. And then she leaped.

And then it came—that awful amputation.

I could not know that Ronnie was so strong a host, potentially—that so well suited to me was he that, as I flashed upward to the nurse, to take possession, I was torn apart!

I have no substance; yet I am an entity, with limits and with boundaries. These were ruptured; while my greater part found room within the nurse's mind, a fragment nestled into Ronnie's.

At first I felt a transcendental pain and dizziness; and then I did the things I could to be protected. I hid the crumpled body with a forced hypnotic wave (this is no subtle mystery; a thousand men can do it) to keep the wave of terror all confused with curiosity, for terror undiluted quite inhibits my possession of a host.

I settled into Lucille Holder's mind and tested the controls which Stoye had forced me to develop. Lucille was far less strong than Grace had been, and forcing her was easy. I was wounded, I was maddened, and at last I drank, with purpose and a new dark joy, the thing called hate.

Stoye had to die. The man called Daniels, Ronnie's father, saw Grace leap and was a witness. Possibly he might become too curious, with his son possessed, and be another probing devil. He must die. Ronnie had a part of me, and I did not think he could release it while he lived. So he must die.

To test my new controls, I sent the nurse at first to do the minor task. The elder Daniels was not there; and when I found myself confronted with that other part of me, I nearly died of yearning. And I realized, in that closeness, that the boy could be controlled as well, and that he could destroy his father quite at my convenience, while Lucille could kill him later. Satisfied, I went away.

I spent that night and all next day securing my controls, and practicing. And late the night that followed, I killed Stoye, and two strange things happened.

One was when Stoye died; I felt a wave of powerful protectiveness about him as he fled his body, and I sensed again the fullest, richest magic that was Grace. I was terrified of it; I had never known before that humans could outlive their carcasses . . .

The other thing was the arrival of Ronnie, apparently moved by the part of me carried within him. Yet since he possessed but a fragment, his effort was late and his motive was weak, and I feared that he might make a botch of the killing of Daniels. I therefore sent Lucille to do it; Ronnie, again weak and tardy, followed my orders.

The gunshot, the bullet which shattered the neck of the nurse, were quite unexpected. I was flung unprepared into cold, in my nakedness, cold indescribable, cold beyond bearing. Yet I was glad; for the fraction of me that was Ronnie's came streaming toward me as I was exploded away from the nurse. The wrench it gave Ronnie must have been dreadful; when I settle into a host all my roots go down deep.

I hid Lucille's body and searched all the minds in the house for a suitable host. Ronnie was perfect, unconscious and closed. Daniels was fretful; I can't abide fear. I fought back the cold, drew inward, contracted, and formed, at long last, a new cyst. I let Lucille's body be seen, and ignoring

the others—their whimsy was as flat as their oversized feet—I withdrew.

And I have been thinking.

Some things were important that now cannot matter. I am different because of the searchings of Stoye—I blame him for all that has happened, and that is a thing which can no longer matter.

I know how to hate now, and how to make murder; the taste of these things is still bitter, but so is the taste of good stout when first taken, and stout has a taste worth acquiring. Like Grace I still have all my earlier qualities—the sun on a mountain or watching the curve of the wing of a gull (through a host) certainly has all the zest for me that it has ever had. Now I have more, though; and that is a thing which can matter very much indeed.

I have been selfish. It never occurred to me, back in the days of the man who did minuets joyfully, that I might do something *for* him whom I choose as a host. Grace taught me that, purely by feeding me richly through her experiences, purely by being a subject for my schooled suggestions. There may have been many who carried me, who were susceptible to my control.

I could not know without trying, and I never tried this command until Grace took me in. And since then I hunger, I thirst for the richness and beauty and shifting and changing of colors and sounds which she brought me, and never again will rest and be fed and be happy to have just enough to sustain me.

I drift, now, encysted, but testing my powers when never before had I thought of them. I find I am mobile; also, to certain degrees, I can move things—this writing machine, for example, though it is slow and laborious. I find I can whisper to humans and fit some strange thoughts and ideas to each other.

I have looked for a host for a weary, cold while, and my energies seem to be dwindling. I still have enough, though, to search for a time, and soon now I'll have what I need.

I'll find, soon, a person, a man or a woman, or even a sensitive child. This one will be mine and I'll lead him to wonders of sense and of music and heady adventure. I think I am learning to savor the tartness of terror, the bloody salt flavor of killing with purpose. My host will exist in a series of colorful pageants and move in a world of emotional riches, all of my carefulest choosing.

And for this I sacrifice that which I guarded—my passion

for quiet and secret enjoyments. I say to you, Know me! Suspect me! for by your suspicion you open yourself to my coming. And when some great mural is painted by someone who never did passable work in his life before that, suspect me. And when in a prison some cringing psychotic says, over and over, "A voice said to do it!" suspect me.

Whenever you walk in the street and feel a strange spasm of nausea, suspect me indeed; for then I am injured, and what you have seen is a part-host like Ronnie; and know that that person must die—and can kill if I will it.

I am so cold. . . .

I write this because in my search for a host who is perfect, I find that one segment of humans is almost entirely open. These are the readers and tellers of tales of the dark and of terror and madness. The one who has written these chapters would serve as a host—but I fear he would turn on me, feed on my memories, use me for piddling profit in plying his trade.

Besides, he's a bit superficial for one of my tastes. I know his intentions, however, and what he will do with this script. I know he is frightened because of the way this long tale has unfolded, I know, too, that nothing will keep him from seeing it printed.

When it is read, though, by thousands of like-minded people over the world, and he hears of the music and murder created by someone who fell to me only through reading it, then he will curse and will wish he were dead, and wish he had torn this to pieces.

THE GRAVEYARD READER

THE STONE was included in the price of the plot; I hadn't known. I hadn't wanted a stone because stones have to say something, and what can you say in a case like this? But unwittingly I'd bought the thing and because I had, the man had put it up—what else? I had anger enough to scatter around heart-deep, but, reasonably, not a flake for the men who had put up the stone.

It was a right and proper stone, I supposed, if one must have one of the things at all: bigger than many of the cheating, bargain sort of stones that stood nearby, and tastefully smaller than the hulking ostenatious ones. *Here lies my wife between poverty and vulgarity.* Now there you go. Have a single elevating thought about that woman and it comes out sounding like that. Soils everything she touches.

The stone called me a liar for that. It was of a whitish granite that would weather whiter still. It had edges of that crinkly texture like matted hair that nothing would stick to because nothing could possibly want to, and a glossy face that nothing would stick to if it wanted nothing else. Whited sepulcher, that's what the hell. The stone is its own epitaph, because look: it's white forever, white and clean, and it has no words—which is to say, nothing. Nothing, and clean, ergo, *Here lies nothing clean.*

What I always say is, there's a way to say anything in the world if you can only think of the way to say it, and I had. I liked this epitaph just fine. There would be no words on this stone, and it had its epitaph.

Laughing out loud is bad form in a graveyard, and stepping down hard on a man's instep is bad form anywhere. This was the moment when, backing off for some perspective on this my masterpiece, I did both these things. The man, apparently, had been standing behind me watching. I whirled and looked him up and down, hoping sincerely that he was offended. There are times in a man's life when he wouldn't want even his friends to like him, and such a time is no time to pay court to the esteem of a stranger.

He wasn't offended. All I got out of him (just then) was a pleasant smile. He had a sort of anybody's face, the like of which you might encounter anywhere, which is to say he had the kind of face you wouldn't be surprised to see visiting a cemetery. I'll say this for him: he was harmonious; his voice and clothing exactly suited his face, and though he wasn't an old man, the things he said weren't hard to figure, coming from a man like that. You could tell he was experienced.

Neither of us said anything right away when I bumped him. He sort of put his hands on my shoulders for a second either to hold one of us up or to keep the other from falling, which gave the gesture a full fifty per cent chance of being selfish, and I am not about to give away a thank-you in the face of those odds. As for an excuse-me, I didn't want to be excused, I wanted to be blamed. So I glared at

first, while he smiled, and after those things got used up there was nothing for it but to stand where we were, side by side, looking at my wife's grave because that was straight ahead and we couldn't just go on looking at each other. It was while we were doing this that he said, "Mind if I read it?"

I looked at him. Even if this had been the perfect time and place for joking, a face that looked the way his face looked contained no jests. I looked from him to the bland, uncommunicative sheet of stone and the raw mound with its neat planes still unslumped by wind or water, and I looked back at him. It occurred to me then that maybe his eyes weren't so good, and he honestly didn't know there was nothing on the stone. "Yes," I said as offensively as I could, "I mind."

He put up his hands placatingly, and said in that same good-natured way, "All right, all *right*! I won't." And he gave me a sort of friendly half-wave and started off.

I looked at the grave and at his retreating back and "Hey!" I called before I realized I wanted to.

He came back, smiling. "Yes?"

I felt robbed, that's why I called him back. I'd realized I wanted to see his face when he got close enough to squint at that unmarked stone. I said, "What I mean is, I'd mind if anyone read anything off that. It would give me the creeps."

He didn't even glance toward the grave, but said patiently, "It's all right. I promised you I wouldn't."

I said, "Oh for God's sake," disgustedly, and with an angry motion beckoned him to follow me. I had that oafish feeling you get when you tell a joke and somebody doesn't get it, so instead of letting the matter drop you lay your ears back and start explaining, knowing perfectly well that when you finally get the point across it isn't going to be funny, either to your victim or to yourself. I ranged up on one side of the grave and he came up and crossed over and stood at the other side, not four feet away from the headstone. He was looking right at it, but didn't say anything, so I barked, "Well?"

"Well," he asked politely, "what?"

The oafish feeling intensified. "Don't you find the language of that epitaph a little on the terse side?" I said sarcastically.

He glanced at it. "There's never very much on the stone," he said, and added, as if to himself, "while it's new."

"New or old," I said, and I guess I showed something of

the anger I felt, "the way it is is the way it stays. Anything that gets written on the rock is not going to be written by me."

"Naturally not," he said.

To make it quite clear, I said, "Or by anyone I hire."

"Well," he said comfortingly, "don't worry. I won't read it, now or later."

"You can say that again," I growled. I was finally coming to a certainty about this grave. "The less said about this whole thing, including her *and* her slab, the better. That was her strong point anyway; keeping her mouth shut. At long last, anything she's hiding, she can keep. I don't want to hear it."

"Then you won't," he said peacefully, "and neither will I, because I've promised." After a sort of pause, he added, "I think I ought to warn you, though, that somebody else might come along and read it, not knowing of your objections."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not the only one in the world who can read graves."

"I told you—I'm not putting any inscription on. Not a monogram. Not so much as *Hers,* or even—hey, this would be cute: *Her lies.* Not that she was really ever a liar. She just wouldn't *say.*"

"The inscriptions never say very much by themselves," he said in his patient voice, "taken out of context."

"What do you mean, context?"

"I don't think you quite understood me. I didn't say I read gravestones. I said I read graves."

I looked blankly at that tidy, tamped-down mound and the virgin stone, and back at the shovel-patted yellow earth turning grainy in the late warm sunlight, and a more uncommunicative arrangement I had never laid eyes on. It conveyed nothing about her, and for that matter, nothing about anyone else. Me, for instance. No flowers.

"Not this one, you can't," I said finally.

"I wouldn't."

"That promise of yours," I said with a certain amount of smug enmity, "comes in pretty handy, doesn't it? I think I see what you're driving at, and I don't think it's any too funny. You've spent a lot of time ghouling around places like this until you can tell to a dime what the planting cost, how much the survivors give a damn, if any, how long the box has been buried, and how good a job the crew did on the detail. But any time there's a little more than readily meets

the eye, like a guy who says he won't have an inscription after paying for a stone, you don't have to risk a wrong guess. You just make a gentlemanly promise, casuallike." I snorted through my nostrils.

He still wouldn't let me annoy him. He simply explained where I was wrong. He said, "It isn't like that at all. There's nothing to deduce, or to guess at. It's all there," he said, nodding at but not looking at the grave, "to be read. I'll admit that it's a little harder to do on a very new grave; you might say that it's all in very fine print and a little hard to see unless you read well. But in time it all comes clear—very clear. As to the promise, it's very obvious that you wouldn't want a stranger like myself to know everything about her."

"Everything?" I laughed bitterly. "Nobody knows everything about *her*."

"Well, it's all there."

"You know what's happened to me," I said a little too loudly and a little too fast, "I'm a little bit out of my head from all that's happened the last week or so, which makes me stand here listening to you as if you made sense."

He didn't say anything.

"By God," I mumbled, not talking to him or to anyone special at the moment, "it wasn't too long ago I'd given anything you like to know some things about that woman. Only since I made up my mind I don't want to know, I feel much better," I said feeling miserable. "You know what she did, she wasn't home when I got there that night, we'd had a little sort of fight the morning before, and that night she was just gone. No note and she didn't pack anything or take anything but that one green tweed suit and that stupid hat she used to wear with it. If she had any money it wasn't much. Then, nothing for three whole days and nights, until that phone call." My hands got all knotted up and then seemed to get too heavy, pulling my shoulders into a slump. I sat down on the edge of an iron pipe railing at the edge of the next grave and let the heavy hands dangle down between my thighs. I hung my head down so I could watch them while I talked. Watching them didn't tell me anything. "Phone call from the police who found her driver's license in her handbag, the one that matched that stupid hat."

I raised my head and looked across the grave at the man. I couldn't see him too clearly until I hit myself across the eyes with my sleeve. The cuff buttons had got themselves turned around, and it hurt. "Eight hundred miles from

home with some guy in a sports car, and all she had on was one of those fancified bathrobes, you know, hostess gown, a good one, I never saw it before. Don't know where the green suit got to or the stupid hat either. Bag was in the car. Car was in an oak tree. No kidding. Upside down in an oak tree fifteen feet off the ground. The police said he had to be going a hundred and twenty to hit as hard as that. I never heard of him before. I don't know how she got there. I don't know why. Well," I said after I thought about it for a minute, "I guess I do know more or less why, but not *exactly* why; not exactly what was in her mind when she did whatever it was she did to get herself into that. I never knew exactly what was in her mind. I could never get her to say. She would—"

I guess at that point I stopped talking out loud, because it all turned into a series of swift pictures, one after the other, inside my head, too fast for words, and too detailed. *What's the matter?* I'd be saying, and her, kissing my hands, looking up at me with tears in her eyes: *Can't you see?* And again: me yelling at her, *Well if what I do makes you unhappy, why don't you tell me what you want? Go ahead, write the script, I'll play it.* And the way she'd turn her back when I talked like that, and I'd hear her voice softly: *If you'd only*—and *I just*—and then she'd stall, inarticulate, shake her head. She never talked enough. She never *said* the things that . . . that . . . World of feeling, spectrum of sensitivity, and no words, no dammit dammit words. Picture of her smiling, looking off, out, a little up; I say *What are you so happy about? Oh,* she says, coming back into the world, *Oh* . . . and whispers my name four times, smiling. Now what is that—communication?

"I got so there was nothing in the world for me, sleeping or waking or working or mixing a drink," I said aloud to the man, "but *why won't she tell me?* And right to the end, she did that to me. Wondering why she does this or that, why she wears one particular kind of look instead of another, maybe, after all, these things don't matter. But look how she winds up, dead in that new housecoat I didn't buy for her, eight hundred miles from home with a guy I don't know; all in the world I have now is *why? why?* and the idea that she wound it up in the one way where I'd never find out. I mean," I added as soberly as I could, because I was unaccountably out of breath, just from talking to a man, imagine? "I mean, not that I want to find out. Because I don't give a damn any more."

"Well, that's good then," he said, "because you'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

"What trouble?"

"Learning to read graves."

I got enormously tired of this conversation suddenly. "Now what good would it do me to learn a thing like that?"

"None," he said in that pleasant way of his. "You have just finished saying that you don't want to know anything about her, any more."

"It finally sinks in," I said sarcastically, "that what you're trying to tell me is that a person who can read graves can stand in front of one and read it like a book."

"A biography." He nodded.

"And get out of it everything that person ever did."

"Or said, or thought," he agreed.

I looked at the grave, its empty crumbling bare planes, its empty-faced headstone. I looked again, but briefly, at the events that had made it be here just where it was, when it was, containing what, and I wet my lips and said, "You're kidding."

He never seemed to answer what deserved no answer, that man.

I asked him, "Even things nobody ever knew before?"

"Especially those things," he said. "What you can see of a human being is only the outside of the top part of the surface. Now if everything—is there—" he pointed—"to be read—*everything*—then it follows that you can read far more than the most penetrating analysis of anything living." When I had no response to this, he said, "Living things aren't finished, you see. Everything they have ever been in contact with, each thought they have had, each person they have known—these things are still at work in them; nothing's finished."

"And when they're buried, they . . . do something to the grave? There's a real difference between one grave and another, or . . . a grave would be different if one person or another was buried in it?"

"It has to be that way," he said. Again one of those odd, waiting pauses, which I refused to take for myself. He said, "Surely you've had that feeling that a human being is too much, has too much, means too much just to go out like a light, or be eroded away like the soil of a dust bowl."

I looked at the grave. So new, so raw, so . . . blank. In a low voice, I asked, "What do you read?"

He understood what I meant: what are the "letters," the "words," the "grammar"?

He said, "A lot of things. The curve of the mound, the encroachment of growth on it—grass, weeds, mosses. The kind of vegetation that grows there, and the shape of each stem and leaf, even the veining in them. The flight of insects over it, the shadows they cast, the contours of rain rivulets as they form, as they fill, as they dry." He laughed deprecatingly. "It sounds like more than a man could learn, doesn't it?"

I thought it did.

He said, "You are so completely familiar with the act of reading that it never occurs to you how complex an act it is, or how vast is your accomplishment. You take in stride a variety of alphabets—upper case and lower case are very nearly two separate ones, and then upper and lower case in script are quite different from printing or typing. Old English and black-letter faces might slow you down but they won't stop you. Your eye measures light intensities between ink and paper: green letters on a yellow page wouldn't stop you. You select, without effort, just what you read on a page and what you do not. For example, every page of a book might have the book title at the top and a page number at the bottom, and you don't even know they're there. In a magazine or a newspaper, blocks of type might be broken up, carried over, interrupted by pictures or advertisements, and you sail right along reading what you are interested in and nothing else. You might notice a misprint or a misspelling, or even an out-of-context line of type lost in the middle of your paragraph, but in most cases it doesn't bother you much. In addition, you're reading in English—one of the richest of all languages, but also one of the most difficult, with irregular structure, spelling, and some pretty far-fetched semantic shorthand and shortcuts. But all these are the rarefied complications; to get back to basics, what about the letters themselves? The letter 'a' doesn't look like the sound—or several sounds—of 'a.' It's only a most arbitrary symbol, chosen by custom and usage to mean what it means."

"But . . . at least there's a system. I mean, an established alphabet. Accepted spelling. And—for all their exceptions, there are rules of grammar and syntax."

Again he said nothing, just waiting for me to come up with something or other. To think, perhaps.

I did, and said, "Oh. You mean—there *is* some such system I laughed suddenly. "A crooked thorn for the letter 'b,' and a line of mud for past tense?"

He smiled and nodded. "Not those, but things like those. Yes, that's the idea."

"Not as hard as it seems at first, hm?"

"The thing you try to put over to every first grader," he agreed. "But—it *is* hard. As hard as anything else you can study. Just as hopeless looking at times, too, when the overall pattern just won't emerge and all your work seems useless. Then—it comes clear, and you go on."

I looked at him and said, "I don't know why I believe you."

He waited until I said, "—but I'd like to learn that trick."

"Why?"

I glanced at the bare new grave. "You said . . . *'everything.'* You said I could find out what she did, with whom. And—why."

"That's right."

"So . . . let's go. Where do we start?" I went down on one knee and made an across-the-board gesture at my wife's grave.

"Not here." He smiled. "You don't use Dostoevsky as a first reader."

"Dostoevsky? *Her?*"

"They're all Dostoevskys. They can all express every shade of meaning of every event, and through what they think and feel one can see the meaning of all their world. Isn't that what makes a great writer?"

"I guess it is . . . but . . . great writer? *Her?*"

"She lived," he said. "Now what she was is . . . graven here. Living and feeling are things done by everybody. Writing on their graves is done by everybody. Dostoevsky, now, had what you might term a *previous* skill. He could do it while he was alive. Dead, they can all do it."

This guy made my head spin. I got up slowly and followed him to the "first reader." Like most such volumes, it was a very little one.

I went back every evening, after work, for nearly a year. I learned the meaning of the curl of a leaf and the glisten of wet pebbles, and the special significance of curves and angles. A great deal of the writing was unwritten. Plot three dots on a graph and join them; you now have a curve with certain characteristics. Extend that curve while maintaining the characteristics, and it has meaning, up where no dots are plotted. In just this way I learned to extend the

curve of a grass blade and of a protruding root, of the bent edges of wetness on a drying headstone.

I quit smoking so I could sharpen my sense of smell, because the scent of earth after a rain has a clarifying effect on graveyard reading, as if the page were made whiter and the ink darker. I began to listen to the wind, and to the voices of birds and small animals, insects and people; because to the educated ear, every sound is filtered through the story written on graves, and becomes a part of it.

The man met me every day; early or late, he was around. I never asked him anything about himself. Somehow that never came up. He never read anything to me. He would point out the "letters" and occasionally the "letter groups" like (analogously) "-ing" and "-ous" and "un-," and would correct me where I read it wrong. But when I got to where I could read whole sentences, he stopped me. He told me that the one thing I must never do is to read off what I read on a grave, aloud. Not even to him. Those who could read it, would, if they cared to. Those who could not must learn as I was learning, or not know what was written there. "There are reasons enough for not wanting to die," he told me, "without adding the fear that someone like you will go around abusing this privilege."

I would go home at night filled with a gray hope, that at last all the mysteries of that woman would be solved for me, and every sordid, rotten thing she had done and kept secret would be illuminated for me. I didn't sleep very well —I hadn't, since the day she left—and I had lots of time to think over the things she had done to me, and the things she probably had done to me, and the things she was doubtless capable of doing. Maybe this long period of insufficient sleep did something to me; I don't know, but I didn't mind it. I did my work at the office, enough to get along, saving my strength and my brain for the evening; and then I worked at my lessons. I worked.

We went from the "first readers" into more complicated stuff. You can have no idea how complicated a thing like a three-year-old is when you first start. The only thing that took me through this stage was his promise that however hopeless it looked, sooner or later the pattern would emerge and I'd understand and could go on. He was right. He was always right.

I began to learn about people. I began to find out how many were afraid of the same things—afraid of being shut out, of being found out, of being unloved, unwanted, or—worst of

all—unneeded. I learned how flimsy were the bases of so many of their fears, and how unimportant, in the long run, were the things on which so many of them pitifully spent their lives. More than anything else, I learned how uncharacteristic of most of them were their cruelties, how excusable their stupidities; in short, how damned decent they were.

I found out the differences between "the truth" and "all the truth." You can know some pretty terrible things about a person, and you can know they're true. But sometimes it makes a huge difference if you know what else is true too. I read something in a book once about an old lady who was walking along the street minding her own business when a young guy came charging along, knocked her down, rolled her in a mud puddle, slapped her head and smeared handsful of wet mud all over her hair. Now what should you do with a guy like that?

But then if you find out that someone had got careless with a drum of gasoline and it ignited and the old lady was splashed with it, and the guy had presence of mind enough to do what he did as fast as he did, and severely burn his hands in the doing of it, then what should you do with him?

Yet everything reported about him is true. The only difference is the amount of truth you tell.

Reading a grave, you read it all. All of the truth makes a difference—but what a difference—in the way you feel about people.

One day the man said to me, "I would say that there are only a half-dozen graves here that are beyond you. I think you're a pretty remarkable student."

I said thanks, but I'd blame the quality of the teaching. "You've taken an awful lot of trouble over me."

He shrugged. "It's what I do," he said inclusively. Then he waited.

I wondered what he was waiting for, and so searched back through what he had been saying. "Oh," I said, and with him, looked up at the north corner of the cemetery where my wife's grave lay. It wasn't sharp-planed any more, or bare. Everything about it had changed . . . been changed . . . except, of course, that unsoilable headstone. So, "Oh," I said. "I could read it"

"Easily," he said.

I went up there. I don't know if he followed me. I wasn't thinking about him any more. I came to the grave and stood

looking at it for a long time. I thought about her, and about the facts I had. Truths. The truth about her. The time I pried her out of a dark corner at a party with a drunk named Wilfred. The time she snatched a letter off the mantel when I came in and threw it into the fire. The time that guy on the boat laughed when her name was mentioned and then shut up when he found I was married to her. More than anything else, the fact of her death in the sports car, the fact of that housecoat, of the missing tweed suit and stupid hat. Now I could know. Now I could know what, where, and how many times. Now I could know why.

I guess I was up there for longer than I realized. When I came to myself it was almost dark, and growing cold. I almost fell when I started to walk. I walked slowly until my legs woke up and, seeing a light in the caretaker's building, went in to talk to the old fellow for a minute. I didn't see the graveyard reader around anywhere.

I was back the next morning. It was Saturday. The stonecutter was there already, crouched in front of my plot, tick-ticking away. I'd had to agree to time-and-a-half to get him, but I was willing. When at last I decided on an epitaph for that stone, I wanted it put there, and right *now*.

I walked up there to watch the man work. He knew his trade, that stonecutter, and he had almost finished. After a few minutes I was aware of someone standing next to me, and sure enough, it was the graveyard reader. "Hi."

"How are you?" he asked—not the way anyone else might ask, but meaning it: how was I? what had happened? how did I feel about it? was I all right?

"I'm all right," I said. Also, not the way you'd say it to just anybody.

Silently we watched the man finish up. I nodded to him and said it was fine. He grinned and gathered up his tools and the tarpaulin with the chips in it, and waved and went away. The reader and I stood looking at the inscription.

I said, a little embarrassed, "Not very original."

"But very effective," he answered.

"You think so? You really think so?"

He nodded, and that made me very, very glad. I hadn't meant to tell him, but it slipped out in one great big blurt: "I didn't read it."

"No?"

"No," I said. "I came up here and stood for a long time, thinking about . . . all the work I'd done to be able to

read it, and about—the truth, what kind of a difference *all* the truth makes. And I thought a lot about people, and about . . . *her.*"

"Yes," he said, interested and . . . non-prying.

"Yes, about her, the things she'd done, the things she could have done. The way she used to talk to me. Do you know, people like her, who aren't so hot with words—they have ways of talking, if you can read them, almost like a grave has?"

"I think you're right."

"Well, I thought about that too. And my own illiteracy . . ." I laughed in some sort of embarrassment and said, "Anyway, the way it wound up, I didn't read it. I went and ordered this epitaph instead."

"Why that particular one?"

We read it over together, and I said, "It's taken me over a year, and a pretty tough year at that, but this is what I wanted to say to her. This is what I want her to know, now and from now on, from me."

He laughed.

I confess to being a little annoyed at that, even after all I had gone through with this fellow. "What's funny?"

"*You're* saying that, to *her?*"

"Something wrong with that?"

"Sure is," he said. And he walked off, and when I called, he just waved, but kept on walking.

I turned to look back at the headstone, with its clean new inscription. I'd put it there because I wanted to say something to her that—

Me? say something to *her?*

No wonder he had laughed. A guy spends more than a year learning to read a grave, and then gets the silly notion that it's reading him.

So I read it again—not the grave; I would never read that—I read just the inscription. I read what she said to me, now, this morning, new and crisp and for the very first time: *Rest in peace.*

"Thanks, honey," I whispered, "I will," and I went on home and got the first real sleep I'd had since she'd left me.

THE OTHER MAN

WHEN he saw her again, he all but yelled—a wordless, painful bleat, one concentrated syllable to contain five years of loneliness, fury, self-revilement and that agony peculiar to the victim of "the other man." Yet he controlled it, throwing it with a practiced reflex to a tensing of his abdomen and the transient knotting of thigh muscles behind the desk, letting the impact strike as it should, unseen.

Outwardly, he was controlled. It was his job to know the language of eyelids, jaw muscles, lips, and it was his special skill to make them mute. He rose slowly as his nurse ushered her in and while she took the three short paces to meet him. He studied her with an impassive ferocity.

He might have imagined her in old clothes, or in cheap clothes. Here she was in clothes which were both. He had allowed, in his thoughts of her, for change, but he had not thought her nose might have been broken, nor that she might be so frighteningly thin. He had thought she would always walk like something wild . . . free, rather . . . but with stateliness, too, balanced and fine. And indeed she still did so; somehow that hurt him more than anything else could.

She stopped before the desk. He moved his hands behind him; her gaze was on them and he wanted her to look up. He waited until Miss Jarrell discreetly clicked the door shut.

"Osa," he said at last.

"Well, Fred."

The silence became painful. How long did that take—two seconds, three? He made a meaningless sound, part of a laugh, and came around the desk to shift the chair beside it. "Sit down, for heaven's sake."

She sat down and abruptly, for the first time since she had entered the office, she looked directly at him. "You look—you look well, Fred."

"Thanks." He sat down. He wanted to say something, but the only thing that would come readily to his lips was, "You're looking well, too"—such a patent lie that he couldn't tell it. And at last he found something else to say: "A lot has happened."

She nodded and her gaze found a corner of the tooled leather blotter frame on the desk. She studied it quietly.

"Five years," she said.

Five years in which she must have known everything about him, at first because such a separation is never sharp, but ragged, raveled, a-crackle with the different snaps of different threads at different times; and later, because all the world knew what he was, what he had done. What he stood for.

For him, five years at first filled with a not-Osa, like a sheet of paper from which one has cut a silhouette; and after that, the diminishing presence of Osa as gossip (so little of that, because anyone directly involved in gossip walks usually in a bubble of silence); Osa as rumor, Osa as conjecture. He had heard that Richard Newell had lost—left—his job about the time he had won Osa, and he had never heard of him working again.

Glancing at Osa's cheap clothes now, and the new small lines in her face, he concluded that whatever Newell had found to do, it could not have been much. Newell, he thought bitterly, is a man God made with only one victory in him and he's used it up.

"Will you help me?" Osa asked stridently.

He thought: Was I waiting for this? Is this some sort of reward, her coming to me for help? Once he might have thought so. At the moment, he did not feel rewarded.

He sat looking at her question as if it were a tangible object, a box of a certain size, a certain shape, made of some special material, which was not to be opened until he had guessed its contents.

Will you help me? Money? Hardly—Osa may have lost a great deal, but her towering pride was still with her. Besides, money settles nothing. A little is never enough and helps only until it is gone. A little more puts real solutions a bit further into the future. A whole lot buries the real problem, where it lives like a cancer or a carcinogen.

Not money, then. Perhaps a job? For her? No, he knew her well. She could get her own jobs. She had not, therefore she didn't want one. This could only mean she lived as

she did for Newell's sake. Oh, yes, he would be the provider, even if the illusion starved her.

Then a job for Newell? Didn't she know he couldn't be trusted with any responsible job and was not constituted to accept anything less? Of course she knew it.

All of which left only one thing. She must be sure, too, that Newell would accept the idea or she would not be here asking.

He said, "How soon can he start therapy?"

She *flickered,* all over and all at once, as if he had touched her with a high voltage electrode—the first and only indication she had evinced of the terrible tensions she carried. Then she raised her head, her face lit with something beyond words, something big enough, bright enough, to light and warm the world. His world. She tried to speak.

"Don't," he whispered. He put out his hand and then withdrew it. "You've already said it."

She turned her head away and tried to say something else, but he overrode that, too.

"I'll get paid," he said bluntly. "After his therapy, he'll earn more than enough—" (For both of us? For my bill? To pay you back for all he's done to you?) "—for everything."

"I should have known," she breathed. He understood. She had been afraid he wouldn't take Newell as a patient. She had been afraid, if he did take him, that he might insist on doing it free, the name of which was charity. She need not have worried. *I should have known.* Any response to that, from a shrug to a disclaimer, would destroy a delicacy, so he said nothing.

"He can come any time you say," she told him. This meant, *He isn't doing anything these days.*

He opened a desk book and riffled through it. He did not see it. He said, "I'd like to do some pretty intensive work with him. Six, eight weeks."

"You mean he'd stay here?"

He nodded. "And I'm afraid—I'd prefer that you didn't visit him. Do you mind very much?"

She hesitated. "Are you sure that . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sure I want to do it," he said, suddenly rough. "I'm sure I'll do everything I can to straighten him out, bar nothing. You wouldn't want me to say I was sure of anything else."

She got to her feet. "I'll call you, Fred." She watched his face for a moment. He did not know if she would want to

shake his hand or—or not. She took one deep breath, then turned away and went to the door and opened it.

"Thank you . . ."

He sat down and looked at the closed door. She had worn no scent, but he was aware of her aura in the room, anyway. Abruptly he realized that she had not said "Thank you."

He had.

Osa didn't call. Three days, four, the phone ringing and ringing, and never her voice. Then it didn't matter—rather, she had no immediate reason to call, because the intercom whispered, and when he keyed it, it said in Miss Jarrel's clear tones, "A Mr. Newell to see you, doctor."

Stupidly he said, "Richard A. Newell?"

Bzz Psss Bzz. "That's right, doctor."

"Send him in."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Send him in," said the doctor. *I thought that's what I said. What did it sound like?* He couldn't remember. He cleared his throat painfully. Newell came in.

"We-ell, Freddy boy." (Two easy paces; cocked head, half smile.) "A small world." Without waiting to be asked, he sat down in the big chair at the end of the desk.

At first glance, he had not changed; and then the doctor realized that it was the—what word would do?—the symphonic quality of the man, the air of perfect blending—it was that which had not changed.

Newell's diction had always suited the clothes he chose and his movements were as controlled as his speech. He still wore expensive clothes, but they were years old—yet so good they hardly showed it. The doctor was immediately aware that under the indestructible creases and folds was a lining almost certainly frayed through; that the elegant face was like a cheap edition printed from worn plates and the mind behind it an interdependence of flimsy parts so exactly matched that in the weak complex there was no weakest component. A machine in that condition might run indefinitely—idling.

The doctor closed his eyes with a brief impatience and consigned the concepts to the limbo of oversimplified analogies. "What do you want?"

Newell raised his eyebrows a fraction. "I thought you knew. Oh, *I* see," he supplemented, narrowing his eyes shrewdly. "One of those flash questions that are supposed to jolt the truth out of a man. Now let's see, just what did pop

into my head when you asked me that?" He looked at the top of the window studiously, then leaned forward and shot out a finger. "More."

"More?"

"More—that's the answer to that question. I want more money. More time to myself. More fun." He widened his eyes and looked disconcertingly into the doctor's. "More women," he said, "and better. Just—more. You know. Can do?"

"I can handle only so much," said the doctor levelly. His thighs ached. "What you do with what I give you will be up to you . . . What do you know about my methods?"

"Everything," said Newell off-handedly.

Without a trace of sarcasm, the doctor said, "That's fine. Tell me everything about my methods."

"Well, skipping details," said Newell, "you hypnotize a patient, poke around until you find the parts you like. These you bring up by suggestion until they dominate. Likewise, you minimize other parts that don't suit you and drive them underground. You push and you pull and blow up and squeeze down until you're satisfied, and then you bake him in your oven—I'm using a figure of speech, of course—until he comes out just the proper-sized loaf. Right?"

"You—" The doctor hesitated. "You skipped some details."

"I said I would."

"I heard you." He held Newell's gaze soberly for a moment. "It isn't an oven or a baking."

"I said that, too."

"I was wondering why."

Newell snorted—amusement, patronization, something like that. Not irritation or impatience. Newell had made a virtual career out of never appearing annoyed. He said, "I watch you work. Every minute, I watch you work; I know what you're doing."

"Why not?"

Newell laughed. "I'd be much more impressed in an atmosphere of mystery. You ought to get some incense, tapestries in here. Wear a turban. But back to you and your bake-oven, what-do-you-call-it—"

"Psychostat."

"Yes, psychostat. Once you've taken a man apart and put him together again, your psychostat fixes him in the new pattern the way boiling water fixes an egg. Otherwise he'd gradually slip back into his old, wicked ways."

He winked amiably.

Not smiling, the doctor nodded. "It is something like that. You haven't mentioned the most important part, though."

"Why bother? Everybody knows about *that.*" His eyes flicked to the walls and he half-turned to look behind him. "Either you have no vanity or you have more than anyone, Fred. What did you do with all the letters and citations that any human being would frame and hang? Where's all the plaques that got so monotonous on the newscasts?" He shook his head. "It can't be no vanity, so it must be more than anyone. You must feel that this whole plant—you yourself—are your citation." He laughed, the professional friendly laugh of a used-car salesman. "Pretty stuffy, Freddy."

The doctor shrugged.

"I know what the publicity was for," said Newell. "A fiendish plot to turn you into a personality kid for the first time in your life." Again the engaging smile. "It isn't hard to get you off the subject, Freddy boy."

"Yes, it is," said the doctor without heat. "I was just making the point that what I do here is in accordance with an ethical principle which states that any technique resulting in the destruction of individual personality, surgical or otherwise, is murder. Your remarks on its being publicly and legally accepted now are quite appropriate. If you must use that analogy about taking a patient all apart and putting him together again in a different and better way, you should add that none of the parts are replaced with new ones and none are left out. Everything you have now, you'll have after your therapy."

"All of which," said Newell, his eyes twinkling, "is backed up by the loftiest set of ethics since Mohandas K. Gandhi."

The twinkle disappeared behind a vitreous screen. The voice was still soft. "Do you suppose I'd be fool enough to put myself in your hands—*your* hands—if I hadn't swallowed you and your legendary ethics down to here?" He jabbed himself on the chest. "You're so rammed full of ethical conduct, you don't have room for an honest insult. You have ethics where most people carry their guts."

