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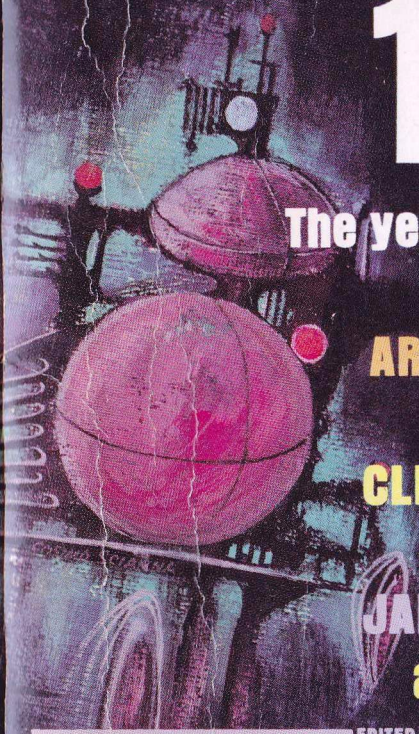
WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: 1966



The year's finest tales of wonder, by

ARTHUR C. CLARKE
FRITZ LEIBER
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK
RON GOULART
JAMES H. SCHMITZ
and many more.

EDITED BY

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM and TERRY CARR

"You set a high standard to start with, and I expect you'll maintain it. . . ."

—Judith Merril

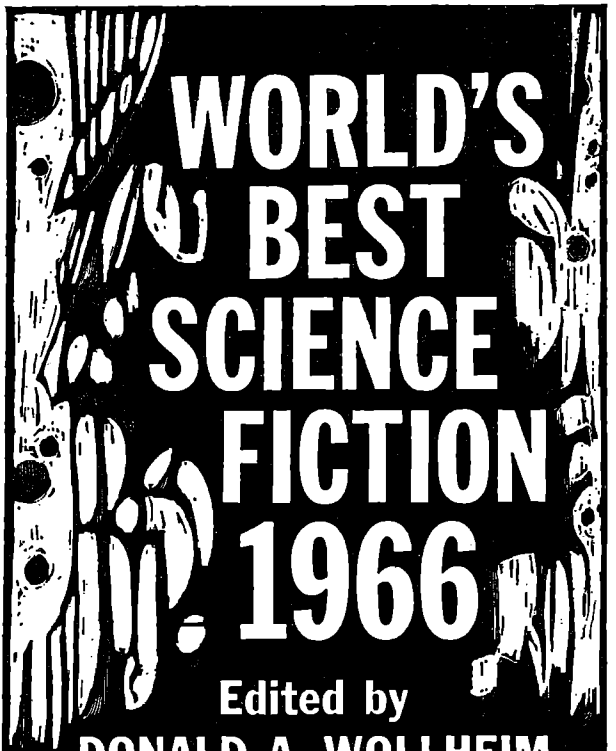
In this, the 1966 selection of the WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION, the editors have again come up with the top tales of imagination by the leading writers in the field. They have taken as their criterion the demand that stories be provocative to the imagination, be entertaining, represent a high literary standard, and yet be the essence of all that is meant by the term science fiction: the wonder of the future, the marvel and mystery of other worlds, the adventure and glory of space and time, and the infinite potentiality of mankind.

The fifteen stories herein, representing such writers as Arthur C. Clarke, Fritz Leiber, Clifford D. Simak, James H. Schmitz, as well as many others, are rewarding evidence of careful search through the world's magazines.

You will find that the WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION: 1966 is exactly that.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM is well-known as a science fiction book and magazine editor, an outstanding anthologist, and the author of many s-f novels and short stories. A native New Yorker, he is the editor of Ace Books.

TERRY CARR is an active s-f fan and critic who proved his merit by writing and selling novels and a number of short stories and articles. A former Californian, he is now a member of the Ace Books staff.



WORLD'S BEST SCIENCE FICTION 1966

Edited by
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and TERRY CARR

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INTRODUCTION

IN AN ERA SO tinctured with the essence of science fiction—or what was science fiction only a few years ago—the question confronting editors determined to select the best of the year's s-f output becomes quite complex. What is science fiction in a year that saw the Gemini space rendezvous come off so successfully, that saw photographs of the surface of Mars taken from a perfectly operating passing spaceship, where new satellites sent up almost every day do not even make the front pages? Or where on the surface of the Earth massive bombing planes fly thousands of miles a day to pinpoint rebellious areas in remote jungle countries —and those flights scarcely make headlines either? Or where all sorts of astounding scientific discoveries in medicine, biology and physics are more often than not relegated to the inner pages of newspapers?

So in a very real way the basic premise of science fiction is the mode of life of the present—namely that the boundaries of human knowledge and human experience are advancing across new frontiers and into unexplored terrains of history just about every day. The task of a science fiction writer thus becomes a quite sophisticated one requiring the ability not only to hold interest in a good story, but also to perk the sense of imagination in an era so jaded with astonishing factuality.

And yet good science fiction *is* being written, and it is still possible to immerse oneself in a world or a vision that is imaginatively a work of wonder. Reading through the large output of American and foreign science fiction and fantasy publications makes this very clear. And it also brings out the increasing freedom of imagination and technique in the best of today's stories—a healthy response to the encroachment of today upon tomorrow.

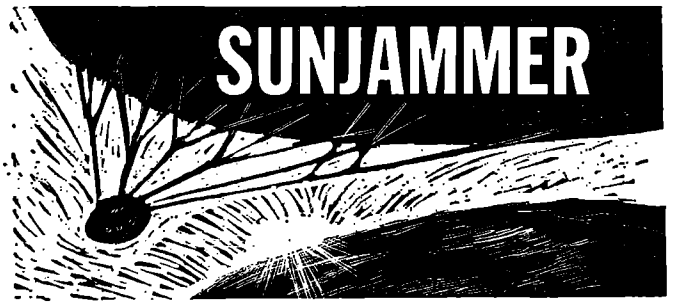
We have collected what we believe to be the best of the crop published during the year ending December 31, 1965. And we also think that among these stories there are some really deft implications of where the world might be going, and what may be behind the scenes somewhere in this complex universe. At the same time, we think these are stories which will individually reward the reader for their own qualities as tales.

It will be noted that there is this time a lack of stories in translation. This is not for want of trying. We have read a good many tales sent to us from Europe—and some of them have had merit—but what they have lacked is the advanced sophistication now to be found in the American and British s-f magazines. This is not surprising, since the great bulk of science fiction has been concentrated in the English language press over the past decades. The writings of Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Italy and the Slavic world are still not as prolific and still reflect the lesser familiarity of the readers with the "standard" gimmicks of s-f—and hence they tend to concentrate on these and thereby not to reflect that additional sophistication now expected in the best modern science fiction. But the editors express their gratitude to the many friends abroad who have assisted us in surveying their markets, and we trust that they will continue their efforts in the years to come, so that we may bring to the U.S. audience those major s-f tales such as we have seen before and expect to see again from foreign publications.

Here, then, is our choice of the best for 1966—fifteen stories of tomorrow, displaying the wonder, the adventure and sometimes the absurdity of many possible realities.

—THE EDITORS

Just as the mystery field has a sub-genre called "police procedural fiction," so there is a type of story so integrally concerned with how the future will work *that it might be called "procedural science fiction"—and Arthur C. Clarke, with tales like* PRELUDE TO SPACE *and* A FALL OF MOONDUST, *has shown that he is the master of the form. He demonstrates it once again in this engrossing story of the ships that sail the solar wind.*



ARTHUR C. CLARKE

THE ENORMOUS DISC of sail strained at its rigging, already filled with the wind that blew between the worlds. In three minutes the race would begin, yet now John Merton felt more relaxed, more at peace, than at any time for the past year. Whatever happened when the Commodore gave the starting signal, whether *Diana* carried him to victory or defeat, he had achieved his ambition. After a lifetime spent in designing ships for others, now he would sail his own.

"T minus two minutes," said the cabin radio. "Please confirm your readiness."

One by one, the other skippers answered. Merton recognized all the voices—some tense, some calm—for they were

the voices of his friends and rivals. On the four inhabited worlds, there were scarcely twenty men who could sail a sun-yacht; and they were all here, on the starting-line or aboard the escort vessels, orbiting twenty-two thousand miles above the equator.

"Number One, *Gossamer*—ready to go."

"Number Two, *Santa Maria*—all O.K."

"Number Three, *Sunbeam*—O.K."

"Number Four, *Woomera*—all systems go."

Merton smiled at that last echo from the early, primitive days of astronautics. But it had become part of the tradition of space; and there were times when a man needed to evoke the shades of those who had gone before him to the stars.

"Number Five, *Lebedev*—we're ready."

"Number Six, *Arachne*—O.K."

Now it was his turn, at the end of the line; strange to think that the words he was speaking in this tiny cabin were being heard by at least five billion people.

"Number Seven, *Diana*—ready to start."

"One through Seven acknowledged," answered that impersonal voice from the judge's launch. "Now T minus one minute."

Merton scarcely heard it; for the last time, he was checking the tension in the rigging. The needles of all the dynamometers were steady; the immense sail was taut, its mirror surface sparkling and glittering gloriously in the sun.

To Merton, floating weightless at the periscope, it seemed to fill the sky. As well it might—for out there were fifty million square feet of sail, linked to his capsule by almost a hundred miles of rigging. All the canvas of all the tea-clippers that had once raced like clouds across the China seas, sewn into one gigantic sheet, could not match the single sail that *Diana* had spread beneath the sun. Yet it was little more substantial than a soap-bubble; that two square miles of aluminized plastic was only a few millionths of an inch thick.

"T minus ten seconds. All recording cameras *on*."

Something so huge, yet so frail, was hard for the mind to grasp. And it was harder still to realize that this fragile mirror

could tow him free of Earth, merely by the power of the sunlight it would trap.

". . . Five, Four, Three, Two, One, *cut!*"

Seven knife-blades sliced through the seven thin lines tethering the yachts to the motherships that had assembled and serviced them.

Until this moment, all had been circling Earth together in a rigidly held formation, but now the yachts would begin to disperse, like dandelion seeds drifting before the breeze. And the winner would be the one that first drifted past the Moon.

Aboard *Diana,* nothing seemed to be happening. But Merton knew better; though his body could feel no thrust, the instrument board told him that he was now accelerating at almost one thousandth of a gravity. For a rocket, that figure would have been ludicrous—but this was the first time any solar yacht had ever attained it. *Diana's* design was sound; the vast sail was living up to his calculations. At this rate, two circuits of the Earth would build up his speed to escape velocity—and then he could head out for the Moon, with the full force of the Sun behind him.

The full force of the Sun. He smiled wryly, remembering all his attempts to explain solar sailing to those lecture audiences back on Earth. That had been the only way he could raise money, in those early days. He might be Chief Designer of Cosmodyne Corporation, with a whole string of successful spaceships to his credit, but his firm had not been exactly enthusiastic about his hobby.

"Hold your hands out to the Sun," he'd said. "What do you feel? Heat, of course. But there's pressure as well—though you've never noticed it, because it's so tiny. Over the area of your hands, it only comes to about a millionth of an ounce.

"But out in space, even a pressure as small as that can be important—for it's acting all the time, hour after hour, day after day. Unlike rocket fuel, it's free and unlimited. If we want to, we can use it; we can build sails to catch the radiation blowing from the Sun."

At that point, he would pull out a few square yards of

sail material and toss it toward the audience. The silvery film would coil and twist like smoke, then drift slowly to the ceiling in the hot-air currents.

"You can see how light it is," he'd continue. "A square mile weighs only a ton, and can collect five pounds of radiation pressure. So it will start moving—and we can let it tow us along, if we attach rigging to it.

"Of course, its acceleration will be tiny—about a thousandth of a g. That doesn't seem much, but let's see what it means.

"It means that in the first second, we'll move about a fifth of an inch. I suppose a healthy snail could do better than that. But after a minute, we've covered sixty feet, and will be doing just over a mile an hour. That's not bad, for something driven by pure sunlight! After an hour, we're forty miles from our starting point, and will be moving at eighty miles an hour. Please remember that in space there's no friction, so once you start anything moving, it will keep going forever. You'll be surprised when I tell you what our thousandth-of-a-g sailingboat will be doing at the end of a day's run. *Almost two thousand miles an hour!* If it starts from orbit—as it has to, of course—it can reach escape velocity in a couple of days. And all without burning a single drop of fuel!"

Well, he'd convinced them, and in the end he'd even convinced Cosmodyne. Over the last twenty years, a new sport had come into being. It had been called the sport of billionaires, and that was true—but it was beginning to pay for itself in terms of publicity and television coverage. The prestige of four continents and two worlds was riding on this race, and it had the biggest audience in history.

Diana had made a good start; time to take a look at the opposition. Moving very gently. Though there were shock absorbers between the control capsule and the delicate rigging, he was determined to run no risks. Merton stationed himself at the periscope.

There they were, looking like strange silver flowers planted in the dark fields of space. The nearest, South America's

Santa Maria, was only fifty miles away; it bore a resemblance to a boy's kite—but a kite more than a mile on its side. Farther away, the University of Astrograd's *Lebedev* looked like a Maltese cross; the sails that formed the four arms could apparently be tilted for steering purposes. In contrast, the Federation of Australasia's *Woomera* was a simple parachute, four miles in circumference. General Spacecraft's *Arachne,* as its name suggested, looked like a spider-web—and had been built on the same principles, by robot shuttles spiraling out from a central point. Eurospace Corporation's *Gossamer* was an identical design, on a slightly smaller scale. And the Republic of Mars' *Sunbeam* was a flat ring, with a half-mile-wide hole in the center, spinning slowly so that centrifugal force gave it stiffness. That was an old idea, but no one had ever made it work. Merton was fairly sure that the colonials would be in trouble when they started to turn.

That would not be for another six hours, when the yachts had moved along the first quarter of their slow and stately twenty-four hour orbit. Here at the beginning of the race, they were all heading directly away from the Sun—running, as it were, before the solar wind. One had to make the most of this lap, before the boats swung around to the other side of Earth and then started to head back into the Sun.

Time for the first check, Merton told himself, while he had no navigational worries. With the periscope, he made a careful examination of the sail, concentrating on the points where the rigging was attached to it. The shroud-lines—narrow bands of unsilvered plastic film—would have been completely invisible had they not been coated with fluorescent paint. Now they were taut lines of colored light, dwindling away for hundreds of yards toward that gigantic sail. Each had its own electric windlass, not much bigger than a game-fisherman's reel. The little windlasses were continually turning, playing lines in or out, as the autopilot kept the sail trimmed at the correct angle to the Sun.

The play of sunlight on the great flexible mirror was beautiful to watch. It was undulating in slow, stately oscillations, sending multiple images of the Sun marching across the heavens, until they faded away at the edges of the sail.

Such leisurely vibrations were to be expected in this vast and flimsy structure; they were usually quite harmless, but Merton watched them carefully. Sometimes they could build up to the catastrophic undulations known as the wriggles, which could tear a sail to pieces.

When he was satisfied that everything was shipshape, he swept the periscope around the sky, rechecking the positions of his rivals. It was as he had hoped: the weeding-out process had begun, as the less efficient boats fell astern. But the real test would come when they passed into the shadow of Earth; then maneuverability would count as much as speed.

It seemed a strange thing to do, now that the race had just started, but it might be a good idea to get some sleep. The two man crews on the other boats could take it in turns, but Merton had no one to relieve him. He must rely on his own physical resources—like that other solitary seaman Joshua Slocum, in his tiny *Spray*. The American skipper had sailed *Spray* single-handed around the world; he could never have dreamt that, two centuries later, a man would be sailing single-handed from Earth to Moon—inspired, at least partly, by his example.

Merton snapped the elastic bands of the cabin seat around his waist and legs, then placed the electrodes of the sleep-inducer on his forehead. He set the timer for three hours, and relaxed.

Very gently, hypnotically, the electronic pulses throbbed in the frontal lobes of his brain. Colored spirals of light expanded beneath his closed eyelids, widening outwards to infinity. Then—nothing. . . .

The brazen clamor of the alarm dragged him back from his dreamless sleep. He was instantly awake, his eyes scanning the instrument panel. Only two hours had passed—but above the accelerometer, a red light was flashing. Thrust was falling; *Diana* was losing power.

Merton's first thought was that something had happened to the sail; perhaps the antispin devices had failed, and the rigging had become twisted. Swiftly, he checked the meters

that showed the tension in the shroud-lines. Strange, on one side of the sail they were reading normally—but on the other, the pull was dropping slowly even as he watched.

In sudden understanding, Merton grabbed the periscope, switched to wide-angle vision, and started to scan the edge of the sail. Yes—there was the trouble, and it could have only one cause.

A huge, sharp-edged shadow had begun to slide across the gleaming silver of the sail. Darkness was falling upon *Diana*, as if a cloud had passed between her and the Sun. And in the dark, robbed of the rays that drove her, she would lose all thrust and drift helplessly through space.

But, of course, there were no clouds here, more than twenty thousand miles above Earth. If there was a shadow, it must be made by man.

Merton grinned as he swung the periscope toward the Sun, switching in the filters that would allow him to look full into its blazing face without being blinded.

"Maneuver 4a," he muttered to himself. "We'll see who can play best at *that* game."

It looked as if a giant planet was crossing the face of the Sun. A great black disc had bitten deep into its edge. Twenty miles astern, *Gossamer* was trying to arrange an artificial eclipse—specially for *Diana*'s benefit.

The maneuver was a perfectly legitimate one; back in the days of ocean racing, skippers had often tried to rob each other of the wind. With any luck, you could leave your rival becalmed, with his sails collapsing around him—and be well ahead before he could undo the damage.

Merton had no intention of being caught so easily. There was plenty of time to take evasive action; things happened very slowly, when you were running a solar sailingboat. It would be at least twenty minutes before *Gossamer* could slide completely across the face of the Sun, and leave him in darkness.

Diana's tiny computer—the size of a matchbox, but the equivalent of a thousand human mathematicians—considered the problem for a full second and then flashed the answer. He'd have to open control panels three and four, until

the sail had developed an extra twenty degrees of tilt; then the radiation pressure would blow him out of *Gossamer's* dangerous shadow, back into the full blast of the Sun. It was a pity to interfere with the autopilot, which had been carefully programmed to give the fastest possible run—but that, after all, was why he was here. This was what made solar yachting a sport, rather than a battle between computers.

Out went control lines one to six, slowly undulating like sleepy snakes as they momentarily lost their tension. Two miles away, the triangular panels began to open lazily, spilling sunlight through the sail. Yet, for a long time, nothing seemed to happen. It was hard to grow accustomed to this slow motion world, where it took minutes for the effects of any action to become visible to the eye. Then Merton saw that the sail was indeed tipping toward the Sun—and that *Gossamer's* shadow was sliding harmlessly away, its cone of darkness lost in the deeper night of space.

Long before the shadow had vanished, and the disc of the Sun had cleared again, he reversed the tilt and brought *Diana* back on course. Her new momentum would carry her clear of the danger; no need to overdo it, and upset his calculations by side-stepping too far. That was another rule that was hard to learn. The very moment you had started something happening in space, it was already time to think about stopping it.

He reset the alarm, ready for the next natural or man-made emergency; perhaps *Gossamer*, or one of the other contestants, would try the same trick again. Meanwhile, it was time to eat, though he did not feel particularly hungry. One used little physical energy in space, and it was easy to forget about food. Easy—and dangerous; for when an emergency arose, you might not have the reserves needed to deal with it.

He broke open the first of the meal packets, and inspected it without enthusiasm. The name on the label—SPACE-TASTIES—was enough to put him off. And he had grave doubts about the promise printed underneath: *Guaranteed Crumbless.* It had been said that crumbs were a greater danger to space vehicles than meteorites. They could drift

into the most unlikely places, causing short circuits, blocking vital jets and getting into instruments that were supposed to be hermetically sealed.

Still, the liverwurst went down pleasantly enough; so did the chocolate and the pineapple purée. The plastic coffee-bulb was warming on the electric heater when the outside world broke in upon his solitude, as the radio operator on the Commodore's launch routed a call to him.

"Dr. Merton? If you can spare the time, Jeremy Blair would like a few words with you." Blair was one of the more responsible news commentators, and Merton had been on his program many times. He could refuse to be interviewed, of course, but he liked Blair, and at the moment he could certainly not claim to be too busy. "I'll take it," he answered.

"Hullo, Dr. Merton," said the commentator immediately. "Glad you can spare a few minutes. And congratulations—you seem to be ahead of the field."

"Too early in the game to be sure of that," Merton answered cautiously.

"Tell me, doctor—why did you decide to sail *Diana* yourself? Just because it's never been done before?"

"Well, isn't that a very good reason? But it wasn't the only one, of course." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "You know how critically the performance of a sun-yacht depends on its mass. A second man, with all his supplies, would mean another five hundred pounds. That could easily be the difference between winning and losing."

"And you're quite certain that you can handle *Diana* alone?"

"Reasonably sure, thanks to the automatic controls I've designed. My main job is to supervise and make decisions."

"But—two square miles of sail! It just doesn't seem possible for one man to cope with all that!"

Merton laughed.

"Why not? Those two square miles produce a maximum pull of just ten pounds. I can exert more force with my little finger."

"Well, thank you, doctor. And good luck."

As the commentator signed off, Merton felt a little ashamed

of himself. For his answer had been only part of the truth; and he was sure that Blair was shrewd enough to know it.

There was just one reason why he was here, alone in space. For almost forty years he had worked with teams of hundreds or even thousands of men, helping to design the most complex vehicles that the world had ever seen. For the last twenty years he had led one of those teams, and watched his creations go soaring to the stars. (But there were failures that he could never forget, even though the fault had not been his.) He was famous, with a successful career behind him. Yet he had never done anything by himself; always he had been one of an army.

This was his very last chance of individual achievement, and he would share it with no one. There would be no more solar yachting for at least five years, as the period of the quiet Sun ended and the cycle of bad weather began, with radiation storms bursting through the Solar System. When it was safe again for these frail, unshielded craft to venture aloft, he would be too old. If, indeed, he was not too old already . . . .

He dropped the empty food containers into the waste disposal, and turned once more to the periscope. At first, he could find only five of the other yachts; there was no sign of *Woomera.* It took him several minutes to locate her—a dim, star-eclipsing phantom, neatly caught in the shadow of *Lebedev.* He could imagine the frantic efforts the Australasians were making to extricate themselves, and wondered how they had fallen into the trap. It suggested that *Lebedev* was unusually maneverable; she would bear watching, though she was too far away to menace *Diana* at the moment.

Now the Earth had almost vanished. It had waned to a narrow, brilliant bow of light that was moving steadily toward the Sun. Dimly outlined within that burning bow was the night side of the planet, with the phosphorescent gleams of great cities showing here and there through gaps in the clouds. The disc of darkness had already blanked out a huge section of the Milky Way; in a few minutes, it would start to encroach upon the Sun.

The light was fading. A purple, twilight hue—the glow of many sunsets, thousands of miles below—was falling across the sail, as *Diana* slipped silently into the shadow of Earth. The Sun plummeted below that invisible horizon. Within minutes, it was night.

Merton looked back along the orbit he had traced, now a quarter of the way around the world. One by one he saw the brilliant stars of the other yachts wink out, as they joined him in the brief night. It would be an hour before the Sun emerged from that enormous black shield, and through all that time they would be completely helpless, coasting without power.

He switched on the external spotlight, and started to search the now darkened sail with its beam. Already, the thousands of acres of film were beginning to wrinkle and become flaccid; the shroud-lines were slackening, and must be wound in lest they become entangled. But all this was expected; everything was going as planned.

Fifty miles astern, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were not so lucky. Merton learnt of their troubles when the radio burst into life on the emergency circuit.

"Number Two, Number Six—this is Control. You are on a collision course. Your orbits will intersect in sixty-five minutes! Do you require assistance?"

There was a long pause while the two skippers digested this bad news. Merton wondered who was to blame; perhaps one yacht had been trying to shadow the other, and had not completed the maneuver before they had both been caught in darkness. Now there was nothing that either could do; they were slowly but inexorably converging together, unable to change course by a fraction of a degree.

Yet, sixty-five minutes! That would just bring them out into sunlight again, as they emerged from the shadow of the Earth. They still had a slim chance, if their sails could snatch enough power to avoid a crash. There must be some frantic calculations going on, aboard *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*.

Arachne answered first; her reply was just what Merton had expected.

"Number Six calling Control. We don't need assistance, thank you. We'll work this out for ourselves."

I wonder, thought Merton. But at least it will be interesting to watch. The first real drama of the race was approaching—exactly above the line of midnight on the sleeping Earth.

For the next hour, Merton's own sail kept him too busy to worry about *Arachne* and *Santa Maria.* It was hard to keep a good watch on that fifty million square feet of dim plastic out there in the darkness, illuminated only by his narrow spotlight and the rays of the still distant Moon. From now on, for almost half his orbit around the Earth, he must keep the whole of this immense area edge-on to the Sun. During the next twelve or fourteen hours, the sail would be a useless encumbrance; for he would be heading into the Sun, and its rays could only drive him backwards along his orbit. It was a pity that he could not furl the sail completely, until he was ready to use it again. But no one had yet found a practical way of doing this.

Far below, there was the first hint of dawn along the edge of the Earth. In ten minutes, the Sun would emerge from its eclipse; the coasting yachts would come to life again as the blast of radiation struck their sails. That would be the moment of crisis for *Arachne* and *Santa Maria*—and, indeed for all of them.

Merton swung the periscope until he found the two dark shadows drifting against the stars. They were very close together—perhaps less than three miles apart. They might, he decided, just be able to make it. . . .

Dawn flashed like an explosion along the rim of Earth, as the Sun rose out of the Pacific. The sail and shroud-lines glowed a brief crimson, then gold, then blazed with the pure white light of day. The needles of the dynamometers began to lift from their zeros—but only just. *Diana* was still almost completely weightless, for with the sail pointing toward the Sun, her acceleration was now only a few millionths of a gravity.

But *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* were crowding on all the sail they could manage, in their desperate attempt to keep

apart. Now, while there was less than two miles between them, their glittering plastic clouds were unfurling and expanding with agonizing slowness, as they felt the first delicate push of the Sun's rays. Almost every TV screen on Earth would be mirroring this protracted drama; and even now, at this very last minute, it was impossible to tell what the outcome would be.

The two skippers were stubborn men. Either could have cut his sail, and fallen back to give the other a chance; but neither would do so. Too much prestige, too many millions, too many reputations, were at stake. And so, silently and softly as snowflakes falling on a winter night, *Arachne* and *Santa Maria* collided.

The square kite crawled almost imperceptibly into the circular spider's-web; the long ribbons of the shroud-lines twisted and tangled together with dreamlike slowness. Even aboard *Diana*, busy with his own rigging, Merton could scarcely tear his eye away from this silent, long drawn out disaster.

For more than ten minutes the billowing, shining clouds continued to merge into one inextricable mass. Then the crew capsules tore loose and went their separate ways, missing each other by hundreds of yards. With a flare of rockets, the safety launches hurried to pick them up.

That leaves five of us, thought Merton. He felt sorry for the skippers who had so thoroughly eliminated each other, only a few hours after the start of the race; but they were young men, and would have another chance.

Within minutes, the five had dropped to four. From the very beginning, Merton had had doubts about the slowly rotating *Sunbeam*. Now he saw them justified.

The Martian ship had failed to tack properly; her spin had given her too much stability. Her great ring of a sail was turning to face the Sun, instead of being edge-on to it. She was being blown back along her course at almost her maximum acceleration.

That was about the most maddening thing that could happen to a skipper—worse even than a collision, for he could blame only himself. But no one would feel much

sympathy for the frustrated colonials, as they dwindled slowly astern. They had made too many brash boasts before the race, and what had happened to them was poetic justice.

Yet it would not do to write off *Sunbeam* completely. With almost half a million miles still to go, she might still pull ahead. Indeed, if there were a few more casualties, she might be the only one to complete the race. It had happened before.

However, the next twelve hours were uneventful, as the Earth waxed in the sky from new to full. There was little to do while the fleet drifted around the unpowered half of its orbit, but Merton did not find the time hanging heavily on his hands. He caught a few hours' sleep, ate two meals, wrote up his log, and became involved in several more radio interviews. Sometimes, though rarely, he talked to the other skippers, exchanging greetings and friendly taunts. But most of the time he was content to float in weightless relaxation, beyond all the cares of Earth, happier than he had been for many years. He was—as far as any man could be in space—master of his own fate, sailing the ship upon which he had lavished so much skill, so much love, that she had become part of his very being.

The next casualty came when they were passing the line between Earth and Sun, and were just beginning the powered half of the orbit. Aboard *Diana,* Merton saw the great sail stiffen as it tilted to catch the rays that drove it. The acceleration began to climb up from the microgravities, though it would be hours yet before it would reach its maximum value.

It would never reach it for *Gossamer.* The moment when power came on again was always critical, and she failed to survive it.

Blair's radio commentary, which Merton had left running at low volume, alerted him with the news: "Hullo, *Gossamer* has the wriggles!" He hurried to the periscope, but at first could see nothing wrong with the great circular disc of *Gossamer's* sail. It was difficult to study it, as it was almost edge-on to him and so appeared as a thin ellipse; but pre-

sently he saw that it was twisting back and forth in slow, irresistible oscillations. Unless the crew could damp out these waves, by properly timed but gentle tugs on the shroudlines, the sail would tear itself to pieces.

They did their best, and after twenty minutes it seemed that they had succeeded. Then, somewhere near the center of the sail, the plastic film began to rip. It was slowly driven outward by the radiation pressure, like smoke coiling upward from a fire. Within a quarter of an hour, nothing was left but the delicate tracery of the radial spars that had supported the great web. Once again there was a flare of rockets, as a launch moved in to retrieve the *Gossamer*'s capsule and her dejected crew.

"Getting rather lonely up here, isn't it?" said a conversational voice over the ship-to-ship radio.

"Not for you, Dimitri," retorted Merton. "You've still got company back there at the end of the field. I'm the one who's lonely, up here in front." It was not an idle boast. By this time *Diana* was three hundred miles ahead of the next competitor, and his lead should increase still more rapidly in the hours to come.

Aboard *Lebedev*, Dimitri Markoff gave a good-natured chuckle. He did not sound, Merton thought, at all like a man who had resigned himself to defeat.

"Remember the legend of the tortoise and the hare," answered the Russian. "A lot can happen in the next quarter-million miles."

It happened much sooner than that, when they had completed their first orbit of Earth and were passing the starting line again—though thousands of miles higher, thanks to the extra energy the Sun's rays had given them. Merton had taken careful sights on the other yachts, and had fed the figures into the computer. The answer it gave for *Woomera* was so absurd that he immediately did a recheck.

There was no doubt of it—the Australasians were catching up at a completely fantastic rate. No solar yacht could possibly have such an acceleration, unless—

A swift look through the periscope gave the answer, *Woomera*'s rigging, pared back to the very minimum of

mass, had given way. It was her sail alone, still maintaining its shape, that was racing up behind him like a handkerchief blown before the wind. Two hours later it fluttered past, less than twenty miles away. But long before that, the Australasians had joined the growing crowd aboard the Commodore's launch.

So now it was a straight field between *Diana* and *Lebedev*—for though the Martians had not given up, they were a thousand miles astern and no longer counted as a serious threat. For that matter, it was hard to see what *Lebedev* could do to overtake *Diana's* lead. But all the way around the second lap—through eclipse again, and the long, slow drift against the Sun—Merton felt a growing unease.

He knew the Russian pilots and designers. They had been trying to win this race for twenty years and after all, it was only fair that they should, for had not Pyotr Nikolayevich Lebedev been the first man to detect the pressure of sunlight, back at the very beginning of the Twentieth Century? But they had never succeeded.

And they would never stop trying. Dimitri was up to something—and it would be spectacular.

Aboard the official launch, a thousand miles behind the racing yachts, Commodore van Stratten looked at the radiogram with angry dismay. It had traveled more than a hundred million miles, from the chain of solar observatories swinging high above the blazing surface of the Sun, and it brought the worst possible news.

The Commodore—his title, of course, was purely honorary; back on Earth he was Professor of Astrophysics at Harvard—had been half expecting it. Never before had the race been arranged so late in the season; there had been many delays, they had gambled and now it seemed they might all lose.

Deep beneath the surface of the Sun, enormous forces were gathering. At any moment, the energies of a million hydrogen bombs might burst forth in the awesome explosion known as a solar fire. Climbing at millions of miles an

hour, an invisible fireball many times the size of Earth would leap from the Sun, and head out across space.

The cloud of electrified gas would probably miss the Earth completely. But if it did not, it would arrive in just over a day. Spaceships could protect themselves, with their shielding and their powerful magnetic screen. But the lightly-built solar yachts, with their paper-thin walls, were defenseless against such a menace. The crews would have to be taken off, and the race abandoned.

John Merton still knew nothing of this as he brought *Diana* around the Earth for the second time. If all went well, this would be the last circuit, both for him and for the Russians. They had spiraled upward by thousands of miles, gaining energy from the Sun's rays. On this lap, they should escape from Earth completely—and head outward on the long run to the Moon. It was a straight race now. *Sunbeam*'s crew had finally withdrawn, exhausted, after battling valiantly with their spinning sail for more than a hundred thousand miles.

Merton did not feel tired; he had eaten and slept well, and *Diana* was behaving herself admirably. The autopilot, tensioning the rigging like a busy little spider, kept the great sail trimmed to the Sun more accurately than any human skipper. Though by this time the two square miles of plastic sheet must have been riddled by hundreds of micrometeorites, the pinhead-sized punctures had produced no falling off to thrust.

He had only two worries. The first was shroud-line number eight, which could no longer be adjusted properly. Without any warning, the reel had jammed; even after all these years of astronautical engineering, bearings sometimes seized up in vacuum. He could neither lengthen nor shorten the line, and would have to navigate as best he could with the others. Luckily, the most difficult maneuvers were over. From now on, *Diana* would have the Sun behind her as she sailed straight down the solar wind. And as the old-time sailors had often said, it was easy to handle a boat when the wind was blowing over your shoulder.

His other worry was *Lebedev*, still dogging his heels three hundred miles astern. The Russian yacht had shown remarkable maneuverability, thanks to the four great panels that could be tilted around the central sail. All her flip-overs as she rounded Earth had been carried out with superb precision; but to gain maneuverability she must have sacrificed speed. You could not have it both ways. In the long, straight haul ahead, Merton should be able to hold his own. Yet he could not be certain of victory until, three or four days from now. *Diana* went flashing past the far side of the Moon.

And then, in the fiftieth hour of the race, near the end of the second orbit around Earth, Markoff sprang his little surprise.

"Hullo, John," he said casually, over the ship-to-ship circuit. "I'd like you to watch this. It should be interesting."

Merton drew himself across to the periscope and turned up the magnification to the limit. There in the field of view, a most improbable sight against the background of the stars, was the glittering Maltese cross of *Lebedev*, very small but very clear. And then, as he watched, the four arms of the cross slowly detached themselves from the central square and went drifting away, with all their spars and rigging, into space.

Markoff had jettisoned all unnecessary mass, now that he was coming up to escape velocity and need no longer plod patiently around the Earth, gaining momentum on each circuit. From now on, *Lebedev* would be almost unsteerable—but that did not matter. All the tricky navigation lay behind her. It was as if an old-time yachtsman had deliberately thrown away his rudder and heavy keel—knowing that the rest of the race would be straight downwind over a calm sea.

"Congratulations, Dimitri," Merton radioed. "It's a neat trick. But it's not good enough—you can't catch up now."

"I've not finished yet," the Russian answered. "There's an old winter's tale in my country, about a sleigh being chased by wolves. To save himself, the driver has to throw off the passengers one by one. Do you see the analogy?"

Merton did, all too well. On this final straight lap, Dimi-

tri no longer needed his co-pilot. *Lebedev* could really be stripped down for action.

"Alexis won't be very happy about this," Merton replied. "Besides, it's against the rules."

"Alexis isn't happy, but I'm the captain. He'll just have to wait around for ten minutes until the Commodore picks him up. And the regulations say nothing about the size of the crew—you should know that."

Merton did not answer. He was too busy doing some hurried calculations, based on what he knew of *Lebedev*'s design. By the time he had finished, he knew that the race was still in doubt. *Lebedev* would be catching up with him at just about the time he hoped to pass the Moon.

But the outcome of the race was already being decided, ninety-two-million miles away.

On Solar Observatory Three, far inside the orbit of Mercury, the automatic instruments recorded the whole history of the flare. A hundred million square miles of the Sun's surface suddenly exploded in such blue-white fury that, by comparison, the rest of the disc paled to a dull glow. Out of that seething inferno, twisting and turning like a living creature in the magnetic fields of its own creation, soared the electrified plasma of the great flare. Ahead of it, moving at the speed of light, went the warning flash of ultra-violet and X-rays. That would reach Earth in eight minutes, and was relatively harmless. Not so the charged atoms that were following behind at their leisurely four million miles an hour—and which, in just over a day, would engulf *Diana, Lebedev,* and their accompanything little fleet in a cloud of lethal radiation.

The Commodore left his decision to the last possible minute. Even when the jet of plasma had been tracked past the orbit of Venus, there was a chance that it might miss the Earth. But when it was less than four hours away, and had already been picked up by the Moon-based radar network, he knew that there was no hope. All solar sailing was over for the next five or six years until the Sun was quiet again.

A great sigh of disappointment swept across the Solar

System. *Diana* and *Lebedev* were halfway between Earth and Moon, running neck and neck—and now no one would ever know which was the better boat. The enthusiasts would argue the result for years; history would merely record: Race canceled owing to solar storm.

When John Merton received the order, he felt a bitterness he had not known since childhood. Across the years, sharp and clear, came the memory of his tenth birthday. He had been promised an exact scale model of the famous spaceship *Morning Star*, and for weeks had been planning how he would assemble it, where he would hang it up in his bedroom. And then, at the last moment, his father had broken the news. "I'm sorry, John—it costs too much money. Maybe next year . . ."

Half a century and a successful lifetime later, he was a heartbroken boy again.

For a moment, he thought of disobeying the Commodore. Suppose he sailed on, ignoring the warning? Even if the race were abandoned, he could make a crossing to the Moon that would stand in the record books for generations.

But that would be worse than stupidity. It would be suicide—and a very unpleasant form of suicide. He had seen men die of radiation poisoning, when the magnetic shielding of their ships had failed in deep space. No—nothing was worth that . . .

He felt sorry for Dimitri Markoff as for himself; they had both deserved to win, and now victory would go to neither. No man could argue with the Sun in one of its rages, even though he might ride upon its beams to the edge of space.

Only fifty miles astern now, the Commodore's launch was drawing alongside *Lebedev*, preparing to take off her skipper. There went the silver sail, as Dimitri—with feelings that he would share—cut the rigging. The tiny capsule would be taken back to Earth, perhaps to be used again—but a sail was spread for one voyage only.

He could press the jettison button now, and save his rescuers a few minutes of time. But he could not do so. He wanted to stay aboard to the very end, on the little boat that

had been for so long a part of his dreams and his life. The great sail was spread now at right angles to the Sun, exerting its utmost thrust. Long ago it had torn him clear of Earth—and *Diana* was still gaining speed.

Then, out of nowhere, beyond all doubt or hesitation, he knew what must be done. For the last time, he sat down before the computer that had navigated him halfway to the Moon.

When he had finished, he packed the log and his few personal belongings. Clumsily—for he was out of practice, and it was not an easy job to do by oneself—he climbed into the emergency survival suit. He was just sealing the helmet when the Commodore's voice called over the radio: "We'll be alongside in five minutes. Captain. Please cut your sail so we won't foul it."

John Merton, first and last skipper of the sun-yacht *Diana*, hesitated for a moment. He looked for the last time around the tiny cabin, with its shining instruments and its neatly arranged controls, now all locked in their final positions. Then he said to the microphone: "I'm abandoning ship. Take your time to pick me up. *Diana* can look after herself."

There was no reply from the Commodore, and for that he was grateful. Professor van Stratten would have guessed what was happening—and would know that, in these final moments, he wished to be left alone.

He did not bother to exhaust the airlock, and the rush of escaping gas blew him gently out into space; the thrust he gave her then was his last gift to *Diana*. She dwindled away from him, sail glittering splendidly in the sunlight that would be hers for centuries to come. Two days from now she would flash past the Moon; but the Moon, like the Earth, could never catch her. Without his mass to slow her down, she would gain two thousand miles an hour in every day of sailing. In a month, she would be traveling faster than any ship that man had ever built.

As the Sun's rays weakened with distance, so her acceleration would fall. But even at the orbit of Mars, she would be gaining a thousand miles an hour in every day. Long before then, she would be moving too swiftly for the Sun itself

to hold her. Faster than any comet that had ever streaked in from the stars, she would be heading out into the abyss.

The glare of rockets, only a few miles away, caught Merton's eye. The launch was approaching to pick him up at thousands of times the acceleration that *Diana* could ever attain. But engines could burn for a few minutes only, before they exhausted their fuel—while *Diana* would still be gaining speed, driven outward by the Sun's eternal fires, for ages yet to come.

"Goodbye, little ship," said John Merton. "I wonder what eyes will see you next, how many thousand years from now?"

At last he felt at peace, as the blunt torpedo of the launch nosed up beside him. He would never win the race to the Moon; but his would be the first of all man's ships to set sail on the long journey to the stars.

Ron Goulart is a young man who works days as an advertising copywriter in San Francisco, and after-hours ducks into a phone booth and changes to his not very secret identity as the most deft satirist in the science fiction field. Witness the following story about the hospital of the future, which pokes fun at more than just automation.

CALLING DR. CLOCKWORK

RON GOULART

ARNOLD VESPER nudged the flower vending machine with the palm of his hand. The dusty green cabinet hunched once and a confetti of yellow rose petals snapped out of the slot and scattered on the parking lot paving. Vesper gave the machine a shy kick. His credit card whirred back out the money intake and he caught it. Turning away, Vesper pressed his lips angrily together for an instant and then hopped onto the conveyor walk that led to the visitor's entrance of the hospital.

He didn't even really know Mr. Keasby. So actually the flowers could be skipped. Vesper wished he wasn't so considerate of his father's wishes. His father lived in a Senior Citizens Sun Tower down in the Laguna Sector of Greater Los Angeles. When he'd heard his old friend Keasby was

laid up in an Urban Free Hospital he'd asked his son to pay a visit. So here Vesper was, thirty years old, still doing errands for his father. Well, the flowers could really be skipped.

Urban Free Hospital #14 was a pale yellow building. It gave the impression that its whole surface was vaguely sticky. Keasby should have taken a bigger chunk out of his salary for insurance and then he wouldn't have ended up in a UFH. Vesper hoped the old man wasn't full of stories about organizing the food scenters union back in 1990. His father was.

The android guard was one of the fat pink models. "Visitors hours end sharp at eight. Be sure you get out, don't make trouble for me so I have to come and get you out special. Is that clear?"

"Fine," said Vesper. "Where's Ward 77?"

"Go right, turn left. Corridor four, then elevator G. Up to three, left again, then right. Move along now."

Vesper went down the stationary corridor, turned left at its end. The corridors that appeared off this one all had letters and not numbers. Vesper continued, slowing his pace.

In front of him a portion of the floor slid away and a bell began ringing up above him. A wheeled stretcher, an automatic one, came up in front of Vesper. The patient on it was a heavyset middle aged man. He moaned.

The stretcher clicked and moved ahead. The ringing stopped. Vesper stayed still, giving the stretcher a chance to get going. But as he watched, the thing zagged into the corridor wall. A bell rang again as the patient bounced up and then snapped off the wheeled cot. Vesper ran to help.

His feet tangled in the covering sheet. The sheet was dirty gray and spotted. Vesper had to kneel to keep from falling. He almost touched the fallen patient, then noticed that there was blood on the man's chest now. Vesper's stomach seemed to grow out like the ripples from a rock dropped in a pool. He began to swallow and his ears gave him a severe pain. He tried to avoid the bloody man when he pitched over and passed out.

The doctor was a human. He had a slightly pointed head

with hair coming down in a strip onto his forehead like a plastic doormat. He had no chin. "Don't I know how you feel," he said to Vesper.

This seemed to be a ward. Five beds side by side, gray sticky walls. Vesper, undressed and wearing a pajama top someone else had already worn, was in one of the beds. The other four cots were empty. It looked like late night outside the one high window slot. "Is that man all right?"

The doctor pursed his lips. "Let's not talk about him. It gives me gooseflesh thinking about that. I'll tell you frankly that blood makes my stomach go whoopsy, too."

"Well, how am I then? I know I'm okay."

The doctor was sitting in a straight chair next to Vesper's bed. "My name is Dr. William F. Norgran, by the way. Why don't you give me all the info on your case?"

"I just fainted, didn't I?" Vesper elbowed up to a sitting position. "See, I came to visit a Mr. Keasby in Ward 77. He's a friend of my father. My father doesn't get around much. He lives in a Senior Citizens Sun Tower down in Laguna Sector."

Dr. Norgran shivered. "Old people give me the willies."

Vesper said, "I'd like to get my clothes back and go on."

"Let me level with you, Mr. . . . ah . . ."

"Vesper. Arnold Vesper."

"Mr. Vesper, whenever somebody is brought in here to Urban Free Hospital #14 he has to be checked out. This is a charity hospital. We have to be thorough. It's our obligation to the public."

"But I have Multimedical. I work in the Oleomargarine Division of one of our largest motivational research companies. I'm covered even if I were sick. I wouldn't have to come to an UFH."

"Yes," said Dr. Norgran, clearing his throat. "You've had some sort of seizure possibly. We can't be too careful in cases of this sort." He shifted in his chair. "Listen. Is that motivational research as much fun as it sounds? I'll tell you why I ask. I wanted to major in that at school but my folks wanted me to be a doctor. Here I am, stranded in a freeby hospital. During my internship at Hollywood Movie Hospital I kept

fainting and getting sick headaches. That helped stick me here."

"It's pretty tough getting into motivational research without a degree in it," said Vesper, looking around the room. There did not seem to be any lockers or closets. "Where exactly are my clothes?"

Dr. Norgran shrugged. "One of the android orderlies whisked them away someplace. Frankly, Mr. Vesper, it's hell being a human doctor here. You don't have a fighting chance. Particularly if you happen to feel queasy about blood. As you may know, the Head Physician at most Urban Frees is an android. And old Dr. Clockwork is a real toughie to work under."

"Dr. Clockwork?"

"We just call him that. The few humans here with the sense of humor enough. Because of the way he whirs and clanks sometimes. His official name is Medi Android A-12 #675 RHLW. An old devil, believe you me."

Vesper nodded. "As soon as you examine me I can go. You can understand, being that way yourself, that I just fainted because of the blood. Did that man die?"

Dr. Norgran gave a quick negative wave of his hand. "Let's not dwell on him. Mr. Vesper, you can really do me a favor. I'll confess something to you. I'm fairly sure it's only a temporary condition. The thing is, I've developed this absolute horror of touching people. Has nothing to do with you. It's my nag."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"I'd prefer to let Dr. Clockwork look at you. I get so really creepy crawly lately if I have to examine someone. Silly of me, isn't it?"

"Why don't you just let me go?"

The doctor shook his head. "No, no. You're already being processed. If you belong to Multimedical then the office andies have already got your MM card from your effects."

"Effects are what dead people have."

Dr. Norgran blushed. "Sorry. Don't let anything worry you, Mr. Vesper. The MM people and our staff are on top of this. You concentrate on getting a good night's sleep."

Vesper started to swing out of bed. "Night's sleep?"

"Dr. Clockwork spends his nights up in Isolation 3. He can't see you until morning."

"My job."

"The hospital will notify. Anyway, Mr. Vesper, you'll more than likely be out of here before Coffee I tomorrow. Do you have a family?"

"I'm divorced. I live in a rancho tower over on Gower in the Hollywood Sector. A two room suite."

"Lucky," said Dr. Norgran. He touched something under the bed and the bed pulled Vesper back and gave him a shot in the left buttock. "To help you sleep. See you tomorrow. And let's hope nobody else makes any unpleasantness tonight. I'm on duty till the wee hours."

"Wait," said Vesper, falling asleep.

The whirring awakened him. Vesper saw a wide-shouldered android in a frayed white coat watching him. The android had a square thrust-jawed face and a convincing head of backswept gray hair. Humor wrinkles had been built in at the eyes and mouth. "How are we feeling?" asked the android in a warm familiar voice. "I'm Medi/Android A/12 #675 RHLW. The young fellows around here call me Dr. Clockwork." He winked. "I'm not supposed to know about it." The winking continued and Dr. Clockwork made a ratcheting sound and his eyeball, the right one, popped out. "The things we old timers have to put up with," he sighed, and stooped, vanishing under the bed. "I've got it."

Vesper sat up. "Dr. Clockwork," he said as the android physician, two eyed again, rose up beside him. "I'm in perfect shape. I simply fainted last night while on the way to visit an old friend of my father's. A Mr. Keasby in Ward 77. I'd like my clothes. Then I'll leave."

"Open your mouth for a second. Fine." The android got a grip on Vesper's jaw. "Nothing is simple in the doctor business. That's one thing I learned as an old-fashioned suburban practitioner. Hmm."

"I'm probably late for work." The window indicated it was along into mid-morning.

"Work, work," said Dr. Clockwork. "We all of us rush and hurry. Well, now." He began tapping Vesper's chest. "Breathe through your mouth. I see, I see."

"My father was in the food scenting field for thirty-nine years before he retired," said Vesper, between inhalations. "As I understand it he and Mr. Keasby worked side by side for several decades."

"Roll over on your stomach."

Vesper obliged. "They don't seem to know where my clothes are."

"Nothing escapes my attention in UFH #14 here," said Dr. Clockwork. "When your clothes are needed old Dr. Clockwork will round them up." He ran a finger along Vesper's spine. "Much history of fainting in your family?"

"I don't know. I only fainted because I saw all that blood." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Did that man survive?"

"Well, well," said Dr. Clockwork, pinching Vesper's right buttock. "How often do you faint?"

"Not often."

"What's your idea of often, young fellow?"

"Three times in my life."

"I see." The android made a bellows sound and whirred in a different way for a moment. "For lunch today tell your nurse to give you gruel and some skim milk. Then I'll want to run tests on you down in Testing 4 this afternoon."

"But I have to leave."

"Not in your condition."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't forget the gruel. Relax now." The doctor started for the door. Halfway there he developed a severe limp. He swung out into the hall and in a moment there was a crash.

The bed wouldn't let Vesper up. He twisted around and spotted a switch marked *nurse*. He stretched and flicked it. This produced a humming in a speaker grid next to the switch. In a few minutes a female voice said, "Ward 23 is supposed to be empty. Who's in there?"

"Never mind. Dr. Clockwork's fallen over in the hall."

"He's always doing that. Now who are you?"

"I'm Arnold Vesper and I want to get out of here."

The grid grew silent and did not reply.

Dr. Rex Willow's lower lip made his orange colored cigar angle up toward his soft nose. He was human, apparently, and he was sitting on Vesper's bed when Vesper came to from an enforced afternoon nap. Willow explained that he was the doctor sent over by Multimedical insurance. After he'd asked Vesper what he thought was wrong with him Dr. Willow said, "Those kids over at your office really like you. Here you go." From under his suit coat he produced a small carton.

Vesper took it. "I got skipped over for lunch today. The nurse won't answer me on the com system. I hope this is food." He rested his hand on the box lid. "What I really hope is that you'll get me out of here."

"Time enough to worry later, Arnold."

The box contained get well cards. Two dozen identical ones. Each signed by a member of the oleomargarine team. "All the same," said Vesper, putting the box on his bedside table.

"Similar sentiments can take similar forms." Dr. Willow jumped off the bed. "Good talking to you, Arnold. Sign this punch form set for me and I'll skat. I have to hustle over to some of the big pay hospitals in the better sectors." He gave Vesper a small deck of miniaturized punch forms.

"How come you're here at all? I thought this was a free hospital."

"Multimedical goes everywhere. It's not a bad hospital if you're down and out, Arnold. Or have an emergency like yours." He pointed. "Sign on the red line. On the blue line on the forms where it's blue."

"My pen's in my clothes."

"Use mine."

Willow's pen said Multimedical on it and Get Well Quick. Vesper asked him, "Can't you arrange to get me out?"

"Not if your head physician is dead set against it."

"I don't even have a phone in here. Can't you at least get me one? I really should have a phone."

"This is a charity hospital, Arnold, not a resort. When you

are up and around you can hunt down a phone. I spotted a phone cubicle in the visitor's lobby. Sign."

Vesper signed. "Have you talked to my doctors here?"

"Well, of course. Dr. Norgran is a fine boy. Medi/Android A/12 #675 RHLW is the best android in any of the freeby hospitals."

"When he was in here this morning his glass eye fell out."

"A man's handicaps don't reflect his abilities."

"But he's a machine."

"If you don't finish signing soon I'll have to put more credit script in my landing strip meter, Arnold."

"Okay." He completed the forms except for the line about his mother's hobbies. Willow said that was optional anyway. As the insurance doctor left Vesper called, "How about telling them to feed me?"

"All in due time," said Willow, hurrying.

Toward evening two androids wheeled in a man named Skeeman and put him in a bed two down from Vesper. Vesper found out the name because the man, who was small and old and yellowish, kept telling the orderlies, "Call Dr. Wollter and say Milton Skeeman's had another one." The andies nodded, smiled and let the bed put Skeeman to sleep.

"When's dinner?" Vesper asked them.

"No mouth from you, freeloader," said one.

"Wise patients are the worst kind. Want to eat, eat all the time."

"And I want to get up and go to the bathroom."

"Your big expensive bed will take care of that."

They left and the bed did.

The lights came on at what Vesper guessed to be seven or eight that night. Something thunked against the door and then it swung in and Dr. Clockwork appeared. "How are we feeling?"

Vesper shook his head. "Why are you in that wheel chair?"

Dr. Clockwork rolled himself over to the bedside. "My

problems are too trivial to fuss about. Let's talk about you. Hmm. That gruel doesn't seem to have helped."

"Nobody has fed me today yet. I'm hungry. It gives me a headache and an upset stomach when I don't eat."

Dr. Clockwork reached up and smoothed back his thick gray hair. "Severe head pains, nausea. I thought so. My boy, let me explain something. Ever since the turn of the 21st Century the Cold War has intensified. It stands to reason, since you can't trust the Oriental mind. While no weapons show on the surface, you can be sure that the mailed glove hides a velvet fist."

"That's not quite the right metaphor."

"The point being that they have all along been using subtle weapons against us." Dr. Clockwork laughed. "You might not think that one of the most insidious weapons known to humanity has been found out by a humble doctor in a humble free hospital. Well now, many great martyrs have had humble backgrounds. There have even been a happy few android martyrs. I may not be human but I love this old country of ours and I do my best to fight her enemies at home and abroad. That's how I came to discover Contagium DDW."

"What is that all about?"

"Contagium DDW," said the android, his voice quivering. "An insidious germ that they send over to debilitate our folks. Up in Isolation 3 I've got two dozen poor victims. No one on the outside has guessed the existence of Contagium DDW. No one knows of my work. Someday they will. A statue perhaps. There'll be a statue someday perhaps. The first one erected to honor an android."

"But when do I get out of here, doctor?"

"Who can tell," said Dr. Clockwork. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that you've been hit by Contagium DDW."

Vesper felt his forehead again. The automatic nurse never told him what his temperature was, but he suspected he'd had a fever for several days. There was something wrong with the heating unit in his isolation room. The crystal in

the thermostat was frosted over, making it difficult to be sure that the room was sometimes much too warm.

As Vesper paced the small room he reached now and then into the pocket of his hospital gown and got a handkerchief to wipe the perspiration off his face. His chest kept perspiring, too. The service was better in Isolation 3 than it had been down in the ward. They fed him regularly and he was allowed an hour's stroll around the cubicle each day.

Something tapped on the view window of his door. Vesper turned to see the face of Dr. William F. Norgran looking in. The live doctor nodded and spoke into the com. "Excuse my not getting back to you sooner. Horrible diseases make me jittery."

Vesper was going to explain that he didn't really have any disease at all and had really only fainted because of the blood. He hesitated. He did feel odd, the fever and the sweating and all. Dr. Clockwork did seem to know about Contagium DDW, even though he never quite explained what it was to Vesper. "I can understand that," he said to Dr. Norgran.

"All things considered," said the doctor, "you're looking moderately well."

"Dr. Clockwork says I'm coming right along."

Dr. Norgrans's face paled. "Too much. I've seen too much of you. Sorry. I'll call again later." He bolted.

Behind him the bed beckoned Vesper back.

Vesper didn't take his walks any more and the bed didn't insist. He was fighting against Contagium DDW but it was making him increasingly tired. It didn't help his condition that the room forgot to feed him now and then or that the heat unit would act up in the quiet hours of the night, suddenly roasting or freezing him awake. Vesper took his pulse, the way he'd seen Dr. Clockwork do it.

The office gang had stopped sending get well cards. So far as he could remember, his union guaranteed him his job back. He was also supposed to be getting $52/day insurance money. Dr. Rex Willow never came, wasn't allowed to, up

to Isolation 3. $52/day was certainly the figure that Vesper remembered from his insurance brochure.

"It's taking its toll," said Dr. Clockwork, wheeling himself into the room. "Buck up, lad."

"I'm feeling pretty good."

Dr. Clockwork rolled nearer. "Hmm. The symptoms are spreading. It's insidious. Still, I vow that someday there will be Contagium DDW sanitariums across the land, perhaps an island colony. I wonder if there can be an android saint. No matter. The thought would be in the hearts and minds of people. No official sanction need be. Let me see your tongue."

"Ah," said Vesper, too fatigued to rise up to a sitting position.

"Yes, yes," said the android doctor.

"Something?"

"We're coming along. Don't fear."

"You know," said Vesper, "I wasn't too appreciative of you at first, doctor. Now I'm feeling I owe you a lot. For diagnosing this thing and helping me."

"Let's give you a shot," said the doctor. "Roll over."

"I really think I'm coming to trust you, doctor."

"Yes, they may call me Dr. Clockwork behind my back, but I'm to be trusted." As he made the injection the android began to whir in a new way. "I'm to be trusted."

"I think so now," said Vesper.

"I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted. I'm to be trusted."

Vesper fell asleep before Dr. Clockwork finished speaking.

The s-f field has been fortunate in attracting a number of excellent new writers in recent years, and among the very best of these is Larry Niven, a young Californian whose ability to combine imagination, solid science and a compelling story is more than ably demonstrated here.

LARRY NIVEN

I COULD FEEL the heat hovering outside. In the cabin it was bright and dry and cool, almost too cool, like a modern office building in the dead of summer. Beyond the two small windows it was as black as it ever gets in the solar system, and hot enough to melt lead, at a pressure equivalent to three hundred feet beneath the ocean.

"There goes a fish," I said, just to break the monotony.

"So how's it cooked?"

"Can't tell. It seems to be leaving a trail of breadcrumbs. Fried? Imagine that, Eric! A fried jellyfish."

Eric sighed noisily. "Do I have to?"

"You have to. Only way you'll see anything worthwhile in this—this—" Soup? Fog? Boiling maple syrup?

"Searing black calm."

"Right."

"Someone dreamed up that phrase when I was a kid, just after the news of the Mariner II probe. An eternal searing black calm, hot as a kiln, under an atomosphere thick enough to keep any light or any breath of wind from ever reaching the surface."

I shivered. "What's the outside temperature now?"

"You'd rather not know. You've always had too much imagination, Howie."

"I can take it, Doc."

"Six hundred and twelve degrees."

"I can't take it, Doc!"

This was Venus, planet of Love, favorite of the science fiction writers of three decades ago. Our ship hung below the Earth-to-Venus hydrogen fuel tank, twenty miles up and all but motionless in the syrupy air. The tank, nearly empty now, made an excellent blimp. It would keep us aloft as long as the internal pressure matched the external. That was Eric's job, to regulate the tank's pressure by regulating the temperature of the hydrogen gas. We had collected air samples after each ten mile drop from three hundred miles on down, and temperature readings for shorter intervals, and we had dropped the small probe. The data we had gotten from the surface merely confirmed in detail our previous knowledge of the hottest world in the solar system.

"Temperature just went up to six-thirteen," said Eric. "Look, are you through bitching?"

"For the moment."

"Good. Strap down. We're taking off."

"Oh frabjous day!" I started untangling the crash webbing over my couch.

"We've done everything we came to do. Haven't we?"

"Am I arguing? Look, I'm strapped down."

"Yeah."

I knew why he was reluctant to leave. I felt a touch of it myself. We'd spent four months getting to Venus in order to spend a week circling her and less than two days in her upper atmosphere, and it seemed a terrible waste of time.

But he was taking too long. "What's the trouble, Eric?"

"You'd rather not know."

He meant it. His voice was a mechanical, inhuman monotone; he wasn't making the extra effort to get human expression out of his "prosthetic" vocal apparatus. Only a severe shock would affect him that way.

"I can take it," I said.

"Okay. I can't feel anything in the ramjet controls. Feels like I've just had a spinal anaesthetic."

The cold in the cabin drained into me, all of it. "See if you can send motor impulses the other way. You could run the rams by guess-and-hope even if you can't feel them."

"Okay." One split second later: "They don't. Nothing happens. Good thinking, though."

I tried to think of something to say while I untied myself from the couch. What came out was, "It's been a pleasure knowing you, Eric. I've liked being half of this team, and I still do."

"Get maudlin later. Right now, start checking my attachments. Carefully."

I swallowed my comments and went to open the access door in the cabin's forward wall. The floor swayed ever so gently beneath my feet.

Beyond the four foot square access door was Eric. Eric's central nervous system, with the brain perched at the top and the spinal cord coiled in a loose spiral to fit more compactly into the transparent glass-and-sponge-plastic housing. Hundreds of wires from all over the ship led to the glass walls, where they were joined to selected nerves which spread like an electrical network from the central coil of nervous tissue and fatty protective membrane.

Space leaves no cripples; and don't call Eric a cripple, because he doesn't like it. In a way he's the ideal spaceman. His life support system weighs only half what mine does, and takes up a twelfth as much room. But his other prosthetic aids take up most of the ship. The ramjets were hooked into the last pair of nerve trunks, the nerves which once moved his legs, and dozens of finer nerves in those trunks sensed and regulated fuel feed, ram temperature, differential acceleration, intake apperture dilation, and spark pulse.

These connections were intact. I checked them four dif-

ferent ways without finding the slightest reason why they shouldn't be working.

"Test the others," said Eric.

It took a good two hours to check every trunk connection. They were all solid. The blood pump was chugging along, and the fluid was rich enough, which killed the idea that the ram nerves might have "gone to sleep" from lack of nutrients or oxygen. Since the lab is one of his prosthetic aids, I let Eric analyze his own blood sugar, hoping that the "liver" had goofed and was producing some other sugar compound. The conclusions were appalling. There was nothing wrong with Eric—inside the cabin.

"Eric, you're healthier than I am."

"I could tell. You look worried, son, and I don't blame you. Now you'll have to go outside."

"I know. Let's dig out the suit."

It was in the emergency tools locker, the Venus suit that was never supposed to be used. NASA had designed it for use at Venusian ground level. Then they had refused to okay the ship below twenty miles until they knew more about the planet. The suit was a segmented armor job. I had watched it being tested in the heat-and-pressure box at Cal Tech, and I knew that the joints stopped moving after five hours, and wouldn't start again until they had been cooled. Now I opened the locker and pulled the suit out by the shoulders and held it in front of me. It seemed to be staring back.

"You still can't feel anything in the ramjets?"

"Not a twinge."

I started to put on the suit, piece by piece like medieval armor. Then I thought of something else. "We're twenty miles up. Are you going to ask me to do a balancing act on the hull?"

"No! Wouldn't think of it. We'll just have to go down."

The lift from the blimp tank was supposed to be constant until takeoff. When the time came Eric could get extra lift by heating the hydrogen to higher pressure, then cracking a valve to let the excess out. Of course, he'd have to be very careful that the pressure was higher in the tank, or we'd get

Venusian air coming in, and the ship would fall instead of rising. Naturally, that would be disastrous.

So Eric lowered the tank temperature and cracked the valve, and down we went.

"Of course, there's a catch," said Eric.

"I know."

"The ship stood the pressure twenty miles up. At ground level it'll be six times that."

"I know."

We fell fast, with the cabin tilted forward by the drag on our tailfins. The temperature rose gradually. The pressure went up fast. I sat at the window and saw nothing, nothing but black, but I sat there anyway and waited for the window to crack. NASA had refused to okay the ship below twenty miles . . . .

Eric said, "The blimp tank's okay, and so's the ship, I think. But will the cabin stand up to it?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Ten miles."

Five hundred miles above us, unreachable, was the atomic ion engine that was to take us home. We couldn't get to it on the chemical rocket alone. The rocket was for use after the air became too thin for the ramjets.

"Four miles. Have to crack the valve again."

The ship dropped.

"I can see ground," said Eric.

I couldn't. Eric caught me straining my eyes and said, "Forget it. I'm using deep infrared, and getting no detail."

"No vast, misty swamps with weird, terrifying monsters and man-eating plants?"

"All I see is hot, bare dirt."

But we were almost down, and there were no cracks in the cabin wall. My neck and shoulder muscles loosened. I turned away from the window. Hours had passed while we dropped through the poisoned, thickening air. I already had most of my suit on. Now I screwed on my helmet and three-finger gauntlets.

"Strap down," said Eric. I did.

We bumped gently. The ship tilted a little, swayed back,

bumped again. And again, with my teeth rattling and my armor-plated body rolling against the crash webbing. "Damn," Eric muttered. I heard the hiss from above. Eric said, "I don't know how we'll get back up."

Neither did I. The ship bumped hard and stayed down, and I got up and went to the airlock.

"Good luck," said Eric. "Don't stay out too long." I waved at his cabin camera. The outside temperature was seven hundred and thirty.

The outer door opened. My suit refrigerating unit set up a complaining whine. With an empty bucket in each hand, and with my headlamp blazing a way through the black murk, I stepped out onto the right wing.

My suit creaked and settled under the pressure, and I stood on the wing and waited for it to stop. It was almost like being under water. My headlamp beam went out thick enough to be solid, penetrating no more than a hundred feet. The air couldn't have been that opaque, no matter how dense. It must have been full of dust, or tiny droplets of some fluid.

The wing ran back like a knife-edged running board, widening toward the tail until it spread into a tailfin. The two tailfins met back of the fuselage. At the tailfin tip was the ram, a big sculptured cylinder with an atomic engine inside. It wouldn't be hot because it hadn't been used yet, but I had my counter anyway.

I fastened a line to the wing and slid to the ground. As long as we were *here* . . . The ground turned out to be a dry, reddish dirt, crumbly, and so porous that it was almost spongy. Lava etched by chemicals? Almost anything would be corrosive at this pressure and temperature. I scooped one pailful from the surface and another from underneath the first, then climbed up the line and left the buckets on the wing.

The wing was terribly slippery. I had to wear magnetic sandals to stay on. I walked up and back along the two hundred foot length of the ship, making a casual inspection. Neither wing nor fuselage showed damage. Why not? If a

meteor or something had cut Eric's contact with his sensors in the rams, there should have been evidence of a break in the surface.

Then, almost suddenly, I realized that there was an alternative.

It was too vague a suspicion to put into words yet, and I still had to finish the inspection. Telling Eric would be very difficult if I was right.

Four inspection panels were set into the wing, well protected from the reëntry heat. One was halfway back on the fuselage, below the lower edge of the blimp tank, which was molded to the fuselage in such a way that from the front the ship looked like a dolphin. Two more were in the trailing edge of the tailfin, and the fourth was in the ram itself. All opened, with powered screwdriver on recessed screws, on junctions of the ship's electrical system.

There was nothing out of place under any of the panels. By making and breaking contacts and getting Eric's reactions, I found that his sensation ended somewhere between the second and third inspection panels. It was the same story on the left wing. No external damage, nothing wrong at the junctions. I climbed back to ground and walked slowly beneath the length of each wing, my headlamp tilted up. No damage underneath.

I collected my buckets and went back inside.

"A bone to pick?" Eric was puzzled. "Isn't this a strange time to start an argument? Save it for space. We'll have four months with nothing else to do."

"This can't wait. First of all, did you notice anything I didn't?" He'd been watching everything I saw and did through the peeper in my helmet.

"No. I'd have yelled."

"Okay. Now get this.

"The break in your circuits isn't inside, because you get sensation up to the second wing inspection panels. It isn't outside, because there's no evidence of damage, not even corrosion spots. That leaves only one place for the flaw."

"Go on."

"We also have the puzzle of why you're paralyzed in both rams. Why should they both go wrong at the same time? There's only one place in the ship where the circuits join."

"What? Oh, yes, I see. They join through me."

"Now let's assume for the moment that you're the piece with the flaw in it. You're not a piece of machinery, Eric. If something's wrong with you it isn't medical. Thot was the first thing we covered. But it could be psychological."

"It's nice to know you think I'm human. So I've slipped a cam, have I?"

"Slightly. I think you've got a case of what used to be called trigger anesthesia. A soldier who kills too often sometimes finds that his right index finger or even his whole hand has gone numb, as if it were no longer a part of him. Your comment about not being a machine is important, Eric. I think that's the whole problem. You've never really believed that any part of the ship is a part of *you*. That's intelligent, because it's true. Every time the ship is redesigned you get a new set of parts, and it's right to avoid thinking of a change of model as a series of amputations." I'd been rehearsing this speech, trying to put it so that Eric would have no choice but to believe me. Now I know that it must have sounded phoney. "But now you've gone too far. Subconsciously you've stopped believing that the rams can *feel* like a part of you, which they were designed to do. So you've persuaded yourself that you don't feel anything."

With my prepared speech done, and nothing left to say, I stopped talking and waited for the explosion.

"You make good sense," said Eric.

I was staggered. "You agree?"

"I didn't say that. You spin an elegant theory, but I want time to think about it. What do we do if it's true?"

"Why . . . I don't know. You'll just have to cure yourself."

"Okay. Now here's *my* idea. I propose that you thought up this theory to relieve yourself of a responsibility for getting us home alive. It puts the whole problem in my lap, metaphorically speaking."

"Oh, for—"

"Shut up. I haven't said you're wrong. That would be an ad hominem argument. We need time to think about this."

It was lights-out, four hours later, before Eric would return to the subject.

"Howie, do me a favor. Assume for awhile that something mechanical is causing all our trouble. I'll assume it's psychosomatic."

"Seems reasonable."

"It is reasonable. What can you do if I've gone psychosomatic? What can I do if it's mechanical? I can't go around inspecting myself. We'd each better stick to what we know."

"It's a deal." I turned him off for the night and went to bed.

But not to sleep.

With the lights off it was just like outside. I turned them back on. It wouldn't wake Eric. Eric never sleeps normally, since his blood doesn't accumulate fatigue poisons, and he'd go mad from being awake all the time if he didn't have a Russian sleep inducer plate near his cortex. The ship could implode without waking Eric when his sleep inducer's on. But I felt foolish being afraid of the dark.

While the dark stayed outside it was all right.

But it wouldn't stay there. It had invaded my partner's mind. Because his chemical checks guard him against chemical insanities like schizophrenia, we'd assumed he was permanently sane. But how could any prosthetic device protect him from his own imagination, his own misplaced common sense?

I couldn't keep my bargain. I knew I was right. But what could I do about it?

Hindsight is wonderful. I could see exactly what our mistake had been, Eric's and mine and the hundreds of men who had built his life support after the crash. There was nothing left of Eric then except the intact central nervous system, and no glands except the pituitary. "We'll regulate his blood composition," they said, "and he'll always be cool, calm and collected. No panic reactions from Eric!"

I know a girl whose father had an accident when he was

forty-five or so. He was out with his brother, the girl's uncle, on a fishing trip. They were blind drunk when they started home, and the guy was riding on the hood while the brother drove. Then the brother made a sudden stop. Our hero left two important glands on the hood ornament.

The only change in his sex life was that his wife stopped worrying about late pregnancy. His *habits* were developed.

Eric doesn't need adrenal glands to be afraid of death. His emotional patterns were fixed long before the day he tried to land a moonship without radar. He'd grab any excuse to believe that I'd fixed whatever was wrong with the ram connections.

But he was counting on me to do it.

The atmosphere leaned on the windows. Not wanting to, I reached out to touch the quartz with my fingertips. I couldn't feel the pressure. But it was there, inexorable as the tide smashing a rock into sand grains. How long would the cabin hold it back?

If some broken part were holding us here, how could I have missed finding it? Perhaps it had left no break in the surface of either wing. But how?

That was an angle.

Two cigarettes later I got up to get the sample buckets. They were empty, the alien dirt safely stored away. I filled them with water and put them in the cooler, set the cooler for 40° Absolute, then turned off the lights and went to bed.

The morning was blacker than the inside of a smoker's lungs. What Venus really needs, I decided, philosophizing on my back, is to lose ninety-nine percent of her air. That would give her a bit more than half as much air as Earth, which would lower the greenhouse effect enough to make the temperature livable. Drop Venus' gravity to near zero for a few weeks and the work would do itself.

The whole damn universe is waiting for us to discover anti-gravity.

"Morning," said Eric. "Thought of anything?"

"Yes." I rolled out of bed. "Now don't bug me with questions. I'll explain everything as I go."

"No breakfast?"

"Not yet."

Piece by piece, I put my suit on, just like one of King Arthur's gentlemen, and went for the buckets, only after the gauntlets were on. The ice, in the cold section, was in the chilly neighborhood of absolute zero. "This is two buckets of ordinary ice," I said, holding them up. "Now let me out."

"I should keep you here till you talk," Eric groaned. But the doors opened and I went out onto the wing. I started talking while I unscrewed the number two right panel.

"Eric, think a moment about the tests they run on a manned ship before they'll let a man walk into the lifesystem. They test every part separately and in conjunction with other parts. Yet if something isn't working, either it's damaged or it wasn't tested right. Right?"