"Why did you come here," asked the doctor calmly, "if you feel that much animosity?"

"I'll tell you why," smiled Newell. "First, I'm enjoying myself. I have a sense of values that tells me I'm a better man than you are, law, fame and all, and I have seventy-odd ways—one of which you were once married to—to prove it. Why wouldn't anyone enjoy that?"

"That was 'first.' You've got a 'secondly'?"

"A beaut," said Newell. "This one's for kicks too: I think I'm the toughest nut you've ever had to crack. I'm real happy about the way I am—all I want is *more*, not anything *different*. If you don't eliminate my lovable character or any part of it—and you won't; you've stacked the deck against yourself—you'll wind up with just what you see before you, hi-fi amplified. And just for a little salt in the stew, I might as well tell you that I know you can't operate well without hypnosis, and I can't be hypnotized."

"You can't?"

"That's right. Look it up in a book. Some people can't be hypnotized because they won't, and I won't."

"Why not?"

Newell shrugged and smiled.

"I see," said the doctor. He rose and went to the wall, where a panel slid aside for him. He took up a shining hypodermic, snicked off the sterile sheath and plunged the needle into an ampoule. He returned to the desk, holding the hypodermic point upward. "Roll up your sleeve, please."

"I also happen to know," Newell said, complying readily, "that you're going to have one hell of a time sorting out drug-reaction effects from true responses, even with neoscopolamine."

"I don't expect my work to be easy. Clench your fist, please."

Newell did, laughing as the needle bit. The laugh lasted four syllables and then he slumped silently in his chair.

The doctor took out a blank case book and carefully entered Newell's name and the date and a few preliminary notes. In the "Medication" column, he wrote, *10 cc neutral saline solution.*

He paused then and looked at the "better" man and murmured, "So you can run a mile faster than Einstein."

"All ready, doctor."

"Right away."

He went to the rack in the corner and took down a white coat. Badge of office, he thought, cloak of Hippocrates, evolved through an extra outdoor duster we used to wear to keep the bodily humours off our street clothes . . . and worn today because, for patients, the generalization "doctor" is an easier departure point for therapeutics than the bewildering specific "man." Next step, the juju mask, and full circle.

He turned into the west corridor and collided with Miss Thomas, who was standing across from Newell's closed door.

"Sorry!" they said in unison.

"Really my fault," said Miss Thomas. "I thought I ought to speak to you first, doctor. He—he's not completely dismantled."

"They very frequently aren't."

"I know. Yes, I know that." Miss Thomas made a totally uncharacteristic, meaningless flutter of the hands and then welded them angrily to her starched flanks.

The doctor felt amusement and permitted it to show. Miss Thomas, his head technician, was neither human nor female during working hours, and the touch of color, of brightness in her lack of ease pleased him somehow.

She said, "I'm familiar with the—uh—unexpected, doctor. Naturally. But after eighty hours of machine catalysis, I don't expect a patient to resemble anything but a row of parts laid out on a laboratory bench."

"And what does this patient resemble?"

There was a sudden, soft peal of delighted feminine laughter from the closed door. Together they looked at its bland surface and then their eyes met.

"Two hundred cycles," said Miss Thomas. "Listen to her."

They listened: Miss Jarrell's voice, a cooing, inarticulate Miss Jarrell, was saying, "Oh . . . you . . . you!" And more laughter.

Miss Thomas said severely, "I know what you're thinking about Hildy Jarrell, but don't. That's exactly what I did myself." Again she made the uncharacteristic fluttery gesture. "Oh-h!" She breathed impatiently.

Because his impulses were kind, the doctor ignored most of this and picked up only, "Two hundred cycles. What do you get at the other frequencies?"

"Oh, that's all right, all of it. Average response. Pretherapeutic personality responds best at eighty cycles. Everywhere else, he's nice and accessible. Anyway," she said a little louder, obviously to drown out another soft sudden chuckle from behind the door, "I just wanted you to know that I've done what I can. I didn't want you to think I'd skipped anything in the spectrum. I haven't. It's just that there's a personality in the 200-cycle area that won't dismantle."

"Yet," he corrected mildly.

"Oh, *you* can do it," she said in rapid embarrassment. "I didn't mean . . . I only meant . . ."

She drew a deep breath and started over. "I just wanted

you to be sure *my* job's done. As to what you can do, you'll handle it, all right. Only—"

"Only what, Miss Thomas?"

"It's a pity, that's all," she blurted, and pushed past him to disappear around the corner.

He shook his head, puzzlement and laughter wrestling gently deep inside him. Only then did something she had said fully register with him: ". . . *there's a personality in the 200-cycle area that won't dismantle.*"

That woman, he thought, has the kind of precision which might be clouded by emotion, but nothing would eliminate it. If she said there's a personality in the 200-cycle area, she meant just that. A personality, not a component or a matrix or a complex.

As she herself had put it, after catalysis a patient should resemble nothing more than a row of parts on a lab bench. Down through the levels of hypnosis, audible frequencies would arbitrarily be assigned to various parts of the personality, and by suggestion each part would respond to its frequency throughout the therapy. Any part could be summoned, analyzed, then minimized, magnified, stressed or quelled in the final modulation and made permanent in the psychostat. But at the stage Newell was in—should be in—these were *parts*, sub-assemblies at most. What did she mean "a personality" in the 200-cycle area?

She was wrong, of course. *Oh, God,* he thought, *she's wrong, isn't she?*

He opened the door.

Miss Jarrell did not see him. He watched for a long moment, then said, just loud enough to be heard over the soft thrumming of the 200-cycle note from the speakers, "Don't stop, Miss Jarrell. I'd like to see a little more of this."

Miss Jarrell flung up a scarlet face.

The doctor said again, quietly but with great force, "Go on, please."

She turned away to the bed, her back held with a painful rigidity and her ears, showing through her hair, looking like the tips of bright little tongues.

"It's all *right,*" soothed the doctor. "It's all right, Miss Jarrell. You'll see him again."

She made a soft sound with her nostrils, grinned ruefully and went to the controls. She set one of them for the patient's allotted sleep-command frequency and hit the master switch. There was a gentle explosion of sound—"white" noise, a combination of all audio frequencies, which served to dis-

orient the dismantled patient, his reflexive obedience attempting to respond to all commands at once—for ten seconds, and then it automatically faded, leaving the 550-cycle "sleep" note. The patient's face went blank and he lay back slowly, his eyes closing. He was asleep before his head reached the pillow.

The doctor stood suspended in thought for some time. Miss Jarrell gently arranged the patient's blanket. It was not done dutifully nor as part of the busyness of waiting for his next move. For some reason, it touched the doctor deeply and pulled him out of his reverie. "Let's have the P.T., Miss Jarrell."

"Yes, doctor." She consulted the index and carefully set the controls. At his nod, she touched the master switch. Again the white noise, and then the deep moo of the 80-cycle tone.

The P.T.—pretherapeutic—personality would be retained untouched throughout the treatment, right up until the final setting process in the psychostat, except, of course, for the basic posthypnotic command which kept all segments under control of the audio spectrum. The doctor watched the sleeping face and was aware of a most unprofessional desire to have something other than that untouched P.T. appear.

He glanced at Miss Jarrell without turning his head. She should leave now, and ordinarily she would. But she was not behaving ordinarily just now.

The patient's eyes half-opened and stayed that way for a time. It was like the soft startlement of a feline which is aware of something, undecided whether the something deserves more attention than sleep, and therefore simply waits, armed and therefore relaxed.

Then he saw the eyes move, though the lids did not. This was the feline taking stock, but deluding its enemies into thinking it still drowsy. The man changed like an aurora, which is ever the same while you watch, but something quite different if you look away and look back again. *I think in analogies,* the doctor chided himself, *when I don't like the facts.*

"Well, Freddy boy," drawled Richard A. Newell.

Behind him, he heard Miss Jarrell's almost inaudible sigh and her brisk quiet footsteps as she turned on the speech recorder, crossed the room and closed the door behind her.

Newell said, "Nurse is an odd term for a woman built like that. How you doing, Freddy?"

"Depends," said the doctor.

Newell sat up and stretched. He waved at the red eye of the recorder. "Everything I say is taken down and may be used against me, hm?"

"Everything is used, yes. Not—"

"Oh, spare me the homilies, Fred. Transcribe them yourself, do you?"

"I—no." As he caught Newell's thought, and knew exactly the kind of thing the man was going to do next, he felt himself filling up with impotent rage. It did not show.

"Fine, fine." Projecting his voice a bit, Newell said over an elaborate yawn, "Haven't waked up like this since I was a kid. You know, disoriented, wondering for a moment where I was. Last bed I was in wasn't so lonesome. Missed thirty of those last forty winks, the way she was all over me. 'Dick, oh, Dick, please . . .' " he mimicked cruelly. "Told her to shut up and get breakfast."

He laughed outright, obviously not at anything he had said, but at the writhing silent thing within the doctor, which he could not see but knew must be there.

He glanced again at the pilot light on the recorder and said, "Mentioning no names, of course," and the doctor understood immediately that names would be mentioned, places, dates and interrelationships, whenever Newell chose . . . which would be when the suspense ceased to entertain him. Meanwhile, the doctor could prepare himself for the behind-the-back gossip, the raised eyebrows of the transcribing typist, the afterhours debates as to the ethical position of a doctor's practicing on the man who had . . . who was . . .

The sequence spiraled down to a low level of his personal inferno and flickered there, hot and smokeless.

"You didn't tell me," said Newell. "How you doing? Find the secret of my success yet?"

The doctor shrugged easily, which was not easy to do. "We haven't begun."

"Thought not." Newell snorted. "By the time you're finished, you won't have begun, either."

"Why do you say that?"

"I extrapolate it. I come here, you give me a shot of knockout drops, I get a sound sleep and wake up rested and cheerful. Otherwise, nothing. Yet I know that you've taken my slumbering corpus, poked it, prodded it, checked it in and wrung it out, tooted on your tooters, punched cards and clicked out four miles of computer tapes—for what? I'm still me, only rested up a little."

"How do you know we did all that?"

"I read the papers." When the doctor made no reply, Newell laughed again. "You and your push-button therapy." He looked up in recall, as if reading words off the ceiling. "What's the claim—82% of your patients cured?"

"Modulated."

"Pretty word, modulated. Pretty percentage, too. What kind of a sieve do you use?"

"Sieve?"

"Don't tell me you don't select your patients!"

"No, we take them as they come."

"Ha. You talk like the Lysenkoists. Remember them? Russian genetics experts fifty years back. They claimed results like that. They claimed nonselective methodology, too, even when some of the people supposed to be breeding split-kernel corn were seen splitting the kernels with a knife. Even the Communists rejected them after a while." He flicked a wolfish glance at the recorder and grinned. "But then," he said clearly, "no Communist would reject *you*, Freddy."

Of the four possible responses which came to him, the doctor could find none that would sound unlike a guilty protest, so he said nothing. Newell's widening grin informed him that his silence was just as bad.

"Ah, Fred, m'boy, I know you. I know you well. I knew a lot about you five years ago and I've learned a lot more since." He touched the dark wiry tuft between his collarbones. "Like, for example, you haven't a single hair on your chest. Or so I've been told."

Again the doctor used silence as a rejoinder. He could examine his feelings later—he knew he would; he inescapably must. For now, he knew that any answer would fall into Newell's quiver as new arrows. Silence was a condition Newell could not maintain nor tolerate; silence made Newell do the talking, take the offensive . . . inform on and expose his own forces. Silence Newell could use only sometimes; words, always.

Newell studied him for a moment and then, apparently deciding that in order to return to a target, it was necessary to leave it temporarily, looked at the compact control panel. "I've read a lot about that. Push one button, I'm a fighting engine. Push another, I lie down with the lamb. Who was it once said humanity will evolve into a finger and a button, and every time the finger wants anything, it will push the button—and that will be the end of humanity, because the finger will get too damn lazy to push the button?"

He wagged his head. "You're going to gadget yourself clear out of a living, Fred."

"Did you read what was written over the entrance when you came here?" the doctor asked.

"I noticed there was something there," said Newell amiably, "and no, I didn't read it. I assumed it was some saw about the sanctity of the personality, and I knew I'd get all I could stand of that from you and your acolytes."

"Then I think you ought to know a little more about what you call 'push-button therapy,' Newell. Hypnosis isn't therapy and neither is the assigned audio-response technique we use. Hypnosis gives us access to the segments of personality and creates a climate for therapy, and that's all. The therapy itself stands or falls on the ability of the therapist, which is true of my school as it is of all others short of the lobotomists."

"Well, well, well. I goaded a real brag out of you at last. I didn't know you had it in you." Newell chuckled. "82% effective and you do it all your little self. Now ain't you something? Tell me, able therapist, how do you account for the 18% who get by you?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I might alter the figures for you. Who are these sturdy souls?"

"Organic defectives," said the doctor. *And certain others* . . . but he kept that to himself.

Newell shouted, "Touché!" and fell back with a roar of appreciative laughter. But the doctor saw his eyes before he closed them, little windows with all the faces of hate looking out.

The doctor was delighted. He braced himself for the reaction against his own pleasure which he could always expect from his austere professionalism, but it did not come. He put this fact away with the others he knew he must examine later.

Newell was saying, "You can't have it both ways, Fred. About hypnosis not being therapy, I mean. What's this I heard somewhere about certain frequencies having certain effects, no matter who you are?"

"Oh, that. Yes, some parts of the audio spectrum do affect most people. The subsonics—fourteen to around twenty cycles, for example, if you use enough amplitude—they scare people. And beat frequencies between two tones, where the beat approaches the human pulse, sometimes have peculiar psychological effects. But these are byways, side phenom-

ena. We use the ones we can rely on and ignore or avoid the others. Audio frequencies happen to be convenient, accurate and easy for patients and therapists to identify.

"But they're not essential. We could probably do the same thing with spoken commands or a spectrum of odors. Audio is best, though; the pure electronic tone is unfamiliar to most people and so has no associations except the ones we give it. That's why we don't use 60 cycles—the hum you're surrounded by all your life from AC devices."

"And what about if you're tone-deaf?" asked Newell, with an underlay of gloating which could only mean that he was talking about himself.

"Nobody's *that* tone-deaf, except the organic defectives."

"Oh," said Newell disappointedly, then returned to the half-sneering search for information. "And so the patient walks out of here prepared for the rest of his life to go into a state of estrus every time an English horn sounds A-440?"

"You know better than that," retorted the doctor for once not concealing his impatience. "That's what the psychostat is for. Every frequency the patient responds to is recorded there—" he waved at the controls—"along with its intensity. These are analyzed by a computer and compared by another one with a pattern which shows which segments are out of line—like too much anger or unwarranted fear, in terms of patient's optimum. The psychostat applies dampers on the big ones and amplifies the atrophied ones until the response matches the master pattern. When every segment is at optimum—the patient's, mind you; no one else's—the new pattern is fixed by an overall posthypnotic which removes every other suggestion that has been applied."

"So the patient *does* go out of here hypnotized!"

"He walks in here hypnotized," said the doctor. "I'm surprised at you, Newell. For a man who knows so much about my specialty, you shouldn't need to be lectured on the elementals."

"I just like the sound of your voice," Newell said acidly, but the acid was dilute. "What do you mean, the patient walks in here hypnotized?"

"Most people are, most of the time. In the basic sense, a man is under hypnosis whenever any one of his senses does not respond to a present stimulus, or when his attention is diverted even slightly from his physical surroundings. You're under hypnosis when you read a book, or when you sit and think and don't see what you're staring at, or when

you bark your shin on a coffee table you didn't see under bright lights."

"That's so much hairsplitting." Newell didn't even pause before his next sentence, which came from quite a different area than his scoffing incredulity. "Why didn't you tell me all this when I said I couldn't be hypnotized?"

"I preferred to believe you when you said you knew it all."

Every pretense of joviality disappeared. "Listen, you," Newell grated, in the ugliest tone of voice the doctor had ever heard, "you better watch what you're doing."

It was time again for silence and the doctor used it. He gave Newell no choice but to lie there and stare at his own words. He watched the man regaining his poise, laboriously, hand over hand, then resting, testing, waiting to be sure he could speak again.

"Well," Newell said at length, and the doctor almost admired him for the smoothness of his tone, "it's been fun so far and it'll wind up more so. If you really can do what you say, I'll make it right with you, Freddy boy. I'll really pay off."

"That's nice," said the doctor guardedly.

"Nice? Just nice? Man, I'll give you a treasure you couldn't get any other way. *You* could never get," he amended. He looked up into the doctor's face brightly. "Nearly five solid years a-building and it's all yours. Me, I'll start a new one."

"What are you talking about?"

"My little black book. Got everything in it from pig to princess. Whoever you are, however you feel from time to time, there's a playmate in there for you. You could really use it, Freddy. You must have stored up quite a charge since you-know-what," he said, grinning at the recording machine. "Fix me up, I fix you up. Fair enough?"

The silence this time was unplanned. The doctor walked to the controls, dialed 550 and hit the master. The 80-cycle note died, the white noise took over, and then the 550-cycle sleep command. The doctor felt that gleaming grin leave the room like a pressure off his back.

He is a patient, the doctor thought at last, out of his hard-held numbness. He is a patient in a therapeutic environment as detached from the world as a non-Euclidean theorem. There is no Newell; there is only a patient. There is no Fred, only a doctor. There is no Osa, only episodes. Newell will be returned to the world because he has a per-

sonality and it has an optimum, because that is what I do here and that is what I am for.

He touched the annunciator control and said, "Miss Jarrell, I want you."

She opened the door almost immediately; she must have been waiting in the corridor. "Oh, doctor, I *am* sorry! I know I shouldn't do anything like that. It's just—well, before I knew it . . ."

"Don't apologize, Miss Jarrell. I mean it—don't. You may even have done some good. But I have to know exactly what influences were . . . no, don't explain," he said when she tried to speak. "Show me."

"Oh, I couldn't! It's so—*silly!*"

"Go on, Miss Jarrell. It isn't silly at all."

Flushing, she passed him with her eyes averted and went to the controls. She dialed a frequency and activated the master, and as the white noise roared out, she went to the foot of the bed, waiting. The audio faded, all but a low, steady thrum—200 cycles.

The patient opened his eyes. He *smiled.* It was a smile the like of which the doctor had never seen before, though he might have imagined one. Not, however, on the face of Richard A. Newell. There was nothing conceivable in Richard A. Newell to coexist with such an expression.

The patient glanced down and saw Miss Jarrell. Ecstatic recognition crossed his face. He grasped the covers and whipped them over his head, and lay stiff and still as a pencil.

"You . . . !" crooned Miss Jarrell, and the blanket was flung down away from the patient's head, and he gurgled with laughter. She snatched at his toes, and he bucked and chortled, and covered up again. "The bumble bee—" she murmured, and he quivered, a paroxysm of delighted anticipation—"goes round the tree . . . and goes bzz . . . *bzzz* . . . BZZ!" and she snatched at his toes again.

He whipped the blanket away from his face and gave himself up to an explosion of merriment which was past vocalization—in fact, but for that soft and intense chuckle, he had made hardly a sound.

"You . . ."

The doctor watched and slowly felt a vacuum in the scene somehow, and a great tugging to fill it with understanding, and the understanding would not come until the word "ridiculous" slipped through his mind . . . and that was it: This should be ridiculous, a grown man reacting like a sev-

en-month infant. What was extraordinary was that it was *not* ridiculous and that it was indeed a grown man, not a mere infantile segment.

It was a thing to be felt. There was a—a radiance in these bursts of candid merriment which, though certainly childlike, were not childish. It was a quality to be laughed with, not laughed at.

He glanced at the audio selector. Yes, this was the 200-cycle response that Miss Thomas had mentioned. "A personality—" He began to see what she had meant. He began, too, to be afraid.

He went to the wall rack where the technician's response-breakdown was clipped. It was a standard form, one column showing the frequencies arbitrarily assigned to age levels (700 cycles and the command suggestion: "You are eleven years old") and another column with the frequencies assigned to emotional states (800 cycles and "You are very angry;" 14 cycles, "You are afraid").

Once the patient was completely catalyzed, response states could readily be induced and their episodic material extracted—fear at age three, sexuality at fourteen, fear plus anger plus gratification at age six, or any other combination.

The 200-cycle area was blotchy with Miss Thomas's erasures, but otherwise blank.

The doctor inwardly shook himself and got a firm grip. He went to the bed and stood looking down at that sensitive, responsive face.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The patient looked at him, eyes bright, a glad, anticipatory smile on his lips. The doctor sensed that the man did not understand him, but that he was eager to; further, that from the bottom of his heart the man was prepared to be delighted when he did understand. It filled the doctor with an almost tender anxiety, a protectiveness. This creature could not be disappointed—that would be inartistic to the point of gross injustice.

"What's your name?" the doctor pursued.

The patient smiled at him and sat up. He looked into the doctor's eyes with an almost unbearable attention and a great waiting, ready to treasure whatever might come next if only—if only he could identify it.

One thing's certain, mused the doctor: this was no infantile segment. Child, yes, but not quite child.

"Miss Jarrell."

"Yes, doctor."

"The initial, the middle initial on the chart. It's 'A.' What does that stand for?"

After a moment, "Anson," she said.

To the patient, he said, "I'm going to call you Anson. That will be your name." He put his hand on the patient's chest. "Anson."

The man looked down at the hand and up, expectantly, at the doctor.

The doctor said, touching his white coat, "Doctor. Doctor." He pointed at Miss Jarrell. "Miss—"

"Hildy," said Miss Jarrell quickly.

The doctor could not help it; he grinned briefly. This elicited a silent burst of glee from the patient, which was shut off instantly, to be replaced by the anticipation, the watchful and ready attentiveness. He burdened the doctor with his waiting and the necessity to appreciate. Yet what burden was it, really? This creature would appreciate the back of a hand across the face or two choruses of the *Londonderry Air.*

The doctor poised over the bed, waiting for an answer, and it came:

The burden lay in the necessity not to please this entity, but to do this thing properly, in ways which would never have to be withdrawn later. *He trusts me*—there, in three words, was the burden.

The doctor took the patient's hand and put the fingertips close to his lips. "An-son," he said. Then he put the hand to the patient's own mouth, nodding encouragingly.

The patient obviously wanted to do it right, too—more, even, than the doctor. His lips trembled. Then, "An-son," he said.

Across the room, Miss Jarrell clapped her hands and laughed happily.

"That's right," smiled the doctor, pointing. "Anson. You're Anson." He touched his own chest. "Doc-tor." He pointed again. "Miss Hildy."

The man in the bed sat up slowly, his eyes on the doctor's face. "An-son. Anson." And then a light seemed to flood him. He hit his chest with his knuckles. "Anson!" he cried. He felt his own biceps, his face, and laughed.

"That's right," said the doctor.

"Doc . . . tor," said Anson with difficulty. He looked wistful, almost distraught.

"That's okay. That's good. Doctor."

"Doc-tor." Anson turned brightly to Miss Jarrell and pointed. "Miss Hildy!" he sang triumphantly.

"Bless you," she said, saying it like a blessing.

While Anson grinned, the doctor stood for a moment grinning back like a fool and feeling frightened and scratching his head.

Then he went to work.

"Richard," he said sharply, and watched for a reaction.

There was none, just the happy eagerness.

"Dick."

Nothing.

"Newell."

Nothing.

"Hold up your right hand. Close your eyes. Look out of the window. Touch your hair. Let me see your tongue."

Anson did none of these things.

The doctor wet his lips. "Osa."

Nothing.

He glanced at Miss Jarrell. "Anson," he said, and Anson increased his attention. It was startling; the doctor hadn't known he could. "Anson, listen." He pulled back his sleeve and showed his watch. "Watch. Watch." He held it close, then put it to Anson's ear.

Anson gurgled delightedly. "Tk tk," he mimicked. He cocked his head and listened carefully to the doctor repeating the word. Then, "Wats. Watts. *Watch*," he said, and clapped his hands exactly as Miss Jarrell had done before.

"All right, Miss Jarrell. That's enough for now. Turn him off."

He heard her intake of breath and thought she was going to speak. When she did not, he faced her and smiled. "It's all right, Miss Jarrell. We'll take good care of him."

She looked for the sarcasm in his face, between his words, back in recall, anywhere, and did not find it. She laughed suddenly and heartily; he knew she was laughing at herself, spellbound as she had been, anxious for the shining something which hid in the 200-cycle area.

"I could use a little therapy myself, I guess," she said wonderingly.

"I would recommend it to you if you had reacted any other way."

She went to the door and opened it. "I like working here," she said, blushed, and went out.

The doctor's smile disappeared with the click of the latch.

He glanced once at the patient, then moved blindly to the controls. He locked them and went back to his office.

Miss Thomas knocked. Getting no answer, she entered the doctor's office. "Oh, I beg your pardon, I thought you were still—"

The expression on his face halted her. She took the reports she carried and put them down on the desk. He did not move. She went to the cabinet, which slid open for her, and shook two white pills from a vial. She broke a beam with a practiced flick of the wrist. A paper cup dropped and filled with ice water. She took it to the doctor. "Here."

He said rapidly, "What? What? What?" and, seeking, looked the wrong way to find her voice. He turned again, saw her. "What?" and put his hand for a moment over his eyes. "Oh, Miss Thomas."

"Here," said the technician again.

"What is it?" He seemed to be trying to identify the cup, as if he had never seen one before.

Because she was kind, Miss Thomas took it another way. "Dexamyl."

"Thank you." He took them, swallowed water, and looked up at her. "Thank you," he said again. "I seem to be . . ."

"It's all right," said Miss Thomas firmly. "Everything's all right."

Some of his control returned and he chuckled a little. "Using my own therapy on me?"

"Everything *is* all right, far as I know," she said, in the grumpy tone under which she so often concealed herself. She folded her arms with an all but audible snap and glared out of the window.

The doctor glanced up at her rigid back and, in spite of himself, was amused. She was daring him to order her out, challenging him not to tell her what the trouble was. He recalled, then, that she was doubtlessly gnawed like the Spartan boy by the fox of curiosity she was hiding under her starch. *There's a personality in the 200-cycle area that won't dismantle . . . oh, you can do it, but . . . it's a pity, that's all,* he recalled.

He said, "It's one of those things of Prince's."

She was quiet for so long that she might not have heard him, and I'm damned, he thought, if I'm going to spell it out for her.

But she said, "I don't believe it," and, into his continued silence, "Morton Prince's alternate personality idea might be

the only explanation for some cases, but it doesn't explain this one."

"It doesn't?"

"Two personalities in one mind—three or more sometimes. One of his case histories was of a woman who had five distinct egos. I'm not quarreling with the possibility, doctor."

Every time Miss Thomas surprised him, it was in a way that pleased him. He would, he thought, think that through some day.

"Then why quarrel with this one?" he asked.

Unmasked and unabashed, she sat down in the big chair. They sat for a time in a companionable, cerebral quiet.

Then she said, "Prince's case histories show a lot of variation. I mean one ego will be refined, educated, another rough and stupid. Sometimes the prime was aware of the others, sometimes not; sometimes they hated each other. But there was this denominator: If the condition existed at all, it existed because the alternate ego *could* communicate and did. Had to."

"Morton Prince wasn't equipped for segmentation under tertiary hypnosis."

"I think that's beside the point," Miss Thomas said flatly. "I'll say it again: Prince's alternate egos *had* to emerge. I think that's the key. If an ego can't communicate and won't emerge unless you drag it out by the scruff of the neck, I don't think it deserves to be called an ego."

"You can say that and yet you've seen Ans—the alternate?"

"Anson. Hildy Jarrell told me about the christening. Yes, I can say that."

He looked at her levelly and she dropped her eyes. He remembered again their encounter in the corridor in front of Newell's door. *Don't blame Hildy Jarrell—that's exactly what I did myself.*

"Miss Thomas, why are you trying to herd me away from this case?"

"Doctor!"

He closed his eyes and said, "You find a segment that you can't break. It's a particularly—well, let's say that whatever it is, you like it." He paused and, exactly in time, said, "Don't interrupt me. You know very well that the rock bottom of my practice is that personality is inviolate. You know that if this is a genuine case of alternate ego, I wouldn't touch it—I couldn't, because the man has only one body,

and to normalize him, I'd have to destroy one ego or the other.

"Now you knew perfectly well that I'd discover the alternate. So the first thing you do is call my attention to it, and the next thing you do is give me an argument about it, knowing I'd disagree with you, knowing that if there was any doubt in my mind, it would disappear in the argument."

"Why on earth would I do a thing like that?" she challenged.

"I told you—so I'd get off the case—reset the P.T. and discharge him."

"Damn it," said Miss Thomas bitterly.

"That's the trouble with knowing too much about a colleague's thought processes," he said into midair. "You can't manipulate somebody who understands you."

"Which one of us do you mean?" she demanded.

"I really don't know. Now are you going to tell me why you tried this, or shall I tell you?"

"I'll tell you," said Miss Thomas. "You're tired. I don't want anything to happen to that Anson. As soon as I found him, I knew exactly what would happen if you went ahead with Newell's therapy. Anson would be the intruder. I don't care how—how beautiful an intruder he might be, he could only show up as an aberration, something extraneous. You'd pack him down to pill size and bury him so deep in a new-model Newell that he'd never see daylight again. I don't know how much consciousness he has, but I do know I couldn't bear to have him buried alive.

"And supposing you committed therapy on Anson alone, brought him up like a shiny young Billy Budd and buried that heel Newell—if you'll pardon the unprofessional term, doctor—down inside him somewhere? You think Anson would be able to defend himself? You think he could take a lane in the big rat race? This world is no place for cherubim.

"So there isn't a choice. I don't know what Anson shares with Newell and I never will. I do know that however Anson has existed so far, it hasn't spoiled him, and the only chance he has to go on being what he is is to be left alone."

"*Quod erat demonstrandum,*" said the doctor, spreading his hands. "Very good. Now you know why I've never treated alternate ego cases. And perhaps you also know how useless your little machination was."

"I had to be sure, that's all. Well, I'm glad. I'm sorry."

He smiled briefly. "I follow that." He watched her get

up, her face softened by content and her admiration of him unconcealed.

She bent an uncharacteristically warm gaze on him and moved toward the door. She looked back once on the way, and once there, she stopped and turned to face him. "Something's the matter."

There were, he knew, other ways to handle this, but at the moment he had to hurt something. There were several ways to do the hurt, too, and he chose the worst one, saying nothing.

Miss Thomas became Miss Thomas again, her eyes like one-way mirrors and her stance like a soldier. She looked out of herself at him and said, "You're going on with the therapy."

He did not deny it.

"Are you going to tell me which one gets it?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'gets it,' " he said with grim jocularity.

She treated the bad joke as it deserved to be treated and simply waited for it to go away.

He said, "Both."

She repeated the word in exactly his inflection, as though she could understand it better if it were as near as her own lips. Then she shook her head impatiently. "You can apply just so much therapy and then there's a choice to make."

"There's this choice to make," he said, in a constricted tone that hurt his throat. "Newell lives in a society he isn't fit for. He's married to a woman he doesn't deserve. If it is in my power to make him more fit and more deserving, what is the ethical choice?"

Miss Thomas moved close to the desk. "You implied that you'd turned down cases like this before. You sent them back into society, untreated."

"Once they sent lepers back untreated," he snapped. "Therapy has to start somewhere, with someone."

"Start it on rats first."

I am, he said, fortunately to himself. He considered her remark further and decided not to answer it, knowing how deeply she must regret saying it.

She said, "Hildy Jarrell will quit when she finds this out."

"She will not quit," said the doctor immediately and positively.

"And as for me—"

"Yes?"

Their gazes locked like two steel rods placed tip to tip,

pressing, pressing, knowing that some slight wavering, some side drift, must come and must make a break and a collision.

But instead, she broke. She closed her eyes against tears and clasped her hands. "Please," she whispered, "do you have to go through with this? Why? Why?"

Oh, God, he thought, I hate this. "I can't discuss it." That, he thought painfully, is altogether the truth.

She said heavily, "I don't think you should." He knew it was her last word.

"It is a psychological decision, Miss Thomas, and not a technological one." He knew it was unfair to fall back on rank and specialty when he no longer had an argument he could use. But this had to stop.

She nodded. "Yes, doctor." She went out, closing the door too quietly. He thought, What do you have to be to a person so you can run after someone crying, Come back! Come back! Don't hate me! I'm in trouble and I hurt!

It took Miss Jarrell about forty minutes to get to the office. The doctor had figured it at about thirty-five. He was quite ready for her.

She knocked with one hand and turned the knob with the other and flew in like an angry bee. Her face was flushed and there was a little pale tension line parenthesizing each nostril. "Doctor—"

"Ah, Miss Jarrell," he said with a huge joviality. "I was just about to call you. I need your help for a special project."

"Well, I'm sorry about *that*," she began. Her eyes were wide and aflame, and the rims were slightly pink. He wished he could magic a few minims of azacyclonol into her bloodstream; she could use it. "I've come to—"

"The Newell case—"

"Yes, the Newell case. I don't think—"

He had almost to shout this time. "And *I* think you're just the one for the job. I want that 200-cycle entity—you know, Anson—I want him educated."

"Well, I think it's just—*what?*" And as the angry syllable ricocheted around the office, she stared at him and asked timidly, "I beg your pardon?"

"I'd like to relieve you of your other duties and put you with Anson full time. Would you like that?"

"Would I like . . . what will I do?"

"I want to communicate with him. He needs a vocabulary and he needs elementary instruction. He probably doesn't

know how to hold a fork or blow his nose. I think you can do a good job of teaching him."

"Well, I—why I'd love to!"

"Good. Good," he said like a department store Santa Claus. "Just a few details. I'll want every minute on sound film, from white noise to white noise, and I'll want to review the film every day. And, of course, I'd have to ask you not to discuss this with anyone, on or off the staff. It's a unique case and a new therapy, and a lot depends on it. On you."

"Oh, you can depend on me, doctor!"

He nodded agreement. "We'll start tomorrow morning. I'll have the first word lists and other instructions ready for you by then. Meanwhile, I've got some research to do. Contact the Medical Information Service in Washington and have them key in Prince, Morton, and Personality, Multiple, on their Big Brain. I want abstracts of everything that has been published in the last fifty years on the subject. No duplicates. An index. Better order microfilm and sent it by telefax, AA priority."

"Yes, doctor," said Miss Jarrell eagerly. "Foreign publications too?"

"Everything any researcher has done. And put a Confidential on the order as well as the delivery."

"*Really* secret."

"Really." He concealed the smile which struggled to show itself; in his mind, he had seen the brief image of a little girl hiding jelly beans. "And get me the nurses' duty list. I have some juggling to do."

"Very well, doctor. Is that all?"

"All for now."

She nearly skipped to the door. He saw a flash of white as she opened it; Miss Thomas was standing in the outer office. He could not have been more pleased if she had been there by his explicit orders, for Miss Jarrell said, as she went out, "And thank you, doctor—thank you *very* much."

Chew on that, Thomas, he thought, feeling his own small vindictiveness and permitting himself to enjoy it for once.

And: Why am I jumping on Thomas?

Well, because I have to jump on somebody once in a while and she can take it.

Why don't I tell her everything? She has a good head. Might have some really good ideas. Why not?

Why not? he asked again into a joyless voice. Because I could be wrong. I could be so wrong. That's why not.

The research began, and the long night work. In addition

to the vast amount of collateral reading—there was much more material published on the subject of multiple personality than he had realized—he had each day's film to analyze, notes to make, abstracts to prepare for computer coding, and then, after prolonged thought, the next day's lessons to outline.

The rest of the clinic refused to stop and wait for this job to be done, and he had an additional weight of consciousness as he concealed his impatience with everything else but the Newell case. He was so constituted that such a weight made him over-meticulous in the very things he wished to avoid, so that his ordinary work took more time rather than less.

As for the research, much of it was theory and argumentation; the subject, like reincarnation, seemed to attract zealots of the most positive and verbose varieties, both pro and con. Winnowing through the material, he isolated two papers of extreme interest to him. One was a theory, one an interim report on a series of experiments which had never been completed due to the death of the researcher.

The theory, advanced by one Weisbaden, was based on a search through just such material as this. Indeed, Weisbaden seemed to have been the only man besides himself who had never asked the Medical Information Service for this complete package.

From it, he had abstracted statistics, weighted then to suit his theory, and come up with the surprising opinion that multiple personality was a twinning phenomenon, and that if a method were found for diagnosing all such cases, a correspondence would be found between the incidence of multiple births and the incidence of multiple personalities. So many births per thousand are twins, so many per hundred thousand are triplets, and the odds with quads and quints are in the millions.

So, too, said Weisbaden, would be the statistical expectation for the multiple personality phenomenon, once such cases stopped being diagnosed as schizoids and other aberrants.

Weisbaden had not been a medical man—he was some sort of actuary—but his inference was fascinating. How many twins and triplets walked the Earth in single bodies, without any organic indication that they were not single entities? How many were getting treatment for conditions they did not have; how many Siamese twins were being penalized because they would not walk like other quadrupeds; how many

separate entities were being forced to spend their lives in lockstep?

Some day, thought the doctor—as so many doctors have thought before—some day, when we can get closer to the genetic biologists, when psychology becomes a true science, when someone devises a cross-reference system between the disciplines which really works . . . and some day, when I have the time—well, maybe I could test this ingenious guess. But it's only a guess, based on neither observation nor experiment. Intriguing though—if only it could be tested.

The other paper was of practical value. A certain Julius Marx—again not a medical man, but a design engineer with, apparently, hobbies—had built an electro-encephalograph for two (would anyone ever write a popular song about *that?*) which graphed each of the patients through a series of stimuli, and at the same time drew a third graph, a resultant.