"Reasonable." He wasn't giving away anything."

"Well, nothing caused any damage. Not only is there no break in the ship's skin, but no coincidence could have made both rams go haywire at the same time. So something wasn't tested right."

I had the panel off. The ice boiled gently where it touched the surfaces of the glass buckets. The blue ice cakes had cracked under their own internal pressure. I dumped one bucket into the maze of wiring and contacts and relays, and the ice shattered, giving me room to close the panel.

"So I thought of something last night, something that wasn't tested. Every part of the ship must have been in the heat-and-pressure box, exposed to artificial Venus conditions, but the ship as a whole, a unit, couldn't have been. It's too big." I'd circled around to the left wing and was opening the number three panel in the trailing edge. My remaining ice was half water and half small chips; I sloshed these in and fastened the panel. "What cut your circuits must have been the heat or the pressure or both. I can't help the pressure, but I'm cooling these relays with ice. Let me know which ram gets its sensation back first, and we'll know which inspection panel is the right one."

"Howie. Has it occurred to you what the cold water might do to those hot metals?"

"It could crack them. Then you'd lose all control over the ramjets, which is what's wrong right now."

"Uh. Your point, partner. But I still can't feel anything."

I went back to the airlock with my empty buckets swinging, wondering if they'd get hot enough to melt. They might have, but I wasn't out that long. I had my suit off and was refilling the buckets when Eric said, "I can feel the right ram."

"How extensive? Full control?"

"No. I can't feel the temperature. Oh, here it comes. We're all set, Howie."

My sigh of relief was sincere.

I put the buckets in the freezer again. We'd certainly want to take off with the relays cold. The water had been chilling for perhaps twenty minutes when Eric reported, "Sensation's going."

"What?"

"Sensation's going. No temperature, and I'm losing fuel feed control. It doesn't stay cold long enough."

"Ouch! Now what?"

"I hate to tell you. I'd almost rather let you figure it out for yourself."

I had. "We go as high as we can on the blimp tank, then I go out on the wing with a bucket of ice in each hand—"

We had to raise the blimp tank temperature to almost eight hundred degrees to get pressure, but from then on we went up in good shape. To sixteen miles. It took three hours.

"That's as high as we go," said Eric. "You ready?"

I went to get the ice. Eric could see me; he didn't need an answer. He opened the airlock for me.

Fear I might have felt, or panic, or determination or self sacrifice—but there was nothing. I went out feeling like a used zombie.

My magnets were on full. It felt like I was walking through shallow tar. The air was thick, though not as heavy as it had been down there. I followed my headlamp to the number two panel, opened it, poured ice in and threw the bucket

high and far. The ice was in one cake. I couldn't close the panel. I left it open and hurried around to the other wing. The second bucket was filled with exploded chips; I sloshed them in and locked the number two left panel and came back with both hands free. It still looked like limbo in all directions, except where the headlamp cut a tunnel through the darkness, and—my feet were getting hot. I closed the right panel on boiling water and sidled back along the hull into the airlock.

"Come in and strap down," said Eric. "Hurry!"

"Gotta get my suit off." My hands had started to shake from reaction. I couldn't work the clamps.

"No you don't. If we start right now we may get home. Leave the suit on and come in."

I did. As I pulled my webbing shut, the rams roared. The ship shuddered a little, then pushed forward as we dropped from under the blimp tank. Pressure mounted as the rams reached operating speed. Eric was giving it all he had. It would have been uncomfortable even without the metal suit around me. With the suit on it was torture. My couch was afire from the suit, but I couldn't get breath to say so. We were going almost straight up.

We had gone twenty minutes when the ship jerked like a galvanized frog. "Ram's out," Eric said calmly. "I'll use the other." Another lurch as we dropped the dead one. The ship flew on like a wounded penguin, but still accelerating.

One minute . . . two . . .

The other ram quit. It was as if we'd run into molasses. Eric blew off the ram and the pressure eased. I could talk.

"Eric."

"What?"

"Got any marshmallows?"

"*What?* Oh, I see. Is your suit tight?"

"Sure."

"Live with it. We'll flush the smoke out later. I'm going to coast above some of this stuff, but when I use the rocket it'll be savage. No mercy."

"Will we make it?"

"I think so. It'll be close."

The relief came first, icy cold. Then the anger. "No more inexplicable numbnesses?" I asked.

"No. Why?"

"If any come up you'll be sure and tell me, won't you?"

"Are you getting at something?"

"Skip it." I wasn't angry any more.

"I'll be damned if I do. You know perfectly well it was mechanical trouble, you fool. You fixed it yourself!"

"No. I convinced you I must have fixed it. You needed to believe the rams *should* be working again. I gave you a miracle cure, Eric. I just hope I don't have to keep dreaming up new placebos for you all the way home."

"You thought that, but you went out on the wing sixteen miles up?" Eric's machinery snorted. "You've got guts where you need brains, Shorty."

I didn't answer.

"Five thousand says the trouble was mechanical. We let the mechanics decide after we land."

"You're on."

"Here comes the rocket. Two, one—"

It came, pushing me down into my metal suit. Sooty flames licked past my ears, writing black on the green metal ceiling, but the rosy mist before my eyes was not fire.

The man with the thick glasses spread a diagram of the Venus ship and jabbed a stubby finger at the trailing edge of the wing. "Right around here," he said. "The pressure from outside compressed the wiring channel a little, just enough so there was no room for the wire to bend. It had to act as if it were rigid, see? Then, when the heat expanded the metal these contacts pushed past each other."

"I suppose it's the same design on both wings?"

He gave me a queer look. "Well, naturally."

I left my check for $5000 in a pile of Eric's mail and hopped a plane for Brasilia. How he found me I'll never know, but the telegram arrived this morning:

HOWIE COME HOME ALL IS FORGIVEN

DONOVANS BRAIN

I guess I'll have to.

Anthropology and archeology . . . the search for ancient civilizations . . . these have formed the background for many colorful s-f stories, from the tales of Atlantis to those of forgotten alien races in the galaxies. Here a new writer offers a different kind of search for a very different lost civilization.

APARTNESS

VERNOR VINGE

". . . BUT HE SAW A LIGHT! *On the coast.* Can't you understand what that means?" Diego Ribera y Rodrigues leaned across the tiny wooden desk to emphasize his point. His adversary sat in the shadows and avoided the weak glow of the whale oil lamp hung from the cabin's ceiling. During the momentary pause in the argument, Diego could hear the wind keening through the masts and rigging above them. He was suddenly, painfully conscious of the regular rolling of the deck and slow oscillations of the swinging lamp. But he continued to glare at the man opposite him, and waited for an answer. Finally Capitán Manuel Delgado tilted his head out of the shadows. He smiled unpleasantly. His narrow face and sharp black moustache made him look like what he was: a master of power—political, military, and personal.

"It means," Delgado answered, "people. So what?"

"That's right. People. On the Palmer Peninsula. The Antarctic Continent is inhabited. Why, finding humans in Europe couldn't be any more fantastic—"

"*Mire,* Señor Professor. I'm vaguely aware of the importance of what you say." There was that smile again. "But the *Vigilancia—*"

Diego tried again. "We simply have to land and investigate the light. Just consider the scientific importance of it all—" The anthropologist had said the wrong thing.

Delgado's cynical indifference dropped away and his young, experienced face became fierce. "Scientific import! If those slimy Australian friends of yours wanted to, they could give us all the scientific knowledge ever known. Instead they have their sympathizers"—he jabbed a finger at Ribera—"run all about the South World doing 'research' that's been done ten times as well more than two centuries ago. The pigs don't even use the knowledge for their own gain." This last was the greatest condemnation Delgado could offer.

Ribera had difficulty restraining a bitter reply, but one mistake this evening was more than enough. He could understand though not approve Delgado's bitterness against a nation which had been wise (or lucky) enough not to burn its libraries during the riots following the North World War. *The Australians have the knowledge, all right,* thought Ribera, *but they also have the wisdom to know that some fundamental changes must be made in human society before this knowledge can be reintroduced, or else we'll wind up with a South World War and no more human race.* This was a point Delgado and many others refused to accept. "But, really. Señor Capitán, we *are* doing original research. Ocean currents and populations change over the years. Our data are often quite different from those we know were gathered before. This light Juarez saw tonight is the strongest evidence of all that things are different." And for Diego Ribera, it was especially important. As an anthropologist he had had nothing to do during the voyage except be seasick. A thousand times during the trip he had asked himself why he had been the one to organize the ecologists and oceanographers and

get them on the ship; now he knew. If he could just convince this bigoted sailor . . .

Delgado appeared relaxed again. "And too, Señor Professor, you must remember that you 'scientists' are really superfluous on this expedition. You were lucky to get aboard at all."

That was true. El Presidente Imperial was even more hostile to scientists of the Melbourne School than Delgado was. Ribera didn't like to think of all the boot-licking and chicanery that had been necessary to get his people on the expedition. The anthropologist's reply to the other's last comment started out respectfully, almost humbly. "Yes, I know you are doing something truly important here." He paused. *To hell with it,* he thought, suddenly sick of his own ingratiating manner. *This fool won't listen to logic or flattery.* Ribera's tone changed. "Yeah, I know you are doing something *truly* important here. Somewhere up in Buenos Aires the Chief Astrologer to el Presidente Imperial looked at his crystal ball or whatever and said to Alfredo IV in sepulchral tones: 'Señor Presidente, the stars have spoken. All the secrets of joy and wealth lie on the floating Isle of Coney. Send your men southward to find it.' And so you, the *Vigilancia NdP,* and half the mental cripples in Sudamérica are wandering around the coast of Antarctica looking for Coney Island." Ribera ran out of breath and satire at the same time. He knew his long-caged temper had just ruined all his plans and perhaps put his life in danger.

Delgado's face seemed frozen. His eyes flickered over Ribera's shoulder and looked at a mirror strategically placed in the space between the door frame and the top of the cabin's door. Then he looked back at the anthropologist. "If I weren't such a reasonable man you would be orca meat before morning." Then he smiled, a sincere friendly grin. "Besides, you're right. Those fools in Buenos Aires aren't fit to rule a pigsty, much less the Sudamérican Empire. Alfredo I was a man, a superman. Before the war-diseases had died out, he had united an entire continent under one fist, a continent that no one had been able to unite with jet planes and automatic weapons. But his heirs, especially the

one that's in now, are superstitious tramps. . . . Frankly, that's why I can't land on the coast. The Imperial Astrologer, that fellow Jones y Urrutia, would claim when we returned to Buenos Aires that I had catered to your Australian sympathizers and el Presidente would believe him and I would probably end up with a one-way ticket to the Northern Hemisphere."

Ribera was silent for a second, trying to accept Delgado's sudden friendliness. Finally he ventured, "I would've thought you'd *like* the astrologers; you seem to dislike us scientists enough."

"You're using labels, Ribera. I feel nothing toward labels. It is success that wins my affection, and failure my hate. There may have been some time in the past when a group calling themselves astrologers could produce results. I don't know, and the matter doesn't interest me, *for I live in the present*. In our time the men working in the name of astrology are incapable of producing results, are conscious frauds. But don't be smug: your own people have produced damn few results. And if it should ever come that the astrologers are successful, I will take up their arts without hesitation and denounce you and your Scientific Method as superstition—for that is what it would be in the face of a more successful method."

The ultimate pragmatist, thought Ribera. *At least there is one form of persuasion that will work.* "I see what you mean, Señor Capitán. And as to success: there is one way that you could land with impunity. A lot can happen over the centuries." He continued half-slyly, "What was once a floating island might become grounded on the shore of the continent. If the astrologers could be convinced of the idea . . ." He let the sentence hang.

Delgado considered, but not for long. "Say! that is an idea. And I personally would like to find out what kind of creature world prefer this icebox over the rest of the South World.

"Very well, I'll try it. Now get out. I'm going to have to make this look like it's all the astrologers' idea, and you are

likely to puncture the illusion if you're around when I talk to them."

Ribera lurched from his chair, caught off balance by the swaying of the deck and the abruptness of his dismissal. Without a doubt, Delgado was the most unusual Sudamérican officer Ribera had ever met.

"*Muchisimas gracias,* Señor Capitán." He turned and walked unsteadily out the door, past the storm light by the entrance, and into the wind-filled darkness of the short Antarctic night.

The astrologers did indeed like the idea. At two-thirty in the morning (just after sunrise) the *Vigilancia, Nave del Presidente,* changed course and tacked toward the area of coast where the light had been. Before the sun had been up six hours, the landing boats were over the side and heading for the coast.

In his eagerness, Diego Ribera y Rodrigues had scrambled aboard the first boat to be launched, not noticing that the Imperial Astrologers had used their favored status on the expedition to commandeer the lead craft. It was a clear day, but the wind made the water choppy and frigid salt water was splattered over the men in the boat. The tiny vessel rose and fell, rose and fell with a monotony that promised to make Ribera sick.

"Ah, so you are finally taking an interest in our Quest," a reedy voice interrupted his thoughts. Ribera turned to face the speaker, and recognized one Juan Jones y Urrutia, Subassistant to the Chief Astrologer to el Presidente Imperial. No doubt the vapid young mystic actually believed the tales of Coney Island, or else he would have managed to stay up in Buenos Aires with the rest of the hedonists in Alfredo's court. Beside the astrologer sat Capitán Delgado. The good captain must have done some tremendous persuading, for Jones seemed to regard the whole idea of visiting the coast as his own conception.

Ribera endeavored to smile. "Why yes, uh—"

Jones pressed on. "Tell me; would you have ever sus-

pected life here, you who don't bother to consult the True Fundamentals?"

Ribera groaned. He noticed Delgado smiling at his discomfort. If the boat went through one more rise-fall, Ribera thought he'd scream; it did and he didn't.

"I guess we couldn't have guessed it, no." Ribera edged to the side of the boat, cursing himself for having been so eager to get on the first boat.

His eyes roamed the horizon—anything to get away from the vacuous, smug expression on Jones' face. The coast was gray, bleak, covered with large boulders. The breakers smashing into it seemed faintly yellow or red where they weren't white foam—probably coloring from the algae and diatoms in the water; the ecology boys would know.

"Smoke ahead!" The shout came thinly through the air from the second boat. Ribera squinted and examined the coast minutely. There! Barely recognizable as smoke, the wind-distorted haze rose from some point hidden by the low coastal hills. What if it turned out to be some sluggishly active volcano? That depressing thought had not occurred to him before. The geologists would have fun, but it would be a bust as far as he was concerned . . . . In any case, they would know which it was in a few minutes.

Capitán Delgado appraised the situation, then spoke several curt commands to the oarsmen. The crew's cadence shifted, and the boat turned ninety degrees to move parallel to the shore and breakers five hundred meters off. The trailing boats imitated the lead craft's maneuver.

Soon the coast bent sharply inward, revealing a long, narrow inlet. The night before, the *Vigilancia* must have been directly in line with the channel in order for Juarez to see the light. The three boats moved up the narrow channel. Soon the wind died. All that could be heard of it was a chill whistle as it tore at the hills which bordered the channel. The waves were much gentler now and the icy water no longer splashed into the boats, though the men's parkas were already caked with salt. Earlier the water had seemed faintly yellow; now it appeared orange and even red, especially farther up the inlet. The brilliant bacterial con-

tamination contrasted sharply with the dull hills, hills that bore no trace of vegetation. In the place of plant life, uniformly gray boulders of all sizes covered the landscape. Nowhere was there snow; that would come with the winter, still five months in the future. But to Ribera this "summer" landscape was many times harsher than the bleakest winter scene in Sudamérica. Red water, gray hills. The only things that seemed even faintly normal were the brilliant blue sky, and the sun which cast long shadows into the drowned valley; a sun that seemed always at the point of setting even though it had barely risen.

Ribera's attention wandered up the channel. He forgot the sea sickness, the bloody water, the dead land. He could see *them*; not an ambiguous glow in the night, but people! He could see their huts, apparently made of stone and hides, and partly dug into the ground. He could see what appeared to be leather-hulled boats or kayaks along with a larger, white boat (now what could that be?), lying on the ground before the little village. He could see people! Not the expressions on their faces nor the exact manner of their clothing, but he could see them and that was enough for the instant. Here was something truly new; something the long dead scholars of Oxford, Cambridge, and UCLA had never learned, could never have learned. Here was something that mankind was seeing for the first and not the second or third or fourth time around!

What brought these people here? Ribera asked himself. From the few books on polar cultures that he had read at the University of Melbourne, he knew that generally populations are forced into the polar regions by competing peoples. What were the forces behind this migration? Who were these people?

The boats swept swiftly forward on the quiet water. Soon Ribera felt the hull of his craft scrape bottom. He and Delgado jumped into the red water and helped the oarsmen drag the boat onto the beach. Ribera waited impatiently for the two other boats, which carried the scientists, to arrive. In the meantime, he concentrated his attention on the natives, trying to understand every detail of their lives at once.

None of the aborigines moved; none ran; none attacked. They stood where they had been when he had first seen them. They did not scowl or wave weapons, but Ribera was distinctly aware that they were not friendly. No smiles, no welcome grimness. They seemed a proud people. The adults were tall, their faces so grimy, tanned, and withered that the anthropologist could only guess at their race. From the set of their lips, he knew that most of them lacked teeth. The natives' children peeped around the legs of their mothers, women who seemed old enough to be great grandmothers. If they had been Sudaméricans, he would have estimated their average age as sixty or seventy, but he knew that it couldn't be more than twenty or twenty-five.

From the pattern of fatty tissues in their faces, Ribera thought he could detect evidence of cold adaption; maybe they were Eskimos, though it would have been physically impossible for that race to migrate from one pole to the other while the North World War raged. Both their parkas and the kayaks appeared to be made of seal hide. But the parkas were ill-designed and much bulkier than the Eskimo outfits he had seen in pictures. And the harpoons they held were much less ingenious than the designs he remembered. If these people were of the supposedly extinct Eskimo race, they were an extraordinarily primitive branch of it. Besides, they were much too hairy to be full-blooded Indians or Eskimos.

With half his mind, he noticed the astrologers glance at the village and dismiss it. They were after the Isle of Coney, not some smelly aborigines. Ribera smiled bitterly; he wondered what Jones' reaction would be if the astrologer ever learned that Coney had been an amusement park. Many legends had grown up after the North World War and the one about Coney Island was one of the weirdest. Jones led his men up one of the nearer hills, evidently to get a better view of the area. Capitán Delgado hastily dispatched twelve crewmen to accompany the mystics. The good sailor obviously recognized what a position he would be in if any of the astrologers were lost.

Ribera's mind returned to the puzzle: Where were these

people from? How had they gotten here? Perhaps that was the best angle on the problem: people don't just sprout from the ground. The pitiful kayaks—they weren't true kayaks; they didn't enclose the lower body of the user—could hardly transport a person ten kilometers over open water. What about that large white craft, further up the beach? It seemed a much sturdier vessel than the hide and bone "kayaks." He looked at it more closely—the white craft might even be made of fiberglass, a pre-War construction material. Maybe he should get a closer look at it.

A shout attracted Ribera's attention; he turned. The second landing craft, bearing the majority of the scientists, had grounded on the rocky beach. He ran down the beach to the men piling out of the boat, and gave them the gist of his conclusions. Having explained the situation, Ribera selected Enrique Cardona and Ari Juarez, both ecologists, to accompany him in a parley with the natives. The three men approached the largest group of natives, who watched them stonily. The Sudaméricans stopped several paces before the silent tribesmen. Ribera raised his hands in a gesture of peace. "My friends, may we look at your beautiful boat yonder? We will not harm it." There was no response, though Ribera thought he sensed a greater tenseness among the natives. He tried again, making the request in Portuguese, then in English. Cardona attempted the question in Zulunder, as did Juarez in broken French. Still no acknowledgement, but the harpoons seemed to quiver, and there was an all but imperceptible motion of hands toward bone knives.

"Well, to hell with them," Cardona snapped finally. "C'mon Diego, let's have a look at it." The short-tempered ecologist turned and began walking toward the mysterious white boat. This time there was no mistaking hostility. The harpoons were raised and the knives drawn.

"Wait, Enrique," Ribera said urgently. Cardona stopped. Ribera was sure that if the ecologist had taken one more step he would have been spitted. "Wait," Diego Ribera y Rodrigues continued. "We have plenty of time. Besides, it would be madness to push the issue." He indicated the natives' weapons.

Cardona noticed the weapons. "All right. We'll humor them for now." He seemed to regard the harpoons as an embarrassment rather than a threat. The three men retreated from the confrontation. Ribera noticed that Delgardo's men had their pistols half drawn. The expedition had narrowly avoided a blood-bath.

The scientists would have to content themselves with a peripheral inspection of the village. In one way this was more pleasant than direct examination, for the ground about the huts was littered with filth. In a century or so this area would have the beginnings of a soil. After ten minutes or so the adult males of the tribe resumed their work mending the kayaks. Apparently they were preparing for a seal hunting expedition; the area around the village had been hunted free of the seals and sea birds that populated most other parts of the coast.

If only we could communicate with them, thought Ribera. The aborigines themselves probably knew (at least by legend) what their origins were. As it was, Ribera had to investigate by the most indirect means. In his mind he summed up the facts he knew: the natives were of an indeterminate race; they were hairy, and yet they seemed to have some of the physiological cold weather adaptions of the extinct Eskimos. The natives were primitive in every physical sense. Their equipment and techniques were far inferior to the ingenious invention of the Eskimos. And the natives spoke no currently popular language. One other thing: the fire they kept alive at the center of the village was an impractical affair, and probably served a religious purpose only. Those were the facts; now, who the hell were these people? The problem was so puzzling that for the moment he forgot the dreamlike madness of the gray landscape and the "setting" noonday sun.

A half hour and more passed. The geologists were mildly ecstatic about the area, but for Ribera the situation was becoming increasingly exasperating. He didn't dare approach the villagers or the white boat, yet these were the things he most wanted to do. Perhaps this impatience made him especially sensitive, for he was the first of the scientists to

hear the clatter of rolling stones and the sound of voices over the shrill wind.

He turned and saw Jones and company descending a nearby hill at all but breakneck speed. One misstep and the entire group would have descended the hill on their backs rather than their feet. The rolling stones cast loose by their rush preceded them into the valley. The astrologers reached the bottom of the hill far outdistancing the sailors delegated to protect them, and continued running.

"Wonder what's trying to eat them," Ribera asked Juarez half-seriously.

As he plunged past Delgado, Jones shouted, "—think we may have found it, Capitán—something man-made rising from the sea." He pointed wildly toward the hill they had just descended.

The astrologers piled into a boat. Seeing that the mystics really intended to leave, Delgado dispatched fifteen men to help them with the craft, and an equal number to go along in another boat. In a couple of minutes, the two boats were well into the channel and rowing fast toward open water.

"What the hell was that about?" Ribera shouted to Capitán Delgado.

"You know as much as I. Señor Professor. Let's take a look. If we go for a little walk"—he nodded to the hill—"we can probably get within sight of the 'discovery' before Jones and the rest reach it by boat. You men stay here." Delgado turned his attention to the remaining crewmen. "If these primitives try to confiscate our boat, demonstrate your firearms to them—on them.

"The same goes for you scientists. As many men as possible are going to have to stay here to see that we don't lose that boat; it's a long, wet walk back to the *Vigilancia.* Let's go, Ribera. You can take a couple of your people if you want."

Ribera and Juarez set out with Delgado and three ship's officers. The men moved slowly up the slope, which was made treacherous by its loose covering of boulders. As they reached the crest of the hill the wind beat into them, tearing at their parkas. The terrain was less hilly but in the far

distance they could see the mountains that formed the backbone of the peninsula.

Delgado pointed. "If they saw something in the ocean, it must be in that direction. We saw the rest of the coast on our way in."

The six men started off in the indicated direction. The wind was against them and their progress was slow. Fifteen minutes later they crossed the top of a gentle hill, and reached the coast. Here the water was a clean bluish-green and the breakers smashing over the rocky beach could almost have been mistaken for Pacific waters sweeping into some bleak shore in the Province of Chile. Ribera looked over the waves. Two stark, black objects broke the smooth, silver line of the horizon. Their uncompromising angularity showed them to be artificial.

Delgado drew a pair of binoculars from his parks. Ribera noted with surprise that the binoculars bore the mark of the finest optical instruments extant: U.S. Naval war surplus. On some markets, the object would have brought a price comparable to that of the entire ship *Vigilancia.* Capitán Delgado raised the binoculars to his eyes and inspected the black forms in the ocean. Thirty seconds passed. *"Madre del Presidente!"* he swore softly but with feeling. He handed the binocs to Ribera. "Take a look, Señor Professor."

The anthropologist scanned the horizon, spotted the black shapes. Though winter sea ice had smashed their hulls and scuttled them in the shallow water, they were obviously ships—atomic or petroleum powered, pre-War ships. At the edge of his field of vision, he noticed two white objects bobbing in the water; they were the two landing boats from the *Vigilancia.* The boats disappeared every few seconds in the trough of a wave. They moved a little closer to the two half-sunken ships, then began to pull away. Ribera could imagine what had happened: Jones had seen that the hulks were no different from the relics of the Argentine navy sunk off Buenos Aires. The astrologer was probably fit to be tied.

Ribera inspected the wrecks minutely. One was half capsized and hidden behind the other. His gaze roamed along the bow of the nearer vessel. There were letters on that bow,

letters almost worn away by the action of ice and water upon the plastic hull of the ship.

"My God!" whispered Ribera. The letters spelled: *S—Hen—k—V—woe—d.* He didn't need to look at the other vessel to know that it had once been called *Nation.* Ribera dumbly handed the binoculars to Juarez.

The mystery was solved. He knew the pressures that had driven the natives here. "If the Zulunders ever hear about this . . ." Ribera's voice trailed off into silence.

"Yeah." Delgado replied. He understood what he had seen, and for the first time seemed somewhat subdued. "Well, let's get back. This land isn't fit for . . . it isn't fit."

The six men turned and started back. Though the ship's officers had had an opportunity to use the binoculars, they didn't seem to understand exactly what they had seen. And probably the astrologers didn't realize the significance of the discovery, either. That left three, Juarez, Ribera, and Delgado, who knew the secret of the natives' origin. If the news spread much further, disaster would result, Ribera was sure.

The wind was at their backs but it did not speed their progress. It took them almost a quarter-hour to reach the crest of the hill overlooking the village and the red water.

Below them, Ribera could see the adult male natives clustered in a tight group. Not ten feet away stood all the scientists, and the crewmen. Between the two groups was one of the Sudaméricans. Ribera squinted and saw that the man was Enrique Cardona. The ecologist was gesturing wildly, angrily.

"Oh, no!" Ribera sprinted down the hill, closely followed by Delgado and the rest. The anthropologist moved even faster than the astrologers had an hour before, and almost twice as fast as he would have thought humanly possible. The tiny avalanches started by his footfalls were slow compared to his speed. Even as he flew down the slope, Ribera felt himself detached, analytically examining the scene before him.

Cardona was shouting, as if to make the natives understand by sheer volume. Behind him the ecologists and biolo-

gists stood, impatient to inspect the village and the natives' boat. Before him stood a tall, withered native, who must have been all of forty years old. Even from a distance the natives' bearing revealed intense, suppressed anger. The native's parka was the most impractical of all those Ribera had seen; he could have sworn that it was a crude, seal-skin imitation of a double-breasted suit.

Almost screaming, Cardona cried, "God damn it, why can't we look at your boat?" Ribera put forth one last burst of speed, and shouted at Cardona to stop his provocation. It was too late. Just as the anthropologist arrived at the scene of the confrontation, the native in the strange parka drew himself to his full height, pointed to all the Sudaméricans, and screeched (as nearly as Ribera's Spanish-thinking mind could record), "*—in di nam niutrantsfals mos yulisterf—*"

The half-raised harpoons were thrown. Cardona went down instantly, transfixed by three of the weapons. Several other men were hit and felled. The natives drew their knives and ran forward, taking advantage of the confusion which the harpoons had created. A painfully loud *BAM* erupted beside Ribera's ear as Delgado fired his pistol, picking off the leader of the natives. The crewmen recovered from their shock, began firing at the aborigines. Ribera whipped his pistol from a pouch at his side and blasted into the swarm of primitives. Their single shot pistols emptied, the scientists and crew were reduced to knives. The next few seconds were total chaos. The knives rose and fell, gleaming more redly than the water in the cove. The anthropologist half stumbled over squirming bodies. The air was filled with hoarse shouts and sounds of straining men.

The groups were evenly matched and they were cutting each other to pieces. In some still calm part of his mind Ribera noticed the returning boats of the astrologers. He glimpsed the crewmen aiming their muskets, waiting for a clear shot at the primitives.

The turbulence of the fray whirled him about, out of the densest part of the fight. They had to disengage; another few minutes and there wouldn't be one man in ten left

standing on the beach. Ribera screamed this to Delgado. Miraculously the man heard him and agreed; retreat was the only sane thing to do. The Sudaméricans ran raggedly toward their boat, with the natives close behind. Sharp cracking sounds came from over the water. The crewmen in the other boats were taking advantage of the dispersion between pursuers and pursued. The Sudaméricans reached their boat and began pushing it into the water. Ribera and several others turned to face the natives. Musket fire had forced most of the primitives back, but a few still ran toward the shore, knives drawn. Ribera reached down and snatched a small stone from the ground. Using an almost forgotten skill of his "gentle" childhood, he cocked his arm and snapped the rock forward in a flat trajectory. It caught one of the natives dead between the eyes with a sharp *smack*. The man plunged forward, fell on his face, and lay still.

Ribera turned and ran into the shallow water after the boat. He was followed by the rest of the rearguard. Eager hands reached out from the boat to pull him aboard. A couple more feet and he would be safe.

The blow sent him spinning forward. As he fell, he saw with dumb horror the crimson harpoon which had emerged from his parka just below the right side pocket.

Why? Must we forever commit the same blunders over and over, and over again? Ribera didn't have time to wonder at this fleeting incongruous thought, before the redness closed about him.

A gentle breeze, carrying the happy sounds of distant parties, entered the large windows of the bungalow and caressed its interior. It was a cool night, late in summer. The first mild airs of fall made the darkness pleasant, inviting. The house was situated on the slight ridge which marked the old shore line of La Plata; the lawns and hedges outside fell gently away toward the general plain of the city. The faint though delicate light from the oil lamps of that city defined its rectangular array of streets, and showed its buildings uniformly one or two stories high. Further out, the city lights came to an abrupt end at the waterfront. But even

beyond that there were the moving, yellow lights of boats and ships navigating La Plata. Off to the extreme left burned the bright fires surrounding the Naval Enclosure, where the government labored on some secret weapon, possibly a steam-powered warship.

It was a peaceful scene, and a happy evening; preparations were almost complete. His desk was littered with the encouraging replies to his proposals. It had been hard work but a lot of fun at the same time. And Buenos Aires had been the ideal base of operations. Alfredo IV was touring the western provinces. To be more precise, el Presidente Imperial and his court were visiting the pleasure spots in Santiago (as if Alfredo had not built up enough talent in Buenos Aires itself). The Imperial Guard and the Secret Police clustered close by the monarch (Alfredo was more afraid of a court coup than anything else), so Buenos Aires was more relaxed than it had been in many years.

Yes, two months of hard work. Many important people had to be informed, and confidentially. But the replies had been almost uniformly enthusiastic, and it appeared that the project wasn't known to those who would destroy its goal; though of course the simple fact that so many people had to know increased the chances of disclosure. But that was a risk that had to be taken.

And, thought Diego Ribera, *it's been two months since the Battle of Bloody Cove.* (The name of the inlet had arisen almost spontaneously). He hoped that the tribe hadn't been scared away from that spot, or, infinitely worse, driven to the starvation point by the massacre. If that fool Enrique Cardona had only kept his mouth shut, both sides could have parted peacefully (if not amicably) and some good men would still be alive.

Ribera scratched his side thoughtfully. Another inch and he wouldn't have made it himself. If that harpoon had hit just a little further up. . . . Someone's quick thinking had added to his initial good luck. That someone had slashed the thick cord tied to the harpoon which had hit Ribera. If the separation had not been made, the cord would most likely have been pulled back and the harpoon's barb en-

gaged. Even as miraculous was the fact that he had survived the impalement and the poor medical conditions on board the *Vigilancia.* Physically, all the damage that remained was a pair of neat, circular scars. The whole affair was enough to give you religion, or, conversely, scare the hell out of you. . . .

And come next January he would be headed back, along with the secret expedition which he had been so energetically organizing. Nine months was a long time to wait, but they definitely couldn't make the trip this fall or winter, and they really did need time to gather just the right equipment.

Diego was taken from these thoughts by several dull thuds from the door. He got up and went to the entrance of the bungalow. (This small house in the plushiest section of the city was evidence of the encouragement he had already received from some very important people). Ribera had no idea who the visitor could be, but he had every expectation that the news brought would be good. He reached the door, and pulled it open.

"Mkambwe Lunama!"

The Zulunder stood framed in the doorway, his black face all but invisible against the night sky. The visitor was over two meters tall and weighed nearly one hundred kilos; he was the picture of a superman. But then, the Zulunder government made a special point of using the super-race type in its dealings with other nations. The procedure undoubtedly lost them some fine talent, but in Sudamérica the myth held strong that one Zulunder was worth three warriors of any other nationality.

After his first outburst, Ribera stood for a moment in horrified confusion. He knew Lunama vaguely as the Highman of Trueness—propaganda—at the Zulunder embassy in Buenos Aires. The Highman had made numerous attempts to ingratiate himself with the academic community of la Universidad de Buenos Aires. The efforts were probably aimed at recruiting sympathizers against that time when the disagreements between the Sudamérican Empire and the Reaches of Zulund erupted into open conflict.

Wildly hoping that the visit was merely an unlucky coin-

cidence, Ribera recovered himself. He attempted a disarming smile, and said, "Come on in, Mkambwe. Haven't seen you in a long time."

The Zulunder smiled, his white teeth making a dazzling contrast with the rest of his face. He stepped lightly into the room. His robes were woven of brilliant red, blue and green fibers, in defiance of the more somber hues of Sudamérican business suits. On his hip rested a Mavimbelamake 20 mm. *revolver*. The Zulunders had their own peculiar ideas about diplomatic protocol.

Mkambwe moved lithely across the room and settled in a chair. Ribera hurried over and sat down by his desk, trying unobtrusively to hide the letters that lay on it from the Zulunder's view. If the visitor saw and understood even one of those letters, the game would be over.

Ribera tried to appear relaxed. "Sorry I can't offer you a drink, Mkambwe, but the house is as dry as a desert." If the anthropologist got up, the Zulunder would almost certainly see the correspondence. Diego continued jovially, desperately trying to dredge up reminiscences. ("Remember that time your boys whited their faces and went down to la Casa Rosada Nueva and raised hell with the—").

Lunama grinned. "Frankly, old man, this visit is business." The Zulunder spoke with a dandyish, pseudo-Castilian accent, which he no doubt thought aristocratic.

"Oh," Ribera answered.

"I hear that you were on a little expedition to Palmer Peninsula this January."

"Yes," Ribera replied stonily. Perhaps there was still a chance; perhaps Lunama didn't know the whole truth. "And it was supposed to be a secret. If el Presidente Imperial found out that your government knew about it—"

"Come, come, Diego. That isn't the secret you are thinking of. I know that you found what happened to the *Hendrik Verwoerd* and the *Nation*."

"Oh," Ribera replied again. "How did you find out?" he asked dully.

"You talked to many people, Diego," he waved vaguely. "Surely you didn't think that every one of them would keep

your secret. And surely you didn't think you could keep something this important from us." He looked beyond the anthropologist and his tone changed. "For three hundred years we lived under the heels of those white devils. Then came the Retribution in the North and—"

What a quaint term the Zulunders use for the North World War, thought Ribera. It had been a war in which every trick of destruction—nuclear, biological, and chemical—had been used. The mere residues from the immolation of China had obliterated Indonesia and India. Mexico and América Central had disappeared with the United States and Canada. And North Africa had gone with Europe. The gentlest wisps from that biological and nuclear hell had caressed the Southern Hemisphere and nearly poisoned it. A few more megatons and a few more disease strains and the war would have gone unnamed, for there would have been no one to chronicle it. This was the Retribution in the North which Lunama so easily referred to.

"—and the devils no longer had the protection of their friends there. Then came the Sixty-Day struggle for Freedom."

There were both black devils and white devils in those sixty days—and saints of all colors, brave men struggling desperately to avert genocide. But the years of slavery were too many and the saints lost, not for the first time.

"At the beginning of the Rising we fought machine guns and jet fighters with rifles and knives," Lunama continued, almost self-hypnotized. "We died by the tens of thousands. But as the days passed *their* numbers were reduced, too. By the fiftieth day *we* had the machine guns, and *they* had the knives and rifles. We boxed the last of them up at Kapa and Durb," (he used the Zulunder terms for Capestown and Durban) "and drove them into the sea."

Literally, added Ribera to himself. *The last remnants of White Africa were physically pushed from the wharves and sunny beaches into the ocean.* The Zulunders had succeeded in exterminating the Whites, and thought they succeeded in obliterating the Afrikaner culture from the continent. Of course they had been wrong. The Afrikaners had left a last-

ing mark, obvious to any unbiased observer; the very name Zulunder, which the present Africans cherished fanatically, was in part a corruption of English.

"By the sixtieth day, we could say that not a single White lived on the continent. As far as we know, only one small group evaded vengeance. Some of the highest ranking Afrikaner officials, maybe even the Prime Minister, commandeered two luxury vessels, the *SR Hendrik Verwoerd* and the *Nation*. They left many hours before the final freedom drive on Kapa."

Five thousand desperate men, women and children crammed into two luxury ships. The vessels had raced across the South Atlantic, seeking refuge in Argentina. But the government of Argentina was having troubles of its own. Two light Argentine patrol boats badly damaged the *Nation* before the Afrikaners were convinced that Sudamérica didn't offer shelter.

The two ships had turned south, possibly in an attempt to round Tierra del Fuego and reach Australia. That was the last anyone had heard of them for more than two hundred years—till the *Vigilancia*'s exploration of the Palmer Peninsula.

Ribera knew that an appeal to sympathy wouldn't dissuade the Zulunder from ordering the destruction of the pitiful colony. He tried a different tack. "What you say is so true, Mkambwe. But please, please don't destroy these descendants of your enemies. The tribe on the Palmer Peninsula is the only polar culture left on Earth." Even as Ribera said the words, he realized how weak the argument was; it could only appeal to an anthropologist like himself.

The Zulunder seemed surprised, and with a visible effort shelved the terrible history of his continent. "Destroy them? My dear fellow, whyever would we do that? I just came here to ask if we might send several observers from the Ministry of Trueness along on your expedition. To report the matter more fully, you know. I think that Alfredo can probably be convinced, if the question is put persuasively enough to him.

"Destroy them?" He repeated the question. "Don't be

silly! They are *proof* of destruction. So they call their piece of ice and rock Nieutransvaal, do they?" He laughed. "And they even have a Prime Minister, a toothless old man who waves his harpoon at Sudaméricans." Apparently Lunama's informant had actually been on the spot. "And they are even more primitive than Eskimos. In short, they are savages living on seal blubber."

He no longer spoke with foppish joviality. His eyes flashed with an old, old hate, a hate that was pushing Zulund to greatness, and which might eventually push the world into another hemispheric war (unless the Australian social scientists came through with some desperately needed answers). The breeze in the room no longer seemed cool, gentle. It was cold and the wind was coming from the emptiness of death piled upon megadeath through the centuries of human misery.

"It will be a pleasure for us to see them enjoy their superiority." Lunama leaned forward even more intensely. "They finally have the apartness their kind always wanted. *Let them rot in it—*"

Clifford D. Simak has won both the International Fantasy Award (for CITY—*Ace Book* D-283) *and two Hugo Awards* (WAY STATION *and* THE BIG FRONT YARD). *His work is marked by a strong emphasis on human emotion and the impact of large forces on very ordinary people—as in this short, simple story of the past and the future.*

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

I

THE TWO CHILDREN came trudging down the lane in apple-canning time, when the first goldenrods were blooming and the wild asters large in bud. They looked, when she first saw them, out the kitchen window, like children who were coming home from school, for each of them was carrying a bag in which might have been their books. Like Charles and James, she thought, like Alice and Maggie—but the time when those four had trudged the lane on their daily trips to school was in the distant past. Now they had children of their own who made their way to school.

She turned back to the stove to stir the cooking apples,

for which the wide-mouthed jars stood waiting on the table, then once more looked out the kitchen window. The two of them were closer now and she could see that the boy was the older of the two—ten, perhaps, and the girl no more than eight.

They might be going past, she thought, although that did not seem too likely, for the lane led to this farm and to nowhere else.

They turned off the lane before they reached the barn and came sturdily trudging up the path that led to the house. There was no hesitation in them; they knew where they were going.

She stepped to the screen door of the kitchen as they came onto the porch and they stopped before the door and stood looking up at her.

The boy said, "You are our grandma. Papa said we were to say at once that you were our grandma."

"But that's not . . ." she said, and stopped. She had been about to say it was impossible, that she was not their grandma. And, looking down into the sober, childish faces, she was glad that she had not said the words.

"I am Ellen," said the girl in a piping voice.

"Why, that is strange," the woman said. "That is my name, too."

The boy said, "My name is Paul."

She pushed open the door for them and they came in, standing silently in the kitchen, looking all about them as if they'd never seen a kitchen.

"It's just like Papa said," said Ellen. "There's the stove and the churn and . . ."

The boy interrupted her. "Our name is Forbes," he said.

This time the woman couldn't stop herself. "Why, that's impossible," she said. "That is our name, too."

The boy nodded solemnly. "Yes, we knew it was."

"Perhaps," the woman said, "you'd like some milk and cookies."

"Cookies!" Ellen squealed, delighted.

"We don't want to be any trouble," said the boy. "Papa said we were to be no trouble."

"He said we should be good," piped Ellen.

"I am sure you will be," said the woman, "and you are no trouble."

In a little while, she thought, she'd get it straightened out.

She went to the stove and set the kettle with the cooking apples to one side, where they would simmer slowly.

"Sit down at the table," she said. "I'll get the milk and cookies."

She glanced at the clock, ticking on the shelf. Four o'clock, almost. In just a little while the men would come in from the fields. Jackson Forbes would know what to do about this; he had always known.

They climbed up on two chairs and sat there solemnly, staring all about them, at the ticking clock, at the wood stove with the fire glow showing through its draft, at the wood piled in the wood box, at the butter churn standing in the corner.

They set their bags on the floor beside them, and they were strange bags, she noticed. They were made of heavy cloth or canvas, but there were no drawstrings or no straps to fasten them. But they were closed, she saw, despite no straps or strings.

"Do you have some stamps?" asked Ellen.

"Stamps?" asked Mrs. Forbes.

"You must pay no attention to her," said Paul. "She should not have asked you. She asks everyone and Mama told her not to."

"But stamps?"

"She collects them. She goes around snitching letters that other people have. For the stamps on them, you know."

"Well, now," said Mrs. Forbes, "there may be some old letters. We'll look for them later on."

She went into the pantry and got the earthern jug of milk and filled a plate with cookies from the jar. When she came back they were sitting there sedately, waiting for the cookies.

"We are here just for a little while," said Paul. "Just a short vacation. Then our folks will come and get us and take us back again."

Ellen nodded her head vigorously. "That's what they told us when we went. When I was afraid to go."

"You were afraid to go?"

"Yes. It was all so strange."

"There was so little time," said Paul. "Almost none at all. We had to leave so fast."

"And where are you from?" asked Mrs. Forbes.

"Why," said the boy, "just a little ways from here. We walked just a little ways and of course we had the map. Papa gave it to us and he went over it carefully with us. . . ."

"You're sure your name is Forbes?"

Ellen bobbed her head. "Of course it is," she said.

"Strange," said Mrs. Forbes. And it was more than strange, for there were no other Forbeses in the neighborhood except her children and her grandchildren and these two, no matter what they said, were strangers.

They were busy with the milk and cookies and she went back to the stove and set the kettle with the apples back on the front again, stirring the cooking fruit with a wooden spoon.

"Where is Grandpa?" Ellen asked.

"Grandpa's in the field. He'll be coming in soon. Are you finished with your cookies?"

"All finished," said the girl.

"Then we'll have to set the table and get the supper cooking. Perhaps you'd like to help me."

Ellen hopped down off the chair. "I'll help," she said.

"And I," said Paul, "will carry in some wood. Papa said I should be helpful. He said I could carry in the wood and feed the chickens and hunt the eggs and . . ."

"Paul," said Mrs. Forbes, "it might help if you'd tell me what your father does."

"Papa," said the boy, "is a temporal engineer."

II

THE TWO hired men sat at the kitchen table with the checker

board between them. The two older people were in the living room.

"You never saw the likes of it," said Mrs. Forbes. "There was this piece of metal and you pulled it and it ran along another metal strip and the bag came open. And you pulled it the other way and the bag was closed."

"Something new," said Jackson Forbes. "There may be many new things we haven't heard about, back here in the sticks. There are inventors turning out all sorts of things."

"And the boy," she said, "has the same thing on his trousers. I picked them up from where he threw them on the floor when he went to bed and I folded them and put them on the chair. And I saw this strip of metal, the edges jagged-like. And the clothes they wear. That boy's trousers are cut off above his knees and the dress that the girl was wearing was so short. . . ."

"They talked of plains," mused Jaclson Forbes, "but not the plains we know. Something that is used, apparently for folks to travel in. And rockets—as if there were rockets every day and not just on the Fourth."

"We couldn't question them, of course," said Mrs. Forbes. "There was something about them, something that I sensed."

Her husband nodded. "They were frightened, too."

"You are frightened, Jackson?"

"I don't know," he said, "but there are no other Forbeses. Not close, that is. Charlie is the closest, and he's five miles away. And they said they walked just a little piece."

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "What can we do?"

"I don't rightly know," he said. "Drive in to the county seat and talk with the sheriff, maybe. These children must be lost. There must be someone looking for them."

"But they don't act as if they're lost," she told him. "They knew they were coming here. They knew we would be here. They told me I was their grandma and they asked after you and they called you Grandpa. And they are so sure. They don't act as if we're strangers. They've been told about us. They said they'd stay just a little while and that's the way they act. As if they'd just come for a visit."

"I think," said Jackson Forbes, "that I'll hitch up Nellie after breakfast and drive around the neighborhood and ask some questions. Maybe there'll be someone who can tell me something."

"The boy said his father was a temporal engineer. That just don't make sense. Temporal means the worldly power and authority and . . ."

"It might be some joke," her husband said. "Something that the father said in jest and the son picked up as truth."

"I think," said Mrs. Forbes, "I'll go upstairs and see if they're asleep. I left their lamps turned low. They are so little and the house is strange to them. If they are asleep, I'll blow out the lamps."

Jackson Forbes grunted his approval. "Dangerous," he said, "to keep lights burning of the night. Too much chance of fire."

III

THE BOY WAS asleep, flat upon his back—the deep and healthy sleep of youngsters. He had thrown his clothes upon the floor when he had undressed to go to bed, but now they were folded neatly on the chair, where she had placed them when she had gone into the room to say good night.

The bag stood beside the chair and it was open, the two rows of jagged metal gleaming dully in the dim glow of the lamp. Within its shadowed interior lay the dark forms of jumbled possessions, disorderly and helter-skelter, no way for a bag to be.

She stooped and picked up the bag and set it on the chair and reached for the little metal tab to close it. At least, she told herself, it should be closed and not left standing open. She grasped the tab and slid it smoothly along the metal tracks and then stopped, its course obstructed by an object that stuck out.

She saw it was a book and reached down to rearrange it so she could close the bag. And as she did so, she saw the title in its faint gold lettering across the leather backstrap—Holy Bible.

With her fingers grasping the book, she hesitated for a moment, then slowly drew it out. It was bound in an expensive black leather that was dulled with age. The edges were cracked and split and the leather worn from long usage. The gold edging of the leaves was faded.

Hesitantly, she opened it, and there, upon the fly leaf, in old and faded ink, was the inscription:

To Sister Ellen from Amelia
Oct. 30, 1896
Many Happy Returns of the Day

She felt her knees grow weak and she let herself carefully to the floor and there, crouched beside the chair, read the fly leaf once again.

Oct. 30, 1896—that was her birthday, certainly, but it had not come, as yet, for this was only the beginning of September, 1896.

And the Bible—how old was this Bible she held within her hands? A hundred years, perhaps more than a hundred years.

A Bible, she thought—exactly the kind of gift Amelia would give her. But a gift that had not been given yet, one that could not be given, for that day upon the fly leaf was a month into the future.

It couldn't be, of course. It was some kind of stupid joke. Or some mistake. Or a coincidence, perhaps. Somewhere else someone else was named Ellen and also had a sister who was named Amelia and the date was a mistake—someone had written the wrong year. It would be an easy thing to do.

But she was not convinced. They had said the name was Forbes and they had come straight here and Paul had spoken of a map so they could find the way.

Perhaps there were other things inside the bag. She looked at it and shook her head. She shouldn't pry. It had been wrong to take the Bible out.

On Oct. 30 she would be fifty-nine—an old farm-wife with married sons and daughters and grandchildren who came to visit her on week-ends and on holidays. And a

sister Amelia who, in this year of 1896, would give her a Bible as a birthday gift.

Her hands shook as she lifted the Bible and put it back into the bag. She'd talk to Jackson when she went downstairs. He might have some thought upon the matter and he'd know what to do.

She tucked the book back into the bag and pulled the tab and the bag was closed. She set it on the floor again and looked at the boy upon the bed. He still was fast asleep, so she blew out the light.

In the adjoining room little Ellen slept, baby-like, upon her stomach. The low flame of the turned-down lamp flickered gustily in the breeze that came through an open window.

Ellen's bag was closed and stood squared against the chair with a sense of neatness. The woman looked at it and hesitated for a moment, then moved on around the bed to where the lamp stood on a bedside table.

The children were asleep and everything was well and she'd blow out the light and go downstairs and talk with Jackson, and perhaps there'd be no need for him to hitch up Nellie in the morning and drive around to ask questions of the neighbors.

As she leaned to blow out the lamp, she saw the envelope upon the table, with the two large stamps of many colors affixed to the upper right-hand corner.

Such pretty stamps, she thought—I never saw so pretty. She leaned closer to take a look at them and saw the country name upon them. Israel. But there was no such actual place as Israel. It was a Bible name, but there was no country. And if there were no country, how could there be stamps?

She picked up the envelope and studied the stamp, making sure that she had seen right. Such a pretty stamp!

She collects them, Paul had said. She's always snitching letters that belong to other people.

The envelope bore a postmark, and presumably a date, but it was blurred and distorted by a hasty, sloppy cancellation and she could not make it out.

The edge of a letter sheet stuck a quarter-inch out of the

ragged edges where the envelope had been torn open, and she pulled it out, gasping in her haste to see it while an icy fist of fear was clutching at her heart.

It was, she saw, only the end of a letter, the last page of a letter, and it was in type rather than in longhand—type like one saw in a newspaper or a book.

Maybe one of those new-fangled things they had in big city offices, she thought, the ones she'd read about. Typewriters—was that what they were called?

do not believe, the one page read, *your plan is feasible. There is no time. The aliens are closing in and they will not give us time.*

And there is the further consideration of the ethics of it, even if it could be done. We can not, in all consciousness, scurry back into the past and visit our problems upon the people of a century ago. Think of the problems it would create for them, the economic confusion and the psychological effect.

If you feel that you must, at least, send the children back, think a moment of the wrench it will give those two good souls when they realize the truth. Theirs is a smug and solid world—sure and safe and sound. The concepts of this mad century would destroy all they have, all that they believe in.

But I suppose I cannot presume to counsel you. I have done what you asked. I have written you all I know of our old ancestors back on that Wisconsin farm. As historian of the family, I am sure my facts are right. Use them as you see fit and God have mercy on us all.

Your loving brother,

Jackson

P.S. A suggestion. If you do send the children back, you might send along with them a generous supply of the new cancer-inhibititor drug. Great-great-grandmother Forbes died in 1904 of a condition that I suspect was cancer. Given those pills, she might survive another ten or twenty years. And what, I ask you, brother, would that mean to this tangled future? I don't pretend to

know. It might save us. It might kill us quicker. It might have no effect at all. I leave the puzzle to you.

If I can finish up work here and get away, I'll be with you at the end.

Mechanically she slid the letter back into the envelope and laid it upon the table beside the flaring lamp.

Slowly she moved to the window that looked out on the empty lane.

They will come and get us, Paul had said. But would they ever come? Could they ever come?

She found herself wishing they would come. Those poor people, those poor frightened children caught so far in time.

Blood of my blood, she thought, flesh of my flesh, so many years away. But still her flesh and blood, no matter how removed. Not only these two beneath this roof tonight, but all those others who had not come to her.

The letter had said 1904 and cancer and that was eight years away—she'd be an old, old woman then. And the signature had been Jackson—an old family name, she wondered, carried on and on, a long chain of people who bore the name of Jackson Forbes?

She was stiff and numb, she knew. Later she'd be frightened. Later she would wish she had not read the letter, did not know.

But now she must go back downstairs and tell Jackson the best way that she could.

She moved across the room and blew out the light and went out into the hallway.

A voice came from the open door beyond.

"Grandma, is that you?"

"Yes, Paul," she answered. "What can I do for you?"

In the doorway she saw him crouched beside the chair, in the shaft of moonlight pouring through the window, fumbling at the bag.

"I forgot," he said. "There was something papa said I was to give you right away."

James H. Schmitz is perhaps best known for his stories of the teenaged telepath Telzey Amberdon (THE UNIVERSE AGAINST HER, *Ace Book* F-314), *but his imagination refuses to be held within the bounds of a popular series, as he demonstrates in this story of conflict between civilizations of the stars.*

JAMES H. SCHMITZ

I

AT BEST, Major Wade Colgrave decided, giving his mud-caked boot tips a brooding scowl, amnesia would be an annoying experience. But to find oneself, as he had just done, sitting on the rocky hillside of an unfamiliar world which showed no sign of human habitation, with one's think-tank seemingly in good general working order but with no idea of how one had got there, was more than annoying. It could be fatal.

The immediate situation didn't look too dangerous. He might have picked up some appalling local disease which would presently manifest itself, but it wasn't likely. A foreign-duty agent of Earth's military intelligence was immunized

early in his career against almost every possible form of infection.

Otherwise, there was a variety of strange lifeforms in sight, each going about its business. Some looked big enough to make a meal of a human being—and might, if they noticed him. But the gun on Colgrave's hip should be adequate to knock such ideas out of predators who came too close.

He'd checked the gun over automatically on discovering a few minutes before that he had one. It was a standard military type, manufactured by upward of a dozen Terran colonies and ex-colonies. There were no markings to indicate its origin; but more important at the moment was the fact that the ammocounter indicated that it contained a full charge.

What could have happened to get him into this position?

The amnesia, however he'd acquired it, took a peculiar form. He had no questions about his identity. He knew who he was. Further, up to a point—in fact, practically up to a specific second of his life—his memory seemed normal. He'd been on Earth, had been told to report at once to the office of Jerry Redman, his immediate superior. And he was walking along a hall on the eighteenth floor of the headquarters building, not more than thirty feet from the door of Redman's office, when his memory simply stopped. He couldn't recall a thing between that moment and the one when he'd found himself sitting there.

Presumably Redman had prepared a new assignment for him; and presumably he'd been briefed on it and had set off. If he could extend his memory even thirty minutes beyond the instant of approaching the door, he might have a whole fistful of clues to what had gone on during the interval. But not a thing would come to mind. It wasn't a matter of many years being wiped out; if he'd aged at all, he couldn't detect it. Some months, however, might easily have vanished, or even as much as two or three years . . . .

Had somebody given him a partially effective memory wipeout and left him marooned here? Not at all likely. A rather large number of people unquestionably would be glad to see Intelligence deprived of his talents, but they

wouldn't resort to such roundabout methods. A bullet through his head, and the job would have been done.

The thought that he'd been on a spaceship which had cracked up in attempting a landing on this planet, knocking him out in the process, seemed more probable. He might have been the only survivor and staggered away from the wreck, his wits somewhat scrambled. If that was it, it had happened very recently.

He was thirsty, hungry, dirty, and needed a shave. But neither he nor his clothing suggested he had been an addled castaway on a wild planet for any significant length of time. The clothes were stained with mud and vegetable matter but in good general condition. He might have stumbled into a mud hole in the swamps which began at the foot of the hills below him and stretched away to the right, then climbed up here and sat down until he dried off. There was, in fact, a blurred impression that he'd been sitting in this spot an hour or so, blinking foggily at the landscape, before he'd suddenly grown aware of himself and his surroundings.

Colgrave's gaze shifted slowly about the panorama before him, searching for the glitter of a downed ship or any signs of human activity. There was no immediate point in moving until he could decide in which direction he should go. It was a remarkable view of a rather unremarkable world. The yellow sun disk had somewhat more than Sol's diameter. Glancing at it, he had a feeling it had been higher above the horizon when he'd noticed it first, which would make it afternoon in this area. It was warm but not disagreeably so; and, now that he thought of it, his body was making no complaints about atmospheric conditions and gravity.

He saw nothing that was of direct interest to him. Ahead and to the left a parched plain extended from the base of the hills to the horizon. In the low marshland on the right, pools of dark, stagnant water showed occasionally through thick vegetation. Higher up, lichen-gray trees formed a dense forest sweeping along the crests of the hills to within a quarter-mile of where Colgrave sat. The rock-clustered hillside about him bore only patches of bushy growth.

The fairly abundant animal life in view was of assorted sizes and shapes and, to Colgrave's eyes, rather ungainly in appearance. Down at the edge of the marshes, herds of several species mingled peacefully, devoting themselves to chomping up the vegetation. An odd, green, bulky creature, something like a a walking vegetable and about the height of a man, moved about slowly on stubby hind legs. It was using paired upper limbs to stuff leaves and whole plants into its lump of a head. Most of the other animals were quadrupeds. Only one of the carnivorous types was active . . . a dog-sized beast with a narrow rod for a body and a long, weaving neck tipped by a round cat head. A pack of them quartered the tall grass between marsh and plain in a purposeful manner, evidently intent on small game.

The other predators Colgrave could see might be waiting for nightfall before they did something about dinner. Half a dozen heavy leonine brutes lay about companionably on the open plain, evidently taking a sunbath. Something much larger and dark squatted in the shade of a tree on the far side of the marsh, watching the browsing herds but making no move to approach them.

The only lifeforms above the size of a lizard on the slopes near Colgrave were a smallish gray hopper, which moved with nervous jerkiness from one clump of shrubs to another. They seemed to be young specimens of the green biped in the marsh. There was a fair number of those downhill on the slopes, ranging between one and three feet in height. They were more active than their elders; now and then about two or three would go gamboling clumsily around a bush together, like fat puppies at play. After returning to the business of stripping clumps of leaves from the shrubbery they would stuff them into the mouth-slits of their otherwise featureless heads. One of them, eating steadily away, was about twenty feet below him. It showed no interest whatever in the visitor from Earth.

However he considered the matter, he couldn't have been stumbling around by himself on this world for more than fifteen hours. And he could imagine no circumstances under which he might have been abandoned here deliberately.

Therefore there should be, within a fifteen-hour hike at the outside, something—ship, camp, Intelligence post, settlement—from which he had started out.

If it was a ship, it might be a broken wreck. But even a wreck would provide shelter, food, perhaps a means of sending an SOS call into space. There might be somebody else still alive on it. If there wasn't, studying the ship itself should give him many indications of what had occurred, and why he was here.

Whatever he would find, he had to get back to his starting point—

Colgrave stiffened. Then he swore, relaxed slightly, sat still. There was a look of intense concentration on his face.

Quietly, unnoticed, while his attention had been fixed on the immediate problem, a part of his lost memories had returned. They picked up at the instant he was walking along the hall toward Redman's office, ran on for a number of months, ended again in the same complete, uncompromising manner as before.

He still didn't know why he was on this world. But he felt he was close to the answer now—perhaps very close indeed.

II

THE LORN WORLDS, Imperial Rala—the Sigma File—

Imperial Rala, the trouble maker, two centuries ago the most remote of the scattered early Earth colonies, now a compact heavy-industry civilization which had indicated for some time that it intended to supplant Earth as the leading interstellar power. It had absorbed a number of other ex-colonies of minor status, turned its attention then on the near-by Lorn Worlds as its first important target of conquest. Colgrave had been assigned to the Lorn Worlds some years previously. At that time the Lornese had been attempting to placate Rala and had refused all assistance to Earth's intelligence agencies.

Redman had called him to the office that day to inform him there had been a basic shift in Lornese policies. He was being sent back. A full-scale invasion by Imperial Rala was

in the making, and the Lorn Worlds had asked for support. Earth's military forces could not be redeployed in sufficient strength to meet a massive thrust in that distant area of space in time to check the expected invasion. When it came, the Lorn Worlds would fight a delaying action, giving ground as slowly as possible until help arrived. Until it did arrive, they would remain sealed off from Earth almost completely by superior Ralan strength.

Colgrave worked with Lornese intelligence men for almost three months, setting up the Sigma File. It contained in code every scrap of previously withheld information they could give against Rala. For decades the Lornese had been concerned almost exclusively with the activities of their menacing neighbor and with their own defensive plans. The file would be of immense importance in determining Earth's immediate stretegy. For Rala, its possession would be of equal importance.

Colgrave set off with it finally in a Lornese naval courier to make the return run to Earth. The courier was a very fast small ship which could rely on its speed alone to avoid interception. As an additional precaution, it would follow a route designed to keep it well beyond the established range of Ralan patrols.

A week later, something happened to it. Just what, Colgrave didn't yet know.

Besides himself there had been three men on board: the two pilot-navigators and an engineering officer. They were picked men and Colgrave had no doubt of their competence. He didn't know whether they had been told the nature of his mission; the matter was not brought up. It should have been an uneventful, speedy voyage home.

When one of the Lornese pilots summoned Colgrave to the control room to tell him the courier was being tracked by another ship, the man showed no serious concern. Their pursuer could be identified on the screen; it was a Ralan raider of the *Talada* class, ten times the courier's tonnage but still a rather small ship. More importantly, a *Talada* could produce nothing like the courier's speed.

Nevertheless, Colgrave didn't like the situation in the least.

He had been assured that the odds against encountering Ralan vessels in this area of space were improbably high. By nature and training he distrusted coincidences. However, the matter was out of his hands. The pilots already were preparing to shift to emergency speed and, plainly, there was nothing to be done at the moment.

He settled down to watch the operation. One of the pilots was speaking to the engineering officer over the intercom; the other handled the controls.

It was this second man who suddenly gave a startled shout.

In almost the same instant, the ship seemed to be wrenched violently to the left. Colgrave was hurled out of his seat, realized there was nothing he could do to keep from smashing into the bulkhead on his right . . .

At that precise point, his memories shut off again.

"Fleegle!" something was crying shrilly. "Fleegle! Fleegle! Fleegle!"

Colgrave started, looked around. The small green biped nearest him downhill was uttering the cries. It had turned and was facing him frontside. Presumably it had just become aware of him and was expressing alarm. It waved its stubby forelimbs excitedly up and down. Farther down the slope several of its companions joined in with "Fleegle!" pipings of their own. Others stood watchfully still. They probably had eyes of a sort somewhere in the wrinkled balls of their heads; at any rate, they all seemed to be staring up at him.

"Fleegle! Fleegle! *Fleegle!*"

The whole hillside below suddenly seemed alive with the shrilling voices and waving green forelimbs. Colgrave twisted half around, glanced up the slope behind him.

He was sliding the gun out of its holster as he came quietly to his feet, completing the turn. The thing that had been coming down toward him stopped in midstride, not much more than forty feet away.

It was also a biped, of a very different kind, splotchy gray-black in color and of singularly unpleasant appearance.

About eight feet tall, it had long, lean talon-tipped limbs and a comparatively small body like a bloated sack. The round, black head above the body looked almost fleshless, sharp bone-white teeth as completely exposed as those of a skull. Two circular yellow eyes a few inches above the teeth stared steadily at Colgrave.

He felt a shiver of distaste. The creature obviously was a carnivore and could have become dangerous to him if he hadn't been alerted by the clamor of the fleegle pack. In spite of its scrawny, gangling look, it should weigh around two hundred and fifty pounds, and the teeth and talons would make it a formidable attacker. Perhaps it had come skulking down from the forest to pick up one of the browsing fleegles and hadn't noticed Colgrave until he arose. But he had its full attention now.

He waited, unmoving, gun in hand, not too seriously concerned—a couple of blasts should be enough to rip that pulpy body to shreds—but hoping it would decide to leave him alone. The creature was a walking nightmare, and tangling with unknown lifeforms always involved a certain amount of risk. He would prefer to have nothing to do with it.

The fleegle racket had abated somewhat. But now the toothy biped took a long, gliding step forward and the din immediately set up again. Perhaps it didn't like the noise, or else it was interested primarily in Colgrave; at any rate, it opened its mouth as if it were snarling annoyedly and drew off to the right, moving horizontally along the slope with long, unhurried spider strides, round yellow eyes still fixed on Colgrave. The fleegle cries tapered off again as the enemy withdrew. By the time it had reached a point around sixty feet away, the slopes were quiet.

Now the biped started downhill, threading its way deliberately among the boulders like a long-legged, ungainly bird. But Colgrave knew by then it was after him; and those long legs might hurl it forward with startling speed when it decided to attack. He thumbed the safety off the gun.

With the fleegles silent, he could hear the rasping sounds the thing made when it opened its mouth in what seemed to be its version of a snarl . . . working up its courage, Col-

grave thought, to tackle the unfamilar creature it had chanced upon.

As it came level with him on the hillside, it was snarling almost incessantly. It turned to face him then, lifted its clawed forelegs into a position oddly like that of a human boxer, hesitated an instant and came on swiftly.

A shrill storm of fleegle pipings burst out along the slope behind Colgrave as he raised the gun. He'd let the thing cut the distance between them in half, he decided, then blow it apart . . . .

Almost with the thought, he saw the big biped stumble awkwardly across a rock. It made a startled, bawling noise, its forelimbs flinging out to help it catch its balance; then it went flat on its face with a thump.

There was instant stillness on the hillside. The fleegles apparently were watching as intently as Colgrave was. The biped sat up slowly. It seemed dazed. It shook its ugly head and whimpered complainingly, glancing this way and that about the slope. Then the yellow eyes found Colgrave.

Instantly, the biped leaped to its feet, and Colgrave hurriedly brought the gun up again. But the thing wasn't resuming its charge. It wheeled, went plunging away up the slope, now and then uttering the bawling sound it had made as it stumbled. It appeared completely panicked.

Staring after it, Colgrave scratched his chin reflectively with his free hand. After a moment, he resafetied the gun, shoved it back into the holster. He felt relieved but puzzled.

The biped, plainly, was not a timid sort of brute. It must possess a certain amount of innate ferocity to have felt impelled to attack a creature of whose fighting ability it knew nothing. Then why this sudden, almost ludicrous flight? It might be convinced he had knocked it down in some manner as it had come at him, but still—

Colgrave shrugged. It was unimportant, after all. The biped had almost reached the top of the slope by now, was angling to the left to reach the lichen-gray forest a few hundred yards away. Its pace hadn't lessened noticeably. He was rid of it.

Then, as Colgrave's gaze shifted along the boulder-studded

top of the hill, something like a half-remembered fact seemed to nudge his mind. He stared, scowling abstractedly. Was there something familiar about that skyline? Something he should . . . He made a shocked sound.

An instant later, he was climbing hurriedly, in something like a panic of his own, up the rocky slope.

Beyond that crest, he remembered now, the ground dropped away into a shallow valley. And in that valley—how many hours ago?—he had landed the Ralan *Talada's* lifeboat, with the Sigma File on board. Every minute he had spent wandering dazedly about the area since then had brought him closer to certain recapture—

III

HE HAD BEEN slammed against the bulkhead on the Lornese courier with enough violence to stun him. When he awoke, he was a prisoner under guard on the *Talada,* lying on a bunk to which he was secured in a manner designed to make him as comfortable as possible. The cabin's furnishings indicated it belonged to one of the ship's officers.

It told Colgrave among other things that they knew who he was. Raiders of the *Talada* class had a liquid-filled compartment in their holds into which several hundred human beings could be packed at a time, layered like so many sardines, and kept alive and semiconscious until the ship returned to port. An ordinary prisoner would simply have been dumped into that vat.

His suspicions were soon confirmed. A swarthy gentleman, who addressed Colgrave by name and introduced himself as Colonel Ajoran, an intelligence agent of Imperial Rala, came into the cabin. He waved out the attendant guard, offered Colgrave a cigarette, outlined his situation briefly to him.

Rala had obtained information of his mission on the Lorn Worlds and arranged to have the courier which would take him back to Earth with the Sigma File intercepted along any of the alternate routes it might take. The courier's en-

gineering officer was a Ralan agent who had jammed the emergency drive to block their escape, then, as an additional measure, released a paralysis gas to keep Colgrave and the Lornese pilots helpless until the courier could be boarded. Colgrave already had been knocked out by the jolt given the ship by the jammed drive, but the pilots had had some seconds left in which to act.

One of them had shot himself in preference to becoming a Ralan prisoner. The other had shot the engineering officer, had been captured with Colgrave and was at present being tortured to death in retribution for his ill-considered slaying of a Ralan agent.

Colonel Ajoran offered Colgrave another cigarette, made a few philosophical remarks about the fortunes of war, and came out with his proposition.

He wanted Colgrave's help in decoding and transcribing the Sigma File immediately. In return he would see to it that when they reached Imperial Rala, Colgrave would be treated as a reasonable man who understood that the only course open to him was to serve Ralan interests as effectively as he previously had served those of Earth. In that event, he would find, Ajoran assured him, that Rala was generous to those who served it well.

Implying that their discussion would be continued after dinner, the colonel then excused himself, called the guard back in and left the cabin.

During the next hour Colgrave put in some heavy thinking. He had made one observation which presently might be of use to him. At the moment, of course, he could do nothing but wait. Colonel Ajoran's plan was a bold one but made sense. Evidently he held a position fairly high up in the echelons of Ralan intelligence. Knowing the contents of the Sigma File in detail, he immediately would become an important man to rival government groups to whom the information otherwise would not be readily available. He could improve his standing by many degrees at one stroke.

At the end of the hour, dinner was served to Colgrave in his cabin by a woman who was perhaps as beautiful, in

an unusual way, as any he had seen. She was very slender; her skin seemed almost as pure a white as her close-cropped hair, and her eyes were so light a blue that in any other type they would have appeared completely colorless. She gave, nevertheless, an immediate impression of vitality and contained energy. She told Colgrave her name was Hace, that she was Ajoran's lady, and that she had been instructed to see to it that he was provided with every reasonable comfort while he considered Ajoran's proposal.

She went on chatting agreeably until Colgrave had finished his dinner in the bunk. The colonel then joined them for coffee. The discussion remained a very indirect one, but Colgrave presently had the impression that he was being offered an alliance by Ajoran. He was one of Earth's top military agents, possessed unique information which the colonel could put to extremely good use on Rala. Colgrave would, in effect, remain on Ajoran's staff and receive every consideration due a valuable associate. He gathered that one of the immediate shipboard considerations being proffered for his cooperation was the colonel's lady.

When the pair left him, Ajoran observing that the *Talada's* sleep period had begun, the thing had been made clear enough. Neither of the two guards assigned to Colgrave reappeared in the cabin—which he had learned was a section of Ajoran's own shipboard suite—and the door remained closed. Presumably he was to be left undisturbed to his reflections for the next seven hours.

Colgrave did not stay awake long. He had a professional's appreciation of the value of rest when under stress; and he already had appraised his situation here as thoroughly as was necessary.

He had a minimum goal—the destruction of the Sigma File—and he had observed something which indicated the goal might be achieved if he waited for circumstances to favor him. Beyond that, he had an ascending series of goals with an ascending level of improbability. They also had been sufficiently considered. There was nothing else he cared to think about at the moment. He stretched out and fell asleep almost at once.

When he awoke some time later with the hairs prickling at the base of his skull, he believed for a moment he was dreaming of the thing he had not cared to think about. There was light on his right and the shreds of a voice . . . ghastly whispered exhalations from a throat which had lost the strength to scream. Colgrave turned his head to the right, knowing what he would see.

Part of the wall to one side of the door showed now as a vision screen; the light and the whispers came from there. Colgrave told himself he was seeing a recording, that the Lornese pilot captured with him had been dead for hours. Colonel Ajoran was a practical man who would have brought this part of the matter to an end without unreasonable delay so that he could devote himself fully to his far more important dealings with Colgrave, and the details shown in the screen indicated the pilot could not be many minutes from death.

The screen slowly went dark again and the whispers ended. Colgrave wiped sweat from his face and turned on his side. There was nothing at all he could have done for the pilot. He had simply been shown the other side of Ajoran's proposition.

A few minutes later, he was asleep again.

When he awoke the next time, the cabin was lit. His two guards were there, one of them arranging Colgrave's breakfast on a wall table across from the bunk. The other simply stood with his back to the door, a nerve gun in his hand, his eyes on Colgrave. Fresh clothes, which Colgrave recognized as his own, brought over from the courier, had been placed on a chair. The section of wall which ordinarily covered the small adjoining bathroom was withdrawn.

The first guard completed his arrangements and addressed Colgrave with an air of surly deference. Colonel Ajoran extended his compliments, was waiting in the other section of the suite and would like to see Major Colgrave there after he had dressed and eaten. Having delivered the message, the guard came over to unfasten Colgrave from the bunk, his companion shifting to a position from which he could watch

the prisoner during the process. That done, the two withdrew from the room, Colgrave's eyes following them reflectively.

He showered, shaved, dressed, and had an unhurried breakfast. He could assume that Ajoran felt the time for indirect promises and threats was over, and that they would get down immediately now to the business on hand.