Marx was after a means of determining brain wave types, rather than individual specimens, and had done circuitry on machines which would handle up to eight people at once. In a footnote, with dry humor, he had qualified his paper for this particular category: "Perhaps one day the improbable theories of Dr. Prince might approach impossibility through the use of device upon a case of multiple personality."

Immediately on reading this, the doctor ordered EEGs on both Anson and Newell, and when he had both before him, he wished fervently that Julius Marx had been there with him; he suspected that the man enjoyed a good laugh, even on himself.

The graphs were as different as such graphs can possibly be.

The confirmation of his diagnosis was spectacular, and he left a note for Miss Jarrell to track down every multiple personality case he had rejected for the past eight years and see what could be done about some further tests. What would come after the tests, he did not know—yet.

The other valuable nudge he got from the Marx paper was the idea of a resultant between two dissimilar electroencephalograms. He made one from the Newell-Anson EEGs —without the use of anything as Goldbergian as Marx's complicated device, but with a simple computer coupling. He kept it in his top desk drawer, and every few days he would draw it out and he would wonder . . .

Therapy for Anson wasn't therapy. Back at the very beginning, Miss Thomas had said that his was a personality that wouldn't dismantle; she had been quite right. You can't get episodic material from an entity which has had no subjective awareness, no experience, which has no name, no sense of identity, no motility, no recall.

There were many parts to that strange radiance of Anson's and they were all in the eye of the beholder, who protected Anson because he was defenseless, who was continually amazed at his unself-consciousness as if it were an attribute rather than a lack. His discovery of the details of self and surroundings was a never-ending delight to watch, because he himself was delighted and had never known the cruel penalties we impose on expressed delight, nor the masking idioms we use instead: *Not a bad sunset there. Yeah. Real nice.*

"He's good," Miss Jarrell said to the doctor once. "He's only good—nothing else."

Therapy for Newell was, however, therapy, and not rewarding. The properly dismantled and segmented patient is relatively simple to handle.

Key in anger (1200 cycles) and demand "How old are you?" Since anger does not exist unsupported, an episode must emerge; the anger has an object, which existed at a time and place; and there's your episode. "I'm six," says your patient. Key in the "You are six years old" note for reinforcement and you're all ready for significant recall. Or start with the age index: "You are twelve years old." When that is established, demand, "How do you feel?" and if there is significant material in the twelfth year, it will emerge. If it is fear, add the "fear" note and ask "Where are you?" and you'll have the whole story.

But not in Newell's case. There was, of course, plenty of conflict material, but somehow the conflicts seemed secondary; they were effects rather than causes. By far the largest category of traumas is the unjustified attack—a severe beating, a disease, a rejection. It is traumatic because, from the patient's point of view, it is unjustified. In Newell's case, there was plenty of suffering, plenty of defeat; yet in every single episode, he had earned it. So he was without guilt. His inner conviction was that his every cruelty was justified.

The doctor had an increasing sense that Newell had lived all his life in a books-balanced, debts-paid condition. His episodes had no continuity, one to the other. It was as if each episode occurred at right angles to the line of his ex-

istence; once encountered, it was past, like a mathematical point. The episodes were easy to locate, impossible to relate to one another and to the final product.

The doctor tried hard to treat Anson and Newell in his mind as discreet, totally unconnected individuals, but Miss Jarrell's sentimental remark kept echoing in his mind: "He's good; he's only good—nothing else," and generating an obverse to apply to Newell: *He's evil, he's only evil—nothing else.*

This infuriated him. How nice, how very nice, he told himself sarcastically, the spirits of good and evil to be joined together to make a whole man, and how tidily everything fits; black is totally black and white is white, and together the twain shall make gray. He found himself telling himself that it wasn't as simple as that, and things did not work out according to moral evaluations which were more arbitrary even than his assigned audio.

It was about this time that he began to doubt the rightness of his decision, the worth of his therapy, the possibility of the results he wanted, and himself. And he had no one to advise him. He told that to Miss Thomas.

It was easy to do and it surprised both of them. He had called her in to arrange a daily EEG on both facets of the Newell case and explain about the resultant, which he also wanted daily. She said yes, doctor, and very well, doctor, and right away, doctor, and a number of other absolutely correct things. But she didn't say why, doctor? or that's good, doctor, and suddenly he couldn't stand it.

He said, "Miss Thomas, we've got to bury the hatchet right now. I could be wrong about this case, and if I am, it's going to be bad. Worse than bad. That's not what bothers me," he added quickly, afraid she might interrupt, knowing that this must spill over or never emerge again. "I've been through bad things before and I can handle that part of it."

Then it came out, simple and astonishing to them both: "But I'm all alone with it, Tommie."

He had never called her that before, not even to himself, and he was overwhelmed with wonderment at where it might have come from.

Miss Thomas said, "No, you're not," gruffly.

"Well, hell," said the doctor, and then got all his control back. He dropped a film cartridge into the viewer and brought out his notes. Using them as index, he sat with his hand on the control, spinning past the more pedestrian

material and showing her the highlights. He presented no interpretations while she watched and listened.

She heard Newell snarling, "You better watch what you're doing," and Anson pointing about the room, singing, "Floor, flower, book, bed, bubble. Window, wheel, wiggle, wonderful." (He had not known at that stage what a wonderful was, but Miss Jarrell said it almost every hour on the hour.) She saw Newell in recall, aged eleven, face contorted, raging at his fifth-grade teacher, "I'll bomb ya, y'ole bitch!" and at thirteen, coolly pleased at something best unmentioned concerning a kitten and a centrifuge.

She saw Anson standing in the middle of the room, left elbow in right hand, left thumb pressed to the point of his chin, a stance affected by the doctor when in perplexity: "When I know everything there is to know," Anson had said soberly, "there'll be two Doctor Freds."

At this, Miss Thomas grunted and said, "You wouldn't want a higher compliment than that from anybody, anytime." The doctor shushed her, but kindly. The first time he had seen that sequence, it made his eyes sting. It still did. He said nothing.

She saw it all, right up to yesterday's viewing, with Newell in a thousand pieces from what appeared to be a separate jigsaw puzzle for each piece, and Anson a bright wonder, learning to read now, marveling at everything because everything was new—teaspoons and music and mountains, the Solar System and sandwiches and the smell of vanilla.

And as he watched, doors opened in the doctor's mind. They did not open wide, but enough for him to know that they were there and in which walls. How to describe the indescribable *feeling* of expertness?

It is said that a good truck driver has nerve endings which extend to the bumper and tail light, tire tread to overhead. The virtuoso pianist does not will each separate spread and crook of each finger; he wills the notes and they appear.

The doctor had steered this course of impossible choices by such willing and such orientation; and again he felt it, the urge that this way is right now, and there is the thing to do next. The miracle to him was not the feeling, but that it had come back to him while he watched the films and heard the tapes with Miss Thomas, who had said nothing, given no evaluation or advice. They were the same films he had studied, run in the same sequence. The difference was only in not being alone any more.

"Where are you going?" Miss Thomas asked him.

From the coat closet, he said, "File that material and lock it up, will you, Miss Thomas? I'll call you as soon as I return." He went to the door and smiled back at her. It hurt his face. "Thanks."

Miss Thomas opened her mouth to speak, but did not. She raised her right hand in a sort of salute and turned around to put the files away.

The doctor called from a booth near the Newell apartment. "Did I wake you, Osa? I'm sorry. Sometimes I don't know how late it gets."

"Who . . . Fred? Is that you, Fred?"

"Are you up to some painful conversation?"

Alarmed, she cried, "Is something the matter? Is Dick—"

He mentally kicked himself for his clumsiness. What other interpretation could she have put on such a remark? "He's okay. I'm sorry. I guess I'm not good at the light banter . . . Can I see you?"

She paused for a long moment. He could hear her breathing. "I'll come out. Where are you?"

He told her.

She said, "There's a café just around the corner, to your left. Give me ten minutes."

He put up the phone and went to the corner. It was on a dingy street which seemed to be in hiding. On the street, the café hid. Inside the café, booths hid. In one of the booths, the doctor sat and was hidden. It was all he could do to keep himself from assuming a fetal posture.

A waiter came. He ordered collinses, made with light rum. He slumped then, with his forearms on the table and his chin on them, and watched bubbles rise in the drinks and collect on the underside of the shaved ice, until the glasses frosted too much for him to see. Then he closed his eyes and attempted to suspend thought, but he heard her footsteps and sprang up.

"Here I am," he said in a seal-like bark far louder than he had intended.

She sat opposite him. "Rum collins," she said, and only then did he remember that it had always been the drink they shared, when they had shared things. He demanded of himself, Now why did I have to do that? and answered, You know perfectly well why.

"Is he really all right?" she asked him.

"Yes, Osa. So far."

"I'm sorry." She turned her glass around, but did not lift it. "I mean maybe you don't want to talk about Dick."

"You're very thoughtful," he said, and wondered why it had never occurred to him to see her just for himself. "But you're wrong. I did want you to talk about him."

"Well . . . if you like, Fred. What, especially?"

He laughed. "I don't know. Isn't that silly?"

He sipped his drink. He was aware that she did the same. They never used to say "cheers" or "skoal" or anything else, but they always took that first sip together.

He said, "I need something that segmentation or hypnosis or narcosynthesis just won't give me. I need to flesh out a skeleton. No, it's more refined than that. I need tints for a charcoal portrait." He lifted his hands and put them down again. "I don't know what I need. I'll tell you when I get it."

"Well, of course I'll help if I can," she said uncertainly.

"All right. Just talk, then. Try to forget who I am."

He met her eyes and the question there, and elaborated, "Forget I'm his therapist, Osa. I'm an interested stranger who has never seen him, and you're telling me bout him."

"Engineering degree, and where he comes from, and how many sisters?"

"No," he said, "but keep that up. You're bound to stumble across what I want that way."

"Well, he's . . . he's been sick. I think I'd tell a stranger that."

"Good! What do you mean, sick?"

She glanced quickly at him and he could follow the thought behind it: *Why don't you tell* ME *how sick he is?* And then, *But you really want to play this game of the interested stranger. All right.*

She stopped looking at him and said, "Sick. He can't be steered by anything but his own—pressures and they—they aren't the pressures he should have. Not for this world."

"Why do you suppose that is?"

"He just doesn't seem to care. No," she denied forcefully, "I don't mean that, not at all. It's more like—I think he would care if he—if he was allowed to, and he isn't allowed to." She got his eyes again. "This is very hard to do, Fred."

"I know and I'm sorry. But do go on; you're doing fine. What do you mean, he isn't allowed to care about the world and the way it wags? Who won't allow him?"

"It isn't a who; it's a—I don't know. You'd have a term for it. I'd call it a monster on his back, something that drives him to do things, be something he really isn't."

"We strangers don't have any terms for anything," he reminded her gently.

"That's a little refreshing," she said with a wan half-smile. "I live . . . mystified . . . people. They make me feel like one of the crowd. You know who's lucky?" she asked, her voice suddenly wild and strained and, by its tone, changing the subject. "Psychotics are lucky. The nuts, the real buggy ones. (I talk like this to layman strangers.) The ones who see butterflies all the time, the ones who think the president is after them."

"Lucky!" he exploded.

"Yes, lucky. They have a name for the beast that's chewing on them. Sometimes they can see it themselves."

"I don't quite—"

"I mean this," she said excitedly. "If I see grizzly bears under every lamp post, I'm *seeing* something. It has a name, a shape; I could draw a picture of it. If I do something irrational, the way some psychos do—run a nonexistent railroad or shoot invisible pheasant with an invisible gun, I'm *doing* something. I can describe it and say how it feels and write letters about it. See, these are all *things* plaguing the insane. Labels, handles. Things that *you* can hold up to reality to demonstrate that they don't coincide with it."

"And that's lucky?"

She nodded miserably. "A mere neurotic—Dick, for example—hasn't a *thing* he can name. He acts in ways we call irrational, and has a sense of values nobody can understand, and does things in a way that seems consistent to him but not to anyone else. It's as if there were a grizzly bear, after all, but we'd never heard of grizzly bears—what they are, what they want, how they act. He's driven by some monster without a name, something that no one can see and that even he is not aware of. That's what I mean."

"Ah."

They sat for minutes, silent and careful.

Then, "Osa—"

"Yes, Fred."

"Why do you love him?"

She looked at him. "You really meant it when you said this would be a painful conversation."

"Never mind that. Just tell me."

"I don't think it's a thing you can tell."

"Then try this: What is it you love in him?"

She made a helpless gesture. "Him."

He sat without responding until he knew she felt his dissatisfaction with the answer.

She frowned and then closed her eyes. "I couldn't make you understand, Fred. To understand you'd have to be two things: a woman, and—Osa." Still he sat silent. Twice she looked up to his face and away, and at last yielded.

She said in a low voice, "It's a . . . tenderness you wouldn't believe, no matter how well you know him. It's a gentle, loving something that no one ever born ever had befor and never will again. It's . . . I hate this, Fred!"

"Go on, for heaven's sake! This is exactly what I'm looking for."

"It is? Well, then . . . But I hate talking like this to you. It doesn't seem right."

"Go on!"

She said, almost in a whisper, "Life is plain hell sometimes. He's gone and I don't know where, and he comes back and it's just awful. Sometimes he acts as if he were alone in the place—he doesn't see me, doesn't answer. Or maybe he'll be the other way, after me every second, teasing and prodding and twisting every word until I don't know what I said or what I should say next, or who I am, or . . . anything, and he won't leave me alone, not to eat or to sleep or to go out. And then he—"

She stopped and the doctor waited, and this time realized that waiting would not be enough. "Don't stop," he said.

She shook her head.

"Please. It's impor—"

"I would, Fred," she burst out frantically. "I'm not refusing to. I *can't*, that's all. The words won't—"

"Don't try to tell me what it is, then," he suggested. "Just say what happens and how it makes you feel. You can do that."

"I suppose so," she said, after considering it.

Osa took a deep breath, almost a sigh, and closed her eyes again.

"It will be hell," she said, "and then I'll look at him and he . . . and he . . . well, it's *there*, that's all. Not a word, not a sign sometimes, but the room is full of it. It's . . . it's something to love, yes, it's that, but nobody can just love something, one-way, forever. So it's a loving thing, too, from him to me. It suddenly arrives and everything else he is doing, the cruelty, the ignoring, whatever might be happening just then, it all stops and there's nothing else but the—whatever it is."

She wet her lips. "It can happen any time; there's never a sign or a warning. It can happen now, and again a minute from now, or not for months. It can last most a day or flash by like a bird. Sometimes he goes on talking to me while it happens; sometimes what he actually says is just nothing, small-talk. Sometimes he just stands looking at me, without saying anything. Sometimes he—I'm sorry, Fred—he makes love to me then and that's . . . Oh, dear God, that's . . ."

"Here's my handkerchief."

"Thank you. He—does that other times, too, when there's nothing loving about it. This—this thing-to-love, it—it seems to have nothing to do with anything else, no pattern. It happens and it's what I wait for and what I look back on; it's all I have and all I want."

When he was quite sure she had no more to say, he hazarded, "It's as if some other—some other personality suddenly took over."

He was quite unprepared for her reaction. She literally shouted, "*No!*" and was startled herself.

She recoiled and glanced guiltily around the café. "I don't know why," she said, sounding frightened, "but that was just—just *awful*, what you said. Fred, if you can give any slightest credence to the idea of feminine intuition, you'll get that idea right out of your head. I couldn't begin to tell you why, but it just isn't so. What loves me that way may be part of Dick, but it's Dick, not anybody or anything else. I *know* that's so, that's all. I know it."

Her gaze was so intense that it all but made him wince. He could see her trying and trying to find words, rejecting and trying again.

At last, "The only way I can say it that makes any sense to me is that Dick could be such a—a louse so much of the time and still walk a straight line without something just as extreme in the other direction. It's—it's a great pity for the rest of the world that he only shows that side to me, but there it is."

"Does he show it only to you?" He touched her hand and released it. "I'm sorry, but I must ask that."

She smiled and a kind of pride shone from her face. "Only to me. I suppose that's intuition again, but it's as certain as Sunday." The pride disappeared and was replaced by a patient agony. "I don't delude myself, Fred—he has other women; plenty of them. But that particular something is for me. It isn't something I wonder about. I just—know."

He sat back wearily.

She asked, "Is all this what you wanted?"

He gave her a quick, hurt glance and saw, to his horror, her eyes filling with tears.

"It's what I asked for," he said in a flat voice.

"I see the difference." She used his handkerchief. "May I have this?"

"You can have—" But he stopped himself. "Sure." He got up. "No," he said, and took the damp handkerchief out of her hand. "I'll have something better for you."

"Fred," she said, distressed, "I—"

"I'm going, forgive me and all that," he said, far more angrily than he had thought he would. But polite talk and farewells were much more than he could stand. "The layman stranger has to have a long interview with a professional acquaintance. I don't think I'd better see you again, Osa."

"All right, Fred," she said to his back.

He had hurt her, he knew, but he knew also that his stature in her cosmos could overshadow the hurt and a hundred more like it. He luxuriated in the privilege and stamped out, throwing a bill to the waiter on the way.

He drove back and plodded up the ramp to the clinic. For some obscure reason, the inscription over the door caught his attention. He had passed it hundreds of times without a glance; he had ordered it put there and he was satisfied with it, and why should it matter now? But it did. What was it that Newell had said about it? *Some saw about the sanctity of personality.* A very perceptive remark, thought the doctor, considering that Newell hadn't read it:

ONLY MAN CAN FATHOM MAN

It was from Robert Lindner and was the doctor's answer to the inevitable charges of "push-button therapy." But he wondered now if the word "Man" was really inclusive enough.

He shook off the conjecture and let himself into the building.

Light gleamed from the translucent door of his office at the far end of the corridor. He walked down the slick flooring toward it, listening to his heels and not thinking otherwise, his mind as purposively relaxed as a fighter's body between rounds. He opened the door.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting," said Miss Thomas.

"Why?"

"Just in case."

Without answering, he went to the closet and hung up his coat. Back at his desk, he sat down and straightened his tired spine until it crackled. Then he looked at Miss Thomas in the big chair. She put her feet under her and he understood that she was ready to leave if he wished her to.

He said, "Hypothesis: Newell and Anson are discreet personalities."

While he spoke, he noticed Miss Thomas's feet move outward a little and then cross at the ankles. His inner thought was, Of all the things I like about this woman, the best is the amount of her conversation I have with her without talking.

"And we have plenty of data to back that up," he continued. "The EEGs alone prove it. Anson is Anson and Newell is Newell, and to prove it, we've crystallized them for anyone to see. We've done such a job on them that we know exactly what Anson is like without Newell. We've built him up that way, with that in mind. We haven't done quite the same with Newell, but we might as well have. I mean we've investigated Newell as if Anson did not exist within him. What it amounts to is this: In order to demonstrate a specimen of multiple personality, we've separated and isolated the components.

"Then we go into a flat spin because neither segment looks like a real human being . . . Miss Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"Do you mind the way I keep on saying 'we'?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not at the moment."

"Further," he said, answering her smile but relentlessly pursuing his summation, "we've taken our two personalities and treated each like a potentially salvable patient—one neurotic, one retarded. We've operated under the assumption that each contained his own disorder and could be treated by separate therapies."

"We've been wrong?"

"*I* certainly have," said the doctor. He slapped the file cabinet at his left. "In here, there's a very interesting paper by one Weisbaden, who theorizes that multiple personalities are actually twins, identical twins born of the same egg-cell and developing within one body. One step, as it were, into the microcosm from *foetus in foetu.*"

"I've read about that," said Miss Thomas. "One twin born enclosed in the body of another."

"But not just partly—altogether enclosed. Whether or not Weisbaden's right, it's worth using as a test hypothesis. That's what I've been doing, among other things, and I've had my nose stuck so far into it that I wasn't able to see a very important corresponding part of the analogy: namely, that twinning itself is an anomaly, and any deviation in a sibling of multiple origin is teratological."

"My," said Miss Thomas in mock admiration.

The doctor smiled. "I should have said 'monstrous,' *but* why drag in superstitions? This thing is bad enough already. Anyway, if we're to carry our twinning idea as an analogy, we have got to include the very likely possibility that our multiple personalities are as abnormal as Siamese twins or any other monstrosity—I *hate* to use that word!"

"I'm not horrified," said Miss Thomas. "Abnormal in what way?"

"Well, in the crudest possible terms, what would you say was the abnormality suffered by one Siamese twin?"

"The other Siamese twin."

"Mmm. And by the same analogy, what's the name of Newell's disorder?"

"My goodness!" gasped Miss Thomas. "We better not tell Hildy Jarrell."

"That isn't the only thing we'll have to keep from her—for a while, at least," said the doctor. "Listen: did you run my notes on Newell?"

"All of them."

"You remember the remark she made that bothered me, about Anson's being only and altogether good, and the trouble I had with the implication that Newell was only and altogether bad?"

"I remember it."

"It's a piece of childishness that annoys me whenever I find it and I was damned annoyed to be thinking at all along those lines. The one reason for its being in the notes at all is that I had to decant it somewhere. Well, I've been euchred, Miss Thomas. Because Anson appeared in our midst shining and unsullied, I've leaned over backward trying to keep away from him the corruptions of anger, fear, greed, concupiscence and all the other hobbies of real mankind. By the same token, it never occurred to me to analyze what kindness, generosity, sympathy or empathy might be lurk-

ing in Newell. Why bother in such a—what was the term you used?"

"Heel," said Miss Thomas without hesitation.

"Heel. So what we have to do first is to give each of these—uh—people the privilege of entirety. If they are monsters, then let us at least permit them to be whole monsters."

"You don't mean you'll—"

"We," he corrected, smiling.

She said, through her answering smile, "You don't mean we'll take poor Anson and—"

He nodded.

"Offhand, I don't see how you're going to do it, Doctor. Anson has no fear. He'd laugh as he walked into a lion's cage or a high-tension line. And I can't imagine how you'd make him angry. You of all people. He—he loves you. As for . . . oh, dear. This is awful."

"Extremes are awful," he agreed. "We'll have to get pretty basic, but we can do it. Hence, I suggest Miss Jarrell be sent to Kalamazoo for a new stove or some such."

"And then what?"

"It is standard practice to acquaint a patient with the name and nature of his disorder. In our field, we don't tell him, we show him, and when he absorbs the information, we call it an insight. Anson, meet Newell. Newell, meet Anson."

"I do hope they'll be friends," said Miss Thomas unhappily.

In a darkness within a darkness in the dark, Anson slept his new kind of sleep, wherein he now had dreams. And then there was his own music, the deep sound which lit the darkness and pierced the dark envelopes, one within the other; and now he could emerge to the light and laughter and the heady mysteries of life and communication with Miss Hildy and Doctor Fred, and the wonder on wonder of perception. Gladly he flung himself back to life to—

But this wasn't the same. He was here, in the bed, but it wasn't the same at all. There was no rim of light around the ceiling, no bars of gold pouring in a sunlit window; this was the same, but not the same—it was dark. He blinked his eyes so hard, he made little colored lights, but they were inside his eyes and did not count.

There was noise, unheard-of, unbearable noise in the form of a cymbal-crash right by his head in the dark. He recoiled from it and tried to bounce up and run, and found he could not move. His arms were bound to his sides, his

legs to the bed, by some wide formless something which held him trapped. He fought against it, crying, and then the bed dropped away underneath him and stopped with a crash, and rose and dropped again. There was another noise—not a noise, though it struck at him like one: this was a photo-flash, though he could not know it.

Blinded and sick, he lay in terror, waiting for terror again.

He heard a voice say softly, "Turn down the gain," and his music, his note, the pervasive background to all his consciousness, began to weaken. He strained toward it and it receded from him. Thumpings and shufflings from somewhere in the dark threatened to hide it away from him altogether. He felt, without words, that the note was his life and that he was losing it. For the first time in his conscious life, he became consciously afraid of dying.

He screamed, and screamed again, and then there was a blackness blacker than the dark and it all ceased.

"He's fainted. Lights, please. Turn off that note. Give him 550 and we'll see if he can sleep normally. God, I hope we didn't go too far."

They stood watching the patient. They were panting with tension.

"Help me with this," said the doctor. Together, he and Miss Thomas unbuckled the restraining sheet. They cleared away the flash-gun, the cymbals, and readjusted the bed-raising control to its normal slow operation.

"He's all right, physically anyway," said the doctor after a swift examination. "I told you it would work if we got basic enough. He wouldn't fear a lion because he doesn't know what a lion is. But restraint and sudden noise and falling—he doesn't have to know what they are. Okay, button him up again."

"What? You're not going to—"

"Come on, button him up," he said brusquely.

She frowned, but she helped him replace the restraining sheet. "I still think—" she began, and earned a "Sh!"

He set up the 200-cycle note again at its usual amplitude and they waited. There was a lag in apparent consciousness this time. The doctor realized that the patient was awake, but apparently afraid to open his eyes.

"Anson . . ."

Anson began to cry weakly.

"What's the matter, Anson?"

"D-doctor Fred, Doctor Fred . . . the big noise, and then

I couldn't move and all the black and white smash lights." He wept again.

The doctor said nothing. He simply waited. Anson's sobs stopped abruptly and he tried to move. He gasped loudly and tried again.

"Doctor Fred!" he cried in panic.

Still the doctor said nothing.

Anson rolled his head wildly, fell back, tried again. "Make it so I can get up," Anson called piteously.

"No," said the doctor flatly.

"Make so I—"

"No."

Piercingly, Anson shrieked. He surged upward so powerfully that for a second the doctor was afraid for the fastenings on the restraining sheet. But they held.

For nearly ten minutes, Anson fought the sheet, screaming and drooling. Fright turned to fury, and fury to an intense, witless battle. It was a childish tantrum magnified by the strength and staying power of an adult.

At about the second minute, the doctor keyed in a supplementary frequency, a shrill 10,500 cycles which had been blank on the index. Whenever Anson paused for breath, the doctor intoned, "You are angry. You are angry." Grimly he watched until, a matter of seconds before the patient had to break, he released him to sleep.

"I couldn't stand another minute of that," said Miss Thomas. Her lips were almost gray. She moistened a towel and gently bathed the sleeping face. "I didn't like that at all."

"You'll like the rest of it," promised the doctor. "Let's get rid of this sheet."

They took it off and stored it.

"How'd you like me to hit the ten-five cycles with that sheet off?" he asked.

"Build him a cage first," she breathed in an awed tone.

He grinned suddenly. "Hit eighty cycles for me, will you?"

She did and they watched Richard Newell wakening. He groaned and moved his head gingerly. He sat up suddenly and yelped, and covered his face for a moment with both hands.

"Hello, Newell. How do you feel?"

"Like the output of a garbage disposal unit. I haven't felt like this since the day I rowed a boat for fourteen hours."

"It's all right, Newell. All in a day's work."

"Work is right. I know—you've had me out pulling a plow

while I was hypnotized. Slave labor. Lowers the overhead. Damn it, Fred, I'm not going to take much more of this."

"You'll take as much as I choose to give you," snapped the doctor. "This is my party now, Dicky boy."

Miss Thomas gasped. Newell slowly swung his legs out and sat looking at the doctor, an ominous and ugly half-smile on his face.

"Miss Thomas," said the doctor, "ten-five, please."

With his amusement deeply concealed, he watched Miss Thomas sidle to the controls and dial for the 10,500 supplementary note. He knew exactly what was going on in her mind. Ten-five was a fury motif, the command to Anson to relive the state of unbearable anger he had been in just moments ago.

"Miss Thomas," said Newell silkily, "did I ever tell you the story of my life? Or, for that matter, the story of the doctor's life?"

"Why—no, Mr. Newell."

"Once upon a time," said Newell, "there was a doctor who . . . who . . ." As the shrill note added itself to the bumble of the 80-cycle tone, Newell's voice faltered. Behind him, the doctor heard the rustle of Miss Thomas's starch as she braced herself.

Newell looked at the doctor with astonishment. "What the hell am I up to?" he murmured. "That isn't a funny story. 'Scuse me, Miss Thomas." He visibly relaxed, swung his feet back up on the bed and rested on one elbow. "I haven't felt like this since . . . Where's Osa?" he asked.

"Home. Waiting for you."

"God. Hope she doesn't have to wait much longer. Is she all right?"

"She's fine. So are you, pretty near. I think we have the thing whipped. Like to hear about it?"

" 'Talk about me,' " Newell quoted. " 'Talk nice if you can, but talk about me.' "

The doctor saw Miss Thomas staring incredulously at the controls, checking to be sure she had keyed the right note. He laughed. Newell laughed with him; it was one of the most pleasant of imaginable sounds. And it wasn't Anson's laugh, either—not even remotely. This was Richard Newell to the life, but warm, responsive, considerate.

The doctor said, "Did Osa ever tell you she thought you had a nameless monster pushing you around?"

"Only a couple hundred times."

"Well, you have. I'm not joking, Dick—you really have. On-

ly you've never suspected it and you don't have a name to call it by."

"I don't get you." He was curious, anxious to learn, to like and be liked. It was in the way he spoke, moved, listened. Miss Thomas stood with her hand frozen near the controls, ready to shut him off at the first sign of expected violence.

"You will. Now here's the picture." And in simple terms, the doctor told him the story of Anson, the theory of multiple personality as a phenomenon of twinning, and at last his theory of the acrobatic stabilization the two entities had achieved on their own.

"Why acrobatic?" asked Newell.

"You know you act like a heel most of the time, Dick."

"You might say so." It was said quite without resentment.

"Here's why. (Just listen, now; you can test it any way you like after you've heard it all.) Your alter ego (to coin a phrase) had been walled in, excluded from consciousness and expression and even self-awareness, ever since you were born. I won't attempt to explain that; I don't know. Anyway, there it lay, isolated but alive, Dick, alive—*and just as strong as you!*"

"I . . . can't picture such a thing."

"It isn't easy. I can't either, completely. It's like trying to get into the mind of another species, or a plant, if you can imagine such a thing. I do know, though, that the thing is alive, and up until recently had nothing—no knowledge, no retained experience, no mode of expression at all."

"How do you know it's there, then?"

"It's there all right," said the doctor. "And right this very minute, it's blowing its top. You see, all your life it's lived with you. It has had a blind, constant urge to break through, and it never could make it until it popped up here and we drew it out. It's a fascinating entity, Dick. I won't go into that now; you'll know it—him—thoroughly before you leave. But believe it or not, it's pretty nice. More than nice: it's positively angelic. It's lain there in the dark all these years like a germinated seed, pushing up toward the light. And every time it came near—you batted it down again."

"I did?"

"For good sound survival reasons, you did. But like a lot of survival impulses yours was pretty irrational. A lion roars, a deer runs. Good survival. But if he runs over a cliff? What I'm getting at is that there's room for both of you in Richard Anson Newell. You've coexisted fairly well, considering, as strangers and sometime enemies. You're going to do

a lot better as friends and partners. Brothers, if you want the true term, because that's just what the two of you are."

"How does this—if true—explain the way I've been mucking around with my life?"

Looking for an image, the doctor paused. "You might say you've been *cantilevered* out from a common center. Way out. Now your alter—we call him Anson—is, as I've said, a very nice fellow. His blind strugglings have been almost all toward something—call it an aura, if you like—in people around you. The pressures are everything that's warm and lovable and good to be with.

"But you—man, you felt invaded! You could never reach out toward anything; Anson was there ahead of you, pressing and groping. You had to react, immediately and with all your might, *in the opposite direction.* Isn't it true that all your life you've rejected and tramped on anything that attracted you—and at the same time you've taken only things you couldn't really care about?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Just hold onto the idea. This speech I'm making is for your intellectual understanding; I don't expect you to buy it first crack out of the barrel."

"But I haven't always . . . I mean what about Osa? Are you telling me I didn't really want Osa?"

"That's the cantilever effect, Dick. Anson never felt about Osa the way you did. I think she must have some confining effect on him; he doesn't like to be confined, does he, Miss Thomas?" He chuckled. "She either leaves him cold or makes him angry. So angry that it's beyond belief. But it's an infant's anger, Dick—blind and furious and extreme. And what happens *then,* when you react in the *opposite* direction?"

"Oh, my God," breathed Newell. "Osa . . ." He turned his suddenly illuminated gaze up. "You know, sometimes I—we—it's like a big light that . . ."

"I know, I know," said the doctor testily. "Matter of fact, that's happening right now. Turn off the ten-five, please, Miss Thomas."

"Yes, doctor."

"That high note," the doctor explained. "It's for Anson—induced anger. You're being pretty decent at the moment, Newell. You realize that?"

"Well, why wouldn't I? You've done a lot for me."

The note faded. Newell closed his eyes and opened them again. There was a long, tense silence.

Finally Newell said in his most softly insulting tone, "You

spin a pretty tale, Freddy boy. But I'm tired of listening. Shall I blackmail you the hell out of here?"

"Five-fifty, Miss Thomas."

"Yes, doctor." She turned Newell off.

Back in the office again, Miss Thomas jittered in indecision. She tried to speak and then looked at the doctor with mute pleading.

"Go ahead," he encouraged.

She shook her head. "I don't know what comes next. Morton Prince was wrong; there are no multiple egos, just multiple siblings sharing the same body, the same brain." She halted, waiting for him to take it from there.

"Well?" he said.

"I know you're not going to sacrifice one for the other; that's why you never handled these cases before. But—" she flapped her hands helplessly—"even if Newell could carry the equipment around, I'd never sleep nights thinking that Anson had to go through the agony of that ten-five note just so Newell would be a decent human being. Or even, for that matter, vice versa."

"It wouldn't be either humane or practical," he said. "Well?"

"Do they take turns being dominant, one day on, one day off?"

"That still would be sacrificing each half the time."

"Then what? You said it would be 'Newell, meet Anson. Anson, meet Newell.' But you don't have the same problem you'd have with Siamese twins or the same solution."

"Which is?"

"Separating them without killing either one. All these two have is a single brain to share and a single body. If you could cut them free—"

"I can't," he said bluntly. "I don't intend to."

"All right," she conceded in defeat. "You're the doctor. You tell me."

"Just what you said—the Morton Prince cases were in communication."

"And Newell and Anson are, just because we gave Anson a vocabulary? What about that cantilever effect you explained to Newell? You can't let them go through life counterbalancing each other—Newell pulling violently to the other side of Anson's reactions, Anson doing the same with Newell's. Then *what?*" she repeated almost angrily. "If you know, why put me through this guessing game?"

"To see if you'd come up with the same answer," he said candidly. "A check on my judgment. Do you mind?"

She shook her head again, but this time with a little complimentary smile. "It's a painful way to get cooperation, only it works, damn you." She frowned then, considering. "The two of them are compartmented. Are they different in that way from the other multiples?"

"Some, yes—the ones that are detected because there is communication. But not the others. And those cases rate treatment (because all people in difficulty do) and Newell-Anson, if we work it out properly, will show us how to help them. There's an obvious answer, Miss Thomas. I'm hoping —almost desperately—that you come up with the one I thought of."

She made a self-impatient gesture. "*Not* the psychostat. *Definitely* not eliminating one or the other. *Not* making them take turns." She looked up wtih a questioning awe on her face. "The *opposite* of treating Siamese twins?"

"Like what?" he asked urgently, leaning forward.

"Don't separate them. *Join* them. Make a juncture."

"Keep going," he pressed. "Don't stop now."

"Surgical?"

"Can't be done. It isn't one lobe for Newell, the other for Anson, or anything that simple. What else?"

She thought deeply, began several times to say something, dismissed each intended suggestion with a curt headshake. He waited with equally deep intensity.

She nodded at last. "Modulate them separately." She was no longer asking. "Then modulate them in relation to each other so they won't be in that awful cantilever balancing act."

"Say it!" he nearly yelled.

"But that isn't enough."

"No!"

"Audio response."

"Why?" he rapped out. "And which?"

"Sixty cycles—the AC tone they'll be hearing almost all the time. Assign it to communication between them."

The doctor slumped into a chair, drained of tension. He nodded at her, with the tiredest grin she had ever seen.

"All of it," he whispered. "You got everything I thought of . . . including the 60 cycles. I knew I was right. Now I *know* it. Or doesn't that make sense?"

"Of course it does."

"Then let's get started."

"Now?" she asked, astonished. "You're too tired—"

"Am I?" He jacked himself out of the chair. "Try stopping me and see."

They used the EEG resultants, made two analogs and another, and used all three as the optimum standard for the final fixing process in the psychostat. It was a longer, more meticulous process than it had ever been and it worked; and what shook the doctor's hand that last day was an unbelievable blend—all of Newell's smoothness and a new strength, the sum of powers he had previously exhausted in the dual struggle that neither had known of; and, with it, Anson's bright fascination with the very act of drawing breath, seeing colors, finding wonderment in everything.

"We're nice guys," said Richard Anson Newell, still shaking the doctor's hand. "We'll get along great."

"I don't doubt it a bit," the doctor said. "Give my best to Osa. Tell her . . . here's something a little better than a wet handkerchief."

"Whatever you say," said Richard Anson Newell.

He waved to Miss Thomas, who watched from the corridor, and behind her, Hildy Jarrell, who wept, and he went down the steps to the street.

"We're making a mistake, doctor," said Miss Thomas, "letting him—them—go."

"Why?" he asked, curious.

"All that brain power packed in one skull . . ."

The doctor wanted to laugh. He didn't. "You'd think so, wouldn't you?" he agreed.

"Meaning it's not so at all," she said suspiciously. "Why not?"

"Because it isn't *twice* the amount of brains any individual has. It's only as much as any *two* distinct individuals have. Like you and me, for instance. Mostly we supplement each other—but just here and there, not everywhere, adding up to a giant double brain. Same with Newell and Anson. And any two people can be counted on to jam one another occasionally. So will they—but not like before treatment."