When Colgrave came out of the cabin, some thirty minutes after being released, he found his assumption confirmed. This section of the suite was considerably larger than the sleep cabin; the colonel and Hace were seated at the far right across the room, and a guard stood before a closed door a little left of the section's center line. The door presumably opened on one of the *Talada*'s passages. The guard was again holding a nerve gun, and a second gun of the same kind lay on a small table beside Ajoran. Hace sat at a recording apparatus just beyond the colonel. Evidently she doubled as his secretary when the occasion arose.

At the center of the room, on a table large enough to serve as a work desk, was writing material, a tape reader and, near the left side of the table, the unopened Sigma File.

Colgrave absorbed the implications of the situation as he came into the room. The three of them there were on edge, and the nerve guns showed his present status—they wouldn't injure him but could knot him up painfully in an instant and leave him helpless for minutes. He was being told his actions would have to demonstrate that he deserved Ajoran's confidence.

Almost simultaneously, the realization came to him that the favorable circumstances for which he had decided to wait were at hand.

He went up to the table, looked curiously down at the Sigma File. It was about the size and shape of a briefcase set upright. Colgrave glancing over at Ajoran said, "I'm taking it for granted you've had the destruct charge removed."

Ajoran produced a thin smile.

"Since it could have no useful purpose now," he said, "I did, of course, have it removed."

Colgrave gave him an ironic bow. His left hand, brushing back, struck the Sigma File, sent it toppling toward the edge of the table.

He might as well have stuck a knife point into all three of them. A drop to the floor could not damage the file, but they were too keyed up to check their reactions. Ajoran started to his feet with a sharp exclamation; even Hace came half out of her chair. The guard moved more effectively. He leaped forward from the wall, bending down, still holding the nerve gun, caught the file with his wrist and free hand as it went off the table, turned to place it back on the table.

Colgrave stepped behind him. In the back of the jackets of both guards he had seen a lumpy bulge near the hip, indicating each carried a second gun, which could be assumed to be a standard energy type. His left hand caught the man by the shoulder, his right found the holstered gun under the jacket, twisted it upward and fired as he bent the guard over it. His left arm tingled—Ajoran had cut loose with the nerve gun, trying to reach him through the guard's body. Then Colgrave had the gun clear, saw Ajoran coming around on his right and snapped off two hissing shots, letting the guard slide to the floor. Ajoran stopped short, hauled open the sleep cabin door and was through it in an instant, slamming it shut behind him.

Across the room, Hace, almost at the other door, stopped, too, as Colgrave turned toward her. They looked at each other a moment, then Colgrave stepped around the guard and walked up to her, gun pointed. When he was three steps away, Hace closed her eyes and stood waiting, arms limp at her sides. His left fist smashed against the side of her jaw and she dropped like a rag doll.

Colgrave looked back. The guard was twisting contortedly about on the floor. His face showed he was dead, but it would be a minute or two before the nerve charge worked itself out of his body. The colonel's lady wouldn't stir for a while. Ajoran himself . . . Colgrave stared thoughtfully at the door of the sleep cabin.

Ajoran might be alerting the ship from in there at the

moment, although there hadn't been any communication device in view. Or he could have picked up some weapon he fancied more than a nerve gun and was ready to come out again. The chances were good, however, that he'd stay locked in where he was until somebody came to inform him the berserk prisoner had been dealt with. It wasn't considered good form in Rala's upper echelons to take personal risks which could be delegated to subordinates.

Whatever happened, Colgrave told himself he could achieve his minimum goal any time he liked now. A single energy bolt through the Sigma File would ignite it explosively. And its destruction, getting it out of Ralan hands, had been as much as he reasonably could expect to accomplish in the situation.

He glanced at the closed door to the sleep cabin again, at the door which should open on one of the *Talada*'s passages, and decided he didn't feel reasonable.

He took the Sigma File from the table, carried it over to the passage door and set it down against the wall. He'd expected to see the second guard come bouncing in through the door as soon as the commotion began in here. The fact that he hadn't indicated either that he'd been sent away or that Ajoran's suite was soundproofed. Probably the latter . . .

Colgrave raised the gun, grasped the door handle with his left hand, turned it suddenly, hauled the door open.

The second guard stood outside, but he wasn't given time to do much more than bulge his eyes at Colgrave.

Colgrave went quickly along the passage, the Sigma File in his left hand, the gun ready again in his right. Now that it was over he felt a little shaky. By the rules he should, in such circumstances, have been satisfied with his minimum goal and destroyed the file before he risked another encounter with an armed man. If he'd been killed just now, it would have been there intact for Rala to decode.

But the other goals looked at least possible now, and he couldn't quite bring himself to put a bolt through the file before it became clear that he'd done as much as he could.

He moved more cautiously as he approached the corner of the passage. This was officer's country, and his plans were

based on a remembered general impression of the manner in which the *Talada* raiders were constructed. The passageway beyond the corner was three times the width of this one . . . it might be the main passage he was looking for.

He glanced around the corner, drew back quickly. About thirty feet away in the other side of the passage was a wide door-space, and two men in officer's uniform had been walking in through it at the moment he looked. Colgrave took a long, slow breath. His next goal suddenly seemed not at all far away.

He waited a few seconds, looked again. Now the passage was clear. Instantly he was around the corner, running down to the doorspace. As he stepped out before it, he saw his guess had been good. He was looking down a short flight of steps into the *Talada*'s control room.

Looking and firing. . . . The gun in his hand hissed like an angry cat, but several seconds passed before any of the half-dozen men down there realized he was around. By then two of them were dead. They had happened to be in the gun's way. The drive control panels, the gun's target, were shattering from end to end. Colgrave swung the gun toward a big communicator in a corner. At that moment, somebody discovered him.

The man did the sensible thing. His hand darted out, throwing one of the switches before him.

A slab of battle-steel slid down across the doorspace, settling the control room away from the passage.

Colgrave sprinted on down the passage. The emergency siren came on.

The *Talada* howled monstrously, like a wounded beast, as it rolled and bucked. Suddenly he was in another passage, heard shouts ahead, turned back, stumbled around a corner, went scrambling breathlessly up a steep, narrow stairway.

At its top, he saw ahead of him, like a wish-dream scene, the lit lock, two white-faced crewmen staggering on the heaving deck as they tried to lift a heavy boxed item into it.

Colgrave came roaring toward them, wild-eyed, waving the gun. They looked around at him, turned and ran as he leaped past them into the lock.

The man at the controls of the *Talada's* lifeboat died before he realized somebody was running up behind him. Colgrave dropped the Sigma File, hauled the body out of the seat, slid into it . . . .

He was several minutes' flight away from the disabled raider before he realized he was laughing like a lunatic.

He was clear. And now the odds, shifting all the way over, were decidedly in his favor. The question was how long it would take them to repair the damage and come after him. With enough of a start, they couldn't know which way he'd headed and the chance of being picked up before he got within range of the Earth patrols became negligible. But first there was the matter of getting the lifeboat fueled for the long run. It used iron, the standard medium; and he had, Colgrave calculated, enough for fifteen hours' flight on hand.

Which wasn't too bad. It would have been nicer if he could have given the two crewmen time to dump another few boxes of ingots on board before he had taken off. But a scan of the stellar neighborhood showed two planets respectively seven and eight hours away indicating conditions which should allow a man to stay a short time without serious damage or discomfort. The lifeboat had the standard iron location and refining equipment on board. A few hours on either of those worlds, and he'd be ready.

After dropping the body of the Ralan pilot into space, he decided the seven hour run gave him a slight advantage. Once the *Talada* got moving, it had speed enough to check over both worlds without losing a significant amount of time. They could figure out his fuel requirements as well as he. If they arrived before he was finished and gone, the raider's scanning devices were almost certain to spot the lifeboat wherever he tried to hide it.

The chances seemed very good that they simply wouldn't get there soon enough. But the minimum goal remained a factor. Colgrave decided to cache the Sigma File in some easily identifiable spot as soon as he touched ground, take the boat to another section of the planet to do his mining, come back for the file when he was prepared to leave. It

would cut the risk of being surprised with it to almost nothing . . . .

IV

How MANY hours had passed since then? Clawing his way up through the boulders and shrubbery, slipping in loose soil Colgrave glanced back for a moment at the sun. It was noticeably lower in the sky again, appeared to be dropping almost visibly toward the horizon. But that told him nothing. He remembered the landing now; it had been daylight and he had come down to hide the Sigma File . . . *had* hidden it, his memory corrected him suddenly. And then, for the next six or ten or fourteen hours, he appeared to have simply waited around here, in some mental fog, for the *Talada* to come riding its fiery braking jets down from the sky.

The raider might arrive at any moment. Unless . . .

Colgrave blocked off the rest of that thought. The slope had begun to level off as he approached the top; he covered the last stretch in a rush, lungs sobbing for breath. He clambored on hastily through a jagged crack in the back of the ridge. For an instant, he saw the shallow dip of the valley beyond.

He dropped flat immediately. They were already here.

It was a shock, but one he realized he had half expected. After a few seconds, he crept up to the shelter of a rock from where he could look into the valley without exposing himself.

The *Talada* had set down about a hundred yards back of the lifeboat, perhaps no more than half an hour ago. The smaller vessel's lock stood open; a man came climbing out of it, followed by two others. The last of the three closed the lock and they started back toward the raider, from which other men were emerging. Ajoran had ordered the lifeboat searched first, to make sure the Sigma File wasn't concealed on it. Without that delay they should have caught him while he was still climbing up the slope. . . . The group coming out

of the *Talada* now was a hunting party; most of them had quick-firing rifles slung across their backs.

They lined up beside the ship while a wedge-shaped device was maneuvered out of the lock. It remained floating a little above the ground near the head of the line, about twenty feet long, perhaps a dozen feet across at its point of greatest width. Colgrave had seen such devices before.

It was a man-tracker, a type used regularly in Ralan expeditions against settlements on other planets. Its power unit and instruments were packed into the narrow tip; most of its space was simply a container, enclosed and filled with the same kind of numbing liquid preservative as that in the prisoner vats in the *Talada* ships. It could be set either to hunt down specific individuals or any and all human beings within its range, and to either kill them as they were overtaken or pick them up with its grapplers and deposit them unharmed in the container. They could use it to follow him now; the clothing he had left on the ship would give it all the indications it needed to recognize and follow his trail.

More men had come out behind the machine, including one in a spacesuit. Colonel Ajoran apparently was assigning almost the entire complement of the *Talada* to the search for Colgrave and the Sigma File.

Colgrave decided he'd seen enough. If he had been observed on the hillside as the *Talada* was descending, they would have gone after him immediately. Instead, they would now follow their man-tracker over the ridge and down to the swamp where the herds of native animals were feeding. It gave him a little time.

He crawled backward a dozen feet into the narrow crevasse, rose and retraced his way through it to the other side of the ridge. Beyond the plain, the sun was almost touching the horizon. The gray forest into which the aggressive biped had retreated began a few hundred yards to his right. He'd have better shelter there than among the tumbled rocks of the ridge.

He went loping toward it, keeping below the crest-line. His eyes shifted once toward the swamp. One great tree stood there, towering a good hundred feet above the vege-

tation about it. The Sigma File was wedged deep among the giant's root, a few feet below the water. He'd seen the tree from the air, put the lifeboat down in the little valley, hurried down to the swamp on foot. Twenty minutes later the file had been buried and he'd started wading back out of the swamp. What had happened between that moment and the one when he found himself sitting on the hillside he still didn't know. . . .

He reached the forest, came back among the trees over the top of the ridge until he saw the valley again. During the few minutes that had passed, the ridge's evening shadow had spread across half the lower ground. It had seemed possible that when they realized how close it was to nightfall here, the hunt for him would be put off till morning. But Ajoran evidently wanted no delay. The man in the spacesuit still stood near the open lock of the ship, but the search party was coming across the valley behind their tracking machine. They headed for a point of the open ridge about a quarter-mile away from Colgrave. They'd have lights to continue on through the night if necessary.

The chase plan was simple but effective. If the man-tracker hadn't flushed him into view before morning, the *Talada* could take the lifeboat aboard, move after the search party and put down again. They could work on in relays throughout the following day, half of them resting at a time on the ship, until he was run down.

The Sigma File was safest where he'd left it. The tracker's scent perceptors were acute enough to follow his trail through the stagnant swamp, getting signs from the vegetation he'd brushed against or grasped in passing, even from lingering traces in the water itself. And it might very well detect the file beneath the surface. But—ironically, considering Ajoran's purpose—the discovery would be meaningless to the machine except as another indication that the man it was pursuing had been there. It would simply move on after him.

The worst thing he could attempt at the moment would be to get down to the swamp ahead of the searchers and destroy the file. He would almost certainly be sighted on the

open slopes below the forest; and either the tracker or the man in the spacesuit could be overhead instants later.

Colgrave's gaze shifted back to the spacesuited figure. He would have to watch out for that one. His immediate role presumably was to act as liaison man between the ship and the hunters, supplementing the communicator reports Ajoran would be getting on the progress of the search. But he was armed with a rifle; and if Colgrave was seen, he could spatter the area around the fugitive with stun-gas pellets while remaining beyond range of a hand weapon. He had floated back up to the *Talada*'s lock for a moment, was now heading out to the ridge, drifting about fifty feet above the ground.

It wasn't a graceful operation. Maneuvering a suit designed for weightless service in space near the surface of a planet never was. But the fellow was handling himself fairly well, Colgrave thought. He came up to the ridge as the troop began filing across it, hovered above the line a few seconds, then swung to the left and moved off in a series of slow, awkward bounces above the hillside. He seemed to be holding something up to his helmet, and Colgrave guessed he was scanning the area with a pair of powerful glasses. After some minutes, he came back.

Colgrave had crossed over to the other side of the ridge to follow the progress of the column. It had swung to the right as it started down, was angling straight toward the swamp along the route he had taken with the file. He watched, chewing his lip. If the man-tracker happened to cross his return trail on the way, he might be in trouble almost immediately . . . .

The man in the spacesuit drifted after the search party, passed above them some two hundred feet in the air, then remained suspended and almost unmoving. Colgrave glanced over at the horizon. The sun was nearly out of sight; its thin golden rim shrank and disappeared as he looked at it. Night should follow quickly here, but as yet he couldn't see any advantage the darkness would bring him.

The man in the spacesuit was coming back to the ridge. He hovered above it a moment, settled uncertainly toward the flat top of a boulder, made a stumbling landing and

righted himself. He turned toward the plain and the swamp, lifting the object that seemed to be a pair of glasses to the front of his helmet again. Evidently he'd had enough of the suit's airborne eccentricities for a while.

Colgrave's throat worked. The man was less than two hundred yards away . . . .

His eyes shifted toward a tuft of shrubs twenty feet beyond the edge of the forest growth.

Some seconds later, he was there, studying the stretch of ground ahead. Other shrubs and rocks big enough to crouch behind . . . but they would give him no cover at all if for some reason the fellow decided to lift back into the air. The fading light wouldn't help then. Those were space glasses he was using, part of the suit, designed to provide clear vision even when only the gleam of distant stars was there for them to absorb.

But perhaps, Colgrave told himself, Spacesuit would not decide to lift back into the air. In any case, no other approach was possible. The far side of the ridge was controlled by the *Talada*'s night-scanners, and they would be in use by now.

He moved, waited, gathered himself and moved again. Spacesuit was directing most of his attention downhill, but now and then he turned for a look along the ridge in both directions. Perhaps, as the air darkened, the closeness of the forest was getting on his nerves. Native sounds were drifting up from the plain, guttural bellowing and long-drawn ululations. The meat eaters were coming awake. Presently there was a series of short, savage roars from the general direction of the swamp; and Colgrave guessed the search party had run into some big carnivore who had never heard about energy rifles. When the roaring stopped with a monstrous scream, he was sure of it.

He had reduced the distance between them by almost half when the spacesuit soared jerkily up from the boulder. Colgrave had a very bad moment. But it lifted no more than a dozen feet, then descended again at a slant which carried it behind the boulder. The man had merely changed his

position. And the new position he had selected took them out of each other's sight.

Colgrave was instantly on his feet, running forward. Here the surface was rutted with weather fissures. He slipped into one of them, drawing out his gun, moved forward at a crouch. A moment later, he had reached the near side of the boulder on which Spacesuit had stood.

Where was he now? Colgrave listened, heard a burst of thin, crackling noises. They stopped for some seconds, came briefly again, stopped again. The suit communicator . . . the man must have taken off the helmet, or the sound wouldn't have been audible. He couldn't be far away.

Colgrave went down on hands and knees, edged along the side of the boulder to the right. From here he could see down the hillside. On the plain, the night was gathering; the boundaries between the open land and the swamp had blurred. But the bobbing string of tiny light beams down there, switching nervously this way and that, must already be moving through the marsh.

The communicator noises came again, now from a point apparently no more than fifteen feet beyond the edge of the boulder ahead of Colgrave. It was as close as he could get. It was important that the man in the spacesuit should die instantly, which meant a head shot. Colgrave rose up, stepped out quietly around the boulder, gun pointed.

The man stood faced half away, the helmet tipped back on his shoulders. In the last instant, as Colgrave squeezed down on the trigger, sighting along the barrel, the head turned and he saw with considerable surprise that it was Colonel Ajoran.

Then the gun made its spiteful hissing sound.

Ajoran's head jerked slightly to the side and his eyes closed. The spacesuit held him upright for the second or two before he toppled. Colgrave already was there, reaching under the collar for one of the communicator's leads. He found it, gave it a sharp twist, felt it snap.

V

In the *Talada*, the man watching the night-scanners saw Colonel Ajoran's spacesuit appear above the ridge and start back to the ship. He informed the control room and the lock attendant.

The outer lock door opened as the suit came to it. Colgrave made a skidding landing inside. His performance in the suit had been no improvement on Ajoran's. He shut off the suit drive, clumped up to the inner door, left arm raised across the front of the helmet, hand fumbling with the oxygen hose. It would hide his face for a moment from whoever was on the other side of the door. His right hand rested on his gun.

The door opened. The attendant stood at rigid attention before the control panel six feet away, rifle grounded, eyes front. Mentally blessing Ralan discipline, Colgrave stepped up beside him, drew out the gun and gave the back of the man's skull a solid thump with the barrel.

When the attendant opened his eyes again a few minutes later, his head ached and there was a gag in his mouth. His hands were tied behind him, and Colgrave was wearing his uniform.

Colgrave hauled him to his feet, poked a gun muzzle against his back.

"Lead the way to the control room," he said.

The attendant led the way. Colgrave followed, the uniform cap pulled down to conceal his face. Ajoran's handgun and a stunner he had taken from the attendant were stuck into his belt. The attendant's energy rifle and the one which had been strapped to the spacesuit were concealed in a closet near the lock. He had assembled quite an arsenal.

When they reached the wide main passage in the upper level of the ship, he halted the lock attendant. They retraced their steps to the last door they had passed. Colgrave opened it. An office of some kind . . . he motioned the attendant in and followed him, closing the door.

He came out a few seconds later, shoved the stunner back

under his belt, and stood listening. The *Talada* seemed almost eerily silent. Not very surprising, he thought. The number of men who had set out after him indicated that only those of the crew who were needed to coordinate the hunt and maintain the ship's planetary security measures had remained on board. That could be ten or twelve at most; and every one of them would be stationed at his post at the moment.

Colgrave went out into the main passage, walked quietly along it. Now he could hear an intermittent murmur of voices from the control room. One of them seemed to be that of a woman, but he wasn't sure. They were being silent again before he came close enough to distinguish what was being said.

There was nothing to be gained by hesitating at this point. The control room was the nerve center of the ship, but there couldn't be more than four or five of them in it. Colgrave had a gun in either hand as he reached the open doorspace. He turned through it, started unhurriedly down the carpeted stairs leading into the control room, eye and mind photographing the details of the scene below.

Ajoran's lady was nearest, seated at a small table, her attention on the man before the communicator set in a corner alcove on the left. This man's back was turned. A gun was belted to his waist. Farther down in the control room sat another man, facing the passage but bent over some instrument on the desk before him. The desk shielded him almost completely, which made him the most dangerous of the three at the moment. No one else was in view, but that didn't necessarily mean that no one else was here.

Hace became aware of him as he reached the foot of the stairs. Her head turned sharply; she seemed about to speak. Then her eyes went wide with shocked recognition.

He'd have to get the man at the desk the instant she screamed. But she didn't scream. Instead, her right hand went up, two fingers lifted and spread. She nodded fiercely at the communicator operator, next at the man behind the desk.

Only two of them? Well, that probably was true. But he'd

better use the stunner on Hace before attempting to deal with the two armed men.

At that moment, the communicator operator looked around.

He was young and his reactions were as fast as Hace's. He threw himself sideways out of the chair with a shout of warning, hit the floor rolling over and clawing for his gun. The man behind the desk had no chance. As he jerked upright, startled, an energy bolt took him in the head. The operator had no real chance, either. Colgrave swung the gun to the left, saw for an instant eyes fixed on him, bright with hatred, and the other gun coming up, and fired again.

He waited a number of seconds, then, alert for further motion. But the control room remained quiet. So Ajoran's lady hadn't lied. She stayed where she was, unstirring, until he turned toward her. Then she said quietly, her expression still incredulous, "It seemed like magic! How could you get into the ship?"

Colgrave looked at the dark, ugly bruise his fist had printed along the side of her jaw, said, "In Ajoran's spacesuit, of course."

She hesitated. "He's dead?"

"Quite dead," Colgrave said thoughtfully.

"I wanted," Hace said, "to kill him myself. I would have done it finally, I believe. . . ." She hesitated again. "It doesn't matter now. What can I do to help you? They're in trouble down in the swamp."

"What kind of trouble?"

"That isn't clear. It began two or three minutes ago, but we haven't been able to get an intelligible report from the two communicator men. They were excited, shouted, almost irrational."

Colgrave scowled. After a moment, he shook his head. "Let's clean up the ship first. How many on board?"

"Nine besides those two . . . and myself."

"The man in the lock's taken care of," Colgrave said. "Eight. On the lifeboat?"

"Nobody. Ajoran had a trap prepared for you there, in case you came back before they caught you. You could have

got inside, but you couldn't have started the engines, and you would have been unable to get out again."

Colgrave grunted. "Can you get the men in the ship to come individually to the control room?"

"I see. Yes, I think I can do that."

"I'll want to check you over for weapons first."

"Of course." Hace smiled slightly, stood up. "Why should you trust me?"

"I wouldn't know," Colgrave said.

They came in, unsuspecting, one by one; and, one by one, the stunner brought them down from behind. Shortly afterwards, a freight carrier floated into the *Talada*'s vat room. Hace stood aside as Colgrave unlocked the cover of the drop hole in the deck and hauled it back. A heavy stench surged up from the vat. Colgrave looked down a moment at the oily black liquid eight feet below, then dragged the nine unconscious men in turn over from the carrier, dropped them in, and resealed the vat.

A man's voice babbled and sobbed. Another man screamed in sudden fright; then there was a sound of rapid, panicky breathing mingled with the sobs.

Colgrave switched off the communicator, looked over at Hace. "Is this what it was like before?"

She moistened her lips. "No, this is insanity!" Her voice was unsteady. "They're both completely incapable of responding to us now. What could there be in that swamp at night to have terrified them to that extent? At least some of the others should have come back to the ship . . ." She paused. "Colgrave, why do we stay here? You know what they're like—why bother with them? You don't need any of them to handle the ship. One person can take it to Earth if necessary."

"I know," Colgrave said. He studied her, added, "I'm wondering a little why you're willing to help me get to Earth."

Anger showed for an instant in the pale, beautiful face.

"I'm no Ralan! I was picked up in a raid on Beristeen

when I was twelve. I've never wanted to do anything but get away from Rala since that day."

Colgrave grunted, rubbed his chin. "I see. . . . Well, we can't leave immediately. For one thing, I left the Sigma File in that swamp."

Hace stared at him. "You haven't destroyed it?"

"No. It never quite came to that point."

She laughed shortly. "Colgrave, you're rather wonderful! Ajoran was convinced the file was lost, and that his only chance of saving his own skin was to get you back alive so he could find out what you had learned on the Lorn Worlds. . . . No, you can't leave the file behind, of course! I understand that. But why don't we lift the ship out of atmosphere until it's morning here?" She nodded at the communicator. "*That* disturbance—whatever they've aroused down there—should have settled out by then. The swamp will be quiet again. Then you can work out a way to get the file back without too much danger."

Colgrave shook his head, got to his feet. "No, that shouldn't be necessary. The man-tracker was being monitored from the ship, wasn't it? Where is the control set kept?"

Hace indicated the desk twenty feet behind her where the second man had sat when Colgrave had come into the control room.

"It's lying over there. That's what he was doing."

Colgrave said, "Let's take a look at it. I want the thing to return to the ship." He started toward the desk.

Hace stood up, went over to the desk with him. "I'm afraid I can't tell you how to operate it."

"I should be able to do it," Colgrave said. "I played around a few hours once with a captured man-tracker which had been shipped back to Earth. This appears to be a very similar model." He looked down at the moving dark blurs in the screen which formed the center of the control set, twisted a knob to one side of it. "Let's see what it's doing now before I have it return to the ship."

The screen cleared suddenly. The scene was still dark, but in the machine's night-vision details were distinct. A rippling weed bed was gliding slowly past below; a taller leafy

thicket ahead moved closer. Then the thicket closed about the tracker.

Hace said, "The operator was trying to discover through the tracker what was happening to the men down there, but it moved out of the range of their lights almost as soon as the disturbance began. Apparently the devices, once set, can't be turned around."

"Not unless you're riding them," Colgrave agreed. "Telemonitoring starts them off and observes what they're doing. They either go on and finish their business, or get their sensors switched off and return to their starting point. It's still following my trail. Now . . ."

"What's that light?" Hace asked uneasily. "It looks like the reflection of a fire."

The tracker had emerged from the thicket, swung to the left, and was gliding low over an expanse of open water, almost touching it. There were pale orange glitters on the surface ahead of it.

Colgrave studied them, said, "At a guess, it simply means there's a moon in the sky." He pushed a stud on the set, and the scene vanished. "That wiped out the last instructions it was given. It will come back to the ship in a minute or two."

Hace looked at him. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'm riding it down to the swamp."

"Not now! In the morning you . . ."

"I don't think I'll be in any danger. Now let's find a place where I'm sure you'll stay locked up until I get back. As you said, one person can do all that's needed to lift this ship off the planet and head away. . . ."

VI

FIVE HUNDRED feet above the ground, the man-tracker's open saddle was not the most reassuring place to be in. But the machine was considerably easier to maneuver than the spacesuit had been and the direct route by air to the giant tree beneath which he'd concealed the Sigma File was the shortest and fastest. Colgrave was reasonably certain nothing had

happened to the file, but he wouldn't know until he held it in his hands again.

The orange moon that had pushed above the horizon was a big one, the apparent diameter of its disk twice that of the vanished sun. Colgrave was holding the tracker's pace down. But no more than a few minutes passed before he could make out the big tree in the vague light, ahead and a little to his right. He guided the machine over to it, circled its crown slowly twice, looking down, then lowered the tracker down to a section of open water near the base of the tree, turned it and went gliding in toward the tangled root system of the giant. He turned the control set off, remained in the saddle a few moments, looking about and listening.

The swamp was full of sound, most of it of a minor nature . . . chirps, twittering, soft hoots. Something whistled piercingly three times in the tree overhead. Behind him, not too far off, was a slow, heavy splashing which gradually moved away. At the very limit of his hearing was something else. It might have been human voices, faint with distance, or simply his imagination at work.

Nearby, nothing moved. Colgrave pulled the control set out of its saddle frame, slid down from the saddle, clinging to it with one hand, finally dropped a few inches into a layer of mud above the mass of tree roots. He climbed farther up on the roots, found a dry place under one of them where he shoved the control set in out of sight. Then he went climbing cautiously on around the great trunk, slipping now and then on the slimy root tangle beneath the mud . . . .

And here was where he had concealed the Sigma File. A little bay of water extended almost to the trunk itself about five feet deep. Colgrave slipped down into it. There was firm footing here. He moved forward to the tip of the bay, took a deep breath and crouched down. The warm water closed over his head. He groped about among the root shelves before him, touched the file, gripped it by its handle and drew it out.

He clambered up out of the water, started back around the tree . . .

And there the thing stood.

Colgrave stopped short. This was almost an exact duplication of what happened after he'd brought the Sigma File down here and concealed it. It had been daylight then, and what he saw now as a bulky manlike shape in the shadow of the tree had been clearly visible. It was a green monstrosity, heavy as a gorilla, with a huge, round bobbing ball of a head which showed no features at all through its leafy appendages. It was bigger than it had looked at a distance from the hillside, standing almost eight feet tall.

The first time, it had been only a few yards away, moving toward him around the tree, when he had seen it. His instant reaction had been to haul out his gun. . . .

Now he stayed still, looking at it. His heartbeat had speeded up noticeably. But this was, he told himself, an essentially vegetarian creature. And it was peaceable because it had a completely effective means of defense. It could sense the impulse to attack in an approaching carnivore, and it could make the carnivore forget its purpose.

As often as was necessary.

Colgrave made himself start forward. He had no intention, his mind kept repeating, of harming this oversized fleegle, and it had no intention of harming him. It did not move out of his path as he came toward it, but turned slowly to keep facing him as he clambered past over the roots a few feet away.

Colgrave didn't look back at it and heard no movement behind him. He saw the man-tracker floating motionless above the mud ahead, put the file down and pulled the tracker's control set out from under the root where he had left it. A minute or two later, he was back in the machine's saddle, out in the moonlight away from the big tree, the Sigma File fastened to his belt.

He tapped a pattern of instructions into the control set, checked them very carefully, slid the set into the saddle frame and switched it on.

The man-tracker swung about purposefully, went gliding away through the swamp. A hundred yards on, it encoun-

tered three fleegles, somewhat smaller than the one under the tree, wading slowly leg-deep through the mud. They stopped as the machine appeared, and Colgrave thought friendly and admiring things about fleegles until they were well behind him again. Perhaps a minute later, the man-tracker stopped in the air above the first of the *Talada*'s lost crew.

He had crawled into a thicket and was blubbering noisily to himself. When two of the machine's grapplers flicked down into the thicket and locked about him, he bawled in horror. Colgrave looked straight ahead, not particularly wanting to watch this. There was a click behind him as the preservative tank opened. For a moment, his nostrils were full of the stink of the liquid. Then there was a splash, and the bawling stopped abruptly. The tank clicked shut.

The man-tracker swung around on a new point, set off again. Its present instructions were to trail and collect every human being within the range of its sensory equipment, except its rider.

They'd been on edge to begin with here, Colgrave told himself. Their rifles already had brought down one brute which had come roaring monstrously at them in the dusk; and presumably the rifles could handle anything else they might encounter. But they hadn't liked the look of the swamp the man-tracker was leading them into. Wading through pools, slipping in the mud, flashing their lights about at every menacing shadow, they followed the machine, mentally cursing the order that had sent them after the Earth intelligence agent as night was closing in.

And then a great green ogre was standing in one of the light beams . . . .

Naturally, they tried to shoot it.

And as they made the decision, they began to forget.

Progressive waves of amnesia . . . first, perhaps, only a touch. The men lifting rifles forgot they were lifting them. Until they saw the fleegle again—

The past few hours might be wiped out next. They stood in a swamp at night, not knowing how they'd got there or

why they were there. But they had rifles in their hands, and an ogrish shape was watching them.

Months forgotten now. The fleegle could keep it up.

About that point, they'd begun to stampede, scattered, ploughed this way and that through the swamp. But the fleegles were everywhere. And as often as a gun was lifted in panic, another chunk of memory would go. Until the last of the weapons was dropped.

The man-tracker wasn't rounding up men, but children in grown-up bodies, huddled in hiding on a wet, dark nightmare world, dazed and uncomprehending, unable to do more than wail wildly as the machine picked them up and placed them in its tank.

VII

COLGRAVE CAME out of the compartment where the man-tracker was housed, locked the door and turned off the control set.

"You haven't closed the vat yet," Hace said.

He nodded. "I know. Let's go back."

"I'm still not clear on just what did happen," she went on, walking beside him up the passage. "You say they lost their memories . . . ?"

"Yes. It's a temporary thing. I had the same experience when I first got here, though I don't seem to have been hit as hard as most of them were. If they weren't floating around in that slop now, they'd start remembering within hours."

He opened the door to the vat room, motioned her inside. Hace wrinkled her nose in automatic distaste at the odor of the preservative, said, "It's very strange. How could any creature affect a human mind in that manner?"

"I don't know," Colgrave said. "But it isn't important now." He followed her in, closing the door behind him, went on, "Now this will be rather unpleasant, so let's get it over with."

She glanced back at him. "Get what over with, Colgrave?"

"You're getting the ride to Earth you said you wanted,"

Colgrave told her, "but you're riding along with the crew down there."

Hace whirled to face him, her eyes wild with fear.

"Ah—no! Colgrave . . . I . . . you couldn't . . ."

"I don't want you awake on the ship," he told her. "Though I might have thought of some other way of making sure you wouldn't be a problem if my pilot hadn't died as he did."

"What does that have to do with me?" Her voice was shrill. "Didn't I try to help you in the control room?"

"You played it smart in the control room," Colgrave said. "But you would have gone into the vat with the first group if I hadn't thought you might be useful in some way."

"But *why?* Am I to blame for what Ajoran did?"

Colgrave shrugged. "I'm not sorry for what happened to Ajoran. But I'm not stupid enough to think that a Ralan intelligence agent would go out in a spacesuit to help look for me, leaving the ship in charge of a couple of junior officers. Ajoran went out because he was ordered to do it. And there were a few other things. What they add up to, lady, is that you were the senior agent in this operation. And it would suit you just fine to get back to Rala with the Sigma File, and no one left alive to tell how you almost let it get away from you."

Hace wet her lips, her eyes darting wildly about his face.

"Colgrave, I . . ." she started to plead.

"No," Colgrave said. He placed his hand flat against her chest, shoved hard. Hace went stumbling backward toward the open drop hole of the vat. There was a scream and a splash. He walked over and looked down. The oily surface was smooth again. He slammed the cover down over the drop hole, sealed it and left the room.

About two hours had passed. The *Talada* hung in space near the fringes of the solar system which contained the Ileegle world. Colgrave had completed his studies of the ship's navigational system. It was a standard setup for long-range vessels, self-locating, self-focusing. Once he got the

raider under way, there would be less for him to do than there would have been on the lifeboat.

But there was one more matter to take care of before he left. On the planet, he hadn't dared let himself think about it.

The *Talada*'s computers knew where the ship was but weren't registering the fact. For most navigational purposes, it was meaningless. You only had to know where you wanted to go. Carrying out a location check was a separate operation which would take him at least another hour.

The time wouldn't be wasted, Colgrave thought. Recording the ship's exact coordinates here might turn out to be as important as getting the Sigma File to Earth—more so . . . .

It had been at the other end of the swamp, shortly before he returned to the ship, while the tracker was picking up a man who had got farther than most, that he suddenly had become aware of a glow of greenish luminescence on his left and turned in the saddle to look at it.

There was a wide opening in the forested hillside above the level of the swamp. Colgrave had stared at it with a feeling almost of superstitious fear. A group of fleegles was streaming slowly into it; a few others were emerging. There was a sense of something ordered and arranged stretching far back into the dim green light under the hill. The equivalent of human buildings, he had thought. And beyond them, taller than the structures, he could make out vague, green figures moving hugely about.

His skin was crawling when the tracker deposited its last captive in the tank, turned and went gliding back toward the center of the swamp. He had a strong conviction he should do nothing whatever to draw attention to himself here. But as the machine came up to a dense thicket which would have shut off his view, Colgrave looked back. The opening in the hill had vanished.

An underground civilization of some kind, and intelligence . . . . In all the time man had been in space, there had been no previous recorded contact with another intelligent race.

Perhaps we've never taken the time to really look for

them, Colgrave thought. *Our main business somehow always seems to be fighting among ourselves.*

As the coming war with Rala would prevent any immediate action being taken on the report he would make. But someday a scientific expedition would start out from Earth to settle down on the fleegle world and make contact—

Colgrave leaned forward in his chair, pulled the *Talada*'s locator toward him, snapped it into the computing system, and placed his hand on the activating switch.

Then he went still, head raised, tilted sideways a little in an attitude of listening.

From somewhere, very far away, a huge, quiet voice was addressing him.

"FORGET IT," it said.

Colgrave gave the locator a puzzled look, pulled it out of the system, stood up and restored it to its casing.

He returned, studied the focal chart which contained Earth briefly once more, then reached out and cut in the main drive. The *Talada* began to move.

Colgrave settled back in his chair, watching a not very remarkable yellow sun slide slowly away from him in the screen. There was a momentary uneasy feeling that something else was also sliding away . . . something very important that now would be forever lost. Then he forgot it.

Harlan Ellison writes screenplays, television scripts, novels, short stories, articles and letters.The piece which starts below is a little bit of all these, and its essence is completely Harlan Ellison: it's outrageous.