They watched until Richard Anson Newell was out of sight, then went back to check the multiple personality cases that Miss Jarrell had dug out of the files.

Four months later, the doctor got a letter:

Dear Fred,

I'll write this because it will do me good to get it off my

chest. If it doesn't do enough good, I'll send it. If that doesn't help, I don't know what I'll do. Yes, I do. Nothing.

Dick is . . . incredible. He takes care of me, Fred, in ways I'd never dreamed of or hoped for. He cares. That's it, he cares—about me, about his work. He learns new things all the time and loves old things over again. It's . . . could I say miracle?

But, Fred—this is hateful of me, I know—the thing I told you about, the thing I used to wish for and live to remember, no matter what . . . it's gone. That's probably good, because of what happened between times.

But sometimes I'd trade my perfect husband for that louse and a wet handkerchief, if I could have the other thing along with it somehow.

There, I've said it.

Osa

The doctor galloped through the clinic until he found his head technician in the electrical lab.

"Tommie," he said jovially, "did you ever go out and get drunk with a doctor?"

The tears were streaming down his face. Miss Thomas went out and got drunk with the doctor.

THE SKY WAS FULL OF SHIPS

SYKES DIED, and after two years they tracked Gordon Kemp down and brought him back, because he was the only man who knew anything about the death. Kemp had to face a coroner's jury in Switchpath, Arizona, a crossroads just at the edge of the desert, and he wasn't too happy about it, being city-bred and not quite understanding the difference between "hicks" and "folks."

The atmosphere in the courtroom was tense. Had there been great wainscoted walls and a statue of blind Justice,

it would have been more impersonal and, for Kemp, easier to take. But this courtroom was a crossroads granger's hall in Switchpath, Arizona.

The presiding coroner was Bert Whelson, who held a corncob pipe instead of a gavel. At their ease around the room were other men, dirt farmers and prospectors like Whelson. It was like a movie short. It needed only a comedy dance number and somebody playing a jug.

But there was nothing comic about it. These hicks were in a position to pile trouble on Kemp, trouble that might very easily wind up in the gas chamber.

The coroner leaned forward. "You got nothin' to be afeard of, son, if your conscience is clear."

"I still ain't talking. I brought the guy in, didn't I? Would I done that if I'd killed him?"

The coroner stroked his stubble, a soft rasping sound like a rope being pulled over a wooden beam.

"We don't know about that, Kemp. *Hmm.* Why can't you get it through your head that nobody's accusing you of anything? You're jest a feller knows something about the death of this here Alessandro Sykes. This court'd like to know exactly what happened?"

He hesitated, shuffled.

"Sit down, son," said the coroner.

That did it. He slumped into the straight chair that one of the men pushed up for him, and told this story.

I guess I better go right back to the beginning, the first time I ever saw this here Sykes.

I was working in my shop one afternoon when he walked in. He watched what I was doing and spoke up.

"You Gordon Kemp?"

I said yes and looked him over. He was a scrawny feller, prob'ly sixty years old and wound up real tight. He talked fast, smoked fast, moved fast, as if there wasn't time for nothin', but he had to get on to somethin' else. I asked him what he wanted.

"You the man had that article in the magazine about the concentrated atomic torch?" he said.

"Yeah," I told him. "Only that guy from the magazine, he used an awful lot of loose talk. Says my torch was three hundred years ahead of its time." Actually it was something I stumbled on by accident, more or less. The ordinary atomic hydrogen torch—plenty hot.

I figured out a ring-shaped electro-magnet set just in front

of the jet, to concentrate it. It repelled the hydrogen particles and concentrated them. It'll cut anything—anything. And since it got patented, you'd be surprised at the calls I got. You got no idea how many people want to cut into bank vaults an' the side doors of hock shops. Well, about Sykes. . . .

I told him this magazine article went a little too far, but I did have quite a gadget. I give him a demonstration or two, and he seemed satisfied. Finally I told him I was wasting my time unless he had a proposition.

He's lookin' real happy about this torch of mine, an' he nods.

"Sure. Only you'll have to take a couple of weeks off. Go out West. Arizona. Cut a way into a cave there."

"Cave, huh?" I said. "Is it legal?" I didn't want no trouble.

"Sure it's legal," he tells me.

"How much?"

He says he hates to argue.

"If you'll get me into that place—and you can satisfy yourself as to whether it's legal—I'll give you five thousand dollars," he said.

Now, five thousand berries cuts a lot of ice for me. Especially for only two weeks' work. And besides, I liked the old guy's looks. He was queer as a nine-dollar bill, mind you, and had a funny way of carryin' on, but I could see he was worth the kind of money he talked.

He looked like he really needed help, too. Aw, maybe I'm just a boy scout at heart. As I say, I liked him, money or no money, and chances are I'd have helped him out for free.

He came to see me a couple more times and we sweated out the details. It wound up with him and me on the train and my torch and the other gear in the baggage car up front. Maybe some of you remember the day we arrived here. He seemed to know a lot of people here. Mm? I thought so. He told me how many years he had been coming out to Switchpath.

He told me lots of things. He was one of the talkin'est old geezers I ever did see. I understood about one ninth of what he said. He was lonely, I guess. I was the first man he ever called in to help him with his work, and he spilled the overflow of years of workin' by himself.

About this Switchpath proposition, he told me that when he was just a punk out of college, he was a archyologist

roamin' around the desert lookin' for old Indian stuff, vases and arrowheads and such stuff. And he run across this here room in the rock, at the bottom of a deep cleft.

He got all excited when he told me about this part of it. Went on a mile a minute about plasticine ages and messy zorics and pally o' lithographs or something. I called him down to earth and he explained to me that this room was down in rock that was very old—a couple of hundred thousand years, or maybe a half million.

He said that rock had been there either before mankind had a start here on earth, or maybe about the same time as the missing link. Me, I don't care about dead people or dead people's great grandfather's, but Sykes was all enthusiastic.

Anyhow, it seems that this cave had been opened by some sort of an earthquake or something, and the stuff in it must have been there all that time. What got him excited was that the stuff was machinery of some kind and must have been put there 'way *before there was any human beings on earth at all!*

That seemed silly to me. I wanted to know what kind of machinery.

"Well," he says, "I thought at first that it was some sort of a radio transmitter. Get this," he says. "Here is a machine with an antenna on top of it, just like a microwave job. And beside it is another machine.

"This second machine is shaped like a dumbbell standing on one end. The top of it is a sort of covered hopper, and at the waist of the machine is a arrangement of solenoids made out of some alloy that was never seen before on this earth.

"There's gearing between this machine and the other, the transmitter. I have figured out what this dumbbell thing is. It's a recorder."

I want to know what is it recording. He lays one finger on the side of his nose and winks at me.

"Thought," he says. "Raw thought. But that isn't all. Earthquakes, continental shifts, weather cycles, lots more stuff. It integrates all these things with thought."

I want to know how he knows all this. That was when he told me that he had been with this thing for the better part of the last thirty years. He'd figured it out all by himself. He was real touchy about that part of it.

Then I began to realize what was the matter with the poor old guy. He really figured he had something big here and he wanted to find out about it. But it seems he was a

ugly kid and a shy man, and he wanted to make the big splash all by himself. It wouldn't do for him just to be known as the man who discovered this thing.

"Any dolt could have stumbled across it," he'd say. He wanted to find out everything there was about this thing before he let a soul know about it. "Greater than the Rosetta Stone," he used to say. "Greater than the nuclear hypotheses." Oh, he was a great one for slinging the five-dollar words.

"And it will be Sykes who gave this to the world," he would say. "Sykes will give it to humanity, complete and provable, and history will be reckoned from the day I speak."

Oh, he was wacky, all right. I didn't mind, though. He was harmless, and a nicer little character you'd never want to meet.

Funny guy, that Sykes. What kind of a life he led I can only imagine. He had dough—inherited an income or something, so he didn't have the problem that bothers most of the rest of us. He would spend days in that cavern, staring at the machines. He didn't want to touch them. He only wanted to find out what they were doing there. One of them was running.

The big machine, the dumbbell-shaped one, was running. It didn't make no noise. Both machines had a little disk set into the side. It was half red, half black. On the big machine, the one he called the recorder, this here disk was turning. Not fast, but you could see it was moving. Sykes was all excited about that.

On the way out here, on the train, he spouted a lot of stuff. I don't know why. Maybe he thought I was too dumb to ever tell anybody about it. If that's what he thought, he had the right idea. I'm just a grease monkey who happened to have a bright idea. Anyway, he showed me something he had taken from the cave.

It was a piece of wire about six feet long. But wire like I have never seen before or since. It was about 35 gauge—like a hair. And crooked. Crimped, I mean. Sykes said it was magnetized too. It bent easy enough, but it wouldn't kink at all, and you couldn't put a tight bend in it. I imagine it'd dent a pair of pliers.

He asked me if I thought I could break it. I tried and got a gash in my lunch-hook for my trouble. So help me, it wouldn't break, and it wouldn't cut, and you couldn't get any of those crimps out of it. I don't mean you'd pull

the wire and it would snap back. No. You couldn't pull it straight at all.

Sykes told me on the train that it had taken him eight months to cut that piece loose. It was more than just tough. It fused with itself. The first four times he managed to cut it through, he couldn't get the ends apart fast enough to keep them from fusing together again.

He finally had to clamp a pair of steel blocks around the wire, wait for enough wire to feed through to give him some slack and then put about twelve tons on some shears to cut through the wire. Forged iridium steel, those cutters were, and that wire left a heck of a hole in them.

But the wire parted. He had a big helical spring hauling the wire tight, so that the instant it parted it was snapped out of the way. It had to be cut twice to get the one piece out, and when he put the ends together they fused. I mean, both on the piece he took out and the two free ends in the machine—not a mark, not a bulge.

Well, you all remember when we arrived here with all that equipment, and how we hired a car and went off into the desert. All the while the old man was happy as a kid.

"Kemp, my boy," he says, "I got it decoded. I can read that tape. Do you realize what that means? Every bit of human history—I can get it in detail. Every single thing that ever happened to this earth or the people in it.

"You have no idea in what detail that tape records," he says. "Want to know who put the bee on Alexander the Great? Want to know what the name of Pericles' girl friend really was? I have it all here. What about these Indian and old Greek legends about a lost continent? What about old Fort's fireballs? Who was the man in the iron mask? I have it, son, I have it."

That was what went on all the way out there, to that place in the dry gulch where the cave was.

You wouldn't believe what a place that was to get to. How that old guy ever had the energy to keep going back to it I'll never know. We had to stop the car about twenty miles from here and hoof it.

The country out there is all tore up. If I hadn't already seen the color of his money I'd 'a said the heck with it. Sand an' heat an' big rocks an' more places to fall into and break your silly neck—*Lord!*

Me with a pack on my back too, the torch, the gas and a power supply and all. We got to this cleft, see, and he outs with a length of rope and makes it fast to a stone col-

umn that's eroded nearby. He has a slip-snaffle on it. He lowers himself into the gulch and I drop the gear down after him, and then down I go.

Brother, it's dark in there. We go uphill about a hundred and fifty yards, and then Sykes pulls up in front of a facing. By the light of his flash I can see the remains of a flock of campfires he's made there over the years.

"There it is," he says. "It's all yours, Kemp. If that three-hundred-years-in-the-future torch of yours is any good—prove it."

I unlimbered my stuff and got to work, and believe me it was hard, slow goin'. But I got through. It took nine hours before I had a hole fit for us to crawl through, and another hour for it to cool enough so's we could use it.

All that time the old man talked. It was mostly bragging about the job he'd done decoding the wire he had. It was mostly Greek to me.

"I have a record here," he says, swishin' his hunk of wire around, "of a phase of the industrial revolution in Central Europe that will have the historians gnashing their teeth. But have I said anything? Not me. Not Sykes!

"I'll have the history of mankind written in such detail, with such authority, that the name of Sykes will go into the language as a synonym for the miraculously accurate." I remember that because he said it so much. He said it like it tasted good.

I remember once I asked him why it was we had to bother cutting in. Where was the hole he had used?

"That, my boy," he says, "is an unforseen quality of the machines. For some reason they closed themselves up. In a way I'm glad they did. I was unable to get back in and I was forced to concentrate on my sample. If it hadn't been for that, I doubt that I would ever have cracked the code."

So I asked him what about all this—what were the machines and who left them there and what for? All this while I was cutting away at that rock facing. And, man! I never seen rock like that. If it *was* rock, which now, I doubt.

It come off in flakes, in front of my torch. *My* torch, that'll cut anything. Do you know that in those nine hours I only got through about seven and a half inches of that stuff! And my torch'll walk into laminated bank vaults like the door was open.

When I asked him he shut up for a long time, but I guess he wanted to talk. He sure was enthusiastic. And besides, he figured I was too dumb to savvy what he was

talking about. As I said before, he was right there. So he run off about it, and this is about how it went—

"Who left these machines here or how they operate, we may never know. It would be interesting to find out, but the important thing is to get the records and decode them all."

It had taken him awhile to recognize that machine as a recorder. The tipoff was that it was running and the other one, the transmitter, was not.

He thought at first that maybe the transmitter was busted, but after a year or two of examining the machines without touching them he began to realize that there was a gear-train waiting by the tape where it fed through the gismo that crimped it.

This gear train was fixed to start the transmitter, see? But it was keyed to a certain crimp in the tape. In other words, when something happened somewhere on earth that was just the right thing, the crimper would record it and the transmitter would get keyed off.

Sykes studied that setup for years before he figured the particular squiggle in that wire that would start that transmitter to sending. Where was it sending to? Why? Sure, he thought about that. But that didn't matter to him.

What was supposed to happen when the tape ran out? Who or what would come and look at it when it was all done? You know, he didn't care. He just wanted to read that tape, is all. Seems there's a lot of guys write history books and stuff. And he wanted to call them liars. He wanted to tell them the way it really was. Can you imagine?

So there I am, cutting away with my super-torch on what seems to be a solid wall made out of some stuff that has no right to be so tough. I can still see it.

So dark, and me with black goggles on, and the doc with his back to me so's he won't wreck his eyes, spoutin' along about history and the first unbiased account of it. And how he was going to thrust it on the world and just kill all those guys with all those theories.

I remember quitting once for a breather and letting the mercury cells juice up a bit while I had a smoke. Just to make talk I ask Sykes when does he think that transmitter is going to go to work.

"Oh," he says. "It already did. It's finished. That's how I knew that my figuring was right. That tape has a certain rate through the machine. It's in millimeters per month. I have the figure. It wouldn't matter to you. But something happened a while ago that made it possible to check.

July sixteenth, nineteen hundred and forty-five, to be exact."

"You don't tell me," I says.

"Oh," he says, real pleased, "but I do! That day something happened which put a wiggle in the wire there—the thing I was looking for all along. It was the crimp that triggered the transmitter. I happened to be in the cave at the time.

"The transmitter started up and the little disk spun around like mad. Then it stopped. I looked in the papers the next week to see what it was. Nothing I could find. It wasn't until the following August that I found out."

I suddenly caught wise.

"Oh—the atom bomb! You mean that rig was set up to send something as soon as an atomic explosion kicked off somewhere on earth!"

He nodded his head. By the glare of the red-hot rock he looked like a skinny old owl.

"That's right. That's why we've got to get in there in a hurry. It was after the second Bikini blast that the cave got sealed up. I don't know if that transmission is ever going to be picked up.

"I don't know if anything is going to happen if it is picked up. I do know that I have the wire decoded and I mean to get those records before anybody else does."

If that wall had been any thicker I never would've gotten through. When I got my circle cut and the cut-out piece dropped inside, my rig was about at its last gasp. So was Sykes. For the last two hours he'd been hoppin' up an' down with impatience.

"Thirty years' work," he kept saying. "I've waited for this for thirty years and I won't be stopped now. Hurry up! Hurry up!"

And when we had to wait for the opening to cool I thought he'd go wild. I guess that's what built him up to his big breakdown. He sure was keyed up.

Well, at last we crawled into the place. He'd talked so much about it that I almost felt I was comin' back to something instead of seeing it for the first time.

There was the machines, the big one about seven feet tall, dumbbell shaped, and the little one sort of a rounded cube with a bunch of macaroni on top that was this antenna he was talking about.

We lit a pressure lantern that flooded the place with light

—it was small, with a floor about nine by nine—and he jumped over to the machines.

He scrabbles around and hauls out some wire. Then he stops and stands there looking stupid at me.

"What's the matter, Doc?" I say. I called him Doc.

He gulps and swallows.

"The reel's empty. It's empty! There's only eight inchs of wire here. Only—" and that was when he fainted.

I jumped up right away and shook him and shoved him around a little until his eyes started to blink. He sits up and shakes himself.

"*Refilled,*" he says. He is real hoarse. "Kemp! They've been here!"

I began to get the idea. The lower chamber is empty. The upper one is full. The whole set-up is arranged to run off a new recording. And where is Sykes' thirty years' work?

He starts to laugh. I look at him. I can't take that. The place is too small for all that noise. I never heard anybody laugh like that. Like short screams, one after the other, fast. He laughs and laughs.

I carry him out. I put him down outside and go back in for my gear. I can hear him laughing out there and that busted-up voice of his echoing in the gulch. I get everything onto the back pack and go to put out the pressure lantern when I hear a little click.

It's that transmitter. The little red and black disk is turning around on it. I just stand there watching it. It only runs for three or four minutes. And then it begins to get hot in there.

I got scared. I ducked out of the hole and picked up Sykes. He didn't weigh much. I looked back in the hole. The cave was lit up. Red. The machines were cherry-red, straw-colored, white, just that quick. They melted. I saw it. I ran.

I don't hardly remember getting to the rope and tying Sykes on and climbing up and hauling him up after me. He was quiet then, but conscious. I carried him away until the light from the gulch stopped me. I turned around to watch.

I could see a ways down into the gulch. It was fillin' up with lava. It was lightin' up the whole desert. And I never felt such heat. I ran again.

I got to the car and dumped Sykes in. He shifted around on the seat some. I asked him how he felt. He didn't answer that but mumbled a lot of stuff.

Something like this.

"They knew we'd reached the atomic age. They wanted to be told when. The transmitter did just that. They came and took the recordings and refilled the machine.

"They sealed off the room with something they thought only controlled atomic power could break into. This time the transmitter was triggered to human beings in that room. Your torch did it, Kemp—that three-hundred-years-in-the-future torch! They think we have atomic power! They'll come back!"

"Who, Doc? Who?" I says.

"I don't know," he mumbles. "There'd be only one reason why someone—some creature—would want to know a thing like that. And that's so they could stop us."

So I laughed at him. I got in and started the car and laughed at him.

"Doc," I said, "we ain't goin' to be stopped now. Like the papers say, we're in the atomic age if it kills us. But we're we're in for keeps. Why, humanity would have to be killed off before it'd get out of this atomic age."

"I know that, Kemp—I know—that's what I mean! What have we done? What have we done?"

After that he's quiet a while and when I look at him again I see he's dead. So I brought him in. In the excitement I faded. It just didn't look good to me. I knew nobody would listen to a yarn like that.

There was silence in the courtroom until somebody coughed, and then everyone felt he had to make a sound with his throat or his feet. The coroner held up his hand.

"I kin see what Brother Kemp was worried about. If that story is true I, for one, would think twice about tellin' it."

"He's a liar!" roared a prospector from the benches. "He's a murderin' liar! I have a kid reads that kind of stuff, an' I never did like to see him at it. Believe me, he's a-goin' to cut it out as of right now. I think this Kemp feller needs a hangin'!"

"Now, Jed!" bellowed the coroner. "If we kill off this man we do it legal, hear?" The sudden hubbub quieted, and the coroner turned to the prisoner.

"Listen here, Kemp—somethin' jest occurred to me. How long was it from the time of the first atom blast until the time that room got sealed up?"

"I dunno. About two years. Little over. Why?"

"An' how long since that night you been talking about, when Sykes died?"

"Or was murdered," growled the prospector.

"Shut up, Jed. Well, Kemp?"

"About eighteen mon— No. Nearer two years."

"Well then," said the coroner, spreading his hands. "If there was anything in your story, or in that goofy idea of the dead man's about someone comin' to kill us off—well, ain't it about time they did?"

There were guffaws, and the end of the grange hall disappeared in a burst of flame. Yelling, cursing, some screaming, they pushed and fought their way out into the moonlit road.

The sky was full of ships.

SHOTTLE BOP

I'D NEVER SEEN the place before, and I lived just down the block and around the corner. I'll even give you the address, if you like. "The Shottle Bop," between Twentieth and Twenty-first Streets, on Tenth Avenue in New York City. You can find it if you go there looking for it. Might even be worth your while, too.

But you'd better not.

"The Shottle Bop." It got me. It was a small shop with a weather-beaten sign swung from a wrought crane, creaking dismally in the late fall wind. I walked past it, thinking of the engagement ring in my pocket and how it had just been handed back to me by Audrey, and my mind was far removed from such things as shottle bops. I was thinking that Audrey might have used a gentler term than "useless" in describing me; and her neatly turned remark about my being a "constitutional psychopathic incompetent" was as uncalled-for as it was spectacular. She must have read it somewhere, balanced as it was by "And I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!" which is a notably worn cliché.

"Shottle Bop!" I muttered, and then paused, wondering where I had picked up such oddly rhythmic syllables with

which to express myself. I'd seen it on that sign, of course, and it had caught my eye. "And what," I asked myself, "might be a Shottle Bop?" Myself replied promptly, "Dunno. Toddle back and have a look." So toddle I did, back along the east side of Tenth, wondering what manner of man might be running such an establishment in pursuance of what kind of business. I was enlightened on the second point by a sign in the window, all but obscured by the dust and ashes of apparent centuries, which read:

WE SELL BOTTLES

There was another line of smaller print there. I rubbed at the crusted glass with my sleeve and finally was able to make out

With things in them.

Just like that:

WE SELL BOTTLES
With things in them.

Well of course I went in. Sometimes very delightful things come in bottles, and the way I was feeling, I could stand a little delighting.

"Close it!" shrilled a voice, as I pushed through the door. The voice came from a shimmering egg adrift in the air behind the counter, low-down. Peering over, I saw that it was not an egg at all, but the bald pate of an old man who was clutching the edge of the counter, his scrawny body streaming away in the slight draft from the open door, as if he were made of bubbles. A mite startled, I kicked the door with my heel. He immediately fell on his face, and then scrambled smiling to his feet.

"Ah, it's good to see you again," he rasped.

I think his vocal cords were dusty, too. Everything else here was. As the door swung to, I felt as if I were inside a great dusty brain that had just closed its eyes. Oh yes, there was light enough. But it wasn't the lamp light and it wasn't daylight. It was like—like reflected from the cheeks of pale people. Can't say I enjoyed it much.

"What do you mean, 'again'?" I asked irritably. "You never saw me before."

"I saw you when you came in and I fell down and got up and saw you again," he quibbled, and beamed. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," I said. "Well, I saw your sign. What have you got in a bottle that I might like?"

"What do you want?"

"What've you got?"

He broke into a piping chant—I remember it yet, word for word.

"For half a buck, a vial of luck
Or a bottle of nifty breaks
Or a flask of joy, or Myrna Loy
For luncheon with sirloin steaks.

"Pour out a mug from this old jug,
And you'll never get wet in rains.
I've bottles of grins and racetrack wins
And lotions to ease your pains.

"Here's bottles of imps and wet-pack shrimps
From a sea unknown to man,
And an elixir to banish fear,
And the sap from the pipes of Pan.

"With the powered horn of a unicorn
You can win yourself a mate;
With the rich hobnob; or get a job—
It's yours at a lowered rate."

"Now wait right there!" I snapped. "You mean you actually sell dragon's blood and ink from the pen of Friar Bacon and all such mumbo-jum?"

He nodded rapidly and smiled all over his improbable face.

I went on—"The genuine article?"

He kept on nodding.

I regarded him for a moment. "You mean to stand there with your teeth in your mouth and your bare face hanging out and tell me that in this day and age, in this city and in broad daylight, you sell such trash and then expect me—me, an enlightened intellectual—"

"You are very stupid and twice as bombastic," he said quietly.

I glowered at him and reached for the doorknob—and there I froze. And I mean froze. For the old man whipped out an ancient bulb-type atomizer and squeezed a couple of whiffs at me as I turned away; and so help me, *I couldn't move!* I could cuss, though, and boy, did I.

The proprietor hopped over the counter and ran over to

me. He must have been standing on a box back there, for now I could see he was barely three feet tall. He grabbed my coat tails, ran up my back and slid down my arm, which was extended doorward. He sat down on my wrist and swung his feet and laughed up at me. As far as I could feel, he weighed absolutely nothing.

When I had run out of profanity—I pride myself on never repeating a phrase of invective—he said, "Does that prove anything to you, my cocky and unintelligent friend? That was the essential oil from the hair of the Gorgon's head. And until I give you an antidote, you'll stand there from now till a week text Neusday!"

"Get me out of this," I roared, "or I smack you so hard you lose your brains through the pores in your feet!"

He giggled.

I tried to tear loose again and couldn't. It was as if all my epidermis had turned to high-carbon steel. I began cussing again, but quit in despair.

"You think altogether too much of yourself," said the proprietor of the Shottle Bop. "Look at you! Why, I wouldn't hire you to wash my windows. You expect to marry a girl who is accustomed to the least of animal comfort, and then you get miffed because she turns you down. Why does she turn you down? Because you won't get a job. You're a no-good. You're a bum. Hee hee! And you have the nerve to walk around telling people where to get off. Now if I were in your position I would ask politely to be released, and then I would see if anyone in this shop would be good enough to sell you a bottle full of something that might help out."

Now I never apologize to anybody, and I never back down, and I never take any guff from mere tradesmen. But this was different. I'd never been petrified before, nor had my nose rubbed in so many galling truths. I relented. "O.K., O.K.; let me break away then. I'll buy something."

"Your tone is sullen," he said complacently, dropping lightly to the floor and holding his atomizer at the ready. "You'll have to say 'Please. Pretty please.' "

"Pretty please," I said, almost choking with humiliation.

He went back of the counter and returned with a paper of powder which he had me sniff. In a couple of seconds I began to sweat, and my limbs lost their rigidity so quickly that it almost threw me. I'd have been flat on my back if the man hadn't caught me and solicitously led me to a chair. As strength dribbled back into my shocked tissues, it occurred to me that I might like to flatten this hobgoblin

for pulling a trick like that. But a strange something stopped me—strange because I'd never had the experience before. It was simply the idea that once I got outside I'd agree with him for having such a low opinion of me.

He wasn't worrying. Rubbing his hands briskly, he turned to his shelves. "Now let's see . . . what would be best for you, I wonder? Hm-m-m. Success is something you couldn't justify. Money? You don't know how to spend it. A good job? You're not fitted for one." He turned gentle eyes on me and shook his head. "A sad case. *Tsk, tsk.*" I crawled. "A perfect mate? Nup. You're too stupid to recognize perfection, too conceited to appreciate it. I don't think that I can—Wait!"

He whipped four or five bottles and jars off the dozens of shelves behind him and disappeared somewhere in the dark recesses of the store. Immediately there came sounds of violent activity—clinkings and little crashes; stirrings and then the rapid susurrant grating of a mortar and pestle; then the slushy sound of liquid being added to a dry ingredient during stirring; and at length, after quite a silence, the glugging of a bottle being filled through a filtering funnel. The proprietor reappeared triumphantly bearing a four-ounce bottle without a label.

"This will do it!" he beamed.

"That will do what?"

"Why, cure you!"

"Cure—" My pompous attitude, as Audrey called it, had returned while he was mixing. "What do you mean cure? I haven't got anything!"

"My dear little boy," he said offensively, "you most certainly have. Are you happy? Have you ever been happy? No. Well, I'm going to fix all that up. That is, I'll give you the start you need. Like any other cure, it requires your cooperation.

"You're in a bad way, young fellow. You have what is known in the profession as retrogressive metempsychosis of the ego in its most malignant form. You are a constitutional unemployable; a downright sociophagus. I don't like you. Nobody likes you."

Feeling a little bit on the receiving end of a blitz, I stammered, "W-what do you aim to do?"

He extended the bottle. "Go home. Get into a room by yourself—the smaller the better. Drink this down, right out of the bottle. Stand by for developments. That's all."

"But—what will it do to me?"

"It will do nothing *to* you. It will do a great deal *for* you. It can do as much for you as you want it to. But mind me, now. As long as you use what it gives you for your self-improvement, you will thrive. Use it for self-gratification, as a basis for boasting, or for revenge, and you will suffer in the extreme. Remember that, now."

"But what is it? How—"

"I am selling you a talent. You have none now. When you discover what kind of a talent it is, it will be up to you to use it to your advantage. Now go away. I still don't like you."

"What do I owe you?" I muttered, completely snowed under by this time.

"The bottle carries its own price. You won't pay anything unless you fail to follow my directions. Now will you go, or must I uncork a bottle of jinn—and I don't mean London Dry?"

"I'll go," I said. I'd seen something swirling in the depths of a ten-gallon carboy at one end of the counter, and I didn't like it a bit. "Good-bye."

"Bood-gye," he returned.

I went out and I headed down Tenth Avenue and I turned east up Twentieth Street and I never looked back. And for many reasons I wish now that I had, for there was, without doubt, something very strange about that Shottle Bop.

I didn't simmer down until I got home; but once I had a cup of black Italian coffee under my belt I felt better. I was skeptical about it at last. I was actually inclined to scoff. But somehow I didn't want to scoff too loudly. I looked at the bottle a little scornfully, and there was a certain something about the glass of it that seemed to be staring back at me. I sniffed and threw it up behind some old hats on top of the closet, and then sat down to unlax. I used to love to unlax. I'd put my feet on the doorknob and slide down in the upholstery until I was sitting on my shoulder blades, and as the old saying has it, "Sometimes I sets and thinks, and sometimes I just sets." The former is easy enough, and is what even an accomplished loafer has to go through before he reaches the latter and more blissful state. It takes years of practice to relax sufficiently to be able to "just set." I'd learned it years ago.

But just as I was about to slip into the vegetable status, I was annoyed by something. I tried to ignore it. I manifested a superhuman display of lack of curiosity, but the annoyance persisted. A light pressure on my elbow, where it

draped over the arm of the chair. I was put in the unpleasant predicament of having to concentrate on what it was; and realizing that concentration on anything was the least desirable thing there could be. I gave up finally, and with a deep sigh, opened my eyes and had a look.

It was the bottle.

I screwed up my eyes and then looked again, but it was still there. The closet door was open as I had left it, and its shelf almost directly above me. Must have fallen out. Feeling that if the damn thing were on the floor it couldn't fall any farther, I shoved it off the arm of my chair with my elbow.

It bounced. It bounced with such astonishing accuracy that it wound up in exactly the same spot it had started from—on the arm of the easy chair, by my elbow. Startled, I shoved it violently. This time I pushed it hard enough to send it against the wall, from which it rebounded to the shelf under my small table, and thence back to the chair arm —and this time it perched cozily against my shoulder. Jarred by the bouncing, the stopper hopped out of the bottle mouth and rolled into my lap; and there I sat, breathing the bittersweet fumes of its contents, feeling frightened and silly as hell.

I grabbed the bottle and sniffed. I'd smelled that somewhere before—where was it? Uh—oh, yes; that mascara the Chinese honkytonk girls use in Frisco. The liquid was dark—smoky black. I tasted it cautiously. It wasn't bad. If it wasn't alcoholic, then the old man in the shop had found a darn good substitute for alcohol. At the second sip I liked it and at the third I really enjoyed it and there wasn't any fourth because by then the little bottle was a dead marine. That was about the time I remembered the name of the black ingredient with the funny smell. Kohl. It is an herb the Orientals use to make it possible to see supernatural beings. Silly superstition!

And then the liquid I'd just put away, lying warm and comfortable in my stomach, began to fizz. Then I think it began to swell. I tried to get up and couldn't. The room seemed to come apart and throw itself at me piecemeal, and I passed out.

Don't you ever wake up the way I did. For your own sake, be careful about things like that. Don't swim up out of a sodden sleep and look around you and see all those things fluttering and drifting and flying and creeping and crawling around you—puffy things dripping blood, and filmy,

legless creatures, and little bits and snatches of pasty human anatomy. It was awful. There was a human hand afloat in the air an inch away from my nose; and at my startled gasp it drifted away from me, fingers fluttering in the disturbed air from my breath. Something veined and bulbous popped out from under my chair and rolled across the floor. I heard a faint clicking, and looked up into a gnashing set of jaws without any face attached. I think I broke down and cried a little. I know I passed out again.

The next time I awoke—must have been hours later, because it was broad daylight and my clock and watch had both stopped—things were a little better. Oh, yes, there were a few of the horrors around. But somehow they didn't bother me much now. I was practically convinced that I was nuts; now that I had the conviction, why worry about it? I dunno; it must have been one of the ingredients in the bottle that had calmed me down so. I was curious and excited, and that's about all. I looked around me and I was almost pleased.

The walls were green! The drab wallpaper had turned to something breathtakingly beautiful. They were covered with what seemed to be moss; but never moss like that grew for human eyes to see before. It was long and thick, and it had a slight perpetual movement—not that of a breeze, but of growth. Fascinated, I moved over and looked closely. Growing indeed, with all the quick magic of spore and cyst and root and growth again to spore; and the swift magic of it was only a part of the magical whole, for never was there such a green. I put out my hand to touch and stroke it, but I felt only the wallpaper. But when I closed my fingers on it, I could feel that light touch of it in the palm of my hand, the weight of twenty sunbeams, the soft resilience of jet darkness in a closed place. The sensation was a delicate ecstasy, and never have I been happier than I was at that moment.

Around the baseboards were little snowy toadstools, and the floor was grassy. Up the hinged side of the closet door climbed a mass of flowering vines, and their petals were hued in tones indescribable. I felt as if I had been blind until now, and deaf, too; for now I could hear the whispering of scarlet, gauzy insects among the leaves and the constant murmur of growth. All around me was a new and lovely world, so delicate that the wind of my movements tore petals from the flowers, so real and natural that it defied its own impossibility. Awestruck, I turned and turned, running

from wall to wall, looking under my old furniture, into my old books; and everywhere I looked I found newer and more beautiful things to wonder at. It was while I was flat on my stomach looking up at the bed springs, where a colony of jewellike lizards had nested, that I first heard the sobbing.

It was young and plaintive, and had no right to be in my room where everything was so happy. I stood up and looked around, and there in the corner crouched the translucent figure of a little girl. She was leaning back against the wall. Her thin legs were crossed in front of her, and she held the leg of a tattered toy elephant dejectedly in one hand and cried into the other. Her hair was long and dark, and it poured and tumbled over her face and shoulders.

I said, "What's the matter, kiddo?" I hate to hear a child cry like that.

She cut herself off in the middle of a sob and shook the hair out of her eyes, looking up and past me, all fright and olive skin and big, filled violet eyes. "Oh!" she squeaked.

I repeated, "What's the matter? Why are you crying?"

She hugged the elephant to her breast defensively, and whimpered, "W-where are you?"

Surprised, I said, "Right here in front of you, child. Can't you see me?"

She shook her head. "I'm scared. Who are you?"

"I'm not going to hurt you. I heard you crying, and I wanted to see if I could help you. Can't you see me at all?"

"No," she whispered. "Are you an angel?"

I guffawed. "By no means!" I stepped closer and put my hand on her shoulder. The hand went right through her and she winced and shrank away, uttering a little wordless cry. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. "I didn't mean . . . you can't *see* me at all? I can see you."

She shook her head again. "I think you're a ghost," she said.

"Do tell!" I said. "And what are you?"

"I'm Ginny," she said. "I have to stay here, and I have no one to play with." She blinked, and there was a suspicion of further tears.

"Where did you come from?" I asked.

"I came here with my mother," she said. "We lived in lots of other rooming houses. Mother cleaned floors in office buildings. But this is where I got so sick. I was sick a long time. Then one day I got off the bed and come over here but then when I looked back I was still on the bed. It

was awful funny. Some men came and put the 'me' that was on the bed onto a stretcher thing and took it—me—out. After a while mummy left, too. She cried for a long time before she left, and when I called to her she couldn't hear me. She never came back, and I just got to stay here."

"Why?"

"Oh, I got to. I—don't know why. I just—got to."

"What do you do here?"

"I just stay here and think about things. Once a lady lived here, had a little girl just like me. We used to play together until the lady watched us one day. She carried on somethin' awful. She said her little girl was possessed. The girl kept callin' me, 'Ginny! Ginny! Tell mamma you're here!'; an' I tried, but the lady couldn't see me. Then the lady got scared an' picked up her little girl an' cried, an' so I was sorry. I ran over here an' hid, an' after a while the other little girl forgot about me, I guess. They moved," she finished with pathetic finality.

I was touched. "What will become of you, Ginny?"

"I dunno," she said, and her voice was troubled. "I guess I'll just stay here and wait for mummy to come back. I been here a long time. I guess I deserve it, too."

"Why, child?"

She looked guiltily at her shoes. "I couldn' stand feelin' so awful bad when I was sick. I got up out of bed before it was time. I shoulda stayed where I was. This is what I get for quittin'. But mummy'll be back; just you see."

"Sure she will," I muttered. My throat felt tight. "You take it easy, kid. Any time you want someone to talk to, you just pipe up. I'll talk to you any time I'm around."

She smiled, and it was a pretty thing to see. What a raw deal for a kid! I grabbed my hat and went out.