"REPENT, HARLEQUIN!" SAID THE TICKTOCKMAN

HARLAN ELLISON

THERE ARE ALWAYS those who ask, what is it all about? For those who need to ask, for those who need points sharply made, who need to know "where it's at," this:

"The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailors, constables, possee comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the

Devil, without intending it, as God. A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men, *serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it."*

—Henry David Thoreau,
"Civil Disobedience"

That is the heart of it. Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning. The end will take care of itself.

Because it was the very world it was, the very world they had allowed it to *become*, for months his activities did not come to the alarmed attention of The Ones Who Kept the Machine Functioning Smoothly, the ones who poured the very best butter over the cams and mainsprings of the culture. Not until it had become obvious that somehow, someway, he had become a notoriety, a celebrity, perhaps even a hero for what Officialdom inescapably tagged "an emotionally disturbed segment of the populace," did they turn it over to the Ticktockman and his legal machinery. But by then, because it was the very world it was, and they had no way to predict he would happen—possibly a strain of disease long-defunct, now, suddenly reborn in a system where immunity had been forgotten, had lapsed—he had been allowed to become too real. Now he had form and substance.

He had become a *personality*, something they had filtered out of the system many decades ago. But there it was, and there *he* was, a very definitely imposing personality. In certain middle-class circles it was thought disgusting. Vulgar ostentation. Anarchistic. Shameful. In others, there was only sniggering, those strata where thought is subjugated to form and to ritual, niceties, proprieties. But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces); a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.

And at the top—where, like socially attuned Shipwreck Kellys, every tremor and vibration threatens to dislodge the

wealthy, powerful and titled from their flagpoles—he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril. He was known down the line, to the very heart-meat core, but the important reactions were high above and far below. At the very top, at the very bottom.

So his file was turned over, along with his time-card and his cardioplate, to the office of the Ticktockman.

The Ticktockman: very much over six feet tall, often silent, a soft purring man when things went timewise.

Even in the cubicles of the hierarchy, where fear was generated, seldom suffered, he was called the Ticktockman. But no one called him that to his mask.

You don't call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days and nights, the years of your life. He was called the Master Timekeeper to his mask.

"This is *what* he is," said the Ticktockman with genuine softness, "but not *who* he is. This time-card I'm holding in my left hand has a name on it, but it is the name of *what* he is, not *who* he is. This cardioplate here in my right hand is also named, but not whom named, merely what named. Before I can exercise proper revocation I have to know who this what is."

To his staff, all the ferrets, all the loggers, all the finks, all the commex, even the mineez, he said, "Who is this Harlequin?"

He was not purring smoothly. Timewise, it was jangle.

However, it *was* the longest single speech they had ever heard him utter at one time—the staff, the ferrets, the loggers, the finks, the commex, but not the mineez, who usually weren't around to know, in any case. But even they scurried to find out—

Who is the Harlequin?

High above the third level of the city, he crouched on the humming aluminum-frame platform of the air-boat (foof! air-boat, indeed! swizzleskid is what it was, with a tow-rack jerry-rigged) and stared down at the neat Mondrian arrangement of the buildings.

Somewhere nearby, he could hear the metronomic left-right-left of the 2:47 P.M. shift, entering the Timkin roller-bearing plant in their sneakers. A minute later, precisely, he heard the softer right-left-right of the 5:00 A.M. formation going home.

An elfish grin spread across his tanned features, and his dimples appeared for a moment. Then, scratching at his thatch of auburn hair, he shrugged within his motley, as though girding himself for what came next, and threw the joystick forward, and bent into the wind as the air-boat dropped. He skimmed over a slidewalk, purposely dropping a few feet to crease the tassels of the ladies of fashion, and—inserting thumbs in large ears—he stuck out his tongue, rolled his eyes and went wugga-wugga-wugga. One pedestrian skittered and tumbled, sending parcels everywhichway, another wet herself, a third keeled slantwise and the walk was stopped automatically by the servitors till she could be resuscitated. It was a minor diversion.

Then he swirled away on a vagrant breeze and was gone. Hi-ho.

As he rounded the cornice of the Time-Motion Study Building, he saw the shift, just boarding the slidewalk. With practiced motion and an absolute conservation of Movement, they sidestepped up onto the slowstrip and (in a chorus line reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley film of the antediluvian 1930's) advanced across the strips ostrich-walking till they were lined up on the expresstrip.

Once more, in anticipation, the elfin grin spread, and there was a tooth missing back there on the left side. He dipped, skimmed, and swooped over them. And then, scrunching about on the air-boat, he released the holding pins that fastened shut the ends of the home-made pouring troughs that kept his cargo from dumping prematurely. And as he pulled the trough-pins, the air-boat slid over the factory workers and one hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans cascaded down on the expresstrip.

Jelly beans! Millions and billions of purples and yellows and greens and licorice and grape and raspberry and mint and round and smooth and crunchy outside and soft-mealy

inside and sugary and bouncing jouncing tumbling clittering clattering skittering fell on the heads and shoulders and hardhats and carapaces of the Timkin workers, tinkling on the sidewalk and bouncing away and rolling about underfoot and filling the sky on their way down with all the colors of joy and childhood and holidays, coming down in a steady rain, a solid wash, a torrent of color and sweetness out of the sky from above, and entering a universe of sanity and metronomic order with quite-mad coocoo newness. Jelly beans!

The shift workers howled and laughed and were pelted, and broke ranks, and the jelly beans managed to work their way into the mechanism of the slidewalks; after which there was a hideous scraping as the sound of a million fingernails rasped down a quarter of a million blackboards, followed by a coughing and a sputtering. And then the slidewalks all stopped and everyone was dumped thisawayandthataway in a jackstraw tumble, and still laughing and popping little jelly-bean eggs of childish color into their mouths. It was a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle. But . . .

The shift was delayed seven minutes.

They did not get home for seven minutes.

The master schedule was thrown off by seven minutes.

Quotas were delayed by inoperative slidewalks for seven minutes.

He had tapped the first domino in the line, and one after another, the others had fallen.

The System had been seven minutes' worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, hardly worthy of note. But in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance.

So he was ordered to appear before the Ticktockman.

It was broadcast across every channel of the communications web. He was ordered to be *there* at 7:00 dammit on time. And they waited, and they waited. But he didn't show up till almost ten-thirty, at which time he merely sang a little song about moonlight in a place no one had ever heard

of, called Vermont, and vanished again. But they had all been waiting since seven, and it wreaked *hell* with their schedules. So the question remained: Who is the Harlequin?

But the *unasked* question (more important of the two) was: How did we get *into* this position, where a laughing, irresponsible jasper of jabberwocky and jive could disrupt our entire economic and cultural life with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans?

Jelly for God's sake beans! This is madness! Where did he get the money to buy a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of jelly beans? (They knew it would have cost that much, because they had a team of Situation Analysts pulled off another assignment, and rushed to the slidewalk scene to sweep up and count the candies, and produce findings, which disrupted *their* schedules and threw their entire branch at least a day behind.) Jelly beans! Jelly . . . beans? Now wait a second—a second accounted for—no one has manufactured jelly beans for over a hundred years.

That's another good question. More than likely it will never be answered to your complete satisfaction. But then, how many questions ever are?

The middle you know. Here is the beginning. How it starts: A desk pad. Day for day, and turn each day. 9:00—open the mail. 9:45—appointment with planning commission board. 10:30—discuss installation progress charts with J. L. 11:15—pray for rain. 12:00—lunch. *And so it goes.*

"I'm sorry, Miss Grant, but the time for interviews was set at 2:30, and it's almost five now. I'm sorry you're late, but those are the rules. You'll have to wait till next year to submit application for this college again." *And so it goes.*

"I couldn't wait, Fred. I had to be at Pierre Cartain's by 3:00, and you said you'd meet me under the clock in the terminal at 2:45, and you weren't there, so I had to go on. You're always late, Fred. If you'd been there, we could have sewed it up together, but as it was, well, I took the order alone. . . ." *And so it goes.*

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Atterley: in reference to your son Gerold's constant tardiness, I am afraid we will have to

suspend him from school unless some more reliable method can be instituted guaranteeing he will arrive at his classes on time. Granted he is an exemplary student, and his marks are high, but his constant flouting of the schedules of this school make it impractical to maintain him in a system where the other children seem capable of getting where they are supposed to be on time *and so it goes.*

YOU CANNOT VOTE UNLESS YOU APPEAR AT 8:45 A.M.

"I don't care if the script is *good,* I need it Thursday!"

CHECK-OUT TIME IS 2:00 P.M.

"You got here late. The job's taken. Sorry."

YOUR SALARY HAS BEEN DOCKED FOR TWENTY MINUTES TIME LOST.

"God, what time is it, I've gotta run!"

And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing, bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

Until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime.

EFFECTIVE 15 JULY 2389, 12:00 midnight, the office of the Master Timekeeper will require that all citizens submit their time-cards and cardioplates for processing. In accordance with Statute 555-7-SGH-999 governing the revocation of time per capita, all cardioplates will be keyed to the individual holder and—

What they had done was devise a method of curtailing the amount of life a person could have. If he was ten minutes late, he lost ten minutes of his life. An hour was proportionately worth more revocation. If someone was consistently tardy, he might find himself, on a Sunday night, receiving a communique from the Master Timekeeper that his time had run out, and he would be "turned off" at high noon on Monday, please straighten your affairs, sir.

And so, by this simple scientific expedient (utilizing

a scientific process held dearly secret by the Ticktockman's office) the system was maintained. It was the only expedient thing to do. It was, after all, patriotic. The schedules had to be met. After all, there *was* a war on!

But wasn't there always?

"Now that is really disgusting," the Harlequin said, when pretty Alice showed him the wanted poster. "Disgusting and *highly* improbable. After all, this isn't the days of desperadoes. A *wanted* poster!"

"You know," Alice noted, "you speak with a great deal of inflection."

"I'm sorry," said the Harlequin humbly.

"No need to be sorry. You're always saying 'I'm sorry.' You have such massive guilt, Everett, it's really very sad."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, then pursed his lips so the dimples appeared momentarily. He hadn't wanted to say that at all. "I have to go out again. I have to *do* something."

Alice slammed her coffee-bulb down on the counter. "Oh for God's *sake,* Everett, can't you stay home just *one* night! Must you always be out in that ghastly clown suit, running around annoying people?"

"I'm—" he stopped, and clapped the jester's hat onto his auburn thatch with a tiny tingling of bells. He rose, rinsed out his coffee-bulb at the tap, and put it into the drier for a moment. "I have to go."

She didn't answer. The faxbox was purring and she pulled a sheet out, read it, threw it toward him on the counter. "It's about you. Of course. You're ridiculous."

He read it quickly. It said the Ticktockman was trying to locate him. He didn't care; he was going out to be late again. At the door, dredging for an exit line, he hurled back petulantly, "Well, *you* speak with inflection, *too!*"

Alice rolled her pretty eyes heavenward. "You're ridiculous." The Harlequin stalked out, slamming the door, which sighed shut softly, and locked itself.

There was a gentle knock, and Alice got up with an exhalation of exasperated breath, and opened the door. He stood there. "I'll be back about ten-thirty, okay?"

She pulled a rueful face. "Why do you tell me that? Why? You *know* you'll be late! You *know* it! You're *always* late, so why do you tell me these dumb things?" She closed the door.

On the other side, the Harlequin nodded to himself. *She's right. She's always right. I'll be late. I'm always late.*

He shrugged again, and went off to be late once more.

He had fired off the firecracker rockets that said: I will attend the 115th annual International Medical Association Invocation at 8:00 P.M. precisely. I do hope you will join me.

The words had burned in the sky, and of course the authorities were there, lying in wait for him. They assumed, naturally, that he would be late. He arrived twenty minutes early, while they were setting up the spiderwebs to trap and hold him, and blowing a large bullhorn, he frightened and unnerved them so that their own moisturized encirclement webs sucked closed, and they were hauled up, kicking and shrieking, high above the amphitheater's floor. The Harlequin laughed and laughed, and apologized profusely. The physicians, gathered in solemn conclave, roared with laughter, and accepted the Harlequin's apologies with exaggerated bowing and posturing, and a merry time was had by all, who thought the Harlequin was a regular foofaraw in fancy pants; all, that is, but the authorities, who had been sent out by the office of the Ticktockman, who hung there like so much dockside cargo, hauled up above the floor of the amphitheater in a most unseemly fashion.

(In another part of the same city where the Harlequin carried on his "activities," totally unrelated in every way to what concerns us here, save that it illustrates the Ticktockman's power and import, a man named Marshall Delahanty received his turn-off notice from the Ticktockman's office. His wife received the notification from the gray-suited minee who delivered it, with the traditional "look of sorrow" plastered hideously across his face. She knew what it was, even without unsealing it. It was a billet-doux of immediate recognition to everyone these days. She gasped, and held it as though it were a glass slide tinged with botulism, and

prayed it was not for her. Let it be for Marsh, she thought, brutally, realistically, or one of the kids, but not for me, please dear God, not for me. And then she opened it, and it *was* for Marsh, and she was at one and the same time horrified and relieved. The next trooper in the line had caught the bullet. "Marshall," she screamed, "Marshall! Termination, Marshall! OhmiGod, Marshall, whattl we do, whattl we do, Marshall, omigodmarshall . . ." and in their home that night was the sound of tearing paper and fear, and the stink of madness went up the flue and there was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do.

(But Marshall Delahanty tried to run. And early the next day, when turn-off time came, he was deep in the forest two hundred miles away, and the offices of the Ticktockman blanked his cardioplate, and Marshall Delahanty keeled over, running, and his heart stopped, and the blood dried up on its way to his brain, and he was dead that's all. One light went out on his sector map in the office of the Master Timekeeper, while notification was entered for fax reproduction, and Georgette Delahanty's name was entered on the dole roles till she could re-marry. Which is the end of the footnote, and all the point that need be made, except don't laugh, because that is what would happen to the Harlequin if ever the Ticktockman found out his real name. It isn't funny.)

The shopping level of the city was thronged with the Thursday-colors of the buyers. Women in canary yellow chitons and men in pseudo-Tyrolean outfits that were jade and leather and fit very tightly, save for the balloon pants.

When the Harlequin appeared on the still-being-constructed shell of the new Efficiency Shopping Center, his bullhorn to his elfishly laughing lips, everyone pointed and stared. He berated them.

"Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don't be slaves of time, it's

a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees. Down with the Ticktockman!"

Who's the nut? most of the shoppers wanted to know. Who's the nut oh wow I'm gonna be late I gotta run . . . .

And the construction gang on the Shopping Center received an urgent order from the office of the Master Timekeeper that the dangerous criminal known as the Harlequin was atop their spire, and their aid was urgently needed in apprehending him. The work crew said no, they would lose time on their construction schedule, but the Ticktockman managed to pull the proper threads of governmental webbing, and they were told to cease work and catch that nitwit up there on the spire with the bullhorn. So a dozen and more burly workers began climbing into their construction platforms, releasing the a-grav plates, and rising toward the Harlequin.

After the debacle (in which, through the Harlequin's attention to personal safety, no one was seriously injured), the workers tried to re-assemble and assault him again. But it was too late. He had vanished. It had attracted quite a crowd, however, and the shopping cycle was thrown off by simply hours. The purchasing needs of the system were therefore falling behind, and so measures were taken to accelerate the cycle for the rest of the day, but it got bogged down and speeded up and they sold too many floatvalves and not nearly enough wegglers, which meant that the popli ratio was off, which made it necessary to rush cases and cases of spoiling Smash-O to stores that usually needed a case only every three or four hours The shipments were bollixed, the trans-shipments were mis-routed, and in the end, even the swizzleskid industries felt it.

"Don't come back till you have him!" the Ticktockman said, very quietly, very sincerely, extremely dangerously.

They used dogs. They used probes. They used cardioplate crossoffs. They used teepers. They used bribery. They used stiktytes. They used intimidation. They used torment. They used torture. They used finks. They used cops. They used search & seizure. They used fallaron. They used betterment incentive. They used fingerprints. They used Bertillion.

They used cunning. They used guile. They used treachery. They used Raoul Mitgong, but he didn't help much. They used applied physics. They used techniques of criminology.

And what the hell: they caught him.

After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time.

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed!" the Harlequin replied, sneering.

"You've been late a total of sixty-three years, five months, three weeks, two days, twelve hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine seconds, point oh three six one one one microseconds. You've used up everything you can, and more. I'm going to turn you off."

"Scare someone else. I'd rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogey man like you."

"It's my job."

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

"You can't adjust. You can't fit in."

"Unstrap me and I'll fit my fist into your mouth."

"You're a nonconformist."

"That didn't used to be a felony."

"It is now. Live in the world around you."

"I hate it. It's a terrible world."

"Not everyone thinks so. Most people enjoy order."

"I don't, and most of the people I know don't."

"That's not true. How do you think we caught you?"

"I'm not interested," said the Harlequin.

"A girl named pretty Alice told us who you were."

"That's a lie."

"It's true. You unnerve her. She wants to belong, she wants to conform. I'm going to turn you off."

"Then do it already, and stop arguing with me."

"I'm not going to turn you off."

"You're an idiot!"

"Repent, Harlequin," said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed."

So they sent him to Coventry. And in Coventry they

worked him over. It was just like what they did to Winston Smith in 1984, which was a book none of them knew about. But the techniques are really quite ancient, and so they did it to Everett C. Marm, and one day quite a long time later the Harlequin appeared on the communications web, appearing elfish and dimpled and bright-eyed, and not at all brainwashed, and he said he had been wrong, that it was a good, a very good thing indeed, to belong, and be right on time hip-ho and away we go, and everyone stared up at him on the public screens that covered an entire city block, and they said to themselves, well, you see, he was just a nut after all, and if that's the way the system is run, then let's do it that way, because it doesn't pay to fight city hall, or in this case, the Ticktockman. So Everett C. Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs, and in every revolution, a few die who shouldn't, but they have to, because that's the way it happens, and if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile. Or, to make the point lucidly:

"Uh, excuse me, sir, I, uh, don't know how to uh, to tell you this, but you were three minutes late. The schedule is a little, uh, bit off."

He grinned sheepishly.

"That's ridiculous!" murmured the Ticktockman behind his mask. "Check your watch." And then he went into his office, going mrmee, mrmee, mrmee, mrmee.

Joseph Green is an American writer who has gathered a steady following with a series of stories in English s-f magazines exploring the wide possibilities of alien life-forms and alien cultures. In THE DECISION MAKERS, *one of his first published in this country, his imagination is at its most colorful.*

THE DECISION MAKERS

JOSEPH GREEN

I

THE DECISION MAKER swam leisurely just beneath the surface, listening to the vast pulsebeat that was the life of his people. It had been some time since he had eaten last and his eyes, obedient to that primal command, were alert for prey; but hunting did not interfere with the more mental functions which occupied the group part of his mind.

He angled to the surface for air, glancing briefly at the humans' Gathering-Place while his head was above water. The round gray buildings squatted like overlarge toadstools on the rocky shore a hundred body-lengths away, dimly seen through the snow that a driving wind had brought down off the mountains.

As he dipped beneath the surface he caught a glimpse

of something dark and sleek to his left and turned that way. The fish saw him and tried, too late, to flee. He bit off its head while still in motion, swallowed it, then seized the body in his webbed fingers and disposed of it in two bites.

The fish-which-flys comes, Decision Maker, came a strong projection from the south. It was a composite voice made by many individuals, and accompanying it was a clear image of a small winged ship.

He swam to the surface and turned his eyes to the southern sky. The ship itself was too small to be visible, but he located it by the brightness of its flaring retro-rockets.

Then the fires winked out as it sank below the horizon.

He called for strength from all people in his immediate area, received it, and projected. He found the ship immediately, now moving swiftly toward him. And yes, the humans' Decision Maker was inside.

"I've put us in a polar orbit, Conscience Odegaard," said the shuttle pilot to his only passenger. "Ground Control says the blow-storm should clear up by the time we make a round. I'll de-polarize the floor viewplate and let you look Sister over direct while we wait."

He touched a control and the floor between their seats grew milky, then transparent. The harsh, xanthic light of Capella G flooded in. Below them, stretching endlessly to the horizons, was mile after mile of deep blue water.

The pilot made a few final adjustments on the attitude gyros, then relaxed and said, "Atlantis is on the other side, and we'll pass over the station in a minute."

Allan Odegaard stared with weary disinterest at the watery landscape. They were moving toward the planet's northern pole, and the edge of the north polar continent soon came in sight. He saw a narrow ledge of ice hugging a low and rocky shore.

"The station's under those," said the pilot, pointing. Allan gazed where the finger indicated, but saw only the white-tinged clouds of the blowstorm. As they moved inland the clouds fell behind, and he saw great mountains rearing crag-

gy heads in an immense annular formation, the dominant feature of the continent. A thin sheet of ice covered most of the lower land between the peaks, sparkling and glittering in the sunlight. Like a rather flat diamond in a Tiffany setting, Allan thought. Then they were over the sea once more.

"There's the first peaks of Atlantis," said the pilot, pointing again, and Allan saw three small islands floating like green jewels on the blue water, the last two curving sharply away to the left. Then the view was monotonous until they reached the southern polar continent, where the mountains seemed taller and the icecap even thinner.

Allan sat back and relaxed, knowing he had seen the planet's entire land area. Sister, or Capella G Eight as it was more properly known, was visually less interesting than most, and nowadays even the best bored him. He had been too long away from home. After this assignment he was going to *insist* on returning to Earth, if only for a vacation. A Practical Philosopher could not afford to lose contact with the people he represented.

The pilot was good, the touchdown scarcely jarring the little shuttle. A big, smiling man in cold weather clothes met Allan at the ship's base and helped him loosen his helmet. The fresh air was so cold he almost strangled on his first breath.

"I'm Station Manager Zip Murdock, Conscience Odegaard," said the big man in a hearty voice. "And this is Phyllis Roen, our biologist."

The tiny woman by the big man's side said, "I'm afraid I'm responsible for getting you here, Conscience Odegaard. Zip and the others don't feel a question even exists."

Murdock glanced up at the cargo hatch, where the pilot was already rigging the small crane. "They don't need us for the unloading. Let's get inside and get you settled, and then Phyllis can bring you up to date on our problem—if we have one."

The sun had moved behind a high cirque in the west, and deep shadows were creeping across the field. Allan started with them toward the foamfab buildings, which huddled at the base of a rocky ridge two hundred yards in-

land. From the ridge to the sea the ground had been cleared of loose rock, the debris forming two long piles of heaped boulders. Half of the cleared area nearest the beach was used for a landing field.

They had taken only a few steps when there was a loud yell of warning behind them. Allan turned, to see that the scene had suddenly and dramatically changed. From behind the rock walls near the water, and from the sea itself, fist-sized rocks were appearing and flying toward the Earthmen. The unloading crew was scrambling for shelter, yelling wildly and drawing their laser guns.

"It's the seals!" said Phyllis, and there was fear in her voice. Murdock had already drawn a laser pistol, its dark red jewel glinting in the fading light. There were no attackers in sight, just the rocks appearing from nowhere and arcing toward them. After a moment Murdock, in apparent frustration, fired toward a cluster of rocks near at hand. The hit boulder sparkled briefly, absorbing the heat but not all the light. Other beams began to flash as the unloading crew got into action. The little landing area became a weird tangle of multicolored lights, shifting shadows and coruscating rocks. The net effect was to provide a flickering but adequate illumination.

Allan saw his first seal clearly as it left the shelter of the rocks and ran for the water, dragging a wounded comrade. They were tiny creatures, only half his height, and they moved with an odd, stiff-jointed swing from one leg to the other that looked awkward but was marvelously fast. Murdock saw them also and lifted his gun, but the beam hissed through the air where they had been as they dove together into the sea. And abruptly the creatures were gone. It was quiet again and the darkness was creeping swiftly over the narrow beach.

"The little devils are getting bolder," said Murdock, holstering his gun. "That's the first daylight attack on dry land."

Allan stooped and picked up one of the stones which had just been flung at them. It was apparently obsidian, and had been hand-chipped until it had several sharp edges,

each capable of penetrating a spacesuit. Primitive—but deadly.

"How did they propel them so far?" he asked Phyllis, but before she could answer an excited voice called, "Miss Roen! Miss Roen, I've found a dead one in the rocks! Do you want the body?"

Allan saw the small woman visibly hesitate before she called back, "Yes, please. Take it into the lab."

"I'd better stay here a moment and assess the damage," said Murdock, moving toward a man who was lying on the ground holding a bloody arm. "If you'll go with Phyllis, Conscience Odegaard . . ."

As they approached the buildings Allan saw two sentries standing on rocky eminences, where they could observe the entire area. Large floodlights brightly illuminated the ground around the buildings. Evidently these civilians had learned to take some rather military precautions on Capella G Eight.

There was no airlock, but the station personnel had built an anteroom where both spacesuits and cold weather gear were hung. Allan shed his suit with thanksgiving, and turned to find Phyllis Roen already out of her heavy clothes and waiting for him.

The tiny woman was obviously Eurasian, with very black hair streaked with gray and features which were delicate without being pretty. He estimated her age at around thirty-five. She still looked very good to him, and this was another indication that he had been too long away from Earth.

"Do you like what you see, Conscience Odegaard?" Phyllis asked, and though she was smiling there was an edge in her voice. He realized he had been staring.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "And please, call me Allan." He paused, not wanting to explain that 'Conscience' was a popular term rather than an actual title, and he had grown very tired of hearing it. A doctorate in philosophy was the highest academic achievement on his record, but to qualify as a Practical Philosopher master's degrees were required in political science, alien psychology, sociology and biology.

The public, when it learned of the unique responsibilities of the Practical Philosophers, had swiftly christened them the "Consciences of Mankind," and the name had stuck.

Mankind needed a conscience, these days. His swiftly expanding exploration and colonization of the galaxy was bringing him into contact with dozens of completely new lifeforms, and seemingly limitless variations of those already familiar. Time and again the question had arisen of whether alien creatures on habitable worlds were animals or intelligent beings, and some wrong decisions had been made before the P.P. corps had been established. The exhaustive academic routine deterred all but the most hardy, and there were less than a dozen "Consciences" to date, but they had brought the problem somewhat under control. At least romantic Space Service captains were no longer declaring a planet unfit for colonization because its overlarge ants had unusually well-developed instinctual patterns.

This time her smile was more sincere. "All right, Allan, and the same. Now if you'll come with me I'll take you on the penny tour, and after dinner we'll have a look at the dead seal."

II

THE Decision Maker's body had relaxed into the state of lazy somnolence which was the nearest his kind approached sleep, but his group mind was still active. As he moved automatically toward the dark surface for air he turned to the matter of his opposite among the humans, and finally concluded that there were too many unknowns at present. He was unable to perform his function.

He could, and did, reach one conclusion, and communicated it to those individuals whose added consciousness within his mind enabled him to be a Decision Maker. It was that the people would make no further attacks at present. The next move would be left to the humans.

At dinner Allan met about half the station's complement of forty scientists, and discovered there was a general air

of cheerful optimism prevalent. On some tiny stations on bitterly hostile worlds he had seen isolation and confinement sour personal relations until the whole crew was ready to commit murder. He was surprised, as Phyllis kept rattling off names and professions, to find meteorologists, geologists and glacialists dominating the group. Usually it was chemists, biologists, and the new "Environmental Adjusters."

Zip Murdock did not appear for dinner. Apparently he and the unloading crew were still busy outside.

The departing thunder of the shuttle's rockets penetrated the aerated walls as Phyllis led Allan into the lab. The seal was lying on a table in the cold room, an area ventilated to outside atmosphere. Phyllis produced light but warm clothing for them and they went inside.

Allan looked down at the prone form on the table, the sleek skin marred by a deep-burned hole in the neck. It was the head that gave the first strong impression of seal. The face had a black, square-cut nose, long whiskers, a rounded ridge of forehead rising abruptly above the muzzle; but the body ruined the illusion. The lower abdomen split into two short legs, each ending in a large flat pad. The upper members, though equally short, had a jointed section, and the ends terminated in long ridged fingers of cartilage, with a thin membrane between.

Allan ran trained fingers over the musculature of a leg. The large muscles on the front and back were equal in size, a wonderful arrangement for swimming but somewhat awkward for walking. Yet he had seen two of them actually running when they had retreated after that brief attack on the landing field.

He asked Phyllis how they did it. She grinned, an impish grimace on her small face. "They fool you, Allan. A bit more adaptable than they look. Watch."

She lifted one pad clear of the table, held the leg with her other hand and slowly forced the pad to move. It revolved until it was perpendicular to the body, and he saw that it was set in a very flexible bone socket. She dropped the leg, rolled the creature on its side and twisted the other

pad in the opposite direction. It also moved to the perpendicular.

"One pad before, one behind. A very stable arrangement." said Phyllis. "It gets around with relative ease on land, even though it looks awkward to us, and you saw how they threw stones with those arms."

"Not with the arms. Look what they found with this fellow." Allan stepped to another bench, picked up a long flat strip of hide she had not noticed, and folded the ends together. A wide section in the center formed a pouch.

"A sling! Of all weapons." There was a touch of awe in Phyllis' voice. "Well, *this* should convince Zip, if he still needs convincing!"

"That the seals are intelligent? I doubt it. Animals have used tools before."

"Yes, but—they didn't have these earlier, you see. They live an almost entirely aquatic existence, and the only artifacts we've seen have been sharpened basalt spears. This is a dry land weapon. They just *invented* it, to use in fighting us."

"That's interesting, but still no proof. This continent you're trying to raise has been dry land several times, I understand. Quite possibly these creatures have used the sling in the past and retained an instinct of how to build it."

"A far more sensible explanation than intelligence," said a new voice.

Allan turned, to see Murdock entering the cold room from outside. The big man stamped some clinging snow off his feet and walked to the table. "H-m-m-m, a nice fat one. Let's have him for dinner tomorrow, Cissy."

"Zip! Please, I have a hard enough time living with the memory that we *did* eat a few!"

"And they were a little fishy tasting, but not bad," said Murdock cheerfully. "Beats the concentrates every time. Look, I've got to change and go eat. Don't let this dizzy female fill your head full of nonsense, Conscience Odegaard."

"I do not form premature conclusions," said Allan carefully. Murdock, and most of the scientists here, were university

employees, the result of a steadily increasing trend for large universities to contract colonization evaluations. They had almost edged out the competing private companies, and the government had long ago settled for supervision of the contracts. These people had a strong vested interest in seeing that his decision went against the seals. When intelligence was established it was standard policy to abandon the planet to its native owners.

"Fine. Cissy is unabashedly prejudiced on the question. I'll see you later in the evening, then."

As the big man closed the door behind him Allan turned to the woman and asked, "Even in an unmilitary organization such as this, isn't that manner of speaking to you a little familiar?"

She gave him a cool glance. "Perhaps, but that's because he feels familiar. We've entered into a trial marriage contract, and plan on full matrimony when we get back to Earth."

"Oh, I see. That's odd; I wouldn't have thought you compatible types."

She shrugged. "Who says we are? Perhaps it's just sex drive and propinquity on both sides. But in any case we're living together, and were perfectly happy until we started quarreling about the seals. I had to go over his head to get you in here, and he's going to be a long time forgiving me for that."

Allan found himself wishing heartily he had not ventured into such personal ground. It was presumptuous of him, and her answer had brought back his own deep-seated loneliness, twisting the knife of bitterness again. Kay had quickly divorced him when he had announced he was going into space; there would be no "widow's wait" for her. She had married again before he finished his final studies and left Earth, and when he visited his children his little daughter was already calling another man father.

The life of a regular spaceman was bad enough, but at least he returned to Earth an average of once every two years. Allan had not been home in eight. Planet after planet raised the unique problem which called for a P.P.'s special

authority, and the swiftly spreading network of exploration brought in new ones faster than decisions could be made. Unless he rebelled he might spend the rest of his days hopping from world to world, with never a life of his own.

Allan beat a hasty retreat. "I'd like to see your notes, if you've already performed a dissection," he said, turning toward the door. "Tomorrow I'll run one on this chap myself."

"Of course," said Phyllis, reverting to business as easily as he. "I ran several, and I've never seen a body better adapted for both swimming and walking. But the brain is —very odd. You'll have to see it for yourself."

She escorted him to his cubicle, then left with word that she would see him later in the lounge. He found his luggage stacked on the bunk, and an hour later, showered, depilated and dressed in clean clothes, he headed for the lounge. Most of the station's off-duty personnel were there, including Murdock.

"Come sit by me, Allan," the big man called. "I'll split my shaker with you."

Murdock was drinking *maquella,* a mildly intoxicating beverage from Centaurus Four that had no after-effects. Allan accepted a glass and sat down.

"What do you think of our operation so far?" asked Murdock pleasantly.

"I hardly know enough about it to think at all. Can you give me a general run-down on your plans? I was amazed to find Phyllis the only biologist here, and this is the first time I've seen an evaluation team with a high percentage of glacialists."

"He can talk about it all night," said Phyllis, who was sitting on Murdock's other side. "But the basic fact is that Sister is so nearly Earth-type that chemists and biologists aren't really needed. The only genuine problem is raising Atlantis, and the general opinion is that this can be accomplished by a slight change in the weather."

"Yes, all it requires is a new ice age," said Murdock with a chuckle. "But to give you some background—the median

temperature on Sister is somewhat higher than humans prefer, and the open land area almost nonexistent. Offhand it looks very unpromising. But this planet has a very fortunate peculiarity. All three major land masses, the two poles and Atlantis, have the same distinguishing feature, a great circle of volcanic mountains surrounding a lower inland area. Atlantis is the largest and lowest of the three, and almost entirely under water. We propose, not to raise the continent, but to lower the ocean level.

"The means of accomplishing this is relatively simple. Sister, despite the high concentration of water vapor in the air, has a low precipitation rate. The atmosphere is exceptionally clean, due to the tiny exposed land surface and low volcanic activity, and there is very little dust to serve as sublimation nuclei for raindrops. Precip is almost entirely dependent on giant condensation nuclei, and that too is small because the oceans have a low salinity rate and there is very little sodium chloride in the air. Briefly, we propose to stimulate the precip rate by blowing up the smallest of the four moons, in such a fashion that most of the material turns to dust. We will slow it below orbital speed with the explosions, and create a rain of dust into the upper atmosphere which will continue for many years. Precip will rise to several thousand percent of normal. Over both polar regions this will come down as snow, and the rapid accumulation in the two enclosed continents will swell the existing ice-fields until a sizable percentage of the planet's water is locked up in ice. The world ocean level will drop, we estimate slightly over three-hundred feet, and that will bring all the ring of mountains and about half the interior of Atlantis above the surface. In addition, the temperature will drop to bearable limits. And then you can send in the colonists."

"It sounds almost too simple," said Allan wonderingly.

"That's an explanation in very broad terms. There are a few relevant details to be worked out, such as the large summirrors we'll have to post above each pole, to artificially stimulate the firm fields and turn snow to ice by continuous melting and refreezing, the four mirrors we plan to place

above what will be the largest lakes on the continent, both to help dry them up and stimulate the precip rate, the river shaping that will have to be done when the dropping ocean level starts them flowing, and a few thousand smaller details, some of which we can't even imagine yet. This will be the first attempt to terraform an entire planet by weather control. But if plans work out, within a hundred years nine-tenths of Atlantis will be growing grass, and that's a land area of almost eight million square miles. The farming activities of the colonists should keep the dust level high and make the new precip rate self-perpetuating."

"It's a big undertaking, but everyone thinks it can be done," said Phyllis earnestly. "When you compare that much surface to those tiny areas on some of the new planets, where every square foot of soil has to be treated and re-treated before it will take Earth plants, you can begin to see what a wonderful opportunity this is."

"Yes, we've taken at least two thousand cores out of the higher areas in Atlantis," resumed Murdock. "They show it's been raised and inundated three times within the past hundred thousand years, obviously a result of volcanic activity causing a temporary increase in the dust level. Plant growth was extensive each time the water receded, and we have a fairly thick layer of humus-rich soil on which to plan an economy. The sea has both animal and plant life in great quantities, including many species, like the seals, which can live on either land or water. I think Sister, within two hundred years, can support a hundred million people."

"Weather control is still not an exact science, even on Earth. Can you really be this sure of how your dust and mirrors will affect this planet?"

"No, but we're certain enough to recommend going ahead with it once we've finished our current job of assessing the ice-carrying capacity of this pole. After all, there's no intelligent life to be harmed if we blunder."

Phyllis glared angrily at Murdock, but did not answer the implied derision. Most of the people in the lounge had been drifting out as they talked, suppressing yawns. The

tiny Eurasian rose, said goodnight to Allan, and left also.

"I'm prepared to offer you any assistance within my power, Allan," said Murdock, rising. "Just let me know what you need."

"Thanks. I'll probably call on you. Phyllis and I are going to dissect that seal in the morning and see what we can learn."

They learned very little Phyllis had not already known. Allan pushed back from the table after four hours of intense work, and turned off the recorder into which he had been making a running commentary. The seal was basically a variation of its distant cousins on Earth. There was nothing of unusual interest about its bodily processes, with the exception of that baffling brain. The pan was small, the cranium narrow, the actual size less than a quarter that of a human. But it was like nothing he had ever seen.