Outside things were the same as in the room to me. The hallways, the dusty stair carpets wore new garments of brilliant, nearly intangible foliage. They were no longer dark, for each leaf had its own pale and different light. Once in a while I saw things not quite so pretty. There was a giggling thing that scuttled back and forth on the third floor landing. It was a little indistinct, but it looked a great deal like Barrel-head Brogan, a shanty Irish bum who'd returned from a warehouse robbery a year or so ago, only to shoot himself accidentally with his own gun. I wasn't sorry.

Down on the first floor, on the bottom step, I saw two youngsters sitting. The girl had her head on the boy's shoulder, and he had his arms around her, and I could see the

banister through them. I stopped to listen. Their voices were faint, and seemed to come from a long way away.

He said, "There's one way out."

She said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

"What else can we do? I've loved you for three years, and we still can't get married. No money, no hope—no nothing. Sue, if we did do it, I just *know* we'd always be together. Always and always—"

After a long time she said, "All right, Tommy. You get a gun, like you said." She suddenly pulled him even closer. "Oh, Tommy, are you sure we'll always be together just like this?"

"Always," he whispered, and kissed her. "Just like this."

Then there was a long silence, while neither moved. Suddenly they were as I had first seen them, and he said:

"There's only one way out."

And she said, "Don't talk that way, Tommy!"

And he said, "What else can we do? I've loved you for three years—" It went on like that, over and over and over.

I felt lousy. I went on out into the street.

It began to filter through to me what had happened. The man in the shop had called it a "talent." I couldn't be crazy, could I? I didn't *feel* crazy. The draught from the bottle had opened my eyes on a new world. What was this world?

It was a thing peopled by ghosts. There they were—storybook ghosts, and regular haunts, and poor damned souls—all the fixings of a storied supernatural, all the things we have heard about and loudly disbelieved and secretly wonder about. So what? What had it all to do with me?

As the days slid by, I wondered less about my new, strange surroundings, and gave more and more thought to that question. I had bought—or been given—a talent. I could see ghosts. I could see all parts of a ghostly world, even the vegetation that grew in it. That was perfectly reasonable—the trees and birds and fungi and flowers. A ghost world is a world as we know it, and a world as we know it must have vegetation. Yes, I could see them. But they couldn't see me!

O.K.; what could I get out of it? I couldn't talk about it or write about it because I wouldn't be believed; and besides, I had this thing exclusive, as far as I knew; why cut a lot of other people in on it?

On what, though?

No, unless I could get a steer from somewhere, there was no percentage in it for me that I could see. And then,

about six days after I took that eye-opener, I remembered the one place where I might get that steer.

The Shottle Bop!

I was on Sixth Avenue at the time, trying to find something in a five-and-dime that Ginny might like. She couldn't touch anything I brought her but she enjoyed things she coule look at—picture books and such. By getting her a little book on photographs of trains since the "De Witt Clinton," and asking her which of them was like ones she had seen, I found out approximately how long it was she'd been there. Nearly eighteen years. Anyway, I got my bright idea and headed for Tenth Avenue and the Shottle Bop. I'd ask the old man—he'd tell me. And when I got to Twenty-first Street, I stopped and stared. Facing me was a blank wall. The whole side of the block was void of people. There was no sign of a shop.

I stood there for a full two minutes not even daring to think. Then I walked downtown toward Twentieth, and then uptown to Twenty-first. Then I did it again. No shop. I wound up without my question answered—what was I going to do with this "talent"?

I was talking to Ginny one afternoon about this and that when a human leg, from the knee down, complete and puffy, drifted between us. I recoiled in horror, but Ginny pushed it gently with one hand. It bent under the touch, and started toward the window, which was open a little at the bottom. The leg floated toward the crack and was sucked through like a cloud of cigarette smoke, reforming again on the other side. It bumbled against the pane for a moment and then ballooned away.

"My gosh!" I breathed. "What *was* that?"

Ginny laughed. "Oh, just one of the Things that's all 'e time flying around. Did it scare you? I used to be scared, but I saw so many of them that I don't care any more, so's they don't light on me."

"But what in the name of all that's disgusting are they?"

"Parts." Ginny was all childish *savoir-faire*.

"Parts of what?"

"People, silly. It's some kind of a game, I think. You see, if someone gets hurt and loses something—a finger or an ear or something, why, the ear—the *inside* part of it, I mean, like me being the inside of the 'me' they carried out of here—it goes back to where the person who owned it lived last. Then it goes back to the place before that, and so on. It doesn't

go very fast. Then when something happens to a whole person, the 'inside' part comes looking for the rest of itself. It picks up bit after bit—Look!" she put out a filmy forefinger and thumb and nipped a flake of gossamer out of the air.

I leaned over and looked closely; it was a small section of semitransparent human skin, ridged and whorled.

"Somebody must have cut his finger," said Ginny matter-of-factly, "while he was living in this room. When something happens to um—you see! He'll be back for it!"

"Good heavens!" I said. "Does this happen to everyone?"

"I dunno. Some people have to stay where they are—like me. But I guess if you haven't done nothing to deserve bein' kept in one place, you have to come all around pickin' up what you lost."

I'd thought of more pleasant things in my time.

For several days I'd noticed a gray ghost hovering up and down the block. He was always on the street, never inside. He whimpered constantly. He was—or had been—a little inoffensive man of the bowler hat and starched collar type. He paid no attention to me—none of them did, for I was apparently invisible to them. But I saw him so often that pretty soon I realized that I'd miss him if he went away. I decided I'd chat with him the next time I saw him.

I left the house one morning and stood around for a few minutes in front of the brownstone steps. Sure enough, pressing through the flotsam of my new, weird coexistent world, came the slim figure of the wraith I had noticed, his rabbit face screwed up, his eyes deep and sad, and his swallowtail coat and striped waistcoat immaculate. I stepped up behind him and said, "Hi!"

He started violently and would have run away, I'm sure, if he'd known where my voice was coming from.

"Take it easy, pal," I said. "I won't hurt you."

"Who are you?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you," I said. "Now stop shivering and tell me about yourself."

He mopped his ghostly face with a ghostly handkerchief, and then began fumbling nervously with a gold toothpick. "My word," he said. "No one's talked to me for years. I'm not quite myself, you see."

"I see," I said. "Well, take it easy. I just happen to've noticed you wandering around here lately. I got curious. You looking for somebody?"

"Oh, no," he said. Now that he had a chance to talk about

his troubles, he forgot to be afraid of this mysterious voice from nowhere that had accosted him. "I'm looking for my home."

"Hm-m-m," I said. "Been looking for a long time?"

"Oh, yes." His nose twitched. "I left for work one morning a long time ago, and when I got off the ferry at Battery Place I stopped for a moment to watch the work on that newfangled elevated railroad they were building down there. All of a sudden there was a loud noise—my goodness! It was terrible—and the next thing I knew I was standing back from the curb and looking at a man who looked just like me! A girder had fallen, and—my word!" He mopped his face again. "Since then I have been looking and looking. I can't seem to find anyone who knows where I might have lived, and I don't understand all the things I see floating around me, and I never thought I'd see the day when grass would grow on lower Broadway—oh, it's terrible." He began to cry.

I felt sorry for him. I could easily see what had happened. The shock was so great that even his ghost had amnesia! Poor little egg—until he was whole, he could find no rest. The thing interested me. Would a ghost react to the usual cures for amnesia? If so, then what would happen to him?

"You say you got off a ferryboat?"

"Yes."

"Then you must have lived on the Island . . . Staten Island, over there across the bay!"

"You really think so?" He stared through me, puzzled and hopeful.

"Why sure! Say, how'd you like me to take you over there? Maybe we can find your house."

"Oh, that would be splendid! But—oh, my, what will my wife say?"

I grinned. "She might want to know where you've been. Anyway, she'll be glad to see you back, I imagine. Come on; let's get going!"

I gave him a shove in the direction of the subways and strolled alone behind him. Once in a while I got a stare from a passerby for walking with one hand out in front of me and talking into thin air. It didn't bother me very much. My companion, though, was very self-conscious about it, for the inhabitants of his world screeched and giggled when they saw him doing practically the same thing. Of all the humans, only I was invisible to them, and the little ghost

in the bowler hat blushed from embarrassment until I thought he'd burst.

We hopped a subway—it was a new experience for him, I gathered—and went down to South Ferry. The subway system in New York is a very unpleasant place to one gifted as I was. Everything that enjoys lurking in the dark hangs out there, and there is quite a crop of dismembered human remains. After this day I took the bus.

We got a ferry without waiting. The little gray ghost got a real kick out of the trip. He asked me about the ships in the harbor and their flags, and marveled at the dearth of sailing vessels. He *tsk, tsked* at the Statue of Liberty; the last time he had seen it, he said, was while it still had its original brassy gold color, before it got its patina. By this I placed him in the late '70s; he must have been looking for his home for over sixty years!

We landed at the Island, and from there I gave him his head. At the top of Fort Hill he suddenly said "My name is John Quigg. I live at 45 Fourth Avenue!" I've never seen anyone quite so delighted as he was by the discovery. And from then on it was easy. He turned left again, straight down for two blocks and again right. I noticed—he didn't—that the street was marked "Winter Avenue." I remembered vaguely that the streets in this section had been numbered years ago.

He trotted briskly up the hill and then suddenly stopped and turned vaguely. "I say, are you still with me?"

"Still here," I said.

"I'm all right now. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this. Is there anything I could do for you?"

I considered. "Hardly. We're of different times, you know. Things change."

He looked, a little pathetically, at the new apartment house on the corner and nodded. "I think I know what happened to me," he said softly. "But I guess it's all right . . . I made a will, and the kids were grown." He sighed. "But if it hadn't been for you I'd still be wandering around Manhattan. Let's see—ah; come with me!"

He suddenly broke into a run. I followed as quickly as I could. Almost at the top of the hill was a huge old shingled house, with a silly cupola and a complete lack of paint. It was dirty and it was tumbledown, and at the sight of it the little fellow's face twisted sadly. He gulped and turned through a gap in the hedge and down beside the house. Casting about in the long grass, he spotted a boulder sunk deep into the turf.

"This is it," he said. "Just you dig under that. There is no mention of it in my will, except a small fund to keep paying the box rent. Yes, a safety deposit box, and the key and an authority are under that stone. I hid it"—he giggled—"from my wife one night, and never did get a chance to tell her. You can have whatever's any good to you." He turned to the house, squared his shoulders, and marched in the side door, which banged open for him in a convenient gust of wind. I listened for a moment and then smiled at the tirade that burst forth. Old Quigg was catching real hell from his wife, who'd sat waiting for over sixty years for him! It was a bitter stream of invective, but—well, she must have loved him. She couldn't leave the place until she was complete, if Ginny's theory was correct, and she wasn't really complete until her husband came home! It tickled me. They'd be all right now!

I found an old pinch bar in the drive and attacked the ground around the stone. It took quite a while and made my hands bleed, but after a while I pried the stone up and was able to scrabble around under it. Sure enough, there was an oiled silk pouch under there. I caught it up and carefully unwrapped the strings around it. Inside was a key and a letter addressed to a New York bank, designating only "Bearer" and authoritizng the use of the key. I laughed aloud. Little old meek and mild John Quigg, I'd bet, had set aside some "mad money." With a layout like that, a man could take a powder without leaving a single sign. The son of a gun! I would never know just what it was he had up his sleeve, but I'll bet there was a woman in the case. Even fixed up with his will! Ah, well—I should kick!

It didn't take me long to get over to the bank. I had a little trouble getting into the vaults, because it took quite a while to look up the box in the old records. But I finally cleared the red tape, and found myself the proud possessor of just under eight thousand bucks in small bills—and not a yellowback among 'em!

Well, from then on I was pretty well set. What did I do? Well, first I bought clothes, and then, I started out to cut ice for myself. I clubbed around a bit and got to know a lot of people, and the more I knew the more I realized what a lot of superstitious dopes they were. I couldn't blame anyone for skirting a ladder under which crouched a genuine basilisk, of course, but what the heck—not one in a thousand have beasts under them! Anyway, my question was answered. I dropped two grand on an elegant office with drapes and

dim indirect lighting, and I got me a phone installed and a little quiet sign on the door—Psychic Consultant. And, boy, I did all right.

My customers were mostly upper crust, because I came high. It was generally no trouble to get contact with people's dead relatives, which was usually what they wanted. Most ghosts are crazy to get in contact with this world anyway. That's one of the reasons that almost anyone can become a medium of sorts if he tries hard enough; Lord knows that it doesn't take much to contact the average ghost. Some, of course, were not available. If a man leads a pretty square life, and kicks off leaving no loose ends, he gets clear. I never did find out where these clear spirits went to. All I knew was that they weren't to be contacted. But the vast majority of people have to go back and tie up those loose ends after they die—righting a little wrong here, helping someone they've hindered, cleaning up a bit of dirty work. That's where luck itself comes from, I do believe. You don't get something for nothing.

If you get a nice break, it's been arranged that way by someone who did you dirt in the past, or someone who did wrong to your father or your grandfather or your great-uncle Julius. Everything evens up in the long run, and until it does, some poor damned soul is wandering around the earth trying to do something about it. Half of humanity is walking around crabbing about its tough breaks. If you and you and you only knew what dozens of powers were begging for the chance to help you if you'll let them! And if you let them, you'll help clear up the mess they've made of their lives here, and free them to go wherever it is they go when they've cleaned up. Next time you're in a jam, go away somewhere by yourself and open your mind to thse folks. They'll cut in and guide you all right, if you can drop your smugness and your mistaken confidence in your own judgment.

I had a couple of ghostly stooges to run errands for me. One of them, an ex-murderer by the name of One-eye Rachuba, was the fastest spook I ever saw, when it came to locating a wanted ancestor; and then there was Professor Grafe, a frog-faced teacher of social science who'd embezzled from a charity fund and fallen into the Hudson trying to make a getaway. He could trace the most devious genealogies in mere seconds, and deduce the most likely whereabouts of the ghost of a missing relative. The pair of them were all the office force I could use, and although every time they

helped out one of my clients they came closer to freedom for themselves, they were both so entangled with their own sloppy lives that I was sure of their services for years.

But do you think I'd be satisfied to stay where I was making money hand over fist without really working for it? Oh, no. Not me. No, I had to big-time. I had to brood over the events of the last few months, and I had to get dramatic about that screwball Audrey, who really wasn't worth my trouble. It wasn't enough that I'd prove Audrey wrong when she said I'd never amount to anything. And I wasn't happy when I thought about the gang. I had to show them up.

I even remembered what the little man in the Shottle Bop had said to me about using my "talent" for bragging or for revenge. I figured I had the edge on everyone, everything. Cocky, I was. Why, I could send one of my ghostly stooges out any time and find out exactly what anyone had been doing three hours ago come Michaelmas. With the shade of the professor at my shoulder, I could backtrack on any far-fetched statement and give immediate and logical reasons for backtracking. No one had anything on me, and I could outtalk, outmaneuver, and outsmart anyone on earth. I was really quite a fellow. I began to think, "What's the use of my doing as well as this when the gang on the West Side don't know anything about it?" and "Man, would that half-wit Happy Sam burn up if he saw me drifting down Broadway in my new six-thousand-dollar roadster!" and "To think I used to waste my time and tears on a dope like Audrey!" In other words, I was tripping up on an inferiority complex. I acted like a veridam fool, which I was. I went over to the West Side.

It was a chilly, late winter night. I'd taken a lot of trouble to dress myself and my car so we'd be bright and shining and would knock some eyes out. Pity I couldn't brighten my brains up a little.

I drove up in front of Casey's pool room, being careful to do it too fast, and concentrating on shrieks from the tires and a shuddering twenty-four-cylinder roar from the engine before I cut the switch. I didn't hurry to get out of the car, either. Just leaned back and lit a fifty-cent cigar, and then tipped my hat over one ear and touched the horn button, causing it to play "Tuxedo Junction" for forty-eight seconds. Then I looked over toward the pool hall.

Well, for a minute I thought that I shouldn't have come, if that was the effect my return to the fold was going to

have. And from then on I forgot about everything except how to get out of here.

There were two figures slouched in the glowing doorway of the pool room. It was up a small side street, so short that the city had depended on the place, an old institution, to supply the street lighting. Looking carefully, I made out one of the silhouetted figures as Happy Sam, and the other was Fred Bellew. They just looked out at me; they didn't move; they didn't say anything, and when I said, "Hiya, small fry—remember me?" I noticed that along the darkened walls flanking the bright doorway were ranked the whole crowd of of them—the whole gang. It was a shock; it was a little too casually perfect. I didn't like it.

"Hi," said Fred quietly. I knew he wouldn't like the big-timing. I didn't expect any of them to like it, of course, but Fred's dislike sprang from distaste, and the others from resentment, and for the first time I felt a little cheap. I climbed out over the door of the roadster and let them have a gander at my fine feathers.

Sam snorted and said, "Jelly bean!" very clearly. Someone else giggled, and from the darkness beside the building came a high-pitched, "Woo-woo!"

I walked up to Sam and grinned at him. I didn't feel like grinning. "I ain't seen you in so long I almost forgot what a heel you were," I said. "How you making?"

"I'm doing all right," he said, and added offensively, "I'm still *working* for a living."

The murmur that ran through the crowd told me that the really smart thing to do was to get back into that shiny new automobile and hoot along out of there. I stayed.

"Wise, huh?" I said weakly.

They'd been drinking, I realized—all of them. I was suddenly in a spot. Sam put his hands in his pockets and looked at me down his nose. He was the only short man that ever could do that to me. After a thick silence he said:

"Better get back to yer crystal balls, phony. We like guys that sweat. We even like guys that have rackets, if they run them because they're smarter or tougher than the next one. But luck and gab ain't enough. Scram."

I looked around helplessly. I was getting what I'd begged for. What had I expected, anyway? Had I thought that these boys would crowd around and shake my hand off for acting this way?

They hardly moved, but they were all around me suddenly. If I couldn't think of something quickly, I was going

to be mobbed. And when those mugs started mobbing a man, they did it up just fine. I drew a deep breath.

"I'm not asking for anything from you, Sam. Nothing; that means advice; see?"

"You're gettin' it?" he flared. "You and your seeanses. We heard about you. Hanging up widdow-women for fifty bucks a throw to talk to their 'dear departed'! P-sykik investigator! What a line! Go on; beat it!"

I had a leg to stand on now. "A phony, huh? Why I'll bet I could put a haunt on you that would make that hair of yours stand up on end, if you have guts enough to go where I tell you to."

"You'll bet? That's a laugh. Listen at that, gang." He laughed, then turned to me and talked through one side of his mouth. "All right, you wanted it. Come on, rich guy; you're called. Fred'll hold stakes. How about ten of your lousy bucks for every one of mine? Here, Fred—hold this sawbuck."

"I'll give you twenty to one," I said half hysterically. "And I'll take you to a place where you'll run up against the homeliest, plumb-meanest old haunt you ever heard of."

The crowd roared. Sam laughed with them, but didn't try to back out. With any of that gang, a bet was a bet. He'd taken me up, and he'd set odds, and he was bound. I just nodded and put two century notes into Fred Bellew's hand. Fred and Sam climbed into the car, and just as we started, Sam leaned out and waved.

"See you in hell, fellas," he said. "I'm goin' to raise me a ghost, and one of us is going to scare the other one to death!"

I honked my horn to drown out the whooping and hollering from the sidewalk and got out of there. I turned up the parkway and headed out of town.

"Where to?" Fred asked after a while.

"Stick around," I said, not knowing.

There must be some place not far from here where I could find an honest-to-God haunt, I thought, one that would make Sam backtrack and set me up with the boys again. I opened the compartments in the dashboard and let Ikey out. Ikey was a little twisted imp who'd got his tail caught in between two sheets of steel when they were assembling the car, and had to stay there until it was junked.

"Hey, Ike," I whispered. He looked up, the gleam of the compartment light shining redly in his bright little eyes. "Whistle for the professor, will you? I don't want to yell for

him because those mugs in the back seat will hear me. They can't hear you."

"O.K. boss," he said; and putting his fingers to his lips, he gave vent to a bloodcurdling, howling scream.

That was the prof's call letters, as it were. The old man flew ahead of the car, circled around and slid in beside me through the window, which I'd opened a crack for him.

"My goodness," he panted, "I wish you wouldn't summon me to a location which is traveling with this high degree of celerity. It was all I could do to catch up with you."

"Don't give me that, professor," I whispered. "You can catch a stratoliner if you want to. Say, I have a guy in the back who wants to get a real scare from a ghost. Know of any around here?"

The professor put on his ghostly pince-nez. "Why, yes. Remember my telling you about the Wolfmeyer place?"

"Golly—he's bad."

"He'll serve your purpose admirably. But don't ask me to go there with you. None of us ever associates with Wolfmeyer. And for Heaven's sake, be careful."

"I guess I can handle him. Where is it?"

He gave me explicit directions, bade me good night and left. I was a little surprised; the professor traveled around with me a great deal, and I'd never seen him refuse a chance to see some new scenery. I shrugged it off and went my way. I guess I just didn't know any better.

I headed out of town and into the country to a certain old farmhouse. Wolfmeyer, a Pennsylvania Dutchman, had hung himself there. He had been, and was, a bad egg. Instead of being a nice guy about it all, he was the rebel type. He knew perfectly well that unless he did plenty of good to make up for the evil, he'd be stuck where he was for the rest of eternity. That didn't seem to bother him at all. He got surly and became a really bad spook. Eight people had died in that house since the old man rotted off his own rope. Three of them were tenants who had rented the place, and three were hobos, and two were psychic investigators. They'd all hung themselves. That's the way Wolfmeyer worked. I think he really enjoyed haunting. He certainly was thorough about it anyway.

I didn't want to do any real harm to Happy Sam. I just wanted to teach him a lesson. And look what happened!

We reached the place just before midnight. No one had said much, except that I told Fred and Sam about Wolfmeyer, and pretty well what was to be expected from him.

They did a good deal of laughing about it, so I just shut up and drove. The next item of conversation was Fred's, when he made the terms of the bet. To win, Sam was to stay in the house until dawn. He wasn't to call for help and he wasn't to leave. He had to bring in a coil of rope, tie a noose in one end and string the other up on "Wolfmeyer's Beam"—the great oaken beam on which the old man had hung himself, and eight others after him. This was an added temptation to Wolfmeyer to work on Happy Sam, and was my idea. I was to go in with Sam, to watch him in case the thing became too dangerous. Fred was to stay in the car a hundred yards down the road and wait.

I parked the car at the agreed distance and Sam and I got out. Sam had my tow rope over his shoulder, already noosed. Fred had quieted down considerably, and his face was dead serious.

"I don't think I like this," he said, looking up the road at the house. It hunched back from the highway, and looked like a malign being deep in thought.

I said, "Well, Sam? Want to pay up now and call it quits?"

He followed Fred's gaze. It sure was a dreary-looking place, and his liquor had fizzed away. He thought a minute, then shrugged and grinned. I had to admire the rat. "Hell, I'll go through with it. Can't bluff me with scenery, phony."

Surprisingly, Fred piped up, "I don't think he's a phony, Sam."

The resistance made Sam stubborn, though I could see by his face that he knew better. "Come on, phony," he said and swung up the road.

We climbed into the house by way of a cellar door that slanted up to a window on the first floor. I hauled out a flashlight and lit the way to the beam. It was only one of many that delighted in turning the sound of one's footsteps into laughing whispers that ran round and round the rooms and halls and would not die. Under the famous beam the dusty floor was dark-stained.

I gave Sam a hand in fixing the rope, and then clicked off the light. It must have been tough on him then. I didn't mind because I knew I could see anything before it got to me, and even then, no ghost could see me. Not only that, for me the walls and floors and ceilings were lit with the phosphorescent many-hued glow of the ever-present ghost plants. For its eerie effect I wished Sam could see the ghost-molds feeding greedily on the stain under the beam.

Sam was already breathing heavily, but I knew it would take more than just darkness and silence to get his goat. He'd have to be alone, and then he'd have to have a visitor or so.

"So long, kid," I said, slapping him on the shoulder, and I turned and walked out of the room.

I let him hear me go out of the house and then I crept silently back. It was without doubt the most deserted place I have ever seen. Even ghosts kept away from it, excepting, of course, Wolfmeyer's. There was just the luxurious vegetation, invisible to all but me, and the deep silence rippled by Sam's breath. After ten minutes or so I knew for certain that Happy Sam had more guts than I'd ever have credited him with. He had to be scared. He couldn't—or wouldn't—scare himself.

I crouched down against the walls of an adjoining room and made myself comfortable. I figured Wolfmeyer would be along pretty soon. I hoped earnestly that I could stop the thing before it got too far. No use in making this any more than a good lesson for a wiseacre. I was feeling pretty smug about it all, and I was totally unprepared for what happened.

I was looking toward the doorway opposite when I realized that for some minutes there had been the palest of pale glows there. It brightened as I watched; brightened and flickered gently. It was green, the green of things moldy and rotting away; and with it came a subtly harrowing stench. It was the smell of flesh so very dead that it had ceased to be really odorous. It was utterly horrible, and I was honestly scared out of my wits. It was some moments before the comforting thought of my invulnerability came back to me, and I shrank lower and closer to the walls and watched.

And Wolfmeyer came in.

His was the ghost of an old, old man. He wore a flowing, filthy robe, and his bare forearms thrust out in front of him were stringy and strong. His head, with its tangled hair and beard, quivered on a broken, ruined neck like the blade of a knife just thrown into soft wood. Each slow step as he crossed the room set his head to quivering again. His eyes were alight; red they were, with deep green flames buried in them. His canine teeth had lengthened into yellow, blunt tusks, and they were like pillars supporting his crooked grin. The putrescent green glow was a horrid halo about him.

He passed me completely unconscious of my presence and paused at the door of the room where Sam waited by the

rope. He stood just outside it, his claws extended, the quivering of his head slowly dying. He stared in at Sam, and suddenly opened his mouth and howled. It was a quiet, deadly sound, one that might have come from the throat of a distant dog, but, though I couldn't see into the other room, I knew that Sam had jerked his head around and was staring at the ghost. Wolfmeyer raised his arms a trifle, seemed to totter a bit, and then moved into the room.

I snapped myself out of the crawling terror that gripped me and scrambled to my feet. If I didn't move fast—

Tiptoeing swiftly to the door, I stopped just long enough to see Wolfmeyer beating his arms about erratically over his head, a movement that made his robe flutter and his whole figure pulsate in the green light; just long enough to see Sam on his feet, wide-eyed, staggering back and back toward the rope. He clutched his throat and opened his mouth and made no sound, and his head tilted, his neck bent, his twisted face gaped at the ceiling as he clumped backward away from the ghost and into the ready noose. And then I leaned over Wolfmeyer's shoulder, put my lips to his ear, and said:

"Boo!"

I almost laughed. Wolfmeyer gave a little squeak, jumped about ten feet, and, without stopping to look around, high-tailed out of the room so fast that he was just a blur. That was one scared old spook!

At the same time Happy Sam straightened, his face relaxed and relieved, and sat down with a bump under the noose. That was as close a thing as ever I want to see. He sat there, his face soaking wet with cold sweat, his hands between his knees, staring limply at his feet.

"That'll show you!" I exulted, and walked over to him. "Pay up, scum, and you may starve for that week's pay!" He didn't move. I guess he was plenty shocked.

"Come on!" I said. "Pull yourself together, man! Haven't you seen enough? That old fellow will be back any second now. On your feet!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!"

He didn't move.

"Sam!" I clutched at his shoulder. He pitched over sideways and lay still. He was quite dead.

I didn't do anything and for a while I didn't say anything. Then I said hopelessly, as I knelt there, "Aw, Sam. Sam—cut it out, fella."

After a minute I rose slowly and started for the door. I'd taken three steps when I stopped. Something was happening! I rubbed my hand over my eyes. Yes, it is—it was getting dark! The vague luminescence of the vines and flowers of the ghost world was getting dimmer, fading, fading—

But that had never happened before!

No difference. I told myself desperately, it's happening now, all right. *I got to get out of here!*

See? You see. It was the stuff—the damn stuff from the Shottle Bop. It was wearing off! When Sam died it . . . it stopped working on me! Was this what I had to pay for the bottle? Was this what was to happen if I used it for revenge?

The light was almost gone—and now it was gone. I couldn't see a thing in the room but one of the doors. Why could I see the doorway? What was that pale green light that set off its dusty frame?

Wolfmeyer! *I got to get out of here!*

I couldn't see ghosts any more. Ghosts could see me now. I ran. I darted across the dark room and smashed into the wall on the other side. I reeled back from it, blood spouting from between the fingers I slapped to my face. I ran again. Another wall clubbed me. Where was that other door? I ran again, and again struck a wall. I screamed and ran again. I tripped over Sam's body. My head went through the noose. It whipped down on my windpipe, and my neck broke with an agonizing crunch. I floundered there for half a minute, and then dangled.

Dead as hell, I was. Wolfmeyer, he laughed and laughed.

Fred found me and Sam in the morning. He took our bodies away in the car. Now I've got to stay here and haunt this damn old house. Me and Wolfmeyer.

MATURITY

DR. MARGARETTA WENZELL, she of the smooth face and wise eyes and flowing dark hair, and the raft of letters after her name in the medical "Who's Who," allowed herself to be called "Peg" only by her equals, of whom there were few. Her superiors did not, and her inferiors dared not. And yet Dr. Wenzell was not a forbidding person in any way. She had fourteen months to go to get to her thirtieth birthday; her figure hadn't changed since she was seventeen; her face, while hardly suited to a magazine cover, was designed rather for a salon study. She maintained her careful distance from most people for two reasons. One was that, as an endocrinologist, she had to make a fetish of objectivity; and the other was the fact that only by a consistent attitude of impersonality could she keep her personal charm from being a drawback to her work. Her work meant more to her than anything else in life, and she saw to it that her life stayed that way.

And yet the boy striding beside her called her "Peg." He had since he met her. He was neither her superior nor her inferior, and he was certainly not her equal. These subconscious divisions of Dr. Wenzell's had nothing to do with age or social position. Her standards were her own, and since Robin English could not be judged by any of them—or by anyone else's standards, for that matter—she had made no protest beyond a lift of the eyebrow. It couldn't be important.

He held her arm as they crossed the rainy street. He always did that, and he was one of the half-dozen men she had met in her life who did it unconsciously and invariably.

"There's a taxi!" she said.

He grinned. "So it is. Let's take the subway."

"Oh, Robin!"

"It's only temporary. Why, I've almost finished that operetta, and any day now I'll get the patent on that power

brake of mine, and—" He smiled down at her. His face was round and ruddy, and it hadn't quite enough chin, and Peg thought it was a delightful face. She wondered if it knew how to look angry or—purposeful.

"I know," she said. "I know. And you'll suddenly have bushels of money, and you won't have to worry about taxis—"

"I don't worry about 'em anyhow. Maybe such things'll bother me when your boy friend gets through with me."

"They will, and don't call him my boy friend."

"Sorry," he said casually.

They went down the steps at the subway terminal. Sorry. Robin could always dismiss things with that laconic expression. And he *could.* Whether he was sorry or not, wasn't important, somehow; it was the way he said it. It reduced the thing he was sorry for to so little value that it wasn't worth being sorry about.

Peg stood watching him as he swung up to the change booth. He walked easily, with an incredible grace. As graceful as a cat, but not at all like a cat. It was like the way he thought—as well as a human being, but not like a human being. She watched the way the light fell on his strange, planeless, open face, and his tousled head of sandy horsehair. He annoyed her ever so much, and she thought that it was probably because she liked him.

He stood aside to let her through the turnstile, smiling at her and whistling a snatch of a Bach fugue through his teeth. That was another thing. Robin played competent piano and absolutely knocked-out trumpet; but he never played the classics. He never whistled anything else.

There was no train in. They strolled up the platform slowly. Peg couldn't keep her eyes off Robin's face. His sensitive nostrils dilated, and she had the odd idea that he was smelling a sound—the echoing shuffle of feet and machinery in the quiet where there should be no quiet. As they passed the massive beam-and-coil-spring bumper at the end of the track, Robin paused, his eyes flickering over it, gauging its strength, judging its materials. It had never occurred to her to look at such a thing before. "What does that matter to you, Robin?"

He pointed. "First it knocks the trains pigeon-toed. Then she'll nose into the beam there and the springs behind it will take up the shock. Now why do they use coils?"

"Why not?"

"Leaf springs would absorb the collision energy between

the leaves, in friction. Coil springs store the energy and throw it right back . . . oh! I see. They took for granted when they designed it that the brakes would be set. Big as those springs are, they're not going to shove the whole train back. And then, the play between the car couplings would—"

"But Robin—what does it matter? To you, I mean. No," she said quickly as a thick little furrow appeared and disappeared between his eyes. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be interested. I'm just wondering exactly what it is about such devices that fascinates you so."

"I don't know," he said. "The . . . the integration, I suppose. The thought that went into it. The importance of the crash barrier to Mrs. Scholtz's stew and Sadie's date, and which ferry Tony catches, and all the other happenings that can happen to the cattle and the gods who use the subways."

Peg laughed delightedly. "And do you think about all of the meanings to all of the people of all of the things you see?"

"I don't have to think of them. They're there, right in front of me. Surely you can see homemade borscht and a good-night kiss and thousands of other little, important things, all wrapped up in those big helical springs?"

"I have to think about it. But I do see them." She laughed again. "What do you think about when you listen to Bach?"

He looked at her quickly. "Did I say I listened to Bach?"

"My gremlins told me." She looked at him with puzzlement. He wasn't smiling. "You whistle it," she explained.

"Do I? Well, all right then. What do I think of? Architecture, I think. And the complete polish of it. The way old J. S. burnished every note, and the careful matching of all those harmonic voices. And . . . and—"

"And what?"

He laughed, a burst of it, a compelling radiation which left little pieces of itself as smiles on the faces of the people around them. "And the sweating choirboys who had to pump the organ when he composed. How they must have hated him!"

A train came groaning into the station and stopped, snicking its doors open. "Watch them," said Robin, his quick eyes taking inventory of the people who jostled each other out of the train. "Not one in fifty is seeing anything. No one knows how far apart these pillars are, or the way all these rivets are set, or the cracks in the concrete under their feet. They're all looking at things separated from them in space

and time—the offices they have left, the homes they're going to, the people they will see. Hardly any of them are consciously here, *now*. They're all ghosts, and we're a couple of Peeping Toms."

"Robin, Robin, you're such a *child!*"

"To you, of course. You're older than I am."

"Four days." It was a great joke between them.

"Four thousand years," he said soberly. They found a seat. "And I'm not a child. I'm a hyperthymus. You said so yourself."

"You won't be for very much longer," said Dr. Margaretta Wenzell. "Dr. Warfield and I will see to that."

"What are you doing it for?"

"You'll find out when we send the bill."

"I know it isn't that."

"Of course not," she said. Her remark tasted badly in her mouth. "It's just . . . Robin, how long have you had that suit?"

"Uh . . . suit?" He looked vaguely at the sleeve. "Oh, about three years. It's a good suit."

"Of course it is." It was, too. She remembered that he had gotten it with prize money from a poetry contest. "How many weeks room rent do you owe?"

"None!" he said triumphantly. "I rewired all the doorbells in the apartment house and fixed Mrs. Gridget's vacuum cleaner and composed a song for her daughter's wedding reception and invented a gadget to hold her cookbook under the kitchen shelf, with a little light that goes on when she swings it out. Next thing I knew she handed me a rent receipt. Wasn't that swell of her?"

"Oh," said Peg weakly. She clutched grimly at the point she was trying to make. "How much are you in debt?"

"Oh, that," he said.

"That."

"I guess ten-twelve thousand." He looked up. "Kcans Yppans. What are you driving at?"

"*What* did you say?"

He waved at the car card opposite. "Snappy Snack. Spelled backwards. Always spell things backward when you see them on car cards. If you don't, there's no telling what you might be missing."

"Oh, you blithering *idiot!*"

"Sorry. What were you saying?"

"I was getting to this," she said patiently. "There doesn't

seem to be anything you can't do. You write, you paint, you compose, you invent things, you fix other things, you—"

"Cook," he said, as she stopped for breath; and he added idly, "I make love, too."

"No doubt," said the gland specialist primly. "On the other hand, there doesn't seem to be anything you've accomplished with all of these skills."

"They're not skills. They're talents. I have no skills."

Peg saw the distinction, and smiled. It was quite true. 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. "A good point. And that is what Dr. Warfield and I want to adjust."

" 'Adjust,' she says. Going to shrivel up all the pretty pink lobulae in my thymus. The only thymus I've got, too."

"And about time. You should have gotten rid of it when you were thirteen. Most people do."

"And then I'll be all grim and determined about everything, and generate gallons of sweat, and make thousands of dollars, so that at age thirty I can go back to school and get that high school diploma."

"Haven't you got a high school diploma?" asked Peg, her appalled voice echoing hollowly against her four postgraduate degrees.

"As a senior," smiled Robin, "I hadn't a thing but seniority. I'd been there six years. I didn't graduate from school; I was released."

"Robin, that's *awful!*"

"Why is it awful? Oh—I suppose it is." He looked puzzled and crestfallen.

Peg put her hand on his arm. It had nothing to do with logic, but something in her was wrenched when Robin looked hurt. "I suppose it doesn't matter, Robin. What you learn, and what you do with it, are really more important than *where* you learn."

"Yes . . . but not *when*. I mean, you can learn too late. I know lots of things, but the things I don't know seem to have to do with getting along in the world. Isn't that what you mean by 'awful'? Isn't that what you and Dr. Warfield are going to change?"

"That's it. That's right. Robin. Oh, you're such a strange person!"

"Strange?"