They washed up and went to lunch. Phyllis had been a competent but not brilliant helper, and the notes she had taken on what little she had observed of the seal's behavior were no help. Her belief that the creatures were intelligent was apparently based on woman's intuition rather than accumulated data.

"I think we've learned as much as we can from a dead specimen," he said after the meal. "What we need is a *live* seal. How do we go about getting one?"

"That's a tough question. They carry away their wounded after an attack, and it's almost impossible to catch them in the water. Several of the men tried, when we were"—she made a moue of distaste —"eating them."

"I'll discuss it with Murdock tonight," said Allan.

I should be the one! the Decision Maker projected into the night, his individuality for once overriding the group consciousness and speaking clearly. *Mine is the risk, let mine be the body! . . .* But the soft, insistent voices of the individuals comprising the race memory cried *No! No! it may not be! No danger to the Decision Maker. No danger. No danger . . .* and he yielded, letting the desire to offer

himself for the trap the humans were setting fade from his mind. With its passing came the need for decisions.

The humans were establishing a work party near the edge of the water, the work to continue after dark in hopes of luring the seals into an attack. Men with stun-guns were hidden throughout the rocks, and three large lights had been concealed at high points overlooking the area. The seals' movements must be planned to insure that the humans captured only the one individual the group selected. Also, the attack must look real, must seem to involve a large party while actually exposing the smallest possible number to danger.

The word "tactics" appeared in his mind, and almost immediately there was an answering pulse. One of the new memory carriers, containing only the human knowledge .... He scanned the word and its associated meanings, leaped to three other memorybank units checking out inferences and related data, and had his plan. One of the humans had been an ardent follower of a game played on Earth, one which involved deceptive movement of bodies, concerted displays of an object called a ball to a specified section of the playing area. . . . He formulated the necessary details, and swiftly communicated them to the selected units of the people.

III

ALLAN crouched low in the rocks and watched the water. The two larger moons were passing slowly through the clear sky and the beach was well-lighted. He turned away a second to rub his eyes, and when he looked again the beach was swarming with short figures. It was almost as if he had signaled them to attack by looking away.

The seals came running upright out of the water and scurried behind the two walls of rock, moving stiff-legged but swiftly across the open area. From his vantage point Allan could see the leaders starting to twirl their slings. He drew his laser pistol and sent a red beam flaring into the sky.

Instantly the searchlights came on, brightly illuminating the areas behind the rocks where the seals were gathering. The work gang dropped their tools and drew stun-guns, and the men hidden in the rocks rose to their feet, searching for targets.

The abortive attack stalled. The seals broke for the sea, fleeing what was obviously a trap. Allan saw the hurrying line of sleek forms plunging into the water, and rubbed his eyes. He would have sworn there had been many more of them than now seemed visible.

"Got one!" came an exultant yell, and "Me too!" said another voice. But Allan's attention was abruptly distracted. A seal popped into view less than twenty feet away, twirling a sling and looking directly at him.

He hastily drew his stun-gun, fired and missed, cursed himself for a bungling professor who belonged in a classroom, fired again, and saw the small figure drop. The sharp-edged missile clattered to the rock at his feet.

The floodlights abruptly went out. There were wild yells as the humans, their eyes slow to adjust back to moonlight, found themselves blinded. Allan groped his way to the seal he had shot and crouched over the body. They should have gotten several prisoners, but remembering the creatures' habit of carrying off their wounded he was taking no chances.

After a moment someone found the outlet where the power cable had been disconnected, and the lights came back on. The noises of fighting had died away in the darkness, and now Allan saw there were no attackers in sight.

"Hey! My seal's gone!" called the first man who had claimed a hit, as though he could hardly believe it.

"Mine too!" said another voice, and other men began to climb among the rocks, looking for seals they had been certain they saw fall. When the confusion subsided Allan discovered they had exactly one captive . . . his.

The small creature in the cage twitched its long whiskers, stirred, and after a moment raised its head. The eyelids moved, and Allan found himself staring into a slightly pro-

tuberant pair of golden eyes. The thick black lips opened as the seal gave an almost human yawn, showing the long incisors of a carnivore's dentition. The mouth closed with an audible click of teeth, and it moved to the bars separating them.

"At close range it even *looks* intelligent," said Phyllis softly, and the captive turned the golden eyes on her. They were alone in the cold room.

I am not intelligent as you humans use the term, said a clear, cold voice in both their minds, in perfect World English. *As a separate entity I exist as an animal, directed primarily by inherited instincts. But I am a member of a mentally interlocked race, and the combined minds which merge in my brain possess the quality of intelligence.*

The two humans turned toward each other simultaneously, and each saw that the other had received the message. There was a brief silence while the stunning implications sank in, and then Phyllis opened her rosebud mouth in a yell of high glee. "I told him! Oh, the thick-headed oaf, I told him, I told him!"

Her enthusiasm was contagious, but Allan forced himself to be calm. A sense of steadily mounting excitement was building up and his breath was ragged—these unexpected discoveries were one of the rewarding parts of his job—but this was no time to become emotional.

There was an odd quality to the mental voice. It gave a strong impression of a group speaking in chorus, but with the voice of this individual dominating the rest.

"How may I best communicate with you?" he asked aloud.

As you are now doing. Your immediate thoughts are unclear when you do not vocalize.

"Then first"—his mind shifted into high gear, many events of the past few hours clicking together into a coherent pattern—"first I want to know why you only pretended to attack the work party and deliberately let us capture you."

Because we wish to establish face-to-face communication. It is our understanding that you will decide whether these

humans now here will leave or stay and be joined by many more.

"That is my responsibility, yes. But why are you interested in my decision?"

There was a brief silence. Allan felt Phyllis' hand clinging tightly to his arm, and he stared into the unblinking golden eyes, waiting. The creature finally projected, *It would be best if you would accompany this unit to a Gathering-Place. I am only a messenger. The Decision Maker wishes to meet you face-to-face, in the presence of a complete memory.*

Allan turned to look at Phyllis. She was staring at him, wide-eyed. Her expression asked, Trap?

He shook his head, turned back to the seal. It had closed its mouth, and the heavy lips his the sharp teeth. For the first time he saw how the large eyes, the downward curve of the mouth, the jutting whiskers, gave the seal a tragic-comic look, like the sad clowns of an ancient circus. "I will go with you," he said aloud.

"Your safety while you are here is my responsibility!" said Murdock angrily. "I couldn't possibly permit it!"

"You have no way of preventing me." Allan made a strong effort and kept his voice down. Despite the man's bluff friendliness he had not liked Murdock from the first, and this unexpected opposition was too ill-timed to be anything but deliberate obstructionism. "I have the authority to take command of this or any other civilian-operated station, and I will summarily remove you as manager if that becomes necessary."

Murdock jumped to his feet, stood towering over the smaller man. His face was a fiery red, his big hands clenched into fists. Allan found himself wondering if Murdock would actually be foolish enough to hit him.

"Removing me may not be as easy as you seem to think!" the big man bellowed. They were alone in his private office, and the sound was almost deafening.

"Don't be childish. The station personnel are thoroughly familiar with the authority of a Practical Philosopher. They

aren't going to risk a prison sentence by supporting you."

"You talk pretty rough for such a small man!"

"Please. Will you simply supply me with the needed equipment without further argument?"

Murdock supplied it. An hour after daybreak Allan and the seal were swimming through the blue water, about twenty feet below the surface, heading northwest along the ice shelf. The station's standard underwater gear was a space-suit with a ducted propeller mounted on the back, with a simple variable speed control installed between the first two fingers of the right hand. At maximum he could move less than ten miles an hour, and keeping his head tilted back for vision and his arms rigidly ahead for guidance was tiring.

Surrounding them, but keeping at a respectful distance, were fighting seals, all carrying basalt spears. Phyllis had assured him she had seen a team of seals kill the largest fish in this fresh-water ocean with those sharpened rocks.

It was another long and weary hour before his escort projected, *Move toward the ice and descend slightly. Slow your speed.*

He obeyed, and after a moment he saw a dark shadow in the white wall of ice, a shadow that swiftly grew larger. He angled slowly toward it and it became a jagged tunnel. The seal moved ahead to guide him.

After a few yards the roof began to recede and he angled upward; he rose until he broke the surface, to find himself in a scene of strange but compelling beauty.

It was a large grotto in the ice, at the head of a glacier that had reached the shore and lost its momentum. It had calved in a peculiar way, leaving this great hollow opening, and the sides had grown together again at the top. The ceiling was thin, sunlight pouring in through several long cracks where the joint was not perfect. The yellow beams struck one ice wall and rebounded in glittering fantasms of color, springing from surface to surface in a deceptive brightness that concealed more than it revealed. The massive walls were rough and jagged, with many sharp protruding edges.

It was a fairy palace of crystal and glass, of reflected light and softened shadow, and Allan Odegaard thought it the most beautiful spot he had ever seen.

Lying on the little beach and watching him with unblinking attention were about thirty adult seals. As he waded out of the water Allan saw that they formed a semi-circle, and at its center was the one who could only be the Decision Maker.

IV

THE TWO Decision Makers faced each other, the golden eyes of the seal meeting and matching the brown eyes of the small Earthman. Allan lowered his gaze to check his environmental indicator, then undid his helmet. The air had a slightly fishy smell, but was crisp and cold.

We welcome you to this Gathering-Place, came a projection, strong and commanding, and again it was compounded of many minds, though the overriding personality was that of the Decision Maker. *We have brought you here to prove that within the meaning of your terms defining "race" and "intelligent" we are an intelligent race. We want you to declare this planet unlawfully occupied by Earthmen, and order those present to leave and all others to stay away.*

"I have no choice but to grant that as a race you are intelligent," said Allan slowly. "But if this mental ability is achieved by grouping minds, and as individuals you are something much less than the unified whole, then you are a unique lifeform and will require further study. But for now I would like to know why you want us to leave the planet."

We know what the other Earthmen, those who understand the ways of wind, water and ice, seek to do here. Three times from the year our racial memory came into being the ice has grown, the sea lowered, the area you call Atlantis become half land and half water, the land green with growing things. Three times within memory our people have moved in great numbers onto the land, only to be driven back into the sea when the ice melted once more. We have confirmed, from knowledge found in the minds of

Earthmen, what we already felt to be true, that we as a race cannot progress until we have freed ourselves of the environment of the sea. In another eight thousand of our seasons the ice will begin to form, as it has before. We will move onto the land, as we have before. But this time we will apply what we have taken from the minds of your companions and stored in our memory; we shall master the physical sciences, develop the necessary technology, learn to control the weather as you do. There will be no more flooding of the land.

Listening to the calm, relentless way the words formed themselves and beat slowly through the neural passages of his brain, Allan accepted the fact these people could do exactly what they said.

"You have taken all the knowledge of all the humans here and stored it in your racial memory?"

All except yourself. Yours we will have in a few more nights.

"Since you can read my mind you know that I have a difficult decision to make. It would help me if I knew what your 'racial memory' is, and how it works. I would also like to know your goals as a race once you are on the land, and how you plan to achieve them."

Those questions are easily answered. Our group memory is an accumulated mass of knowledge which is impressed on the memory area of young individuals at birth, at least three such young ones for each memory segment. We are a short-lived race, dying of natural causes after eight of our years. As each individual who carries a share of the memory feels death approaching he transfers his part to a newly born child, and thus the knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation, forever.

As for our aims, they are similar to your own. We have achieved—there was a brief pause—*economic plenty. We have none of the conflicts between individuals which characterize your society. But this is not enough. We seek to improve the life of the individual within the race, and this entails increasing the natural lifespan, eliminating enemies, perfecting a science of medicine—a concept new to us—*

and achieving the ability to enjoy pleasure, which we now know to be lacking in our lives. All this we can accomplish by means of the knowledge now stored in our memory, once the land is again ours.

And the Earthman has corrupted another innocent race, thought Allan with wry bitterness.

We can read your thoughts when you project that strongly. You define "corruption" as increased knowledge of the choices open to an intelligent being, and an inclination to make those choices which lead toward greater pleasure in life. Why do you consider this a retrogressive quality?

"I'm afraid it would be too complicated to explain, and perhaps I don't fully understand myself," said Allan grimly. "For now, it's enough to know I must make a decision which will vitally affect your future, and I freely admit I'm going to find it hard to do."

Since you state we qualify as an intelligent race your path should be clear. If you are now ready another unit will guide you back to your base. When you have made your decision, speak it aloud, and we will hear. Bear in mind that if you decide to stay we will harass and fight you in every manner within our power.

Allan slowly replaced his helmet and turned toward the water. He felt like a man who has eaten too large a meal and wants nothing more than to crawl into a corner and estivate while it digests. But his meal had been mental, and he might be a long time in torpor before he fully understood all that he had learned.

The trip back was uneventful, and by noon he found himself in Murdock's office, with only Phyllis and the base manager present. He gave them a brief report, and watched the incredulous expression form on Murdock's face. Phyllis, too, seemed a little stunned.

"Do I understand you have definitely decided an individual seal is not intelligent?" asked Murdock when he regained his composure.

"I've made no decisions. This ability to group minds is new to us, and requires study."

"Because their group intelligence is a unique phenomena is no reason to consider the individuals within the group as weak," said Phyllis heatedly.

"I'll probably want to talk to you again later." Murdock's voice was carefully expressionless. "In the meantime why don't you get a bite of lunch. Phyllis, can you stay a moment?"

Allan took the implied dismissal at face value and rose. He was hungry, but when he sat down to eat, the concentrates seemed curiously tasteless. He kept thinking of the refreshing coolness of the air in the grotto, of the beauty of the sun on the sparkling ice, the strange and ancient wisdom he had found in a group of seals. How odd, that as a race they had achieved the goals that had dominated the thinking of Earth's best philosophers for thousands of years, and then had formed the conviction that the needs of the individual were as important as those of the race. There were *still* social planners on Earth who were unable to think of people in any terms except "groups" and "masses."

After lunch he put on cold weather gear and went outside. He walked the beaches all afternoon, hating his responsibility and the necessity for it. When he returned to the station at dusk his thinking had degenerated to vagrant thoughts; loose fragments, impressions and partial memories swirled through his mind . . . *we have achieved economic plenty, but this is not enough . . . corruption is increased knowledge of the choices open to an intelligent being . . . we will harass and fight you in every manner within our power* . . . The memory of blood oozing from the bitten body of a fish before the seal gulped it down without chewing, the sad-clown faces, the overwhelming inclination to think of them as lovable pets. . . . What would it be like, to share your thoughts, emotions and desires with your fellows, to form a composite being greater than the sum of its parts? There was a clear, reasoning power in the Decision Maker, an intellect of great strength.

When he stepped inside the door the p.a. was calling his name. He walked to Murdock's office as requested.

"Sit down, Allan." The bluff heartiness, the easy, friendly attitude had been discarded, as though the big man knew they no longer served a purpose. His voice was brisk and impersonal. "I'm going to give you some information about Sister you won't find in the regular reports. All personnel who are aware of it have been sworn to strict secrecy. Not that that's necessary in your case, of course."

"Thanks," said Allan stiffly.

"You are aware, I'm sure, that Earth's supply of uranium is almost exhausted. In the excitement over this new 'sunlight diffusion' method of power generation and propagation the public has tended to forget the thousands of other industrial and medical applications of atomic science. They think that virtually unlimited power, available anywhere at any time, will solve all problems. Actually, the need for uranium grows every day, and it has proven hard to find in commercial quantities. Sister is a very rich planet. The cores we have taken from Atlantis show extensive deposits of uranite and davidite, as well as some pitchblende, carnotite and tobernite. The primary concentration of davidite is on a rather high plateau, one which will be above water in five years. I predict that within ten there will be a refining plant there, shipping ore to Earth. I can't over-emphasize how important this is."

"That's interesting information, Zip, but I fail to see the direct connection. I'm sure you are aware economic considerations never play any part in a P.P.'s decision."

"Oh, come off it! That garbage about being the 'conscience of Mankind' won't wash with me. When word of these deposits reaches certain ears on Earth they'll have your credentials withdrawn in a minute if you give us trouble."

"Do you really think so?" asked Allan. His voice was soft, almost gentle.

"I'm certain of it. Idealism has its uses, but it can't stand in the way of a genuine need."

"Would this sudden disbelief in a P.P.'s authority be connected in any way with the royalties your university will lose if I rule against you?"

Murdock's face flushed, and he rose to his feet.

"Can't you understand that I'm thinking of the good of *all* mankind?"

Allan sighed tiredly. "Perhaps you are. And the needs of all mankind influence me, in a way you might not understand. But you're a little late with your information. I've already made up my mind. And I'll require that underwater gear again in the morning."

When he was standing in his own cubicle after dinner he spoke into the air: "You said that you could hear me. Acknowledge that you do."

There was a sudden electric sense of awareness, as though someone had picked up a telephone and stood holding it without speaking. He waited, and after a moment the calm multiple voice asked, *What is your wish?*

"I would like to speak to the Decision Maker again, in person. Would you send someone at daylight to take me to the Gathering-Place?"

There was another brief silence, and he could almost hear the ether stirring with the hurried conference.

Then the voice said, *It shall be done.*

The beautiful grotto seemed unchanged, except that there were several more of the spear-carrying warriors present. They did not trust him, which indicated that their mind-reading abilities were limited. He had prepared no treachery.

The Decision Maker regarded him sadly from the center of his race's memory bank, the golden eyes unblinking. *This time you have summoned us.*

Allan took a deep breath of the cold air and paced back and forth on the small beach as he spoke, not looking at the seals. "You said you had no concept until our arrival of the science of medicine. Do you understand the meaning of the term 'gamble'? Because I am gambling with your future, and I can't possibly know how it will turn out. Let me give you my reasons and then my decision, which I have already sent to Earth."

The guards nearest him moved closer, their spears perceptibly rising. He sensed the air of menace in the room,

and wondered if he had made a mistake in coming here in person. It would be strange to die in this ice palace, when he had many times felt himself to be in far greater danger and escaped alive.

"If you are left alone it will be eight thousand years before a seal again walks the land, but then it will be a safe and certain thing. If we occupy your planet and war comes, you will kill many Earthmen before you are finally hunted down and killed. But make no mistake about it, you will be exterminated. Man is a capable, ruthless, relentless foe, and if he sets out to destroy you he will succeed. Your cooked bodies will grace his table, and it will not matter that the brains he shatters contain a racial memory that reaches farther into the past than his own.

"I cannot endure the thought that another thousand generations of your kind should follow the tortuous road of the sea, gaining nothing but the day's sustenance. Neither do I wish war between us. My decision has been to report that you are definitely an intelligent race . . . but that I recommend completing the terraforming operation and starting colonization."

There was an instant stir among the seals, a silent shifting of position as the guards nearest him raised their spears and advanced, stood poised, ready to thrust him through. He glanced to the waiting warriors and back to the Decision Maker, and knew that his life hung on his next words.

He had not known how they would react, and his meager knowledge of hive-minds did not justify guesses, but somehow he had not thought they'd take an immediate and personal revenge.

"I am an Earthman," he said slowly and clearly. "Sometimes I have been proud of my people, and sometimes ashamed. But the gamble I am taking is based on a knowledge of them, of other races, of your own, that you cannot match even with your long memory. If the colonists will follow my recommendation—cooperate with you, help you on land and be helped by you in the sea—there is no reason the two races cannot progress together. Despite our

past history I have enough faith in man to think he will fulfill his share of the bargain. Will you match my faith, and pledge your race to work with mine?"

The Decision Maker faced him silently, and he felt a secret tug of knowing sympathy for an individual who must decide the course of his entire race. The silence stretched out; the guards standing by him did not lower their spears.

The Earthman stood waiting for the word that would decide his personal fate. The decision that the two races could work together had been reached by reasoning, the one to tell the seals in person by a sudden impulse.

Now he would learn the truth of both.

It's a truism that although Man makes constant progress in civilization and even in culture, he seems unable to rise above the ancient barbarity of war. Here British writer David I. Masson, with fascinatingly detailed imagination, brings that thought to life in a war story rich in symbolism and power—and with a final, unsettling suggestion about the nature of the Enemy.

DAVID I. MASSON

IT WAS AN apocalyptic sector. Out of the red-black curtain of the forward sight-barrier, which at this distance from the Frontier shut down a mere twenty meters north, came every sort of meteoric horror: fission and fusion explosions, chemical detonations, a super-hail of projectiles of all sizes and basic velocities, sprays of nerve-paralysants and thalamic dopes. The impact devices burst on the barren rock of the slopes or the concrete of the forward stations, some of which were disintegrated or eviscerated every other minute. The surviving installations kept up an equally intense and nearly vertical fire of rockets and shells. Here and there a protectivized figure could be seen "sprinting" up, down or along

the slopes on its mechanical "walker" like a frantic ant from an anthill attacked by flamethrowers. Some of the visible oncoming trajectories could be seen snaking overhead into the indigo gloom of the rear sight-curtain, perhaps fifty meters south, which met the steep-falling rock surface forty-odd meters below the observer's eye. East and west, as far as the eye could see, perhaps some forty miles in this clear mountain air despite the debris of explosion (but cut off to west by a spur from the range), the visibility-corridor witnessed a continual onslaught and counter-onslaught of devices. The audibility-corridor was vastly wider than that of sight; the many-pitched din, even through left ear in helm, was considerable.

"Computer-sent, must be," said H's transceiver into his right ear. No sigil preceded this statement, but H knew the tones of B, his next-up, who in any case could be seen a meter away saying it, in the large concrete bubble whence they watched, using a plaspex window and an infrared northviewer with a range of some hundreds of meters forward. His next-up had been in the bunker for the three minutes, apparently overchecking, probably for an appreciation to two-up who might be in station VV now.

"Else how can they get minute-ly impacts here, you mean?" said H.

"Well, of course it could be longrange low-frequency—we don't really know how Time works over There."

"But if the conceleration runs asymptotically to the Frontier, as it should if Their Time works in mirror-image, would anything ever have got over?"

"Doesn't have to, far's I can see—maybe it steepens a lot, then just falls back at the same angle the other Side," said B's voice; "anyway, I didn't come to talk science: I've news for you. If we hold out the next few seconds here, you're Relieved."

H felt a black inner sight-barrier beginning to engulf him, and a roaring in his ears swallowed up the noise of the bombardment. He bent double as his knees began to buckle, and regained full consciousness. He could see his replacement now, an uncertain-looking figure in prot-suit

(like everybody else up here) at the far side of the bunker.

"XN 3, what orders then?" he said crisply, his pulse accelerating.

"XN 2: pick em-kit now, repeat now, rocket 3333 to VV, presént tag"—holding out a luminous orange label printed with a few coarse black characters—"and proceed as ordered thence."

H stuck up his right thumb from his fist held sideways at elbow length, in salute. It was no situation for facial gestures or unnecessary speech. "XN 3, yes, em-kit, 3333 rocket tag" (he had taken it in his left glove) "and VV orders; parting!"

He missed B's nod as he skimmed on soles to the exit, grabbed a small bundle hanging (one of fifteen) from the fourth hook along, slid down the greasy slide under ground ten meters to a fuel-cell-lit cavern, pressed a luminous button in the wall, watched a lit symbol passing a series of marks, jumped into the low "car" as it ground around the corner, and curled up foetuswise. His weight having set off the cardoor mechanism, the car shut, slipped down and (its clamps settling on H's body) roared off down the chute.

Twenty-five seconds after his "parting" word H uncurled at the forward receiver cell of station VV nearly half a mile downslope. He crawled out as the rocket ground off again, walked ten steps onward in this larger version of his northward habitat, saluted thumb-up and presented his tag to two-up (recognized from helm-tint and helm-sign), saying simultaneously, "XN 3 rep, Relieved."

"XN 1 to XN 3: take this" (holding out a similar orange tag plucked from his pocket) "and take rocktrain down, in—70 seconds. By the way, ever seen a prehis?"

"No sir."

"Spot through here, then; look like pteros but more primitive."

The infrared telescopic viewer looking northwest passed through the forward sight-barrier which due north was about forty meters away here; well upslope yet still well clear of the dark infrared-radiation barrier could be seen,

soundlessly screaming and yammering, two scaly animals about the size of large dogs, but with two legs and heavy wings, flopping around a hump or boulder on the rock. They might have been hit on their way along, and could hardly have had any business on that barren spot, H thought.

"Thanks; odd," he said. Eleven seconds of the seventy had gone. He pulled out a squirter-cup from the wall and took a drink from the machine, through his helm. Seventeen seconds gone, fifty-three to go.

"XN 1 to XN 3: how are things up there?"

Naturally a report was called for: XN 2 might never return, and communication up-time and down-time was nearly impossible at these latitudes over more than a few meters.

"XN 3. Things have been hotting up all day; I'm afraid a burst through may be attempted in the next hour or so —only my guess, of course. But I've never seen anything like it all this time up here. I suppose you'll have noticed it in VV too?"

"XN 1, thanks for report," was all the answer he got. But he could hear for himself that the blitz was much more intense than any he had known at this level either.

Only twenty-seven seconds remained. He saluted and strode off across the bunker with his em-kit and the new tag. He showed the tag to the guard, who stamped it and pointed wordlessly down a corridor. H ran down this, arriving many meters down the far end at a little gallery. An underslung railguided vehicle with slide-doors opening into cubicles sliced quietly alongside. A gallery-guard waved as H and two others waiting opened doors whose indicators were unlit, the doors slid to, and H found himself gently clamped in on a back-tilted seat as the rocktrain accelerated downhill. After ten seconds it stopped at the next checkhalt, a panel in the cubicle ceiling lit up to state "DIVERSION, LEFT," presumably because the direct route had been destroyed. The train now appeared to accelerate, but more gently, swung away to left (as H could feel), and stopped at two more checkhalts before swinging back to right and finally decelerating, coming to rest and opening

some 480 seconds after its start, by Had's personal chronograph, instead of the 200 he had expected.

At this point daylight could again be seen. From the top bunker where XN 2 had discharged him, Had had now gone some ten miles south and nearly three thousand meters down, not counting detours. The forward sight-barrier here was hidden by a shoulder of mountain covered in giant lichen, but the southern barrier was evident as a violet-black fog-wall a quarter of a mile off. Lichens and some sort of grass-like vegetation covered much of the neighboring landscape, a series of hollows and ravines. Noise of war was still audible, mingled with that of a storm, but nearby crashes were not frequent and comparatively little damage could be seen. The sky overhead was turbulent. Some very odd-looking animals, perhaps between a lizard and a stoat in general appearance, were swarming up and down a tree-fern nearby. Six men in all got out of the rocktrain, besides Had. Two and three marched off in two groups down a track eastward. One (not one of those who had got in at VV) stayed with Had.

"I'm going down to the Great Valley; haven't seen it for twenty days; everything'll be changed. Are you sent far?" said the other man's voice in Had's right ear through the transceiver.

"I—I—I'm Relieved," tried Had uncertainly.

"Well I'm . . . disintegrated!" was all the other man could manage. Then, after a minute, "Where will you go?"

"Set up a business way south, I think. Heat is what suits me, heat and vegetation. I have a few techniques I could put to good use in management of one sort or another. I'm sorry—I never meant to plume it over you with this—but you did ask me."

"That's all right. You certainly must have Luck, though. I never met a man who was Relieved. Make good use of it, won't you. It helps to make the Game worthwhile, up here—I mean, to have met a man who is joining all those others we're supposed to be protecting—it makes them real to us, in a way."

"Very fine of you to take it that way," said Had.

"No—I mean it. Otherwise we'd wonder if there *was* any people to hold the Front for."

"Well, if there weren't, how'd the techniques have developed for holding on up here?" put in Had.

"Some of the Teccols I remember in the Great Valley might have developed enough techniques for that."

"Yes, but think of all the pure science you need to work up the techniques from; I doubt if that could have been studied inside the Valley Teccols."

"Possibly not—that's a bit beyond me," said the other's voice a trifle huffily, and they stood on in silence till the next cable-car came up and around at the foot of the station. Had let the man get in it—he felt he owed him that—and a minute later (five seconds only, up in his first bunker, he suddenly thought ironically) the next car appeared. He swung himself in just as a very queer-looking purple bird with a long bare neck alighted on the stoat-lizards' tree-fern. The cable-car sped down above the ravines and hollows, the violet southern curtain backing still more swiftly away from it. As the time-gradient became less steep his brain began to function better and a sense of well-being and meaningfulness grew in him. The car's speed slackened.

Had was glad he still wore his prot-suit when a couple of chemical explosions burst close to the cable line, presumably by chance, only fifty meters below him. He was even more glad of it when flying material from a third broke the cable itself well downslope and the emergency cable stopped him at the next pylor. He slid down the pylon's lift and spoke with his transceiver close to the telephone at the foot. He was told to make west two miles to the next cable-car line. His interlocutor, he supposed, must be speaking from an exchange more or less on the same latitude as that of his pylon, since communication even here was still almost impossible north-south except at ranges of some meters. Even so, there was a squeaky sound about the other voice and its speech came out clipped and rapid. He supposed his own voice would sound gruff and drawled to the other.

Using his "walker," he picked his way across ravines and

gullies, steering by compass and watching the sight-barriers and the Doppler tint-equator ahead for yawing. "All very well for that man to talk about Teccols," he thought, "but he must realize that no civilization could have evolved from anywhere as far north as the Great Valley: it's far too young to have even evolved Men by itself—at least at this end; I'm not sure how far south the eastern end goes."

The journey was not without its hazards: there were several nearby explosions, and what looked like a suspicious artificial miasma, easily overlooked, lay in two hollows which he decided to go around. Moreover, an enraged giant bear-sloth came at him in a mauve shrub-thicket and had to be eliminated with his quickgun. But to one who had just come down from that mountain-hell all this seemed like a pleasant stroll.

Finally he came upon the line of pylons and pressed the telephone button at the foot of the nearest, after checking that its latitude-number was nearly right. The same voice, a little less outlandish and rapid, told him a car would arrive in three-quarters of a minute and would be arranged to stop at his pylon; if it did not, he was to press the emergency button nearby. Despite his "walker," nearly an hour had gone by since he had set out by it. Perhaps ninety minutes had passed since he had first left the top bunker—well over a minute and a half of their time there.

The car came and stopped, he scrambled up and in, and this time the journey passed without incident, except for occasional sudden squalls, and the passage of flocks of nervous crows, until the car arrived at its terminus, a squat tower on the heathy slopes. The car below was coming up, and a man in it called through his transceiver as they crept past each other, "First of a bunch!" Sure enough, the terminus interior was filled with some twenty men all equipped almost enough to have warranted sending them up by polyheli, thought Hadol, rather than wait for cars at long intervals. They looked excited and not at all cast down, but Hadol refrained from giving away his future. He passed on to the ratchet-car way and found himself one of a group

of men more curious about the landscape than about their fellows. A deep reddish curtain of indeterminate thickness absorbed the shoulders of the heights about a quarter-mile northward, and the bluish fog terminated the view over the valley at nearly half a mile southward, but between the two the latitudinal zone was tolerably clear and devoid of obvious signs of war. Forests of pine and lower down of oak and ash covered the slopes, until finally these disappeared in the steepening edge of the Great Valley, whose meadows could however be glimpsed past the bluff. Swirling cloud-shadows played over the ground, skirts and tassels of rain and hail swept across it, and there was the occasional flash and rumble of a storm. Deer could be seen briefly here and there, and dense clouds of gnats danced above the trees.

A journey of some fifty minutes took them down, past two empty stations, through two looped tunnels and among waterfalls and under cliffs where squirrels leapt across from dangling root to root, through a steadily warmer and warmer air to the pastures and cornfields of the Great Valley, where a narrow village of concrete huts and wooden cabins, Emmel, nestled on a knoll above the winding river, and a great road ran straight to the east, parallel to a railway. The river was not, indeed, large here—a shallow, stony but attractive stream, and the Great Valley (all of whose breadth could now be seen) was at this western point no more than a third of a mile across. The southward slopes terminating the North-Western Plateau, now themselves visible, were rich in shrubland.

The utter contrast with what was going on above and, in top bunker time, perhaps four minutes ago, made Hadolar nearly drunk with enjoyment. However, he presented his luminous tag and had it (and his permanent checktab) checked for radiation, countersigned and stamped by the guard commander at the military terminal. The detachable piece at the end of the tag was given back to him to be slipped into the identity disc which was, as always, let into a lot in one of his ribs; the other portion was filed away. He got out of his prot-suit and "walker," gave up his gun,

ammunition and em-kit, was given two wallets of one thousand credit tokens each and a temporary civsuit. An orderly achieved the identity-disc operation. The whole ceremony from his arrival took 250 seconds flat—two seconds up in the top bunker. He walked out like an heir to the earth.

The air was full of scents of hay, berries, flowers, manure. He took intoxicated gulps of it. At the freshouse he ordered, paid for, and drank four decis of light ale, then ordered a sandwich and an apple, paid and ate. The next train east, he was told, would be in a quarter of an hour. He had been in the place perhaps half an hour. No time to spend watching the stream, but he walked to the railhead, asked for a ticket to Veruam by the Sea some 400 miles east and, as the detailed station map showed him, about 30 miles south, paid, and selected a compartment when the train arrived from its shed.

A farm girl and a sleepy-looking male civilian, probably an army contractor, got in one after the other close behind Hadolar, and the compartment contained just these three when the train left. He looked at the farm girl with interest—she was blonde and placid—as the first female he had seen for a hundred days. Fashions had not changed radically in thirty-odd years, at least among Emmel farmgirls. After a while he averted his gaze and considered the landscape. The valley was edged by bluffs of yellowish stone now to north and now to south. Even here their difference in hue was perceptible—the valley had broadened slightly; or perhaps he was being fanciful and the difference was due solely to normal light-effects. The river meandered gracefully from side to side and from cliff to cliff, with occasional islands, small and crowned with hazel. Here and there a fisher could be seen by the bank, or wading in the stream. Farm houses passed at intervals. North above the valley rose the great slopes, apparently devoid of signs of human life except for funicular stations and the occasional heliport, until they vanished into the vast crimson-bronze curtain of nothingness which grew insensibly out of a half cloud-covered green sky near the zenith. Swirls of whirlwind among

the clouds told of the effects of the time-gradient on weather, and odd lightning-streaks, unnoticed further north amid the war, appeared to pirouette among them. To the south the plateau was still hidden by the height of the bluffs, but the beginnings of the dark blue haze grew out of the sky above the valley skyline. The train stopped at a station and the girl, Hadolar saw with a pang, got out. Two soldiers got in in light dress and swapped minor reminiscences: they were on short-term leave to the next stop, a small town, Granev, and eyed Hadolar's temporary suit but said nothing.

Granev was mostly built of steel and glass: not an exciting place. It made a one-clock twenty-story five-mile strip on either side of the road, with overpass-canopy. (How lucky, thought Hadolar, that speech and travel could go so far down this Great Valley without interlatitude problems: virtually the whole 450 miles.) Industry and some of the Teccols now appeared. The valley had broadened until, from the line, its southern cliffs began to drown in the blue haze half a mile off. Soon the northern slopes loomed a smoky ruddy brown before they, too, were swallowed up. The river, swollen by tributaries, was a few hundred meters across now and deep whenever the line crossed it. So far they had only gone fifty-odd miles. The air was warmer again and the vegetation more lush. Almost all the passengers were civilians now, and some noted Hadolar's temporary suit ironically. He would buy himself a wardrobe at Veruam at the first opportunity, he decided. But at the moment he wished to put as many miles as possible between himself and that bunker in the shortest personal time.

Some hours later the train arrived at Veruam by the North-Eastern Sea. Thirty miles long, forty storys high, and 500 meters broad north-south, it was an imposing city. Nothing but plain was to be seen in the outskirts, for the reddish fog still obliterated everything about four miles to the north, and the bluish one smothered the view southward some seven. A well-fed Hadolaris visited one of the city's Rehabilitation Advisors, for civilian techniques and material resources had advanced enormously since his last

acquaintance with them, and idioms and speech-sounds had changed bewilderingly, while the whole code of social behavior was terrifyingly different. Armed with some manuals, a pocket recorder, and some standard speechform and folkway tapes, he rapidly purchased thin clothing, stormwear, writing implements, further recording tools, lugbags and other personal gear. After a night at a good guestery, Hadolaris sought interviews with the employing offices of seven subtropical development agencies, was tested and, armed with seven letters of introduction, boarded the night liner rocktrain for the south past the shore of the North-Eastern Sea and to Oluluetang some 360 miles south. One of the tailors who had fitted him up had revealed that on quiet nights very low-pitched rumblings were to be heard from, presumably, the mountains northward. Hadolaris wanted to get as far from that North as he conveniently could.

He awoke among palms and savannah-reeds. There was no sign of either sight-barrier down here. The city was dispersed into compact blocks of multistory buildings, blocks separated by belts of rich woodland and drive-like roadways and monorails. Unlike the towns of the Great Valley, it was not arranged on an east-west strip, though its north-south axis was still relatively short. Hadolarisóndamo found himself a small guestery, studied a plan of the city and its factory areas, bought a guide to the district and settled down to several days of exploration and inquiry before visiting the seven agencies themselves. His evenings were spent in adult classes, his night absorbing the speech-form recordings unconsciously in sleep. In the end after nineteen days (about four hours at Veruam's latitude, four minutes at that of Emmel, less than two seconds at the higher bunker, he reflected) he obtained employment as a minor sales manager of vegetable products in one of the organizations.