"I mean . . . you know, I was sure that Mel Warfield

and I would have no end of trouble in persuading you to take these thymus treatments?"

"Why?"

With a kind of exasperation she said, "I don't think you fully realize that the change in you will be drastic. You're going to lose a lot that's bad about you—I'm sure of that. But you'll see things quite differently. You . . . you—" She fought for a description of what Robin would be like without his passionate interest in too many things, and her creative equipment bogged down. "You'll probably see things quite differently."

He looked into her eyes thoughtfully. "Is that bad?"

Bad? There never was a man who had less evil about him, she thought. "I think not," she said.

He spread his hands. "I don't think so either. So why hesitate? You have mentioned that I do a lot of things. Would that be true if I got all frothed up every time I tried something I'd never tried before?"

"No. No, of course not." She realised that it had been foolish of her to mix ordinary practical psychology into any consideration of Robin English. Obviously gland imbalances have frequent psychological symptoms, and in many of these cases the abnormal condition has its own self-justifying synapses which will set up a powerful defense mechanism when treatment is mentioned. Equally obviously, this would apply to Robin. Where most people seem to have an inherent dislike of being changed, Robin seemed to have a subconscious yearning for just that.

He said, "We get off at the next station."

"I know."

"I just wanted to tell you."

"Where to get off?"

In utter surprise, he said "Me?" and it was the most eloquent monosyllable she had ever heard. For the first time it occurred to her to wonder consciously what he thought of her. It hadn't seemed to matter, before. What was she, in his eyes? She suddenly realized that she, as a doctor meeting a man socially, had really no right to corner him, question him, analyze and diagnose the way she had over the past few weeks. She couldn't abide the existence of a correctible condition in her specialty, and this was probably the essence of selfishness. He probably regarded her as meddling and dominating. She astonished herself by asking him, point-blank.

"What do I think of you?" He considered, carefully. He

appeared not to think it remarkable that she could have asked such a question. "You're a taffy puller."

"I'm a *what?*"

"A taffy puller. They hypnotize me. Didn't you ever see one?"

"I don't think so," she breathed. "But—"

"You see them down on the boardwalk. Beautifully machined little rigs, all chrome-plated eccentrics and cams. There are two cranks set near each other so that the 'handle' of each passes the axle of the other. They stick a big mass of taffy on one 'handle' and start the machine. Before that sticky, homogeneous mass has a chance to droop and drip off, the other crank has swung up and taken most of it. As the crank handles move away from each other the taffy is pulled out, and then as they move together again it loops and sags; and at the last possible moment the loop is shoved together. The taffy welds itself and is pulled apart again." Robin's eyes were shining and his voice was rapt. "Underneath the taffy is a stainless steel tray. There isn't a speck of taffy on it. Not a drop, not a smidgin. You stand there, and you look at it, and you wait for that lump of guff to slap itself all over those roller bearings and burnished cam rods, but it never does. You wait for it to get tired of that fantastic juggling, and it never does. Sometimes gooey little bubbles get in the taffy and get carried around and pulled out and squashed flat, and when they break they do it slowly, leaving little soft craters that take a long time to fill up; and they're being mauled around the way the bubbles were." He sighed. "There's almost too much contrast—that competent, beautiful machinist's dream handling—what? Taffy—no definition, no boundaries, no predictable tensile strength. I feel somehow as if there ought to be an intermediate stage somewhere. I'd feel better if the machine handled one of Dali's limp watches, and the watch handled the mud. But that doesn't matter. How I feel, I mean. The taffy gets pulled. You're a taffy puller. You've never done a wasteful or incompetent thing in your life, no matter what you were working with."

She sat quietly, letting the vivid picture he had painted fade away. Then, sharply, "Haven't I!" she cried. "I've let us ride past our station!"

Dr. Mellett Warfield let them in himself. Towering over his colleague, he bent his head, and the light caught his

high white forehead, which, with his peaked hairline, made a perfect Tuscan arch. "Peg!"

"Hello, Mel. This is Robin English."

Warfield shook hands warmly. "I *am* glad to see you. Peg has told me a lot about you."

"I imagine she has," grinned Robin. "All about my histones and my albumins and the medullic and cortical tissues of my lobulae. I love that word. Lobulae. I lobule very much, Peg."

"Robin, for Pete's sake!"

Warfield laughed. "No—not only that. You see, I'd heard of you before. You designed that, didn't you?" He pointed. On a side table was a simple device with two multicolored disks mounted at the ends of a rotating arm, and powered by a little electric motor.

"The Whirltoy? Robin, I didn't know that!"

"I don't know a child psychologist or a pediatrician who hasn't got one," said Warfield. "I wouldn't part with that one for fifty times what it cost me—which is less than it's worth. I have yet to see the child, no matter how maladjusted, glandular, spoiled, or what have you, who isn't fascinated by those changing colors. Even the color-blind children can't keep their eyes off it because of the changing patterns it makes."

Peg looked at Robin as if he had just come in through the wall. "Robin . . . the patent on that—"

"Doesn't exist," said Warfield. "He gave it to the Parents' Association."

"Well, sure. I made mine for fun. I had it a long time before a friend of mine said I ought to sell the idea to a toy manufacturer. But I heard that the Parents' Association sent toys to hospitals and I sort of figured maybe kids that needed amusement should have it, rather than only those whose parents could afford it."

"Robin, you're crazy. You could have—"

"No, Peg," said Warfield gently. "Don't try to make him regret it. Robin . . . you won't mind if I call you Robin . . . what led you to design the rotors so that they phase over and under the twentieth-of-a-second sight persistence level, so that the eye is drawn to it and then the mind has to concentrate on it?"

"I remember Zeitner's paper about that at the Society for Mental Sciences," said Peg in an awed tone. " 'A brilliant application of optics to psychology.'"

"It wasn't brilliant," said Robin impatiently. "I didn't even

know that that was what it was doing. I just messed with it until I liked it."

A look passed between Warfield and Peg. It said, "What would he accomplish if he ever really tried?"

Warfield shook his head and perched on the edge of a table. "Now listen to me, Robin," he said, gently and seriously. "I don't think Peg'll mind my telling you this; but it's important."

Peg colored slightly. "I think I know what you're going to say. But go ahead."

"When she first told me about you, and what she wanted to try, I was dead set against it. You see, we know infinitely more about the ductless glands nowadays than we did—well, even this time last year. But at the same time, their interaction is so complex, and their functions so subtle that there are dozens of unexplored mysteries. We're getting to them, one by one, as fast as they show themselves and as fast as we can compile data. The more I learn the less I like to take chances. When Peg just told me about you as a talented young man whose life history was a perfect example of hyperthymus—infantilism, I think was the word she used—"

"Da! Also goo!" laughed Robin. "She might have been kind enough to call it, say, a static precocity."

"Please don't tease me about it, Robin."

"Oh. Sorry. Go on, Mel." Peg smiled at Warfield's slight start. She had done the same thing, for the same reason, the first time Robin called her "Peg."

"Anyhow, I certainly had no great desire to follow her suggestion—shoot you full of hormones and sterones to help you reorganize your metabolism and your psychology. After all, interesting as these cases are, a doctor has to ration his efforts. There are plenty of odd glandular situations walking around in the guise of a human being. In addition, I had no personal interest in you. I have too much work to do to indulge a Messiah complex.

"But Peg was persistent. Peg can be *very* persistent. She kept bringing me late developments. I didn't know whether you were a hobby or an inverted phobia of hers. With some efforts I managed to remain uninterested until she brought me those blood analyses."

"I'll never get over my disappointment about what she did with those blood specimens," said Robin soberly.

"Disappointment? Why?"

"I had hoped she was a vampire."

"Go on, Mel. Don't try to keep up with him."

"It wasn't until I found out that you wrote 'The Cellophane Chalice'—and mind you, I never did like poetry, but that was *different*—and that you also"—he ticked them off on his fingers—"wrote the original continuity for that pornographic horror of a comic strip 'Gertie and the Wolves,' did the pipe-cleaner figurines that were photographed to illustrate 'The Tiny Hans Andersen,' dropped a sackful of pine oil into the fountain at Radio City purely because you wanted to see thirty thousand gallons of bubbles, got thrown in the pen for it and while there saved the lives of two prisoners and a guard by slugging it out with a homicidal maniac in the bull pen; composed 'The Lullaby Tree' . . . by the way, how was it Rollo Vincente got all the credit—and the money—for that song? It was Number One on the hit list for sixteen weeks."

"He did a swell job," said Robin. "He wrote it down for me."

"Robin can't read music," Peg said tiredly.

"Oh Lord," said Warfield reverently. "I also learned that you invented that disgusting advertising disease 'Stoplight Acne' and gave it for free to an advertising copywriter—"

"Who is now making twenty thousand a year," said Peg.

"That guy was desperate," said Robin. "Besides, he gave me my gold trumpet."

"Which is in hock," said Peg.

"Oh, why go on?" said Warfield. "Most important, I learned that you didn't eat regularly, that you suffered from recurrent eviction, that you continually gave away your possessions, including your overcoats, with such bland illogic that once you spent four months in the hospital with pneumonia and complications—"

"Four winter months, I might point out," said Robin. "So help me, I don't know how I'd have gotten through that winter otherwise. That was well worth the price of an overcoat."

"So Peg began to make a social issue of it. She said that you were a fountainhead of art, science, and industry and that the dispersal of your talents was a crime against humanity. At this stage I would be inclined to agree with her even if she weren't Peg." Warfield looked at the girl, and the way he did it made Robin grin.

"So now that we have your cooperation, we'll go ahead, for the greater honor and glory of humanity and creative genius, as Dr. Wenzell here once phrased it. But I want you

to understand that although there is every chance of success, their might be no result at all, or . . . or something worse."

"Like what?"

"How do I know?" said Warfield sharply, and only then did Peg realize what a strain this was to him.

"You're the doctor," said Robin. Suddenly he walked up to Warfield and touched his chest gently. He smiled. He said, "Mel, don't worry. I'll be all right."

Peg's emotional pop-valve let go a hysterical giggle. Warfield turned abruptly away and roughly tore a drawer open and pulled out a thin sheaf of documents. "You'll have to sign these," he said roughly. "I'm going to get the solutoin ready. Come on, Peg."

In the laboratory, Peg leaned weakly against the centrifuge. "Don't worry, Mel," she quoted mistily.

"From the time of Hippocrates," growled Warfield, "it has been the duty and practice of the physician to do everything in his power to engender confidence in the patient. And he—"

"Made you feel better."

After a long pause Warfield said, "Yes, he did."

"Mel, I think he's right. I think he *will* be all right. I think that what he has can't be killed. There's too *much* of it!"

She suddenly noticed that Warfield's busy hands had become still, though he didn't turn to look at her. He said, "I was afraid of that."

"What?"

"Oh, I—skip it."

"Mel, what's the matter?"

"Nothing of any importance—especially to you. It's just the way you talk about Robin . . . the way your voice sounds—"

"That's utterly ridiculous!"

Warfield chuckled a little. "Not that I can blame you. Really I can't. That boy has, without exception, the most captivating—"

"Mel, you're offensive. You certainly know me well enough to know that my interest in Robin English is purely professional—even if I have to include the arts among the professions. Personally he doesn't appeal to me. Why, he's a *child!*"

"A situation which I shall adjust for you."

"That was the n-nastiest thing anyone ever said to me!" she blazed.

"Oh, Peg." He came to her, wiping his hands on a towel. He threw it away—a most uncharacteristic gesture, for him

—and put his hands gently on her shoulders. She would not meet his eyes. "Your lower lip is twice as big as it ought to be," he said softly. "I am sorry, darling."

"Don't call me darling."

"I lost my good sense. May I ask you to marry me again?"

"M-marry you again?"

"Thank the powers for that sense of the ridiculous! May I ask you again? It's about time."

"Let's see—what is the periodicity?— You ask me every nineteen days, don't you?"

"Aloud," he said gravely.

"I—" At last she met his eyes. "No. No! Don't talk about it!"

He took his hands off her shoulders. "All right, Peg."

"Mel, I wish you wouldn't keep bringing this up. If I ever change my mind, I'll speak up."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I believe you would."

"It's just that you— Oh, Mel, everything's so balanced now! My work is finally going the way I want it to go, and I just don't *need* anything else." She held up a hand, quickly. "If you say anything about ductless glands I'll walk out of here and *never* see you again!"

"I won't, Peg."

There was a strained silence. Finally Peg said, "Are you almost ready?"

Mel nodded and went back to the bench. "You can bring him in now."

Peg went out into the reception office. Something white and swift swished past her face, went rocketing up into the corner of the ceiling, hovered, and then drifted down to the floor in slow spirals. "What in—"

"Oh— Sorry, Peg," Robin said, grinning sheepishly. He went and picked up the white object, and held it out to her. "Tandem monoplane," he explained. "The Langley principle. If Langley had only had a decent power plant, aviation history would have been drastically different. The thing is really air-worthy."

"Robin, you're impossible. Mel's ready. Where's the thing he asked you to sign?"

"Hm-m-m? Oh, that—this is it."

"You made that airplane out of it?"

"Well, I wanted to see if I could do it without tearing the paper. I did too." He disassembled the craft busily, and smoothed the papers. "They're all right, see?"

"I ought to make you stand in the corner," she said, half

angrily. She looked at him and suddenly, violently, resented Mel for what he had intimated. "Come on, Robin," she said. She took his hand and led him into the laboratory.

"Sit down, Robin," said Warfield without looking up.

"Per–dition!" said Robin, wide-eyed. "You've got more glassware here than the Biltmore Bar. As the hot, cross Bunsen said to the evaporator, 'Be still, my love.' "

Peg moaned. Warfield said "And what did the evaporator say to that?"

" 'Thank you very much.' You see," said Robin solemnly, "It was a retort courteous."

"Do you think," gasped Peg, "that we'll be able to put a stop to that kind of thing with these treatments?"

"Here," said Warfield, handing him a glass. "Bottoms up."

Robin rose, accepted the glass, bowed from the waist, and said, "Well, here's to champagne for my real friends and real pain for my sham friends. Exist wastrel." And he drained the glass.

"Now if you'll rope him and throw him," said Warfield, approaching with a hypodermic. Robin sat on the examining table, quite relaxed, as the needle sank into his arm.

"Never felt a thing," he said briskly, and then collapsed. Peg caught his head before it could strike the pillow and lowered it gently. She took his wrist. His pulse felt as if it had lost its flywheel.

"Postpituitary syncope," said Warfield. "I half expected that. He'll be all right. It's compensated for. There just isn't any way of slowing down neopituitrin. Watch what happens when the pineal starts kicking up."

Peg suddenly clutched at the limp wrist. "He's . . . He's—Oh, Mel, it's stopped."

"Hang on, Peg. Just a few more seconds, and it should—"

Under Peg's desperate fingers, the pulse beat came in full and strong, as suddenly as if it had been push button turned. With it, Peg began to breathe again. She saw Warfield wipe his eyes. Sweat, probably.

Robin's eyes opened slowly, and an utterly beatific expression crossed his face. He sighed luxuriously. "Beautiful," he said clearly.

"What is it, Robin?"

"Did you see it? I never thought of that before. It's the most perfectly functional, aesthetically balanced thing produced by the mind of man." Sheer wonder suffused his face. "*I saw* one!"

"What was it?"

"A baseball bat!"

Warfield's chin came up. "Well I'll be . . . Peg, don't laugh." Peg was hardly likely to. "You know, he's about right?"

"I'll think about aesthetics later," said Peg with some heat. "Is he going to be all right?"

"That's all of the immediate reactions that I suspected. There'll be some accelerated mental states—melancholia and exuberance alternating pretty rapidly and pretty drastically. He'll have to have some outlet for stepped-up muscular energy. Then he'll sleep."

"I'm glad it's over."

"Over?" said Warfield, and went out. She called after him, but he went straight out through the office.

Robin sat up and shook his head violently. "How did—"

Peg took his upper arm. "Sit up, Robin. Up and go." She raised him, but instead of merely sitting up, he rose and pulled away from her. He paced rapidly down the laboratory, turned and came back. His face held that pitiable, puzzled look, with the deep crease between his brows. He walked past her, his eyes distant; then he whirled suddenly on her. His smile was brilliant. "Peg!" he shouted. "I didn't expect to see you here!" His eyes drifted past her face, gazed over her shoulder, and he turned and looked around the walls. "Where, incidentally, is 'here'?"

"Dr. Warfield's laboratory."

"Me. Oh . . . Mel. Yes, of course. I must be getting old."

"Perhaps you are."

He put his hand on his chest, just below his throat. "What would my thymus be doing about now? Trying to think of something quotable to say as its last words?"

"It may be some time," she smiled. "But I imagine it's on its way out. Get your coat on. I'll go home with you."

"What on earth for?"

She considered, and then decided to tell him the truth. "You're full of sterones and hormones and synthetic albuminoids, you know. It isn't dangerous, but glandular balance is a strange thing, and from the treatment you just got you're liable to do anything but levitate—and knowing you," she added, "even that wouldn't surprise me."

"Gosh. I didn't realize that I might be a nuisance to people."

"You didn't realize . . . why, there was a pretty fair list of possibilities of what might happen to you in that release you signed."

"There was? I didn't read it."

"Robin English, I *don't* know what I'm supposed to do with you."

"Haven't you already done it?" he shrugged. "What's the odds? Mel said I'd have to sign it, and I took his word for it."

"I wish," said Peg fervently, "that I could guarantee the change in your sense of values the way I can the change in your homone adjustment. You're going to have to be educated! And let this be the first lesson—*never* sign anything without reading it first! What are you laughing at, you idiot?"

"I was just thinking how I would stall things if I go to work for some big outfit and have to sign a payroll," he chuckled.

"Get your coat," said Peg, smiling. "And stop your nonsense."

They took a taxi, after all. In spite of Robin's protests, Peg wouldn't chance anything else after Robin:

Nearly fainted on the street from a sudden hunger, and when taken to a restaurant got petulant to the point of abusiveness when he found there was no tabasco in the place, advancing a brilliant argument with the management to the effect that they should supply same to those who desired it even if what the customer *had* ordered was four pieces of seven-layer cake.

Ran half a block to give a small boy with a runny nose his very expensive embroidered silk handkerchief.

Bumped into a lamp post, lost his temper and swung at it, fracturing slightly his middle phalanx annularis.

Indulged in a slightly less than admirable remorseful jag in which he recounted a series of petty sins—and some not too petty at that—and cast wistful eyes at the huge wheels of an approaching tractor-trailer.

Went into gales of helpless laughter over Peg's use of the phrase "Signs of the times" and gaspingly explained to her that he was suffering from sinus of the thymus.

And the payoff—the instantaneous composition of eleven verses of an original song concerning one "Stella with the Springy Spine" which was of far too questionable a nature for him to carol at the top of his voice the way he did. She employed a firmness just short of physical force and at last managed to bundle him into a cab, in which he could horrify no one but the driver, who gave Peg a knowing wink which infuriated her.

After getting in his rooms—a feat which required the assistance of Landlady Gridget's passkey, since he had lost his, and the sufferance of a glance of deep suspicion from the good lady—Robin, who had been unnaturally silent for all of eight minutes, shucked off his coat and headed for the studio couch in one continuous movement. He rolled off his feet and onto the couch with his head buried in the cushions.

"Robin—are you all right?"

"Mm-m-m."

She looked about her.

Robin's two-and-kitchenette was a fantastic place. She had never dreamed that the laws of gravity would permit such a piling-up of miscellany. There were two guitars on an easy chair, one cracked across the head. A clarinet case with little holes punched in it lay on the floor by the wall. Curious, she bent and lifted the lid. It was lined with newspaper, and in it were two desiccated bananas and a live tarantula. She squeaked and dropped the cover.

Leaning against the far wall was a six-foot square canvas, unfinished, of a dream-scape of rolling hills and pale feathery trees. She looked away, blinked, and looked back. It could have been a mistake. She sincerely hoped that it was; but it seemed to her that the masses of those hills, and the foliage, made a pretty clear picture of a . . . a—

"No," she whispered. "I haven't got that kind of a mind!"

There was a beautifully finished clay figurine standing proudly amongst a litter of plasticine, modeling tools, a guitar tuner and a flat glass of beer. It was a nude, in an exquisitely taut pose; a girl with her head flung back and a rapt expression on her face, and she was marsupial. On the bookcase was a four-foot model of a kayak made of whalebone and sealskin. Books overflowed the shelves and every table and chair in the place. There were none in the sink; it was too full of dishes, being sung to by a light cloud of fruit flies. It was more than she could stand. She slipped out of her coat, moved a fishbowl with some baby turtles in it, and an 8 mm projector, off the drainboard and went to work. After she had done all the dishes and reorganized the china closet, where ivy was growing, she rummaged a bit and found a spray gun, with which she attacked the fruit flies. It seemed to be a fairly efficient insecticide, although it smelled like banana oil and coagulated all over the sink. It wasn't until the next day that she identified the distinctive odor of it. It was pastel fixatif.

She tiptoed over to the arch and looked in at Robin. He had hardly moved. She knew he was probably good for twelve hours' sleep.

She bent over him and gently pushed some of his rough hair away from his eyes. She had never seen eyes, before, which had such smooth lids.

Robin smiled while he slept. She wished she knew why.

Carefully she removed his shoes. She had to step very close to the couch to do it, and something crunched under her foot. It was a radio tube. She shook her head and sighed, and got a piece of cardboard—there was no dustpan—and a broom and swept up the pieces. Among them she found a stuffed canary and a fifty-dollar bill, both quite covered with "flug," or dust whiskers. She wondered how many times Robin had sat on that couch, over that bill, eating beans out of the can and thinking about some glorious fantasy of his own.

She sighed again and put on her coat. As she reached the door she paused, debating whether, if she left a note anywhere in this monumental clutter, he would find it. She wanted him to call her as soon as he awoke, so she could have an idea as to his prognosis. She knew well that in his condition, with his particular treatment, that the imbalances should be all adjusted within twelve hours. But still—

Then why not wake him and remind him to call?

She suddenly realized that she was afraid to—that she was glad he was asleep and . . . and harmless. She felt that she could name what it was she was afraid of if she tried. So she didn't try.

"Blast!" she said half aloud. She hated to be hesitant, ever, about anything.

She would leave word with the landlady to wake him early in the morning, she decided abruptly.

She felt like a crawling coward.

She turned to the door, and Robin said brightly, "Goodbye, Peg darling. Thanks for everything. You've been swell. I'll call you when I wake up."

"You young demon!" she ejaculated. "How long have you been awake?"

"I haven't been asleep," he said, coming to the archway. He chuckled. "I'm sorry to say you are right about the canvas. I forgot about the disgusting thing's being so conspicuous."

"Oh, that's all . . . why did you pretend to be asleep?"

"I felt something coming and didn't want it to."

"I . . . don't know what you mean; but why didn't you let it come?"

He looked at her somberly. Either it was something new, or she had never noticed the tinge of green in his eyes. "Because you wouldn't have fought me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The lower half of his face grinned. "You like most of the things I do," he said. "I like you to humor me in those things. Those things are"—he put his fingertips to his chest, then flung them outward—"like this—fun, from here out. I don't want to be humored from here *in*."

Over his shoulder she saw the big canvas. From the distance it was even more specific. She shuddered.

"Good-bye, Peg."

It was a dismissal. She nodded, and went out, closing the door softly behind her. Then she ran.

Dr. Margaretta Wenzell was highly intelligent, and she was just as sensitive. Twice she appeared at Mel Warfield's laboratory at the hour appointed for Robin's succeeding treatments. Once Robin did not speak to her. The second time she went, Robin did not show up. On inquiry she learned from the information desk at the medical center that Robin had been there, had asked if she were in Dr. Warfield's office, and having been told that she was, had turned around and walked out. After that she did not go again. She called up Warfield and asked him to forward Robin's case history and each progress report. Mel complied without asking questions; and if Dr. Wenzell spent more time poring over them than their importance justified, it was the only sign she gave that it mattered to her.

It mattered—very much. Never had Peg, in consultation or out, turned a patient over to another doctor before. And yet, she was conscious of a certain relief. Somehow, she was deeply certain that Robin had not ceased to like her. Consciously, she refused to give any importance to his liking for her, but in spite of that she derived a kind of comfort from an arduously reached conclusion that Robin had reasons of his own for avoiding her, and that they would come out in good time.

She was astonished at the progress reports. She could deduce the probable changes in Robin from the esoteric language of the reaction listings. Here a sharp drop in the 17-kesteroids; there a note of the extraordinary effect of the whole metabolism, making it temporarily immune to the de-

pressing effect of the adrenal cortices in colossal overdoses. An entry in the third week of the course caused Peg two sleepless nights of research; the pituitrin production was fluctuating wildly, with no apparent balancing reaction from any other gland—and no appreciable effect on the patient. A supplementary report arrived then, by special messenger, which eased her mind considerably. It showed a slight miscalculation in a biochemical analysis of Robin's blood which almost accounted for the incredible activity of the pituitaries. It continued to worry her, although she knew that she could hardly pretend to criticize Mel Warfield's vast experience in the practice of hormone therapy.

But somehow, somewhere deep inside, she did question something else in Mel. Impersonality had to go very closely with the unpredictable psychosomatic and physiological changes that occurred during gland treatments; and in Robin's case, Peg doubted vaguely that Mel was able to be as detached as might be wished. She tried not to think about it, and was bothered by the effort of trying. And every time she felt able to laugh it off, she would remember Mel's odd statement in the laboratory that day—but then, he had taken such a quick and warm liking to the boy. Could he possibly resent him on her behalf? Again she felt that resurgence of fury at Mel and at herself; and again she wished that she could be left alone; she wanted to laugh at herself in the rôle of *femme fatale*, but laughter was out of order.

The progress reports were by no means the only source of information about Robin, however. In the tenth day of his treatment, she noticed an item in the "Man About Town" column in the *Daily Blazes*.

> Patrons of the Goose's Neck were treated to a startling sight this A.M. when Vincent (The Duke) Voisier came tearing into the place, literally bowling over a table-full of customers—and their table—in the process of hauling Vic Hill, song writer extraordinary, out to the curb. The center of attention out there seemed to be a tousleheaded character by the name of Robin English, who told this snooper mildly that Mr. Voisier was going to produce his show. At that moment The Duke and Hill came sailing out of the bistro, scooped up this Robin England and hurled him into a taxicab, leaving your reporter in a cloud of carbon monoxide and wild surmise. Now followers of this column know that Brother Voisier is usually as excitable as the occupant of Slab 3 at the City

Morgue. My guess is missed if show business isn't about to be shown some business. Voisier is a rich man because of his odd habit of taking no wild chances . . .

And then there was a letter from a book publisher tactfully asking for a character reference prior to giving one Robin English an advance on an anthology of poems. She answered immediately, giving Robin an A-1 rating, and only after sending it off did she realize that a few short weeks ago she would not have considered such a thing. Robin's reliability was a strange and wonderful structure, and his record likewise.

At long last, then, came his phone call.

"Peg?"

"Wh . . . oh, Robin! Robin, how are you?"

"Sharp as a marshmallow, and disgustingly productive. Will you come over?"

"Come over?" she asked stupidly. "Where?"

"Robin's Roost," he chuckled. "My McGee hall closet and bath. Home."

"But Robin, I . . . you—"

"Safe as a tomb," he said solemnly.

Something within her rose delightedly at the overtone of amusement in his voice.

"I'm a big grown-up man now," he said. "Restrained, mature, reliable and thoroughly unappetizing. Come over and I won't be anything but repulsive. Impersonal. Detached. No . . . say semi-detached. Like a brownstone front. A serious mein. Well, if it's before dinner I'll have a chow mein."

"Stop!" she gasped. "Robin, you're mad! You're delirious!"

"Delirious and repressing, like a certain soft drink. Four o'clock suit you?"

It so happened that it did not. "All right, Robin," she said helplessly, and hung up.

She discovered that she had cleared her afternoon so efficiently that she had time to go home and change. Well, of course she had to change. That princess neckline was—not daring, of course, but—too demure. That was it; demure. She did not want to be demure. She wanted to be businesslike.

So she changed to a navy sharkskin suit with a wide belt and a starched dicky at the throat, the severest thing in her wardrobe. It was incidental that it fitted like clasped hands, and took two inches off her second dimension and added

them to her third. As incidental as Robin's double take when he saw it; she could almost sense his shifting gears.

"Well!" said Robin as he stepped back from the door. "A mannequin, kin to the manna from heaven. Come *in*, Peg!"

"Do you write your scripts out, Robin? You *can't* generate those things on the spur of the moment!"

"I can for moments like this," he said gallantly, handing her inside.

It was her turn for a double take. The little apartment was scrupulously clean and neat. Books were in bookcases; it had taken the addition of three more bookcases to accomplish that. A set of shelves had been built in one corner, very cleverly designed to break up the boxlike proportions of the room, and in it were neatly stacked manuscripts and, up above, musical instruments. There was more livestock than ever, but it was in cages and a terrarium—she wondered where the white rats had been on her last visit. Imprisoned in the bathtub, no doubt. There was a huge and gentle pastel of a laughing satyr on the wall. She wondered where the big oil was.

"I painted ol' Splay-foot over it," said Robin.

"You include telepathy among your many talents?" she asked without turning.

"I include a guilty conscience among my many neuroses," he countered. "Sit down."

"I hear you're getting a play produced," she said conversationally, as he deftly set out a beautiful tray of exotic morsels—avocado mashed with garlic juice on little toast squares; stuffed olives sliced paper-thin on zwieback and chive cheese; stems of fennel stuffed with bluecheese; deviled eggs on rounds of pimento, and a strange and lovely dish of Oriental cashews in a blood-orange pulp.

"It isn't a play. It's a musical."

"Oh? Whose book?"

"Mine."

"Fine, Robin. I read that Vic Hill's doing the lyrics."

"Well, yes. Voisier seemed to think mine were— Well, to tell you the truth, he called in Hill for the name. Got to have a name people know. However, they are my lyrics."

"Robin. Are you letting him—"

"Ah—shush, Peg! No one's doing anything to me!" He laughed. "Sorry. I can't help laughing at the way you, looking like a Vassar p.g., ruffle up like a mother hen. The truth is that I'm getting plenty out of this. There just don't seem to be enough names to go around on the billing. I

wrote the silly little thing at one sitting, and filled in the music and staging just to round it off—sort of an overall synopsis. Next thing you know this Voisier is all over me like a tent, wanting me to direct it as well; and since there's a sequence in there—sort of a duet between voice and drums in boogie-beat—that no one seems to be able to do right, he wants me to act that part too." He spread his hands. "Voisier knows what he is doing. Only you can't have one man's name plastered all over the production. The public doesn't take to that kind of thing. Voisier's treating the whole deal like a business. Show business is still business."

"Oh—that's better. And what about this anthology of poems?"

"Oh, that. Stuff I had kicking around the house here." His eyes traveled over the neat shelves and bookcases. "Remarkable what a lot of salable material I had, once I found it by cleaning up some."

"What else did you find?"

"Some gadgets. A centrifugal pump I designed using the business end of a meat grinder for the impeller. A way to take three-dimensional portraits with a head clamp and a swivel chair and a 35 mm camera. A formula for a quick-drying artist's oil pigment which can't contract the paint. A way to drill holes through glass—holes a twenty-five thousandth of an inch or less in diameter—with some scraps of wire and a No. 6 dry cell. You know—odds and ends."

"You've marketed all these?"

"Yes, or patented or copyrighted them."

"Oh Robin, I'm *so* glad! Are you getting results?"

"Am I?" The old, lovely, wondering look came into his face. "Peg, people are crazy. They just give money away. I honestly don't have to think about money any more. That is, I never did; but now I tell people my account number and ask them to send their check to it for deposit, and they keep piling it in, and I can't cash enough checks to keep up with it. When are you going to ask me why I've been keeping away from you?"

The abruptness of the question took Peg's breath away. It was all she had been thinking about, and it was the reason she had accepted his invitation. She colored. "Frankly, I didn't know how to lead up to it."

"You didn't have to lead up to it," he said, smiling gravely. "You know that, Peg."

"I suppose I know it. Well—why?"

"You like the eatments?" He indicated the colorful dishes on the coffee table.

"Delicious, and simply lovely to look at. But—"

"It's like that. This isn't food for hungry people. Canapés like these are carefully designed to appeal to all five senses—if you delight in the crunch of good zwieback the way I do, and include hearing."

She stared at him. "I think I'm being likened to a . . . a smörgasbord!"

He laughed. "The point I'm making is that a hungry man will go for this kind of food as happily as any other. The important thing to him is that it's food. If he happens to like the particular titillations offered by such food as this, he will probably look back on his gobbling with some regret, later, when his appetite for food is satisfied and his psychic—artistic, if you like—hungers can be felt." Robin grinned suddenly. "This is a wayward and wandering analogy, I know; but it does express why I kept away from you."

"It does?"

"Yes, of course. Look, Peg, I can see what's happening to me even if I am the patient. I wonder why so many doctors overlook that? You can play around with my metabolism and my psychology and ultimately affect such an abstract as my emotional maturity. But there's one thing you can't touch—and that is my own estimate of the things I have learned. My sense of values. You can change my approach to these things, but not the things themselves. One such thing is that I have a violent reaction against sordidness, no matter how well justified the sordidness may have been when I did the sordid thing, whatever it was. In the past, primarily the justification has been the important thing. Now—and by 'now' I mean since I started these treatments—the reaction is more important. So I avoid sordidness because I don't want to live through the reaction afterward, and not so much because I dislike doing a sordid thing."

"That's a symptom of maturity," said Peg. "But what has it to do with me?"

"I was hungry," he said simly. "So hungry I couldn't see straight. And suddenly so full of horse sense that I wouldn't reach for the pretty canapés until I could fully appreciate them. And now—sit down, Peg!"

"I . . . have to go," she said in a throttled voice.

"Oh, you're wrong," he said, not moving. He spoke very quietly. "You don't have to go. You haven't been listening to me. You're defensive when I've laid no siege. I have just

said that I'm incapable of doing anything in bad taste—that is, anything which will taste bad to me, now or later. And you are behaving as if I had said the opposite. You are thinking with your emotions instead of your intellect."

Slowly, she sank back into her chair. "You take a great deal for granted," she said coldly.

"That, in effect, is what the bread and cheese and pimentos and olives told me when I told them about these trays," he said. "Oh, Peg, let's not quarrel. You know that all I've just said is true. I could candy-coat all my phrases, talk for twice as long, and say half as much; and if I did you'd resent it later; you know you would."

"I rather resent it now."

"Not really." He met her gaze, and held it until she began to smile.

"Robin, you're impossible!"

"Not impossible. Just highly unlikely."

He sprang to pour coffee for her—and how did he know that she preferred coffee to tea? he had both—and he said, "Now we can talk about the other thing that's bothering me. Mel."

"What about Mel?" she said sharply.

He smiled at her tone. "I gather that it's the other thing that's been bothering you?"

She almost swore at him.

"Sorry," he said with his quick grin, and was as quickly sober. "Warfield's very much in love with you, Peg."

"He—has said so."

"Not to me," said Robin. "I'm not intimating that he has poured out his soul to me. But he can't conceal it. What he mostly does is avoid talking about you. Under the circumstances, that begins to be repetitious and—significant." He shrugged. "Thing is, I have found myself a little worried from time to time. About myself."

"Since when did you start worrying about yourself?"

"Perhaps it's symptomatic. This induced maturity that I am beginning to be inflicted with has made me think carefully about a lot of things I used to pass off without a thought. No one can escape the basic urgencies of life—hunger, self-preservation, and so on. At my flightiest moments I was never completely unaware of hunger. The difference between a childish and a mature approach to such a basic seems to be that the child is preoccupied only with an immediate hunger. The adult directs most of his activities to overcoming tomorrow's hunger.

"Self-preservation is another basic that used to worry me not at all as long as danger was invisible. I'd dodge an approaching taxi, but not an approaching winter. Along come a few gland treatments and I find myself feeling dangers, not emotionally, and now, but intellectually, and in the future."

"A healthy ego," nodded Peg.

"Perhaps so. Although that intellectual realization is a handy thing to have around to ward off personal castrophes, it is also the raw material for an anxiety neurosis. I don't think Mel Warfield is trying to kill me, but I think he has reason enough to."

"*What?*" Peg said, horrified.

"Certainly. He loves you. You—" he broke off, and smiled engagingly. She felt her color rising, as she watched his bright eyes, the round bland oval of his almost chinless face.

"Don't say it, Robin," she breathed.

"—you won't marry him," Robin finished easily. "Whom you love needn't enter into the conversation." He laughed. "What amounts of wind we use to avoid the utterance of a couple of syllables! Anyway, let it suffice that Mel, for his own reasons, regards me as a rival, or at least as a stumbling block." His eyes narrowed shrewdly. "I gather that he has also concluded that your chief objection to me has been my . . . ah . . . immaturity. No, Peg, don't bother to answer. So if I am right—and I think I am—he has been put in the unenviable position of working like fury to remove his chief rival's greatest drawback. His only drawback, if you'll forgive the phrase, ma'am," he added, with a twinkle and the tip of an imaginary hat. "No fun for him. And I don't think that Brother Mel is so constituted that he can get any pleasure out of the great sacrifice act."

"I think you're making a mountain out of—"

"Peg, Peg, certainly you know enough about psychology to realize that I am not accusing Mel of being a potential murderer, or even of consciously wanting to hurt me. But the compulsions of the subconscious are not civilized. Your barely expressed annoyance at the man who jostles you in a crowded bus is the civilized outlet to an impulse for raw murder. Your conditioned reflexes keep you from transfixing him with the nearest nail file; but what about the impulses of a man engaged in the subtle complexities of a thing like the glandular overhaul I'm getting? In the bus, your factor of safety with your reactions can run from no visible reaction through a lifted eyebrow to an acid comment, before

you reach the point where you give him a tap on the noggin and actually do damage. Whereas Mel's little old subconcious just has to cause his hand to slip while doing a subcutaneous, or to cause his eye to misread a figure on the milligram scale, for me to be disposed of in any several of many horrible ways. Peg! What's the matter?"

Her voice quivering, she said quietly, "That is the most disgusting, conceited, cowardly drivel I have ever had to listen to. Mel Warfield may have the misfortune to be human, but he is one of the finest humans I have ever met. As a scientist, there is no one in this country—probably in the world more skilled than he. He is also a gentleman, in the good old-fashioned meaning of the word—I *will* say it, no matter how much adolescent sneering you choose to do—and if he is engaged on a case, the case comes first." She rose. "Robin, I have had to take a lot from you, because as a specialist I knew what an advanced condition I had to allow for. That is going to stop. You are going to find out that one of the prices you must pay for the privilege of becoming an adult is the control of the noises your mouth makes."

Robin looked a little startled. "It would be a little dishonest of me to think these things without expressing them."

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "The kind of control I mean has to go back further than the antrums. All of us have mean, cowardly thoughts from time to time. Apparently the maturity you're getting is normal enough that you're developing a man-sized inferiority complex along with it. You are beginning to recognize that Mel is a better man than you'll ever be, and the only way you can rationalize that is to try to make him small enouh to be taking advantage of you."

"Holy cow," breathed Robin. "Put down that knout, Peg! I'm not going to make a hobby of taking cracks at Mel Warfield behind his back. I'm just handing it to you straight, the way I see it, for just one reason—to explain why I am discontinuing the course of treatment."

She was halfway to the door as he spoke, and she brought up sharply as if she had been tied by a ten-foot rope. "Robin! You're not going to do anything of the kind!"

"I'm going to do exactly that," said Robin. "I'm not used to lying awake nights worrying about what someone else is likely to do. I'm doing all right. I've come as far in this thing as I intend to go. I'm producing more than I ever did in my life before, and I can live adequately on what I'm getting and will get for this music and these patents and

plays and poems, to live for the rest of my life if I quit working tomorrow—and I'm not likely to quit working tomorrow."

"Robin! You're half hysterical! You don't know what you're talking about! In your present condition you can't depend on the biochemical balance of your glandular system. It can only be kept balanced artificially, until it gradually adjusts itself to operation without the thymus. In addition, the enormous but balanced overdoses of other gland extracts we have had to give you must be equalized as they recede to normalcy. You simply *can't* stop now!"

"I simply *will* stop now," he said, mimicking her tone. "I took the chance of starting with this treatment, and I'll take the chance of quitting. Don't worry; no matter what happens your beloved Mel's nose is clean, because of that release I signed. I'm not going to sue anybody."

She looked at him wonderingly. "You're really trying to be as offensive as you possibly can, aren't you? I wonder why?"

"It seems the only way for me to put over a point to you," he said irritably. "If you must know, there's another reason. The stuff I'm producing now is good, if I can believe what I read in the papers. It has occurred to me that whatever creativeness I have is largely compounded of the very immaturity you are trying to get rid of. Why should I cut off the supply of irrationality that produces a work of art like my musical comedy? Why should I continue a course of treatment that will ultimately lead me to producing nothing creative? I'm putting my art before my course, that's all."

"A good pun, Robin," said Peg stonily, "but a bad time for it. I think we'll let you stew in your own juice for a while. Watch your diet and your hours, and when you need professional help, get in touch with me and I'll see what I can do about getting Mel to take you on again."

"Nice of you. Why bother?"

"Partly sheer stubbornness; you make it so obvious you want nothing of the kind. Partly professional ethics, a thing which I wouldn't expect a child, however precocious, to understand fully."

He went slowly past her and opened the door. "Good-bye, Dr. Wenzell."

"Good-bye, Robin. And *good* luck."

Later in her office at the hospital, Peg's phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Peg! I've just received a note, by messenger, from Robin English."

"Mel! What did he say?"

"He inclosed a check for just twice what I billed him for, and he says that he won't be back."

Mel, is it safe?"

"Of course it's not safe! The pituitary reactions are absolutely unpredictable—you know that. I can't prognosticate anything at all without the seventy-two-hour checkups. He might be all right; I really wouldn't know. He's strong and healthy and tremendously resilient. But to stop treatment now is taking unfair advantage of his metabolism. Can't you do anything about it?"

"Can't *I* do anything?"

"He'll listen to you, Peg. Try, won't you? I . . . well, in some ways I'm glad to have him off my neck, frankly. It's been . . . but anyway, I'll lose sleep over it, I know I will. Will you see if you can do anything with him?"

A long pause.

"Hello, Peg—are you still there?"

"Yes, Mel . . . let him go. It's what he wants."

"Peg! You . . . you mean you won't see him?"

"N-no, I—can't, Mel, I won't. Don't ask me to."

"I hardly know what to say. Peg, what's the matter?"

"*Nothing's* the matter. I won't see him, that's all, and if I did it wouldn't do any good. I don't care what hap— Oh, Mel, do watch him! Don't let anything . . . I mean, he's *got* to be all right. Read his stuff, Mel. Go see his plays. You'll be able to f-find out that way."

"And if I don't like the looks of what I find out, what am I supposed to do about it?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Call me up whenever you find out anything, Mel."

"I will, Peg. I'm—sorry. I didn't realize that you . . . I mean, I knew it, but I didn't know you felt so—"

"Good-bye, Mel."

She hung up and sat and cried without hiding her face.

Robin's first novel was published five months later, while his musical, "Too Humorous To Mention," was eight weeks old and just at the brilliant beginning of its incredible run. while "The Cellophane Chalice," his little, forgotten book of verse, went into its sixth printing, and while three new songs from "Too Humorous" were changing places like the shells in the old army game, on the Hit Parade in the one-two-

three spots. The title of one of them, "Born Tomorrow," had been bought at an astonishing figure by Hollywood, and royalties were beginning to roll in for Robin's self-tapping back-out drill bits.

The novel was a strange and compelling volume called "Festoon." The ravings of the three critics who were fortunate enough to read it in manuscript made the title hit the top of the best-seller lists and stay there like a masthead. Robin English was made an honorary doctor of law by a college in Iowa, a Kentucky Colonel, a member of the Lambs Club and a technical advisor to the American Society of Basement Inventors. He dazedly declined a projected nomination to the State Senate which was backed by a colossal petition; wrote a careful letter of thanks to the municipality of Enumclaw, Washington, for the baroque golden key to the city it sent him because of the fact that early in his life he had been born there; was photographed for the "Young Men of the Month" page of *Pic,* and bought himself a startlingly functional mansion in Westchester County. He wrote a skillful novella which was sold in Boston and banned in Paris, recorded a collection of *muezzin* calls, won a pie-eating contest at the Bucks County Fair, and made a radio address on the evolution of modern poetry which was called one of the most magnificent compositions in the history of the language. He bought a towboat and had a barge built in the most luxurious pleasure-yacht style and turned them over to the city hospital for pleasure-cruises to Coney Island for invalid children. Then he disappeared.

He was a legend by then, and there was plenty of copy about him for the columnists and the press agents to run, so that in spite of his prominence, his absence was only gradually felt. But gradually the questions asked in the niteries and on the graveyard shifts at newspaper offices began to tell. Too often reporters came back empty-handed when assigned to a new R. E. story—*any* new R. E. story. An item in the "Man About Town" column led to a few reader's letters, mostly from women, asking his whereabouts; and then there was a landslide of queries. It was worth a stick or two on the front pages, and then it suddenly disappeared from the papers when all the editors were told in a mimeographed letter that Mr. English's business would be handled by his law firm, which had on proud exhibition a complete power of attorney—and which would answer no queries. All business mail was photostated and returned, bearing Robin's rub-

ber-stamped signature and the name of his lawyers. All fan mail was filed.

The categories of men who can disappear in New York are extreme. The very poor can manage it. The very rich can manage it, with care. Robin did it. And then the rumors started. The rôle of "Billy-buffoon" which he had taken in his musical was a mask-and-wig part, and it was said that his understudy didn't work at every performance. English was reported to have been seen in Hollywood; in Russia; dead; and once even on Flatbush Avenue. Robin's extraordinary talents, in the gentle hands of idle rumor, took on fantastic proportions. He was advisor to three cabinet members. He had invented a space drive and was at the moment circling Mars. He was painting a mural in the City Morgue. He was working on an epic novel. He had stumbled on a method of refining U-235 in the average well-equipped kitchen, and was going crazy in trying to conceal that he knew it. He was the author of every anonymous pamphlet cranked out to the public everywhere, from lurid tracts through political apassionatae to out and out pornography. And of course, murders and robberies were accredited to his capacious reputation. All of these things remained as engagingly fictional as his real activities had been; but since they had nothing like books and plays and inventions to perpetuate them, they faded from the press and from conversation.

But not from the thoughts of a few people. Drs. Wenzell and Warfield compiled and annotated Robin English's case history, with as close a psychological analysis as they could manage. Ostensibly, the work was purely one of professional interest; and yet if it lead to a rational conclusion as to where he was and what he was doing, who could say that such a conclusion was not the reason for the work? In any case, the book was not published, but rested neatly in the active files of Mel Warfield's case records, and grew. Here a flash of fantasy was a sure sign of suprarenal imbalance, there a line of sober thought was post-pituitary equilibrium. One couldn't know—but then, so little could be known . . .

Dr. Mellett Warfield was called, late one night, to the hospital, on a hormone case. It was one of the sedative and psychology sessions which he had always found so wearing; this one, however, was worse than usual. The consultation room was just down the corridor from Peg's office—the office into which he used to drop for a chat any time he was nearby. He had not seen the inside of it for three months

now; he had not been forbidden to come in, nor had he been invited. Since Robin disappeared, a stretched and silent barrier had existed between the doctors.

And tonight, Mel Warfield had a bad time of it. It wasn't the patient—a tricky case, but not unusual. It was that silent office down the hall, empty now, and dark, empty and dark like Peg's telephone voice these days, like her eyes . . . inside the office it would be empty and dark, but there would be a pencil from her hand, a place on the blotter where she put her elbow when she paused to think of—of whatever she thought, these distant days.

Efficient and hurried, he rid himself of his patient and, leaving the last details to a night nurse, he escaped down the corridor. He was deeply annoyed with himself; that room had been more with him than his patient. That wouldn't do. Realizing this, he also recognized the fact that his recent isolation in his own laboratory had been just as bad, just as much preoccupation, for all the work he had done. "Overcompensation," he muttered to himself, and then wanted to kick himself; here he was dragging out labels to stick on his troubles like a damned parlor psychologist. He opened the half-glazed door and stepped into Peg's office.

He leaned back against the closed door and closed his eyes to accustom them to the dark. Peg seldom used scent, but somehow this room was full of her. He opened his eyes slowly. There was the heavy bookcase, with its prim rows of esoterica, green and gold, black and gold; some twin books, some triplets, some cousins to each other, but all of the same concise family, all pretending to be Fact in spite of having been written by human beings . . . He shook himself impatiently.

The clock at the end of the desk sent him its dicrotic whisper, and glowed as faintly as it spoke. Half-past three . . . in twelve hours it would be like that again, only Peg would be sitting there, perhaps bowed forward, her chin on one hand, sadly pensive, thinking of—oh, a line of poetry and a ductless gland, a phrase from a song and a great, corrosive worry. If he opened his eyes wide to the desk in the darkness, he could all but see—

She sobbed, and it shocked him so that he cried out, and saw flames.

"Peg!"

Her shock was probably as great, but she made no sound.

"Peg! What is it? Why are you—it's half-past—what are you—" He moved.

"Don't turn on the light," she said grayly.

He went round to her, held out his hands. He thought she shook her head. He let his hands fall and stood stupidly for a moment. Then he knew, somehow, that she was trembling. He dropped on his knees beside her chair and held her close to him. She cried, then.

"You've seen him."

She nodded, moving her wet cheek against his neck. He thought, something has happened, and I've got to know what it is—I'll go out of my mind if I have to guess. "Peg, what happened?"

She cried. It was hurtful crying, the crying which granulates the eyelids and wrenches the neck-tendons with its saw-toothed, shameless squeaks.

He thought, I'll ask her. I'll ask her right out, the worst possible thing it could be, and it won't be that. And then I'll ask her the next worst thing. He wet his lips. "Did—did he—" But it wouldn't come out that way. "He—asked you—"

She nodded again, her cheekbone hard and hot and wet against him. "I just said yes," she gasped hoarsely. "What else could I say? He knew . . . he must have known . . ."

Mel Warfield's stomach twisted into a spastic knot, and his stopped breath made thunder in his ears.

He stood up, and spoke to himself levelly, with great care. He spoke silent, balanced things about behaviorism, about things which, after all, happen every day to people . . . "God damn it!" Peg wasn't people! Peg was—was—

"This is crazy," he said. "This is completely insane, Peg. Listen to me. You're going to tell me the whole thing, every last little rotten detail, right from the very beginning."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to. Because you've got to." A detached part of his mind wondered what he would have to do to make his voice sound like that on purpose.

"If you like," she said, and he knew she was doing it because of him, and not at all for herself.

She had been looking for Robin. She had been looking for him for weeks—near the theaters which were showing his plays, at the libraries, the parks—anywhere. She had admitted to herself that although his development would follow logic of a sort, the logic would be of a kind, or in a direction, that would be beyond her. Therefore a haphazard search was her most direct course. Random radiation can interfere with any frequency. A siren touches every note on any scale.

There is a place in the Village which serves no food or

hard liquor, but only wines and champagne. There are divans and easy chairs and coffee tables; it is more like a living room, thrice compounded, than a café. Dr. Margaretta Wenzell, bound for an obscure Italian place in the neighborhood whence emanated rumors of spaghetti and green sauce, had yielded to some impulse and found herself ordering a wine cooler here instead.

She sat near the corner and looked at the surprisingly good paintings which filled most of the space between windows. Out of her sight someone stroked a piano with dolorous perfection. Near her a man with a book studied its cover as if he saw all its contents. Opposite, a man with a girl studied her eyes as wordlessly, and as if he saw all her soul.

Peg sipped and felt alone. And then there was a burst of laughter from the hidden corner, and Peg came up out of her chair as if she had been physically snatched. "It wasn't that I recognized his voice," she told Mel, "or even the way it was used. I can't really describe what happened. It was like the impulse which had made me come into the place—a reasonless, vague tugging, the kind of thing that makes you say 'Why not?' . . . it was that, but a thousand times more intense. That's important, because it's one of the few things that shows how he's changed and—and what he is."

She ignored her spilled drink and, like a sleepwalker, went back toward the gentle drumming of voices and the casual piano.

He was there, facing her, leaning forward over a long, low coffee table, his hands—they seemed larger or heavier than she had remembered—spread on it, his head turned to the girl who sat at the end of the chesterfield at his right.

She looked at the girl, at the four other people in the group, at the bored man who played the piano, and back again at Robin and it was only in this second glance that she recognized him, though, oddly, she knew he was there.

He was different. His hair was different—darker, probably because he had used something to control its coarse rebelliousness. His eyes seemed longer, probably because in repose they were now kept narrow. But his face as a whole was the most different thing about him. It was stronger, better proportioned. The old diffidence was gone, gone with the charming bewilderment. But there was charm in the face—a new kind, a charm which she had never associated with him. In that instant of recognition, she knew that she could never couple the words "childish" and "Robin" together again.

She might have spoken, but her voice had quite deserted her. Robin looked up and rose in the same split second, with an apparent understanding of the whole situation and all of her feelings. "Miss Effingwell!" he said joyfully. He was at her side in three long strides, his strong hand under her elbow—and she needed it. "Remember me? I'm Freddy, from the Accounting Department." His left eyelid flickered.

Too faint to think, Peg said, "F-freddy. Of course."

He steered her to the chesterfield, into which she sank gratefully. "Miss Effingwell, I want you to meet my quaffing-cohorts. Left to right, Binnie Morrow, Missouri's gift to show-business. Cortlandt—he's a real traveling salesman. Look out."

"I travel in hops," said Cortlandt surprisingly.

"The kind of hops they put in beer." Robin supplemented, and laughed that new, confident laugh again. "And those two gentlemen with spectacles and intense expressions are Doctors Pellegrini and Fels, who are psychiatrists."

"I'm still an intern," said Pellegrini, and blushed. He seemed very young.

"And this," said Robin, indicating a tweedy, thin little woman, "is Miss McCarthy, a member of the second oldest profession."

"He makes it sound very romantic," smiled Miss McCarthy. "Actually I'm a pawnbroker's assistant."

"Her motto is *'In hoc ferplenti,'* " said Robin, and sat down.

"How do you do?" murmured Peg faintly, with a small inclusive smile.

"We were in the middle of a fantastic argument," Robin said. "I just asked for a simple little definition, and caused no end of fireworks."

"Do go on," said Peg. "What were you trying to define?"

"Maturity," said Robin; and immediately, as if to attract attention away from Peg's white twisted face, "Cortlandt, where on earth do you buy your ties?"

The salesman dropped his sandy lashes and pulled up his blazing four-in-hand, which then and there served the only real function of its gorgeous life, by holding the eyes of the party until Peg could calm herself.

"Where were we?" asked Miss McCarthy at length.

"I had just said," answered Binnie Morrow, the showgirl, "that all psychiatrists were crazy." She blushed. It went well with the glossy frame of chestnut hair round her face.

"And then Dr. Pellegrini said that he and Dr. Fels were psychiatrists. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Don't apologize," said Fels.

"No, don't," said Robin. "If it's true, it's true whether or not we have these madmen in our midst. If it's false, I'm sure they can defend themselves. What about it, Dr. Fels?"

Fels turned to the showgirl. "Why do you think psychiatrists are crazy?"

She twirled the stem of her glasses. "It's the company they keep. The stuff comes off on them."

Pellegrini laughed. "You know, I think you're right! In the clinic, we work in pairs and in groups. That way we can watch each other. Sometimes I think about the influences a psychiatrist must come under when he's on his own, and I get scared."

"What about that?" Robin asked the older doctor.

"I don't worry much. Few neurotics are particularly dominating. There are minor monomaniacs, of course, but many of those just stay on the single track and don't have operating conflicts. It's the ones with internal frictions who come under our hands mostly, and they're full of opposed or nearly opposed forces which work out to overall weakness."

"And immaturity," added Robin.

The salesman looked up. "There's a definition, then," he said. "Turn it around and make it positive, and you define maturity as strength and sanity."

Robin opened his mouth and closed it again. What was so very different about his face?

"Strength and sanity," said Miss McCarthy thoughtfully. "They don't mean anything. Strength—stronger than what? A man is stronger than an ant; an ant can move much more, for its size and weigh, than a man can. And sanity—who knows what that is?"

Pellegrini said, "Sanity and maturity are the same thing."

"Are all children insane?" smiled Miss McCarthy.

"You know what I mean," said Pellegrini, almost irritably. "Maturity is the condition achieved when sanity exists within an organism at its ontogenetic peak."

"That'll hold you," grinned Robin.

"It won't hold me," said Cortlandt. "What do you mean by 'ontogenetic peak'? The fullest possible development of function and facilities in the animal concerned?"

"That's right."

Cortlandt shook his sandy head. "Seems to me I read somewhere that, according to comparative anatomies, among

warm-blooded animals homo sapiens *is* unique in the fact that physically, he dies of old age before he is fully mature."

"That's right," nodded Dr. Fels. "Just as anatomy comparisons indicate that man should have a period of gestation of eleven months instead of nine. The law recognizes that one—did you know? Anyhow, in psychiatry we run into immaturity all the time. I might almost say that our job is primarily to mature our patients . . . man is the only animal which stays kittenish all its life. Maturity to a bull gorilla or a full-grown lion is a very serious thing. The basics become very close—procreation, self-preservation, the hunt. The isn't time for the playful amusements which preoccupy most of humanity."

"Ah," said Robin. "Poetry, then, and music and sculpture—they're all the results of the same impulses that make a kitten roll a ball of yarn around?"

Fels hesitated. "I—suppose they are, viewed objectively."

The sandy-haired Cortlandt broke in again. "You just came out with another definition, by implication, doctor. You said that a psychiatrist's job is primarily to mature his patients. Maturity, then, would be what a psychiatrist would call adjustment?"

"Or psychic balance, or orgastic potency, or 'cured,' " grinned Robin, "depending on his school."

Fels nodded. "That would be maturity."

Miss McCarthy, the pawnbroker's assistant, had spoken next. "I'm interested," she said to Pellegrini, "in what you said a moment ago about the onto—uh—that fullest possible development of function and facilities that you were talking about. It it's true that humans die of old age before they can grow up—then what would one be like if he did fully mature?"

Pellegrini looked started. The other psychiatrist, Fels answered. "How can we extrapolate such a thing? It has never happened."

"Hasn't it?" asked Robin quietly. No one heard, apparently, but Peg. *What was so different about his face?*

Cortlandt said, "That's quite a thought. In terms of other animals, your fully developed man would be a silent, predatory, cautious, copulating creature to whom life and living was a deadly serious business."

"No!" said the showgirl unexpectedly and with violence. "You're turning him into a gorilla instead of a making him something better."

"Why must he be something better?" asked Robin.

"He would have to be," said the girl. "I just know it. Maybe he would be like that if he was just an animal; but a man is more than that. A man's got something else that—that—" She floundered to a stop, tried again. "I think he would become like—like Christ."

"Or Leonardo?" mused Cortlandt.

"Well, doctor?" Robin asked Fels.

"Don't ask me," said the psychiatrist testily. "You're out of my field with a thing like this. This is pure fantasy."

Robin grinned broadly. "Is it, now?"

"It is," said Fels, and rose. "If you'll excuse me, it's getting late, and I have a heavy day tomorrow. Coming, Pellegrini?"

The young doctor half-rose, sat down, blushed, and said, "If you don't mind, Fels, I'd just as soon—I mean, I'd kind of like to see where this is leading."

"Into pure fantasy," reiterated Dr. Fels positively. "Come on."

"Dr. Fels makes a good point," said Robin to Pellegrini, not unkindly. "You'd better take his advice."

Bewildered, not knowing whether he had been asked to leave, torn between his obvious respect for Fels and his desire to pursue the subject, Pellegrini got up and left the table. As he turned away, the elder doctor said to Robin, "You, sir, show an astonishing degree of insight. You should have been a psychologist."

Robin waved his hand. "I knew you'd understand me, doctor. Good night."

They all murmured their good nights. When the psychiatrists were out of earshot, Cortlandt turned to Robin, "Hey," he said, frowning. "Something happened here that I missed. What was it?"

"Yes," said Miss McCarthy. "What did he mean by that remark about your insight?"

Robin laughed richly. "Dr. Fels was guarding the young Dr. Pellegrini against evil influences," he said through his laughter, "and I caught him at it."

"Evil—what are you talking about?" asked Binnie Morrow.

Robin said patiently, "Do you remember what Fels said a while back—that the business of psychiatry is to mature its patients? He's right, you know. A psychiatrist regards emotional balance and maturity as almost the same thing. And a patient who has achieved that kind of balance is one whose inner conflicts are under control. These inner conflicts

aren't just born into a person. A clubfoot or a blind eye or a yearning for a womb with a view produce no conflicts *except in terms of other people;* the thing called society. So—" he spread his heavy hands—"what modern psychiatry strives to do is to mature its patients, not in ontogenetic terms, not on an individual psychosomatic basis, but purely and necessarily in terms of society, which is in itself illogical, unfunctional, and immature."

"That makes sense," said Cortlandt. "Society as a whole gets away with things which are prohibited in any well-run kindergarten, in the violence, greed, injustice, and stupidity departments. We have to wear clothes when the weather's too hot for it; we have to wear the wrong kind of clothes when the weather's too cold. We can be excused of any crime if we do it on a large enough scale. We—but why go on? What was Fels protecting Pellegrini from?"

"Any further consideration of maturity in terms of the individual, completely disregarding society. When we started considering the end-product, the extrapolated curve on the graph, we were considering an end which negates everything that modern psychiatry is and is trying to do. So Fels called it fantasy and cleared out."

"You mean he didn't want Pellegrini's fresh young convictions in the worth of psychiatry upset," said Miss McCarthy sardonically.

"But—" Binnie Morrow's voice was anxious—"you mean that psychiatry and analysis are worthless?"

"No!" Robin exploded. "I didn't say that! The psychos are doing a noble job, considering what they're up against. The fact remains that their chief occupation is in fitting individuals to a smooth survival in a monstrous environment. Fels realizes that very clearly. I don't think Pellegrini does, yet. He will when he's been practicing for as long as Fels. But Fels is right; when a youngster has gone as far as an internship there's no point in shaking him to his roots. Not until he has been practicing long enough to learn the objectivity of competence."

Cortlandt whistled. "I see what Fels meant by your insight."

"Cut it out," smiled Robin. "Let's get back to maturity, just to sum up. Then I have a date with one Morpheus . . . Binnie, you said that there's more to a man than his physiology. What's your idea on what a fully developed, truly mature man would be?"

"What I said before," murmured the girl. "Like Christ.

Someone who would understand everything, and do what he could for people."

"Cortlandt?"

The salesman shifted his feet. "I don't know. Maybe Binnie's right. Maybe it would be like the grim gorilla, too." He wet his lips. "Maybe both. An extension of the basic urges—hunger and sex and self-preservation, but carried so far that in self-preservation he might try to save humanity purely to keep it from killing him off when everything went to blazes."

"That's interesting," said Robin. "Miss McCarthy?"

"I think," she said slowly, "that he would be something quite beyond our understanding. I think that physically he would be superb—not muscle-bound, no; but balanced and almost impervious to diseases, with the kind of reflexes which would make him almost invulnerable to any physical accident. But his big difference would be in the mind, and I can't describe that. He couldn't describe it himself. If he tried, he would be like a teacher—a really good teacher—trying to teach algebra to a class of well-trained, unusually intelligent—chimpanzees."

"Superman!" said Robin. "Miss Effingwell?"

He looked directly at Peg, who, just in time, checked herself from looking behind her to see whom he was talking to. "M-me?" she squeaked stupidly. "I really don't know, Ro—uh, Freddy. I think Miss McCarthy has the right idea. What do you think?"

Laughing, Robin rose and tossed a bill on the table. "It would be a man with such profound understanding that he could define maturity in a sentence. A simple sentence. He wouldn't be asking other people what they thought. Good night, chillun. Going my way, Miss Effingwell?"

Peg nodded mutely.

"We wus robbed!" Cortlandt called after them. "You have an answer tucked away in your insight, Freddy!"

"Sure I have," winked Robin, "and I'm taking it outsight with me!"

Followed by reverent groans, Robin and Peg departed.

Out on the street, Robin squeezed her upper arm and said, "Hello, Peg . . ." When he spoke quietly, his voice was almost the same as the one she remembered.

She said, "Oh, Robin—"

"How long have you been looking for me?"

"Three months. Ever since you—"

"Yes. Why?"

"I wanted to know how you were. I wanted to know what was happening to you. Your glands—"

"I can assume your clinical interest. That's not what I meant by *why*. So—why?"

She said nothing. He shrugged. "I know. I just wanted to hear you say it. No—" he said hastily, "don't say it now. I was playing with you. I'm sorry."

The "I'm sorry," was an echo, too. "Where are we going?"

"That depends," said Robin. "We'll talk first."

He led the way across Washington Square South and up wandering West Fourth Street. Around the corner of Barrow Street was a dimly-lit restaurant, once a stable, with flagstone flooring and fieldstone walls. The tables were candle-lit, the candles set in multicolored holders made of the drippings of the countless candles which had glimmered there before. A speaker, high up, murmured classical music. They found a table and Robin ordered sherry. The sound of his voice brought sharply to her their silence with each other; she had never been silent with Robin before. She felt a togetherness, a sharing, which was a new thing; he was not so evident to her as *they* were, listening to the music and watching the tilt and twist of reflected candle flames in the meniscus of their wine.

When the music permitted, and a little after, she asked, "Where have you been?"

"Nowhere. Right here in New York. And in the back room of my Westchester place. Sandy Hook, for a while. You know—around."

"Why have you been hiding?"

He looked quickly at her and away. "Have I changed?"

"You certainly have."

"A lot," he agreed. "And I knew it. I didn't want anyone else to know it. I didn't want anyone to watch it happen. It's happened fast. It's happening fast. I—I don't know where it's going."

"Have you been sick?"

"Oh, no—well, some aches in my hands and face and feet, and vertigo once in a while. Otherwise I've never been better."

Peg frowned. "Aches . . . what have you been doing?"

"Oh—a little writing. A lot of reading. I holed up in Westchester with all the books I could think of that I'd ever wanted to read. I got right out of myself for a while. Not for long, though."

"What happened?"

"It was strange . . . I got bored. I got so that a paragraph would tell me an author's style, a page would give me the plot . . . maybe if I could have become interested in mathematics or something it would have been different. I was suddenly cursed with a thing you might call hyper-understanding. It made me quit working altogether. There was no challenge in anything. I could do anything I wanted to do. I knew how to do it well. I didn't need to publish anything, or even to write it down. I didn't need approbation. It was pretty bad for a while. I know what failure is like, and the what's-the-use feeling. This was worse. This was what's-the-use—it will succeed."

"I don't know that I understand that," said Peg thoughtfully.

"I hope you never do," he said fervently.

"What you saw me doing tonight. Starting arguments."

"On maturity?" Suddenly she snapped her fingers. "But—of course! I should have realized. You added nothing to that discussion—you just kept the ball rolling. But why, Robin?"

He rubbed his knuckles. "I'm—very alone, Peg. I'm a little like Stapledon's Sirius—I'm the only one of my kind. When I reached a stage of boredom at which I had to find some alternative for suicide, I began to look for something I could have in common with other people. It seemed a slim hope. At first glance, there was nothing which interested me which would interest enough different *kinds* of people to make me want their opinions."

"There's always sex," said Peg facetiously.

"Sex!" he said scornfully. "The American public is basically disinterested in sex."

"*What!* Robin, you're mad! Why, every magazine cover, every plot of every book and movie, practically, shouts sex. How can you say a thing like that?"

"If the public were really interested," he smiled, "do you think they'd need all that high-pressure salesmanship? No, Peg; people are most curious about the same thing that has been bothering me; I happen to be in the odd position of having to face it, which is where I differ from most people."

"Having to face what?"

"Maturity."

She stared at him. "And that's what most people are interested in?"

"Certainly. You heard the argument tonight. I've started the same one hundreds of times recently. It's about all I

do, these days. I've heard it knocked around in bars, in parks, in subways and buses and parish houses. Try it yourself. Bear in mind, though, that not everyone calls it maturity. Some call it self-help, and where their self-help will get them; others call it wishful thinking. Coué was preaching maturity; so were Philip Wylie and the Federation of Atomic Scientists and Fletcher, with his disgusting idea of chewing each mouthful of food a hundred times; Santayana and Immanuel Kant and Thoreau and, in their twisted ways, Dr. Townsend and Schopenhauer and Adolf Hitler and Billy Sunday were striving toward maturity insofar as maturity represents a greater goal for humanity, or a part of it . . . it's a sorry mistake to think one part deserves it over the rest . . ."

"Have you found out what true, complete maturity is?"

"True, complete maturity isn't," he said positively. "But I *think* I know what it would be if it happened along. And don't ask me. If I'm ever absolutely sure, I'll let you know. Now let's talk about you."

"Not yet," she said, "If at all . . . I want to know first why you are making these rounds."

"Research," he said shortly.

"Certainly you can find more authoritative sources outside of bars and buses."

"Can I? By reading the experts, I found out that with very few exceptions, the more erudite and articulate a man gets, the more he feels that the rest of the world lacks what he has, and that therefore maturity is his condition, immaturity is the state of those less gifted than he. The man on the street talks more sense, though he may do it with less polish. I run into blocks occasionally—remember the hesitant psychiatrist?—and sometimes people in the late thirties confuse 'maturity' with 'middle aged' so thoroughly that they are kept from thinking about it. But by and large a gentle push in the right direction will yield the most astonishing conclusions. A mature man would be a tough, naked swami, perched in the fork of a tree, living an indescribably psycho-cosmic existence. Or he would be a camouflaged man, superficially a nonentity, living with but not of society, leaving it meticulously alone in favor of a private, functional, hyper-sensual existence. Or he would be a mysterious gangster, pulling strings, making and stopping wars for amusement. It's fascinating, Peg. Most people describe maturity as an extension of themselves; some describe it as something hateful and terrible; occasionally one, like that boy Cortlandt

tonight, will become objective enough to dream up something like the Messianic gorilla he described." Robin shrugged. "Research."

"I see. And—and you? What's happening to you?"

"I think I'm getting there. I think I'm going to be that thing that has never happened before."

"Let me make some tests," she begged.

Very slowly he put his right hand, palm down, on the table, and said "No." It was the most positive utterance imaginable.

"Robin, why not?"

"Remember my two reasons for quitting the treatments?"

"I remember," she said acidly. "You thought that if you matured any more you'd stop producing your glittering little works of art. And you were afraid of Mel Warfield."

He apparently took no offense, but simply nodded. "They both still apply—transmuted, extended; but still the same two excellent reasons."

"I don't understand. You're not composing or writing or inventing now."

"I'm doing something much bigger. I'm—maturing. Peg," he said with a flash of his old diffidence, "do pardon my colossal immodesty, but there's no other way to phrase it—I myself am becoming a work of art, a deeply important, complex, *significant* thing. I am more completely alive now, I think, in every one of my senses, and in new ways that I'm only beginning to understand, than any man has ever been. You don't want to aid that process. You want it stopped. I'm different now, but not so different that I couldn't be a man among men. My difference will increase, and you are afraid of it, and there's nothing more to your unease than the emotion which makes the brown monkeys tear apart the white one."

"I'm afraid of nothing except that you'll turn into a monster!" she said hotly. "You seem all right now, but you obviously haven't rid yourself of all your childishness. It's childish in the extreme to imagine that nothing bad can happen to you."

"You won't say that," Robin said softly, "when you've heard my definition of maturity."

"Maturity!" she spat. "Do you know what maturity is in a vegetable? It's death. Do you know what maturity is in a simple animal? It's nothing—its the redivision of immature cells, indefinitely—it's everlasting life, and everlasting im-

maturity. What are you, that can find something between those extremes?"

"I am Robin English, ex-child, post-adolescent, pre—"

"Go on."

He grinned. "Can't. It's never happened. There's no word for it. Now may we talk about you—aside from endocrinology?"

She gazed at him, her glance touching his cheek, stroking down and back to nestle in the hollow of his neck.

"Remember what I said once," he mused, "about the amounts of wind we waste?"

She nodded. "Let's not."

He grunted approvingly. "I mentioned my senses."

"You said that they were—uh—hyperdeveloped."

"I like 'em," he said, and smiled. "Maybe Cortlandt's super-gorilla was a good guess. I like delicacy—by the bucketful. I don't experiment, I don't probe, I don't instruct, and I don't play around with sensual matters."

"I understand," she said thickly.

"I know what you want."

"I don't doubt it," she said. She was sure that, holding the overhang of the table so tightly, every tiny thread of the tablecloth would leave an impression on her fingers.

"You want devotion, and sharing, and growth-together, and all the other components of that four-letter Anglo-Saxon monosyllable called love."

"You're playing with me again."

"Sorry . . . I can't give you those things. I think you know that. I'm far too preoccupied with my own importance . . . you see? It sounds much more effective when I say it myself! Anyway, do you want as much as I can give you?"

"I think," she whispered, "that you had better be specific . . ."

In her office, in the dark, as she told it all to Mel Warfield, Peg began to cry again. She tried to hold it in, tried to speak, and then gave up to it altogether.

Mel rose from his perch on the edge of the desk and swore. "Spit it out, Peg," he barked. "So he asked you and you said yes." His fist struck his palm with a frightening snap, like bones breaking. "I wish I *had* killed him. I wish I had the chance now."

"You *what*?" She was shocked out of her tears. "Why?"

"For what he did to you."

She stared at him in the darkness. "That's a new wrinkle

in chivalry," she said, with the ghost of her old sense of humor.

"I don't understand you," said Mel irritably.

Suddenly she uttered an extraordinary sound, a sort of attenuated chirp of hysterical laughter. "Mel Warfield, what on earth do you think I—he—just what do you think he did?"

"That is perfectly obvious," he said. "What else could have driven you into such a state?"

Her voice was suddenly clear and cold. "What he asked me, you purblind idiot, was whether I was a virgin. And I said yes. And he looked at me with that damned twinkle in his eyes and said, 'Sorry, Peg.' And then I came straight here and you found me. Now gather up your shiny ideals and that sink you call a mind and take them out of here and leave me alone!"

When Mel had backed off almost to the door, he uttered a grunt, as if from a heavy blow, and then turned and fled.

He called three times before he realized that the hospital switchboard operator's bland "Dr. Wenzell is out, Dr. Warfield" was on Peg's orders. He wrote a letter of apology which she answered after ten days—just *"Let's forget it, Mel,"* on memo-paper.

The year grew old, grew cold and died, and a new one rose from its frozen bones, to cling for months to its infantile frigidity. It robbed itself of its childhood, sliding through a blustery summer, and found itself growing old too early. What ides, what cusp, what golden day is a year in its fullness, grown to its maturity? Where is the peak in a certain cycle, the point of farthest travel in a course which starts and ends in ice, or one which ends in dust, or starts and circles, ending in its nascent dream?

The meteor, Robin English, had passed, and the papers put him in their morgues and gave themselves to newer wonders and war talk. Margaretta Wenzell worked too much and began to grow thin. Mellett Warfield worked too much and began to grow gray. They had nothing to do with each other.

And when Peg burst into his laboratory one gray day, there was a moment when she paused in the doorway, shocked by his appearance as he was shocked by hers. He was gaunt and disheveled, and she was thin and livid. The moment passed.

"Peg! Why, I'm so—"

"Never mind that," she said crisply. "Look at this." She threw down a glossy eight by ten print.

"What—" he picked it up. It was slightly out of focus, a picture of a man elbowing his way through a crowd. The people around him were craning their necks toward a point off the picture, behind and beyond the grim figure. "It's a blow-up of a picture from this week's *Day Magazine*," said Peg. "People crowding around a dogfight on 48th Street. That doesn't matter. What does matter is the man who got caught in the crowd."

Warfield flicked the edge of the print in annoyance. "I'd hoped that this visit had something to do with me," he growled.

"It has," she said. "You know who that is?"

"Of course."

"What do you think?"

Mel glanced at the picture again. "Getting to be quite a glamor boy in his old age, isn't he?"

Peg closed her eyes. There was a strange movement of the lids as she rolled the eyes under them. "You call yourself a doctor," she hissed. "Look at his chin."

"Nice chin."

"You don't remember Robin. You don't remember that round baby face."

"I'm not in love with him."

Mel thought she was going to strike him. She jammed the picture under his nose. "Look, look," she breathed.

He sighed and looked. Then he saw what she meant. He went white. "Ac—" His voice failed him.

"Acromegaly," she said.

"Oh, my God."

"We've got to get to him. We've got to arrest that condition before he turns into a monster and dies."

"Why should we arrest the condition?"

"Why? Mel, are you out of your mind? When does your responsibility to a patient end?"

"When the patient stops cooperating."

"I'll find him myself. Somewhere, somehow or other, there's a way to find him. I had hoped you'd help." She turned away.

"I know where he is," he said dully. "I don't see him."

"I don't care. I'm going to every single—you *what*?"

"I've always known." He wet his lips. "He was under some sort of delusion, apparently. A week or so after he quit his treatments he came to see me. He . . . explained carefully that he had—uh—no use for you, that there was no longer

any reason for me to want to . . . to kill him, and—you don't seem surprised."

"He told me about it."

"You *knew* about that?"

"Did you try to kill him, Mel?"

"It was an accident, Peg. Really it was. And he compensated for it. Splendidly. I don't know how he found out. The man's incredibly sharp."

"It was that postpituitrin excess, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but that couldn't have anything to do with this—this hypertrophy, I mean—" he faltered—"I don't think so—"

She stared coldly at him. "Take me to him."

"Now?"

"Now."

He looked at her marble face, her set lips, and then slipped into his coat. She said, as he locked his door, "Why didn't you tell me where he was?"

"You didn't ask me. And, frankly, I didn't want you to see him, not as long as he refused to take his treatments."

"You could have let me decide that."

"Why did he let you know where he was?"

"Part of his fixation. He told me I could—uh—kill him any time I wanted to, any way except with my needles. It seemed important to him. Oh, Peg—"

She turned her face away from him. Downstairs, they caught a cab almost immediately, and Warfield gave the driver a Riverside address. Peg sat staring blindly ahead. Mel slumped in a corner and looked at his wrists, dully.

Peg broke the silence only once—to ask in a deceptively conversational voice if anything had been learned that she didn't know about the treatment of acromegaly. Warfield shook his head vaguely. She made a sound, then, like a sob, but when Warfield looked at her she still sat, dry-eyed, staring at the driver's coat collar.

They pulled up in front of one of those stately old cell blocks of apartment houses that perch on the slanted, winding approaches to the Drive. They got out, and a doorman, a bit over life-size, swung open both leaves of a huge plate glass and bronze door to let them into the building.

"Mr. Wenzell," said Warfield to a wax-faced desk clerk.

"What?" said Peg.

"He . . . it amuses him to use your name," said Warfield, as if he were speaking out of a mouthful of sal ammoniac.

"Mr. Wenzell is out," said the clerk. "Can I take a message?"

"You can take a message right to Mr. Wenzell, who is not out," said Warfield. "Tell him his two doctors are here and must see him."

"Tell him," said Peg clearly, "that Margaretta Wenzell is here."

"Yes, Mrs. Wenzell," said the clerk with alacrity.

"Why must you make this painful as well as unpleasant?" gritted Warfield. Peg smiled with her teeth and said nothing.

The clerk returned from the phone looking as if he had learned how to pronounce a word he had only seen chalked on fences before. "Fourteen. Suite C. The elevators—"

"Yes," growled Warfield. He took Peg's elbow and walked her over to the elevators as if she were a window dummy.

"You're hurting me."

"I'm sorry. I'm—a little upset. Do you have to go through with this weird business?"

She didn't answer. Instead she said, "Stay down here, Mel."

"I will not!"

She looked at him, and said a thousand words—hot-acid ones—in the sweep of her eyes across his face.

"Well," he said, "all right. All right. Tell you what. I'll give you fifteen minutes and then I'm coming up." He paused. "Why are you looking at me like that? What are you thinking about?"

"That corny line about the fifteen minutes. I was thinking about how much better Robin would deliver it."

"I think I hate you," said Warfield hoarsely, quietly.

Peg stepped into the elevator. "That was *much* better done," she said, and pushed the button which closed the doors.

On the fourteenth floor she walked to the door marked "C" and touched the bell. The door swung open instantly.

"Come in!" grated a voice. There was no one standing in the doorway at all. She hesitated. Then she saw that someone was peering through the crack at the hinge side of the door.

"Come in, Peg!" said the voice. It was used gently now, though it was still gravelly. She stepped through and into the room. The door closed behind her. Robin was there. "Peg! It's *so* good to see you!"

"Hello, Robin," she whispered. Just what gesture she was about to make she would never know for she became suddenly conscious of someone else in the room. She wheeled. There was a girl on the davenport, who rose as Peg faced

her. The girl didn't look, somehow, like a person. She looked like too many colors.

"Janice," said Robin. It wasn't an introduction. Robin just said the one word and moved his head slightly. The girl came slowly across the room toward him, passed him, went to the hall closet and took out a coat and hat and a handbag with a long strap. She draped the coat over her arm and opened the door; and then she paused and shot Peg a look of such utter hatred that Peg gasped. The door closed and she was alone with Robin English.

"Is *that* the best you can do," she said, without trying to keep the loathing out of her voice.

"The very best," said Robin equably. "Janice has no conversation. What else she has to recommend her, you can see. She is a great convenience."

A silly, colorful little thought crept into Peg's mind. She looked around the room.

"You're looking for a smorgasbord tray," chuckled Robin, sinking into an easy chair and regarding her with amusement. "Why won't you look at me?"

Finally, she did.

He was taller, a very little. He was much handsomer. She saw that, and it was as if something festering within her had been lanced. There was pain—but oh! the blessed relief of pressure! His face was— *Oh yes,* said Dr. Wenzell to herself, *prepituitary. Acromegaly.* She said, "Let me see your hands."

He raised his eyebrows, and put his hands in his pockets. He shook his head.

Peg turned on her heel and went to the hall closet. She dipped into the pockets of an overcoat, and then into a topcoat, until she found a pair of gloves. She came back into the room, examining them carefully. Robin got to his feet.

"As I thought," she said. She held up the left glove. The seam between the index and second finger was split. And they were new gloves. She threw them aside.

"So you know about that. You would, of course."

"Robin, I don't think this would have happened if you had continued your treatments."

He slowly took out his hands and stared at them. They were lumpy, and the fingers were too long, and a little crooked. "A phenomenal hypertrophy of the bony processes, according to the books," he said. "A development that generally takes years."

"There's nothing normal about this case. There never

was," said Peg, her voice thick with pity. "Why did you let it go like this?"

"I got interested in what I was doing." Suddenly he got to his feet and began to stride restlessly about the room. She tried not to look at him, at his altered face, with the heavy, coarse jaw. She strained to catch the remnants of his mellow voice through the harshness she heard now.

"What is it, Robin—Mel? Are you still afraid of Mel Warfield?"

"Hm? Mel . . . oh! Mel. I'd almost forgotten. No, Peg, not any more. That was a long time ago. I've been so busy."

"With what?"

He squinted at her, then resumed his pacing. She realized that he was here, and not here. "My mind is working on two levels," he said. "Maybe more."

"Wh—are you telepathic?"

"I don't know. No. I'm—it's too slowly to say it."

"Too hard to say it?"

"Too slowly. It isn't a thing you can say piece by piece. It's a whole picture; you see it all at once and it means something."

"I don't understand."

"No," he said.

"Do you have any palsy, Robin?"

He held up his misshapen hands. They were quite steady. "It isn't Parkinson's disease," he said, again speaking her thought. "My mind is very clear, but only to me. My brain isn't softening. It's—deepening. A Klein bottle has only one surface but can contain a liquid because it has a contiguity through a fourth direction; my mind has five surfaces, so how many different liquids can it contain at once?"

"Robin!"

He made some inner effort that twisted his heavy face. "I've found out what maturity is, Peg," he said.

"Sit down, Robin," she said gently, "and tell me."

"I won't sit down!" he said. He took a turn around the room, and in quite a different voice, said, "What made it so hard to find out was the haziness of the word, and the ambivalence of the human animal. You said that maturity, in a plant, is death. Laurence Manning said that a plant isn't a plant, and a man isn't a man; they are conspiracies of millions of separate cell animals with thousands of separate specialties. Cells mature and die, singly and in great masses; sometimes they reach a full function that is maturity of another kind, and perform it for a long time—microseconds or

years . . . so maturity is and isn't, all the time, within a man. The unit man, as an animal, has a maturity that can only be an approximation—that would be when most of the specialized cells were doing their cooperative best—not their best, but their cooperative best, within him. And that's maturity in man, but only in man the animal. Man is another thing too. Call it mind, keep it simple . . ." He paused for a long time, stopped, opened and closed his hands. Peg resisted the impulse to interrupt.

At last Robin said, "Mind is different. When the old man in the Huxley book ate carp-guts and lived for centuries, the mind part died, and he wasn't a mature thing. The mind part does not mature because it can't. It doesn't complete a life with a culminating death like a plant cell, because it doesn't simply exchange nourishment for the performance of a specialty like that. Mind—not brain; mind—works and does work. Some of it has to do with physical living, but most of it does—*other* work. And there's no necessity for this work, no reason to start it, within the animal; and there's no end to it when it does work, no place it cannot go. When is it mature? How high is up?

"But mind leads to wisdom—precepts for mature conduct within any framework. These are the wisdoms which can produce a mature Democrat or Protestant or stockbroker or husband. And I've found the simple statement of maturity within the largest framework any ordinary human being can know. It *is* simple—all the wisdoms are simple, because, for their fields, they are basic. I'll tell you—"

He stopped, his great head up, listening. Peg heard nothing. "—later," Robin finished. The door buzzer shrilled.

"Come in!"

"Peg!" Mel Warfield all but ran in. "Are you all right?"

"Hello, Mel."

Warfield spun. The change from frantic male to absorbed physician was so swift it would have been comic anywhere else. "Robin!" His eyes flickered to the face, the hands, the feet, which were in cut slippers. "You know what that condition is?"

"He knows," said Peg.

"Saving no one's presence," said Mel Warfield. "There are three damned fools in this room. English, we might be able to arrest that condition; we might even—well, I can't promise too much, you understand, but if you'll only start treatment again, we might at least—"

He was interrupted by quite the most horrible sound Peg

had ever heard—a burst of thunderous laughter from Robin's distorted throat. "Sure, Mel, sure. Glad to."

"Robin!" cried Peg. "You will?"

He laughed again. "Of course I will. I'm—mature enough to know what to do. Not today, though. Tomorrow all right?"

"Fine, fine," said Mel. He looked as if some great burden had been lifted from him—something that had been strapped to his whole body. "Ten o'clock at my place—I'll have everything ready. We'll run the most exhaustive set of tests on you that can be found this side of the Mayo Clinic."

"I can't be sure about the time." Robin went to the desk in the corner. "My number's unlisted," he said, writing rapidly on a sheet of note paper. He folded it, folded it again. "Call me tonight or in the morning, just to make sure." He chuckled again. "I feel better already. Arrest the condition? It will be easy . . . you've never had a mature patient before." He slipped the paper into Peg's envelope handbag, and laughed again.

"Is there a joke?" Peg asked painfully.

"Sorry . . . no, it isn't a joke. But the huge relief . . . I see an end at last to a thing that seemed to have none, a final adjustment of the two factors I mentioned, one of which is an approximation, and the other a thing with no upper limits. Why do you hate each other?"

Warfield sucked in his breath and looked at Peg. Peg looked at her feet.

"I have been my own damnation," said Robin, "like most damned souls. There isn't a thing you could have done to prevent it. Mel once made an honest mistake, and it wasn't even a serious one. Peg, you have no right to assume that it was made through a single motive, and that a base one. Nature never shows one motive or one law at a time, unaffected by any other. And Mel—to hate Peg because of the things she has felt is like hating a man for moving when a tornado has taken him away. I—want to say something like 'Bless you, my children.' Now get out of here. You'll see me soon enough."

He herded them toward the door. Mel, feeling that there was something unsaid, something important, unable to think clearly because of the sudden rush, tried to gain a moment. "When would be the best time to call?"

"You'll know. Hurry, now. I have things to do."

Through the closing door, Peg got a last glimpse of Robin's face, distorted and handsome, slipping into an inward-turning relaxation as he let go the concentration that he had

assumed shortly after she had arrived. *Like a man leaving children,* she thought.

In the elevator, with wonder in his voice, Mel said, "He thinks he's mature. He's just—just sick. Sick and old."

"I don't know what he is," Peg said wearily. "Some of what he said sounded like a delirium. And yet—I suppose a discussion of the Döppler shift would sound fairly delirious to a fourth-grade child. I don't know, Mel, I just don't know. I can't think. . . . He seems—quite sure . . ."

"We'll do what we can," said Mel. The doors slid open. "Peg—"

"Shh." She took his arm.

Robin English had talents and, lately, skills.

His will divided a large fortune between Drs. Wenzell and Warfield. His body and his brain were a mystery and a treasure to the institute to which he donated them. The mystery lay in the cause of death; the body was aberrated but still healthy, and it had simply stopped. A skill . . . Robin English was not the first man in the world to have that power, nor the only one. All men have it to a degree; the will to live is its complement, and daily works greater miracles than this simple thing of saying "Stop."

There was a terrible time when Peg and Mel burst back into the apartment on Riverside Drive, and after. But when enough time had gone by, it was all part of the many things they shared, and sharing is good. They shared their pain and their pleasure in their memories of him, as they shared an ineradicable sense of guilt. In due season they shared an understanding of Robin's death; it came to them that his decision to die had been made with his frightening burst of laughter, that day. Later still they understood his reason, though that took longer, in spite of the fact that he had written it on the paper he had tucked into Peg's handbag.

And they share, now, the simple wisdom he wrote; not a definition of maturity, but a delineation of the Grail in which it is contained:

"Enough is maturity—"

MEMORIAL

The Pit, in A.D. 5000, had changed little over the centuries. Still it was an angry memorial to the misuse of great power; and because of it, organized warfare was a forgotten thing. Because of it, the world was free of the wasteful smoke and dirt of industry. The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace.

To go near The Pit was slow, certain death, and it was respected and feared, and would be for centuries more. It winked and blinked redly at night, and was surrounded by a bald and broken tract stretching out and away over the horizon; and around it flickered a ghostly blue glow. Nothing lived there. Nothing could.

With such a war memorial, there could only be peace. The earth could never forget the horror that could be loosed by war.

That was Grenfell's dream.

Grenfell handed the typewritten sheet back. "That's it, Jack. My idea, and—I wish I could express it like that." He leaned back against the littered workbench, his strangely asymmetrical face quizzical. "Why is it that it takes a useless person adequately to express an abstract?"

Jack Roway grinned as he took back the paper and tucked it into his breast pocket. "Interestin' question, Grenfell, because this *is* your expression, the words *are* yours. Practically verbatim. I left out the 'er's and 'Ah's' that you play conversational hopscotch with, and strung together all the effects you mentioned without mentioning any of the technological causes. Net result: you think I did it, when you did. You think it's good writing, and I don't."

"You don't?"

Jack spread his bony length out on the hard little cot. His

relaxation was a noticeable act, like the unbuttoning of a shirt collar. He laughed.

"Of course I don't. Much too emotional for my taste. I'm just a fumbling aesthete—useless, did you say? Mm-m-m—yeah. I suppose so." He paused reflectively. "You see, you cold-blooded characters, you scientists, are the true visionaries. Seems to me the essential difference between a scientist and an artist is that the scientist mixes his hopes with patience.

"The scientist visualizes his ultimate goal, but pays little attention to it. He is all caught up with the achievement of the next step upward. The artist looks so far ahead that more often than not he can't see what's under his feet; so he falls flat on his face and gets called useless by scientists. But if you strip all of the intermediate steps away from the scientist's thinking, you have an artistic concept to which the scientist responds distantly and with surprise, giving some artist credit for deep perspicacity purely because the artist repeated something the scientist said."

"You amaze me," Grenfell said candidly. "You wouldn't be what you are if you weren't lazy and superficial. And yet you come out with things like that. I don't know that I understand what you just said. I'll have to think—but I do believe that you show all the signs of clear thinking. With a mind like yours, I can't understand why you don't use it to build something instead of wasting it in these casual interpretations of yours."

Jack Roway stretched luxuriously. "What's the use? There's more waste involved in the destruction of something which is already built than in dispersing the energy it would take to help build something. Anyway, the world is filled with builders—and destroyers. I'd just as soon sit by and watch, and feel things. I like my environment, Grenfell. I want to feel all I can of it, while it lasts. It won't last much longer. I want to touch all of it I can reach, taste of it, hear it, while there's time. What is around me, here and now, is what is important to me. The acceleration of human progress, and the increase of its mass—to use your own terms—are taking humanity straight to Limbo. You, with your work, think you are fighting humanity's inertia. Well, you are. But it's the kind of inertia called momentum. You command no force great enough to stop it, or even to change its course appreciably."

"I have atomic power."

Roway shook his head, smiling. "That's not enough. No power is enough. It's just too late."

"That kind of pessimism does not affect me," said Grenfell. "You can gnaw all you like at my foundations, Jack, and achieve nothing more than the loss of your front teeth. I think you know that."

"Certainly I know that. I'm not trying to. I have nothing to sell, no one to change. I am even more impotent than you and your atomic power; and you are completely helpless. Uh—I quarrel with your use of the term 'pessimist,' though. I am nothing of the kind. Since I have resolved for myself the fact that humanity, as we know it, is finished, I'm quite resigned to it. Pessimism from me, under the circumstances, would be the pessimism of a photophobiac predicting that the sun would rise tomorrow."

Grenfell grinned. "I'll have to think about that, too. You're such a mass of paradoxes that turn out to be chains of reasoning. Apparently you live in a world in which scientists are poets and the grasshopper has it all over the ant."

"I always did think that ant was a stinker."

"Why do you keep coming here, Jack? What do you get out of it? Don't you realize I'm a criminal?"

Roway's eyes narrowed. "Sometimes I think you wish you were a criminal. The law says you are, and the chances are very strong that you'll be caught and treated accordingly. Ethically, you know you're not. It sort of takes the spice out of being one of the hunted."

"Maybe you're right," Grenfell said thoughtfully. He sighed. "It's so completely silly. During the war years, the skills I had were snatched up and the government flogged me into the Manhattan Project, expecting, and getting, miracles. I have never stopped working along the same lines. And now the government has changed the laws, and pulled legality from under me."

"Hardly surprising. The government deals rather severely with soldiers who go on killing other soldiers after the war is over." He held up a hand to quell Grenfell's interruption. "I know you're not killing anyone, and are working for the opposite result. I was only pointing out that it's the same switcheroo. We the people," he said didactically, "have, in our sovereign might, determined that no atomic research be done except in government laboratories. We have then permitted our politicians to allow so little for maintenance of those laboratories—unlike our overseas friends—that no really exhaustive research can be done in them. We have further

made it a major offense to operate such a bootleg lab as yours." He shrugged. "Comes the end of mankind. We'll get walloped first. If we put more money and effort into nuclear research than any other country, some other country would get walloped first. If we last another hundred years—which seems doubtful—some poor, spavined, underpaid government researcher will stumble on the aluminum-isotope space-heating system you have already perfected."

"That was a little rough," said Grenfell bitterly. "Driving me underground just in time to make it impossible for me to announce it. What a waste of time and energy it is to heat homes and buildings the way they do now! Space heating—the biggest single use for heat-energy—and I have the answer to it over there." He nodded toward a compact cube of lead alloys in the corner of the shop. "Build it into a foundation, and you have controllable heat for the life of the building, with not a cent for additional fuel and practically nothing for maintenance." His jaw knotted. "Well, I'm glad it happened that way."

"Because it got you started on your war memorial— The Pit? Yeah. Well, all I can say is, I hope you're right. It hasn't been possible to scare humanity yet. The invention of gunpowder was going to stop war, and didn't. Likewise the submarine, the torpedo, the airplane, and that two-by-four bomb they pitched at Hiroshima."

"None of that applies to The Pit," said Grenfell. "You're right; humanity hasn't been scared off war yet; but the Hiroshima bomb rocked 'em back on their heels. My little memorial is the real stuff. I'm not depending on a fission effect, you know, with a release of one-tenth of one percent of the energy of the atom. I'm going to disrupt it completely, and get all the energy there is in it. And it'll be *more* than a thousand times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb, because I'm going to use twelve times as much explosive; and it's going off on the ground, not fifteen hundred feet above it." Grenfell's brow, over suddenly hot eyes, began to shine with sweat. "And then—The Pit," he said softly. "The war memorial to end war, and all other war memorials. A vast pit, alive with bubbling lava, radiating death for ten thousand years. A living reminder of the devastation mankind has prepared for itself. Out here on the desert, where there are no cities, where the land has always been useless, will be the scene of the most useful thing in the history of the race—a never-ending sermon, a warning, an example of the dread-

ful antithesis of peace." His voice shook to a whisper, and faded.

"Sometimes," said Roway, "You frighten me, Grenfell. It occurs to me that I am such a studied sensualist, tasting everything I can, because I am afraid to feel any one thing that much." He shook himself, or shuddered. "You're a fanatic, Grenfell. Hyperemotional. A monomaniac. I hope you can do it."

"I can do it," said Grenfell.

Two months passed, and in those two months Grenfell's absorption in his work had been forced aside by the increasing pressure of current events. Watching a band of vigilantes riding over the waste to the south of his little buildings one afternoon, he thought grimly of what Roway had said. "Sometimes I think you wish you were a criminal." Roway, the sensualist, would say that. Roway would appreciate the taste of danger, in the same way that he appreciated all the other emotions. As it intensified, he would wait to savor it, no matter how bad it got.

Twice Grenfell shut off the instigating power of the carbon-aluminum pile he had built, as he saw government helicopters hovering on the craggy skyline. He knew of hard-radiation detectors; he had developed two different types of them during the war; and he wanted no questions asked. His utter frustration at being unable to announce the success of his space-heating device, for fear that he would be punished as a criminal and his device impounded and forgotten—that frustration had been indescribable. It had canalized his mind, and intensified the devoted effect he had put forth for the things he believed in during the war. Every case of neural shock he encountered in men who had been hurt by war and despised it, made him work harder on his monument—on The Pit. For if humans could be frightened by war, humanity could be frightened by The Pit.

And those he met who had been hurt by war and who still hated the late enemy—those who would have been happy to go back and kill some more, reckoning vital risk well worth it—those he considered mad, and forgot them.

So he could not stand another frustration. He was the center of his own universe, and he realized it dreadfully, and he had to justify his position there. He was a humanitarian, a philanthropist in the world's truest sense. He was probably as mad as any man who has, through his own efforts, moved the world.

For the first time, then, he was grateful when Jack Roway

arrived in his battered old convertible, although he was deliriously frightened at the roar of the motor outside his laboratory window. His usual reaction to Jack's advent was a mixture of annoyance and gratification, for it was a great deal of trouble to get out to his place. His annoyance was not because of the interruption, for Jack was certainly no trouble to have around. Grenfell suspected that Jack came out to see him partly to get the taste of the city out of his mouth, and partly to be able to feel superior to somebody he considered of worth.

But the increasing fear of discovery, and his race to complete his work before it was taken from him by a hysterical public, had had the unusual effect of making him lonely. For such a man as Grenfell to be lonely bordered on the extraordinary; for in his daily life there were simply too many things to be done. There had never been enough hours in a day nor days in a week to suit him, and he deeply resented the encroachments of sleep, which he considered a criminal waste.

"Roway!" he blurted, as he flung the door open, his tone so warm that Roway's eyebrows went up in surprise. "What dragged you out here?"

"Nothing in particular," said the writer, as they shook hands. "Nothing more than usual, which is a great deal. How goes it?"

"I'm about finished." They went inside, and as the door closed, Grenfell turned to face Jack. "I've been finished for so long I'm ashamed of myself," he said intently.

"Ha! Ardent confession so early in the day! What are you talking about?"

"Oh, there have been things to do," said Grenfell restlessly. "But I could go ahead with the . . . with the big thing at almost any time."

"You hate to be finished. You've never visualized what it would be like to have the job done." His teeth flashed. "You know, I've never heard a word from you as to what your plans are after the big noise. You going into hiding?"

"I . . . haven't thought much about it. I used to have a vague idea of broadcasting a warning and an explanation before I let go with the disruptive explosion. I've decided against it, though. In the first place, I'd be stopped within minutes, no matter how cautious I was with the transmitter. In the second place—well, this is going to be so big that it won't need any explanation."

"No one will know who did it, or why it was done."

"Is that necessary?" asked Grenfell quietly.

Jack's mobile face stilled as he visualized The Pit, spewing its ten-thousand-year hell. "Perhaps not," he said. "Isn't it necessary, though, to you?"

"To me?" asked Grenfell, surprised. "You mean, do I care if the world knows I did this thing, or not? No; of course I don't. A chain of circumstance is occurring, and it has been working through me. It goes directly to The Pit; The Pit will do all that is necessary from then on. I will no longer have any part in it."

Jack moved, clinking and splashing, around the sink in the corner of the laboratory. "Where's all your coffee? Oh—here. Uh . . . I have been curious about how much personal motive you had for your work. I think that answers it pretty well. I think, too, that you believe what you are saying. Do you know that people who do things for impersonal motives are as rare as fur on a fish?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"I believe that, too. Sugar? And milk. I remember. And have you been listening to the radio?"

"Yes. I'm . . . a little upset, Jack," said Grenfell, taking the cup. "I don't know where to time this thing. I'm a technician, not a Machiavelli."

"Visionary, like I said. You don't know if you'll throw this gadget of yours into world history too soon or too late—is that it?"

"Exactly. Jack, the whole world seems to be going crazy. Even fission bombs are too big for humanity to handle."

"What else can you expect," said Jack grimly, "with our dear friends across the water sitting over their push buttons waiting for an excuse to punch them?"

"And we have our own set of buttons, of course."

Jack Roway said: "We've got to defend ourselves."

"Are you kidding?"

Roway glanced at him, his dark brows plotting a V. "Not about this. I seldom kid about anything, but particularly not about this." And he—shuddered.

Grenfell stared amazedly at him and then began to chuckle. "Now," he said, "I've seen everything. My iconoclastic friend Jack Roway, of all people, caught up by a . . . a fashion. A national pastime, fostered by uncertainty and fed by yellow journalism—fear of the enemy."

"This country is not at war."

"You mean, we have no enemy? Are you saying that the

gentlemen over the water, with their itching fingertips hovering about the pushbuttons, are not our enemies?"

"Well—"

Grenfell came across the room to his friend, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Jack—what's the matter? You can't be so troubled by the news—not *you!*"

Roway stared out at the brazen sun, and shook his head slowly. "International balance is too delicate," he said softly; and if a voice could glaze like eyes, his did. "I see the nations of the world as masses balanced each on its own mathematical point, each with its center of gravity directly above. But the masses are fluid, shifting violently away from the center lines. The opposing trends aren't equal: they can't cancel each other; the phasing is too slow. One or the other is going to topple, and then the whole works is going to go."

"But you've known that for a long time. You've known that ever since Hiroshima. Possibly before. Why should it frighten you now?"

"I didn't think it would happen so soon."

"Oh-ho! So that's it! You have suddenly realized that the explosion is going to come in your lifetime. Hm-m-m? And you can't take that. You're capable of all of your satisfying aesthetic rationalizations as long as you can keep the actualities at arm's length!"

"Whew!" said Roway, his irrespressible humor passing close enough to nod to him. "Keep it clean, Grenfell!"

Grenfell smiled. "Y'know, Jack, you remind me powerfully of some erstwhile friends of mine who write science fiction. They had been living very close to atomic power for a long time—years before the man on the street—or the average politician, for that matter—knew an atom from Adam. Atomic power was handy to these specilized word-merchants because it gave them a limitless source of power for background to a limitless source of story material. In the heyday of the Manhattan Project, most of them suspected what was going on, some of them knew—some even worked on it. All of them were quite aware of the terrible potentialities of nuclear energy. Practically all of them were scared silly of the whole idea. They were afraid for humanity, but they themselves were not really afraid, except in a delicious drawing room sort of way, because they couldn't conceive of this Buck Rogers event happening to anything but posterity. But it happened, right smack in the middle of their own sacrosanct lifetimes.

"And I will be doggoned if you're not doing the same thing. You've gotten quite a bang out of figuring out the doom humanity faces in an atomic war. You've consciously risen above it by calling it inevitable, and in the meantime, leave us gather rosebuds before it rains. You thought you'd be safe home—dead—before the first drops fell. Now social progress has rolled up a thunderhead and you find yourself a mile from home with a crease in your pants and no umbrella. And you're scared."

Roway looked at the floor and said, "It's so soon. It's so soon." He looked up at Grenfell, and his cheekbones seemed too large. He took a deep breath. "You . . . we can stop it, Grenfell. The war . . . the . . . this thing that's happening to us. The explosion that will come when the strains get too great in the international situation. And it's *got* to be stopped!"

"That's what The Pit is for."

"The Pit!" Roway said scornfully. "I've called you a visionary before. Grenfell, you've got to be more practical! Humanity is not going to learn anything by example. It's got to be kicked and carved. Surgery."

Grenfell's eyes narrowed. "Surgery? What you said a minute ago about my stopping it . . . do you mean what I think you mean?"

"Don't you see it?" said Jack urgently. "What you have here—total disruptive energy—the peak of atomic power. One or two wallops with this, in the right place, and we can stop anybody."

"This isn't a weapon. I didn't make this to be a weapon."

"The first rock ever thrown by a prehistoric man wasn't made to be a weapon, either. But it was handy and it was effective, and it was certainly used because it had to be used." He suddenly threw up his hands in a despairing gesture. "You don't understand. Don't you realize that this country is likely to be attacked at any second—that diplomacy is now hopeless and helpless, and the whole world is just waiting for the thing to start? It's probably too late even now—but it's the least we can do."

"What, specifically, is the least thing we can do?"

"Turn your work over to the War Department. In a few hours the government can put it where it will do the most good." He drew his finger across his throat. "Anywhere we want to, over the ocean."

There was a taut silence. Roway looked at his watch and licked his lips. Finally Grenfell said. "Turn it over to the

government. Use it for a weapon—and what for? To stop war?"

"Of course!" blurted Roway. "To show the rest of the world that our way of life . . . to scare the daylights out of . . . to—"

"*Stop it!*" Grenfell roared. "Nothing of the kind. You think—you hope anyway—that the use of total disruption as a weapon will stall off the inevitable—at least in your lifetime. Don't you?"

"No. I—"

"Don't you?"

"Well, I—"

"You have some more doggerel to write," said Grenfell scathingly. "You have some more blondes to chase. You want to go limp over a few more Bach fugues."

Jack Roway said: "No one knows where the first bomb might hit. It might be anywhere. There's nowhere I . . . we . . . can go to be safe." He was trembling.

"Are the people in the city quivering like that?" said Grenfell.

"Riots," breathed Roway, his eyes bright with panic. "The radio won't announce anything about the riots."

"Is that what you came out here for today—to try to get me to give disruptive power to *any* government?"

Jack looked at him guiltily. "It was the only thing to do. I don't know if your bomb will turn the trick, but it has to be tried. It's the only thing left. We've got to be prepared to hit first, and hit harder than anyone else."

"No." Grenfell's one syllable was absolutely unshakable.

"Grenfell—I thought I could argue you into it. Don't make it tough for yourself. You've got to do it. Please do it on your own. Please, Grenfell." He stood up slowly.

"Do it on my own—or what? *Keep away from me!*"

"No . . . I—" Roway stiffened suddenly, listening. From far above and to the north came the whir of rotary wings. Roway's fear-slackened lips tightened into a grin, and with two incredibly swift strides he was across to Grenfell. He swept in a handful of the smaller man's shirt front and held him half off the floor.

"Don't try a thing," he gritted. There was not a sound then except their harsh breathing, until Grenfell said wearily: "There was somebody called Judas—"

"You can't insult me," said Roway, with a shade of his old cockiness, "And you're flattering yourself."

A helicopter sank into its own roaring dust cloud outside

the building. Men poured out of it and burst in the door. There were three of them. They were not in uniform.

"Dr. Grenfell," said Jack Roway, keeping his grip, "I want you to meet—"

"Never mind that," said the taller of the three in a brisk voice. "You're Roway? Hm-m-m Dr. Grenfell, I understand you have a nuclear energy device on the premises."

"Why did you come by yourself?" Grenfell asked Roway softly. "Why not just send these stooges?"

"For you, strangely enough. I hoped I could argue you into giving the thing freely. You know what will happen if you resist?"

"I know." Grenfell pursed his lips for a moment, and then turned to the tall man. "Yes. I have some such thing here. Total atomic disruption. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Where is it?"

"Here, in the laboratory, and then there's the pile in the other building. You'll find—" He hesitated. "You'll find two samples of the concentrate. One's over there—" he pointed to a lead case on a shelf behind one of the benches. "And there's another like it in a similar case in the shed back of the pile building."

Roway sighed and released Grenfell. "Good boy. I knew you'd come through."

"Yes," said Grenfell. "Yes—"

"Go get it," said the tall man. One of the others broke away.

"It will take two men to carry it," said Grenfell in a shaken voice. His lips were white.

The tall man pulled out a gun and held it idly. He nodded to the second man. "Go get it. Bring it here and we'll strap the two together and haul 'em to the plane. Snap it up."

The two men went out toward the shed.

"Jack?"

"Yes, doc."

"You really think humanity can be scared?"

"It will be—now. This thing will be used right."

"I hope so. Oh, I hope so," Grenfell whispered.

The men came back. "Up on the bench," said the leader, nodding toward the case the men carried between them.

As they climbed up on the bench and laid hands on the second case, to swing it down from the shelf, Jack Roway saw Grenfell's face spurt sweat, and a sudden horror swept over him.

"Grenfell!" he said hoarsely. "It's—"

"Of course," Grenfell whispered. "Critical mass."

Then it let go.

It was like Hiroshima, but much bigger. And yet, that explosion did not create The Pit. It was the pile that did—the boron-aluminum lattice which Grenfell had so arduously pieced together from parts bootlegged over the years. Right there at the heart of the fission explosion, total disruption took place in the pile, for that was its function. This was slower. It took more than an hour for its hellish activity to reach a peak, and in that time a huge crater had been gouged out of the earth, a seething, spewing mass of volatilized elements, raw radiation, and incandescent gases. It was—The Pit. Its activity curve was plotted abruptly—up to peak in an hour and eight minutes, and then a gradual subsidence as it tried to feed further afield with less and less fueling effect; and as it consumed its own flaming wastes in an effort to reach inactivity. Rain would help to blanket it, through energy lost in volatilizing the drops; and each of the many elements involved went through its respective secondary radioactivity, and passed away its successive half-lives. The subsidence of The Pit would take between eight and nine thousand years.

And like Hiroshima, this explosion had effects which reached into history and into men's hearts in places far separated in time from the cataclysm itself.

These things happened:

The explosion could not be concealed; and there was too much hysteria afoot for anything to be confirmed. It was easier to run headlines saying WE ARE ATTACKED. There was an instantaneous and panicky demand for reprisals, and the government acceded, because such "reprisals" suited the policy of certain members who could command emergency powers. And so the First Atomic War was touched off.

And the Second.

There were no more atomic wars after that. The Mutant's War was a barbarous affair, and the mutants defeated the tattered and largely sterile remanants of humanity, because the mutants were strong. And then the mutants died out because they were unfit. For a while there was some very interesting material to be studied on the effects of radiation on heredity, but there was no one to study it.

There were some humans left. The rats got most of them, after increasing in fantastic numbers; and there were three plagues.

After that there were half-stooping, naked things whose

twisted heredity could have been traced to humankind; but these could be frightened, as individuals and as a race, so therefore they could not progress. They were certainly not human.

The Pit, in A.D. 5000, had changed little over the centuries. Still it was an angry memorial to the misuse of great power; and because of it, organized warfare was a forgotten thing. Because of it, the world was free of the wasteful smoke and dirt of industry. The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace.

To go near The Pit was slow, certain death, and it was respected and feared, and would be for centuries more. It winked and blinked redly at night, and was surrounded by a bald and broken tract stretching out and away over the horizon; and around it flickered a ghostly blue glow. Nothing lived there. Nothing could.

With such a war memorial, there could only be peace. The earth could never forget the horror that could be loosed by war.

That was Grenfell's dream.

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