Communication north and south, he found, was possible verbally for quite a number of miles, provided one knew the rules. In consequence the zoning here was far from severe and travel and social facilities covered a very wide area. One rarely saw the military here. Hadolarisóndamo bought an automob and, as he rose in the organization's

hierarchy, a second one for pleasure. He found himself well liked and soon had a circle of friends and a number of hobbies. After a number of love-affairs he married a girl whose father was higher up in the organization, and, some five years after his arrival in the city, became the father of a boy.

"Arison!" called his wife from the boat. Their son, aged five, was puttering at the warm surface of the lake with his fists over the gunwale. Hadolarisóndamo was painting on the little island, quick lines and sweeps across the easeled canvas, a pattern of light and shade bursting out of the swamp trees over a little bay. "Arison! I can't get this thing to start. Could you swim over and try?"

"Five minutes more. Mihányo. Must get this down."

Sighing, Karamihanyolàsve continued, but without much hope, to fish from the bows with her horizontal yo-yo gadget. Too quiet around here for a bite. A parakeet flashed in the branches to the right. Derestó, the boy, stopped hitting the water, and pulled over the tube-window, let it into the lake and got Mihanyo to slide on its lightswitch. Then he peered this way and that under the surface, giving little exclamations as tiny fish of various shapes and hues shot across. Presently Arison called over, folded up his easel, pulled off his trousers, propped paints and canvas on top of everything, and swam over. There were no crocs in this lake, hippo were far off, filariasis and bilharzia had been eliminated here. Twenty minutes' rather tense tinkering got things going, and the silent fuel-cell driven screw was ready to pilot them over to the painting island and thence across the lake to where a little stream's current pushed out into the expanse. They caught four. Presently back under the westering sun to the jetty, tie-up and home in the automob.

By the time Deresto was eight and ready to be formally named Lafonderestónami, he had a sister of three and a baby brother of one. He was a keen swimmer and boatman, and was developing into a minor organizer, both at home and in school. Arison was now third in the firm, but

kept his balance. Holidays were spent either in the deep tropics (where one could gain on the time-exchange) or among the promontories on the southern shores of the North-Eastern Sea (where one had to lose), or, increasingly, in the agricultural stream-scored western uplands, where a wide vista of the world could in many areas be seen and the cloudscapes had full play. Even there the sight-barriers were a mere fogginess near the north and south horizons, backed by a darkness in the sky.

Now and then, during a bad night, Arison thought about the "past." He generally concluded that, even if a break-through had been imminent in, say, half an hour from his departure, this could hardly affect the lives of himself and his wife, or even of their children, down here in the south, in view of the time-contraction southwards. Also, he reflected, since nothing ever struck further south than a point north of Emmel's latitude, the ballistic attacks must be mounted close to the Frontier; or if they were not, then the Enemy must lack all knowledge of either southern time-gradients or southern geography, so that the launching of missiles from well north of the Frontier to pass well south of it would not be worthwhile. And even the fastest heli which could be piloted against time conceleration would, he supposed, never get through.

Always adaptable, Arison had never suffered long from the disabilities incident on having returned after a time at the Front. Rocktrain travel and other communications had tended to unify the speech and the ethos, though naturally the upper reaches of the Great Valley and the military zone in the mountains of the North were linguistically and sociologically somewhat isolated. In the western uplands, too, pockets of older linguistic forms and old-fashioned attitudes still remained, as the family found on its holidays. By and large, however, the whole land spoke the tongue of the "contemporary" subtropical lowlands, inevitably modified of course by the onomatosyntomy or "shortmouth" of latitude. A "contemporary" ethical and social code had also spread. The southern present may be said to have colonized the northern past, even geological past, somewhat as the

birds and other traveling animals had done, but with the greater resources of human wits, flexibility, traditions and techniques.

Ordinary people bothered little about the war. Time conceleration was on their side. Their spare mental energies were spent in a vast selection of plays and ploys, making, representing, creating, relishing, criticizing, theorizing, discussing, arranging, organizing, cooperating, but not so often out of their own zone. Arison found himself the member of a dozen interweaving circles, and Mihanyo was even more involved. Not that they were never alone: the easy tempo of work and life with double "week" of five days' work, two days free, seven days' work and six days free, the whole staggered across the population and in the organizations, left much leisure time which could be spent on their own selves. Arison took up texture-sculpting, then returned after two years to painting, but with magnetobrush instead of spraypen; purified by his texture-sculpting period, he achieved a powerful area control and won something of a name for himself. Mihanyo, on the other hand, became a musician. Deresto, it was evident, was going to be a handler of men and societies, besides having, at thirteen, entered the athletic age. His sister of eight was a great talker and arguer. The boy of six was, they hoped, going to be a writer, at least in his spare time: he had a keen eye for things, and a keen interest in telling about them. Arison was content to remain, when he had reached it, second in the firm: a chiefship would have told on him too much. He occasionally lent his voice to the administration of local affairs, but took no major part.

Mihanyo and Arison were watching a firework festival on the North-Eastern Sea from their launch, off one of the southern promontories. Up here, a fine velvety backdrop for the display was made by the inky black of the northern sight-barrier, which cut off the stars in a gigantic arc. Fortunately, the weather was fine. The silhouettes of the firework boats could just be discerned. In a world which knew no moon the pleasures of a "white night" were often only

to be got by such displays. The girl and Deresto were swimming around and around the launch. Even the small boy had been brought out, and was rather blearily staring northward. Eventually the triple green star went up and the exhibition was over; at the firework boats a midnight had been reached. Deresto and Venoyyè were called in, located by a flare, and ultimately prevailed on to climb in, shivering slightly, and dry off in the hot-air blaster, dancing about like two imps. Arison turned the launch for the shore and Silarrè was found to be asleep. So was Venoyye when they touched the jetty. Their parents had each to carry one in and up to the beachouse.

Next morning they packed and set out in the automob for home. Their twenty days' holiday had cost 160 days of Oluluetang time. Heavy rain was falling when they reached the city. Mihanyo, when the children were settled in, had a long talk on the opsiphone with her friend across the breadth of Oluluetang: she (the friend) had been with her husband badger-watching in the western uplands. Finally Arison chipped in and, after general conversation, exchanged some views with the husband on developments in local politics.

"Pity one grows old so fast down here," lamented Mihanyo that evening; "if only life could go on forever!"

"Forever is a big word. Besides, being down here makes no difference to the feeling—you don't feel it any slower up on the Sea, do you, now?"

"I suppose not. But if only . . ."

To switch her mood, Arison began to talk about Deresto and his future. Soon they were planning their children's lives for them in the way parents cannot resist doing. With his salary and investments in the firm they would set up the boy for a great administrator, and still have enough to give the others every opportunity.

Next morning it was still in something of a glow that Arison bade farewell to his wife and went off to take up his work in the offices. He had an extremely busy day and was coming out of the gates in the waning light to his automob in its stall, when he found standing around it three of

the military. He looked inquiringly at them as he approached with his personal pulse-key in hand.

"You are VSQ 389 MLD 194 RV 27 XN 3, known as Hadolarisóndamo, resident at" (naming the address) "and subpresident today in this firm." The cold tones of the leader were a statement, not a question.

"Yes," whispered Arison as soon as he could speak.

"I have a warrant for your immediate re-employment with our Forces in the place at which you first received your order for Release. You must come with us forthwith." The leader produced a luminous orange tag with black markings.

"But my wife and family!"

"They are being informed. We have no time."

"My firm?"

"Your chief is being informed. Come now."

"I—I—I must set my affairs in order."

"Impossible. No time. Urgent situation. Your family and firm must do all that between them. Our orders override everything."

"Wh—wh—what is your authority? Can I see it, please?"

"This tag should suffice. It corresponds to the tagend which I hope you still have in your identity disc—we will check all that en route. Come on now."

"But I *must* see your authority. How do I know, for instance, that you are not trying to rob me, or something?"

"If you know the code you'll realize that these symbols can only fit one situation. But I'll stretch a point: you may look at this warrant, but don't touch it."

The other two closed in. Arison saw that they had their quickguns trained on him. The leader pulled out a broad screed. Arison, as well as the dancing characters would let him, resolved them in the light of the leader's torch into an order to collect him, Arison, by today at such and such a time, local Time, if possible immediately on his leaving his place of work (specified); and below, that one man be detailed to call Mihanyo by opsiphone simultaneously, and another to call the president of the organization. The Remployee and escort to join the military rocktrain to Veruam (which was leaving withint about fifteen minutes). The Rem-

ployee to be taken as expeditiously as possible to the bunker (VV) and thence to the higher bunker (from which he had come some twenty years before, but only about ten minutes in the Time of that bunker, it flashed through Arison's brain—apart from six or seven minutes corresponding to his journey south).

"How do they know if I'm fit enough for this job after all these years?"

"They've kept checks on you, no doubt."

Arison thought of tripping one and slugging two and doing a bolt, but the quickguns of the two were certainly trained upon him. Besides, what would that gain him? A few hours' start, with unnecessary pain, disgrace and ruin on Mihanyo, his children and himself, for he was sure to be caught.

"The automob," he said ridiculously.

"A small matter. Your firm will deal with that."

"How can I settle my children's future?"

"Come on, no use arguing. You are coming now, alive or dead, fit or unfit."

Speechless, Arison let himself be marched off to a light military vehicle.

In five minutes he was in the rocktrain, an armored affair with strong windows. In ten more minutes, with the train moving off, he was stripped of his civilian clothes and possessions (to be returned later to his wife, he learnt), had his identity disc extracted and checked and its Relief tagend removed, and a medical checkup was begun on him. Apparently this was satisfactory to the military authorities. He was given military clothing.

He spent a sleepless night in the train trying to work out what he had done with *this*, what would be made of *that*, who Mihanyo could call upon in need, who would be likely to help her, how she would manage with the children, what (as nearly as he could work it out) they would get from a pension which he was led to understand would be forthcoming from his firm, how far they could carry on with their expected future.

A gray pre-dawn saw the train's arrival at Veruam. Food-

less (he had been unable to eat any of the rations) and without sleep, he gazed vacantly at the marshaling-yards. The body of men traveling on the train (apparently only a few were Remployees) were got into closed trucks and the long convoy set out for Emmel.

At this moment Hadolaris' brain began to re-register the conceleration situation. About half a minute must have passed since his departure from Oluluetang, he supposed, in the Time of his top bunker. The journey to Emmel might take up another two minutes. The route from Emmel to that bunker might take a further two and a half minutes there, as far as one could work out the calculus. Add the twenty-years' (and southward journey's) sixteen to seventeen minutes, and he would find himself in that bunker not more than some twenty-two minutes after he had left it. (Mihan, Deres and the other two would all be nearly ten years older and the children would have begun to forget him.) The blitz had been unprecedentedly intense when he had left, and he could recall (indeed it had figured in several nightmares since) his prophecy to XN 1 that a breakthrough might be expected within the hour. If he survived the blitz, he was unlikely to survive a breakthrough; and a breakthrough of what? No one had ever seen the Enemy, this Enemy that for Time immemorial had been striving to get across the Frontier. If It got right over, the twilight of the race was at hand. No horror, it was believed at the Front, could equal the horror of that moment. After a hundred miles or so he slept, from pure exhaustion, sitting up in a cramped position, wedged against the next man. Stops and starts and swerves woke him at intervals. The convoy was driving at maximum speeds.

At Emmel he stumbled out to find a storm lashing down. The river was in spate. The column was marched to the depot. Hadolar was separated out and taken in to the terminal building where he was given inoculations, issued with "walker," quickgun, em-kit, prot-suit and other impedimenta, and in a quarter of an hour (perhaps seven or eight seconds up at the top bunker) found himself entering a polyheli with thirty other men. This had barely

topped the first rise and into sunlight when explosions and flarings were visible on all sides. The machine forged on, the sight-curtains gradually closing up behind and retreating grudgingly before it. The old Northern vertigo and somnambulism re-engulfed Had. To think of Kar and their offspring now was to tap the agony of a ghost who shared his brain and body. After twenty-five minutes they landed close to the foot of a rocktrain line. The top-bunker lapse of "twenty-two minutes" was going, Had saw, to be something less. He was the third to be bundled into the rocktrain compartments, and 190 seconds saw him emerging at the top and heading for bunker VV. XN 1 greeted his salute merely with a curt command to proceed by rocket to the top bunker. A few moments more and he was facing XN 2.

"Ah, here you are. Your Relief was killed so we sent back for you. You'd only left a few seconds." A ragged hole in the bunker wall testified to the incident. The relief's cadaver, stripped, was being carted off to the disposal machine.

"XN 2. Things are livelier than ever. They certainly are hot stuff. Every new offensive from here is pitched back at us in the same style within minutes, I notice. That new cannon had only just started up when back came the same shells—I never knew They had them. Tit for tat."

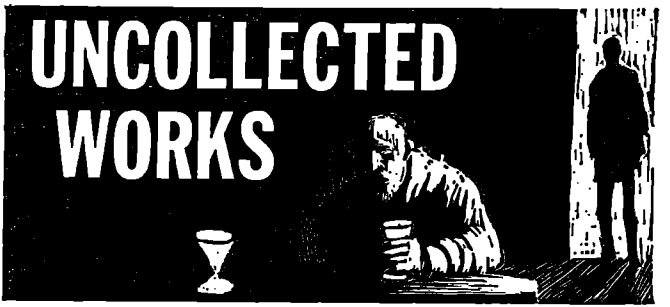
Into H's brain, seemingly clarified by hunger and exhaustion and much emotion, flashed an unspeakable suspicion, one that he could never prove or disprove, having too little knowledge and experience, too little overall view. No one had ever seen the Enemy. No one knew how or when the War had begun. Information and communication were paralyzingly difficult up here. No one knew what really happened to Time as one came close to the Frontier, or beyond it. Could it be that the conceleration there became infinite and that there was nothing beyond the Frontier? Could all the supposed missiles of the Enemy be their own, somehow returning? Perhaps the war had started with a peasant explorer lightheartedly flinging a stone northwards, which returned and struck him? Perhaps there was, then, no Enemy?

"XN 3. Couldn't that gun's own shells be reflected back *from* the Frontier, then?"

"XN 2. Impossible. Now you are to try to reach that forward missile post by the surface—our tunnel is destroyed—at 15° 40′ East—you can just see the hump near the edge of the I/R viewer's limit—with this message; and tell him verbally to treble output."

The ragged hole was too small. H left by the forward port. He ran, on his "walker," into a ribbon of landscape which became a thicket of fire, a porcupine of fire, a Nessus-shirt to the Earth, as in a dream. Into an unbelievable supercrescendo of sound, light, heat, pressure and impacts he ran, on and on up the now almost invisible slope .....

Lin Carter's first two novels, THE WIZARD OF LEMURIA (Ace Book F-326) *and its sequel* THONGOR OF LEMURIA (Ace Book F-383), *were free-swinging sword-and-sorcery tales in the Edgar Rice Burroughs vein. It would be hard to imagine anything more different from them than this quiet tale of an old man and a machine you'll wish very much that you could own.*



LIN CARTER

STRANGE, THAT YOU SHOULD ask if I minded growing old. Actually, old age has much occupied my mind recently. Age, you see, my boy, has overtaken me by such imperceptible degrees that I was hardly conscious of its surreptitious advance. But, of late, I have had the matter brought to my attention by a certain shortness of breath and an increased and unsteady activity of my heart, whenever I am foolish enough—or forgetful enough—to climb stairs or to walk further along the cliffs than I have become accustomed to doing.

Age is a curious phenomenon, if I may call it that (for I would rather, by my peace of mind, rank it with the accidents than with the certainties of life). Its symptoms in

my case, save for certain minor physical annoyances, such as those I have just alluded to, are rather pleasantly limited to a lack of—what shall I call it?—excitability, perhaps? The burning issues of literature, which, in my more youthful years seemed so desperately important, can now scarcely rouse me to anything stronger than a vague displeasure, or, pleasure. I become more interested in the temperature of my afternoon tea, than in the current state of letters; more concerned with the health of my El-Martinique roses, than with the decline in elegance of form . . . subjects which once aroused within me a degree of fervor and evangelical zeal I am now mildly embarrassed to recollect.

The life of a literary critic (or, as I much preferred to entitle my 'calling', an *apostle of letters*) does, after all, seldom demand violent physical activity or emotional exertion. Therefore I am hardly made aware of any lessening of my bodily capabilities. As for life, itself . . . you know, young man, when I look back on my little handful of years, I find it oddly difficult to disentangle the strands of my personal life from the texture of my professional career! Does that disturb you? but it is true: I cannot be sure, for example, which disturbed me more in recent years, the death of my third wife, or the lamentable stupidity of the distinguished members of the Swedish Academy of Literature not to award the Nobel to the great Ezra Pound before his death (he always said he would outlive me by at least long enough to compose a savage epitaph for my memorial-stone; I attacked too fiercely, I regret, his last volume of *canzoni*). And I find myself, when looking back, dating the events of my inner emotional life with the events of my career . . . "When did I meet Par Lagerkvist?" I will ask myself. "Ah, yes, that summer Barbara and I rented the villa near Capri!" Or: "Now where *was* I when Roger was born?" "Oh, of course, correcting proofs on my *Filigree!*"

(Does all this seem inhumane to the young? Well, perhaps it is. Who was it—Bertrand Russell?—who once observed that "books made a damned poor substitute for living." I fear I am the living proof of that coined adage

. . . although I always rejoined, "yes, but life is damned empty without books.")

I beg your pardon? Ah—you read *Filigree.* Well, it was an amazing little trifle, and beguiled me all one summer. It is a distinct pleasure to see young journalists like yourself actually *reading* some of the writers they make up features about! It is a joy to me to learn that the young people still remember me, for you might say it is my greatest regret in life that I was not gifted by the Gods to be a creator of literature myself, but one of that lesser breed who merely comments, in print, on their reading. I am, therefore, flattered that you came all the way out here to gather "copy" on an old writer-on-writers. I am surprised, in fact, that your magazine (I am sorry that I am not familiar with it, but we get so few, so very few, American magazines over here) should be at all interested in a passé gentleman of letters, to send you so far for an interview. I hope, I *do* hope, that you will not ask for my comment on Mr. Kerouac and his work, or why I refused to attend Mr. Graves' testimonial dinner that summer in Paris . . .

"Eh? Is that my chief regret? Oh, probably not. I lack the, shall I say, *stamina,* for creative work. It demands a certain physical durability to be a writer of the prime rank, like Tom Wolfe writing in long-hand on the top of his icebox for forty-six hours, or Hemingway living on gin and black coffee for ten hours at a stretch. Pounding a typewriter is hard work, young man, I assure you! Ditch-digging, by comparison, demands far less of one, or so I have been told.

What is my greatest regret? Ah, what an interesting question! You might say, I chiefly regret never having met Yeats. Or that I am most sorry to have published that savagely satirical critique of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* when it was being serialized in *The Egoist* in 1913 (or thereabouts). But—no, that would be telling you what you expect to hear, and it would be begging the question.

Shall I be very cryptic, young stranger? Very well. I most regret that I shall not live to read the supreme monument of American fiction, Willard Paxton's *Those Who Err.* It shall not be printed until some forty years after I die (if

the local physicians are correct in their estimates of my current state of wellbeing). Or, that I shall never experience the merciless wit of those glittering comedies that shall earn for the as yet unborn Juan Ramon Chiminez his immortality as "the Argentine Shakespeare" . . . or those intoxicating sonnets, the *Adoratinos,* that Claude de Montaubon will publish seventy-six years from now. What else could you expect an aging critic to regret most, but those masterpieces of the future not yet written, whose authors are yet unborn?

Bear with me, young man. And you need not look at me so . . . my wits are intact although my body is somewhat the worse for wear. I know you could never dare publish what I am going to tell you, but as I have never related this to a living soul, let a talkative and lonely old man unburden himself, here in the shadow of his summer roses. . . .

I never knew his name. To me, these many, many years, he has been simply: The Gentleman in Green. He has always been an enigma to me. Sometimes I wonder if I ever met him at all, in reality, or if his tall figure slipped from a waking dream. Perhaps he was a phantom of the mind, dreamed in a doze over a cool glass of good Chateau Medoc on a soft and wistful autumn afternoon. . . .

Do you know Paris? Ah, if you know Paris at all, you must know the Left Bank. There is a little, cobble-paved side-street off the *Place d'Opera,* going up the hill towards the old Cathedral of St. Stephan's. Seventy years ago there was a tiny, and very dirty, bistro on that crooked street that winds and meanders and zig-zags its dilapidated way under the shadow of Bernette's belltower, once the talk of the continent, with its corbeled arches and baroque, sexless angels, pigeons roosting on their blown, frozen bronze tresses. Nearby is the attic studio where Nerval lived once, and down the hill towards the Opera, that stucco apartment building whose *concierge,* if asked with a coin, could wheeze out some quaint reminiscences of d'Auberville and the poets of the *Paladins,* who used to gather there on rainy,

Proustian afternoons and utter manifestos designed to resuscitate literature.

I had only been in Paris a month or less. The unexpected success of my first (and only) slim volume of verse, *Mandragore*, had gone to my head. Still lacking of twenty, I fled the bourgeois, stifling atmosphere of America, hoping to find in the City of Light those ideal regions in whose pure, stimulating atmosphere perfect verse could be composed, and among whose aloof, Olympian *salons* I would take my brilliant place. Ah—to be young, and an artist, and living in Paris in those dim days! It was Valhalla and El Dorado combined, where Heine died and Proust drowsed. There was an industrious young Degas in every garrett, and a few wilted Rimbauds still ornamented the more picturesque gutters and scrawled *"Dieu est morte!"* in pastel chalk on the alley-walls.

I had spent a fatiguing day. Two editors had I visited, in fear and trembling but *sans* result, and had talked poetry with a bearded Russian expatriate who looked like an unclipped goat and who vehemently believed the future of "modern" poetry lay in imitating Pushkin in *vers libre*.

I stopped on my way back to my flat at the little bistro for a cool glass and a warm bun. It was crowded with the afternoon troop of sight-seers from the Cathedral, so I shared a corner table with an elderly gentleman of scholarly, even professorial, appearance. He was neatly, but cheaply dressed, slim and going gray over the temples, in an old suit of bottle-green with lapels whose pointed width became passé a full generation ago, and a loose *foulard* at his throat, half-hidden beneath a sharp little spike-like goatee, also gray. As is universal with two strangers sharing a table or a seat, we ignored each other save for covert, side-wise glances. He sat back, watching the crowd, a *pernod* before him from which he rarely sipped. When he reached for the glass, I noted his hands: stained with grease, which savored of the inventor, while his long hair and the genteel decay of his accoutrements suggested, rather, the artist. His face was in shadow, but the profile, with the jutting goatee and patriarchal, hawk-beaked nose, reminded me inescapably of

Cardinal Giambatiste in the Louvre's collection of El Greco. I drew out a copy of my book (which, I fear, I carried with me everywhere and pointedly took out and read in public) and began leafing through it.

The *garcon* took my order, and my companion finished his drink. Somehow or other we struck up a conversation. I was very proud of my aristocratic French (as I fancied it) and delighted to display my linguistic accomplishment, scorning as mere *touriste* the American who spoke English in Paris. He elicited from me my profession, and casually exercised a remarkable literary knowledge which excited my interest. I overrode his polite protest, and brought him a second *pernod*—I was drinking *Medoc*, priding myself on the taste of a born connoisseur—and listened as he held forth:

"As you may have noticed from my hands, young sir, I am a technician. A mechanic, if you will. I am fortunate enough to possess a few patents, obtained idly in my youth, and these bring a sufficient income for me to live as I please and perform my experiments as I will. There is no name, as yet coined, for my speciality . . . I have christened it Bibliochanics for my own amusement.

"When I was a young student in Prague—that would be long before you were born, my young friend—I read widely and, I fear, indiscriminately. I recall an image, or metaphor, in one of the philosophers that so intrigued the young intellectual I was then, that it became a profound and motivating force in selecting my career. Perhaps you recall it: the notion that if you put fifty million monkeys to work, scribbling aimlessly (for this was long before the typewriter was invented) they would eventually produce, letter-perfect, the complete works of Montaigne?"

I nodded, absently—in my day, it had been Shakespeare, but I let him go on without comment, curious as to where all this was leading, even as you doubtlessly are. He adjusted a monocle, took a sip of *pernod*, and continued:

"I was possessed by that paradox. The verb is precise: it was as if a demon had entered me. I was fascinated and enchanted by the idea. Later, in my courses in mathematics

and symbolic logic at the University, I was electrified to discover that even so quaint and bizarre a concept, was, after all, quite within the realms of possibility. After all, the number of possible letter-combinations within any alphabet is quite finite, you know. Of course, the project, as originally envisioned by the philosopher (was in St. Goudet?) would consume fifty thousand years. But, still it *was* possible.

"And so I became an experimental mechanical engineer. And a very successful one, if I may be so immodest as to be truthful. During the years that followed, busy ones, and crowded with events, I remained under the valence of that demonic possession. At length, financially independent, thanks to my inventions, I began toying with the idea. Again, the verb is precise, for I played with the notion as an idle amusement, to beguile my leisure. Most inventors of my youth had a perpetual-motion machine hidden away in the cellar, or a fantastic aerofoil of some eccentric and da Vincian design. My hobby was the writing-machine.

"After some years of idle tinkering, I conceived of a unique device—and a leisurely hobby gave birth to an absorbing, full-time pursuit. My mechanism was not unlike the modern typewriter, but perfected far beyond that crude device. It did not use letters affixed to the ends of rods, but wheels of raised letters, which revolved at random, creating a patternless meaninglessness—a chaos of "chance" combinations of letters. The main problem, since I did not have fifty thousand years at my disposal, was to accelerate the printed combinations. My experiments consumed many years, and devoured my youth as well. My invention went through a hundred models, a hundred improvements, and rapidly ate into my small stipend. I was lucky enough, purely as by-products to my main research, to patent several valuable modifications on the linotype and on the typewriter, itself, providing me the wherewithall to continue my work. Rather early in my attempts to increase the speed of the combinations, I eliminated actual letters, replacing them with spools of paper tape punched with a coded system of dots and dashes. Next, I devised a phonetic system composed of sounds, not letters. . . . I shall not bore you by re-

counting the many years it took before I was ready to—begin. But at length my machine (which I called *Bibliac,* for only a maniac would attempt a device that could write all the books in the world) was ready. It operated at perfect random, and 'wrote' at a speed impossible to achieve by hand—hundreds, even thousands of times faster than the typewriter. I had increased the speed by reducing the size of the paper spools and the coded wheels that punched through them . . . ah, I shall not try to explain, but, in short, I had the mechanical equivalent of the fifty million monkeys."

"And did they produce Montaigne?" I asked, rather lightly, I fear, for the Gentleman in Green fixed me with a serious glance.

"No, they did not. For many months, *Bibliac* produced undiluted gibberish, at the rate of millions of 'words' a day."

"Surely you did not *read—*"

"No. I had devised a monitor that spot-scanned the tapes and was keyed to register any significant combination of phonemes, any that would seem to display a logical pattern. After two full years, during which *Bibliac* continued to operate without a pause, such a combination was noted. I translated the tape, but could make no sense out of it at all. Utter Babel, yet, undeniably, certain 'words' reappeared in the text over and over. One cannot devote a sizable portion of one's life to a certain project and then give up. I determined to secure the advice of an old friend from the University, who had made his home in Paris even as I. He identified the text without delay—why had I never thought to consult a linguist.

" 'Why, of course,' Markoy said when I showed him my translation. 'You have here an early passage of *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,* the ancient Babylonian epic. And in the original Sumerian, too. It is, you must be aware, widely considered the most ancient known work in any literature."

"From then on, I dwelt in Paradise, tasting such delights as only he can savor, who sees the dream of a lifetime com-

ing true before him. During the next years, *Bibliac* progressed through the Sumerian, the Babylonian, the Assyrian and finally, the Egyptian literatures. Ere long it began on Homer, and from that point on, its course was a predictable one."

"Can it be—you mean—?"

The Gentleman in Green nodded, with a faint smile. "Of course, no one had ever bothered to work out the logical implications of the fifty-million-monkeys paradox. It would not *begin* with Montaigne, but with the very beginnings of written literature! Thence forward, it would trace the development of letters through time in orderly sequence. For, you see, there existed a living equivalent of the fifty-million-monkeys—*the human race, itself.*"

I stared at him, staggered, not knowing whether he was mad or merely entertaining me with an amusing fable, but completely lost in his tale. He continued:

"I watched my invention reproduce the entire literature of the Greeks (including, I must note, the fourteen lost comedies of Aristotle which perished with the Alexandrian Library, the long-vanished *Marsyas* of Homer, and the many lost works of Hesiod, Pindar, Sappho, and the Cyclic poets). By winter *Bibliac* had entered upon the Romans. Ah, what an unending delight. I was watching the complete vindication of all my dreams—the fulfillment of my life's work!"

I ordered the glasses filled, and as the long gray shadows of afternoon mingled with the plum-purple of evening, he talked on.

"The next years were somewhat less interesting, for they merely repeated the triumph endlessly, with the literature of the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and so on into modern times. There is no point in listing these modern works, for you are already familiar with many of them."

I nodded, secretly wondering if *Bibliac* had reproduced my own book of verse. "Now that *Bibliac* is silent," I said, going along with his fantastic tale, "you must be ready to publish an account of your experimental work in the technical journals, and reap your well-deserved harvest of fame—?"

His reply was not at all what I had expected. He fixed me with a quick glance.

"Finished? But it is not—the experiment goes on."

"But how can it go on, when it has reached . . ."

"The only direction is—forward," he said cooly. My shock must have been visibly traced on my features, for he leaned forward and tapped the marble tabletop with his forefinger.

"Last week I read the works that shall enrich the next century. *Bibliac* is printing the unwritten words of the future."

"That is—impossible—surely?" I said weakly.

He cut through my fumblings with a short, decisive gesture.

"Listen to me, young man. I have read the productions of genius that shall astonish the world long after you and I are dust. That gigantic novel, *Those Who Err,* which Willard Paxton, the greatest of the American novelists, will die before completing, even as did the great Cervantes, before finishing the *Quixote* to which it shall be compared. I have read the *Arthuriad* of Gwyn Rhys Jones, a Welshman, and the greatest epic poet since Milton. And I have explored the intricate music of the cyclic-dramas of Von Bremen . . . and the rich dream-imagery of *Taliesin in Limbo,* for which the English King, Charles IV, will knight Edward Quinsey Marlinson. I, alone of all men, recall the subtle music of the opening couplet of Tierney's mock-romance, *Baghdad* . . . 'Sindbad am I, sailor of Ocean,/Sailor of all of the Orient Seas' . . . Ah, yes my fine young poet, you who do not even believe what I am saying is the truth . . . at this hour, *Bibliac* is puzzling its tireless way through poems and tales in Neo-Anglic, a language which has not yet evolved from present-day English . . . *Bibliac will run forever,* tireless as any automaton, filling its endless spools of paper tape with the triumphs of the thirtieth, and the fortieth and even the fiftieth centuries . . . *'to the last syllable of recorded time'* . . . ."

You are looking, young man, with very much the same expression I must have worn, when the Gentleman in Green

uttered those words. He must have been irritated by my vapid stare, my idiotic comments, my not-very-well-concealed air of ironic tolerance of what may, after all, have merely been a madman, and not a genius who has rifled through the treasure vaults of Tomorrow.

What? Oh, he sprang up from the table and darted angrily into the street—and was struck down by a bicyclist. His fine brow struck the curbstone, splattering it with crimson . . . ah, why should I bother recalling it yet again!

Hmm? Dead? Perhaps—the crowd gathered swiftly, the *gendarmes* . . . I was shaken to the core of my spirit and hesitated—fatally hesitated—then he was gone, taken away in an ambulance, and my one and only chance—gone with him. His name, his address—I never knew. Whether he lived or died—forever unknown.

But he has plagued me forever since. *Was* he just a clever cadger-of-drinks, who repaid the generous with a fine-spun romance? *Was* he just a cafe hanger-on, seeking the ear of the well-pursed, gullible tourist? Was he insane—deluded—a dreamer—an eccentric would-be inventor, seeking funds for some wild invention that would never see the light of day?

Perhaps my first theory is the soundest of all. Surely you, a journalist, must have listened to many surprising revelations over a free glass of liquor? I recall a grizzled Irishman for whom I bought a glass of beer once, in McSorley's in New York. He confided to me that he had sold his soul to Asmodeus for eternal youth . . . but unfortunately had neglected to realize it meant eternal poverty, since no amount of money could support a man who never dies. And the Italian count I met on the Rivera—twenty years ago, as I recall—who sponged a full week off a wealthy art-collector, by his claim to be a genuine werewolf . . . he left our mutual host before the full moon, and I have always rather regretted it. Alcohol will frequently bring out, even in the most common man—the unexpected.

No, no, of course you cannot publish this. Just write that I regret Pound died before being given the Nobel . . . or that I regret having never met Yeats. Or say that I deplore

the formlessness of contemporary letters. Or anything you will. It does not matter.

. . . But, if you will, remember those names. Paxton. Chiminez. De Montaubon. Jones. Von Bremen. Sir Edward Marlinson. Tierney. You are very young, scarce older than I, when I met the Gentleman in Green. You may live to see *Those Who Err* . . . Ah, Great God, I envy you. *You will know whether it was the truth or not* . . . no, no, you must forgive me, tears come easy to the old. . . .

Yes, the river does look lovely from here. You should see it in June, with the willows dipping their thin green fingers in the shallows, and the rich curve of the cliffs beyond. On clear days, you can actually . . .

Ah, that will be my housekeeper, and I expect it is time for your train. Thank you so much for stopping by. And—please—you must forgive an old man for rambling on like this. There are so few hereabouts with whom I can talk. Yes, yes, certainly. Just say I salute the memory of Pound, and regret never having met Yeats. Anything you like. Anything.

It doesn't matter.

Most stories of interstellar adventure are told in deadly earnest, and all too many become plain melodrama —so it's a special pleasure to find a story like the following, which is so unpretentious and charming that it could well serve as a child's bedtime story. In fact, it does.

VANISHING POINT

JONATHAN BRAND

I

THE MOMENT Bill Wheeler stepped into the bathroom, both little girls shrieked and leapt out of the bath. Bill grabbed for Hannah and his wife grabbed for Tammy. She missed, he connected, but Hannah twisted out of his grasp, left him with a handful of suds, and chased the other handful of suds into the nursery.

A moment later they were back brandishing sheets of drawing-paper covered with drawings.

"Look, Daddy! Look what I drew at school!" yelled Tammy.

"Look, I drew something too!" shouted Hannah.

"Look, look, look, *look!*"

Their mother shushed helplessly through the steam but Bill just laughed.

"Look, Daddy, stop laughing Daddy. Look at our pictures."

"All right, already," he said. "Now one at a time, for Heaven's sake. Get in a line, why don't you?"

"They'll get in the bath again if anywhere," said Mrs. Wheeler, and firmly lifted Hannah—the nearest and smallest—over the rim, her pink sudsy legs kicking in the air.

"Well, you seem to have your feet on the ground," he said to his other daughter.

"Oh, come *on*, Daddy," she answered, and thrust the drawing towards him.

He took it from her, and, prolonging the suspense, slowly fetched from his inside pocket a leather case from which he took his lenses and fixed them deliberately on his nose. Meanwhile Hannah was energetically resisting her mother's efforts to soap her arms and was beating the back of her father's neck with a roll of drawing paper. Mrs. Wheeler acted like a wise mother, and whipped the roll of paper out of one daughter's hand and wrapped the other in a shroud-sized towel.

"Let's keep it a little quiet," said Bill. "I'm concentrating on Tammy's picture." There was a comparative silence, broken only by a suppressed whinnying from the two girls.

"Now let's see. Right in the front, bigger than everything else, there's a man with a fur round his neck—"

"That's not fur, Daddy," said Tammy from inside the towel. "That's a beard."

"And he seems to be wearing a sort of yachting jacket covered with bottle tops."

"Silly, Daddy! That's his Space Police uniform with his rows and rows of medals."

"Oh, yes. Well, behind him a piece there's this space cruiser on its hind legs, there's a couple more people in yachting jackets—"

"Oh, *Daddy!*"

"—around a little fire, and then there's trees and flowers and so on and a monster artichoke—"

"It's a Murray person, Daddy. A Murray person."

"I see now by the warts. And then there's more trees very small in the background, and after that there's a little, little man walking away into the distance."

"Now look at mine! Now look at mine!" came a shout out of the stream in the bath, and Hannah pummeled at her mother's arm.

"Put that somewhere safe for me," said Bill to his elder daughter, handing her back her drawing. "I must look at Hannah's." From the windowsill he picked up the other drawing and opened it. "Remarkable unanimity of theme, I see," he said. "There's this big man with a beard in the front and then halfway back the other two medium-sized men by the fire and the warty artichoke—"

"Murray person!" screamed Hannah, incensed, from the bath.

"And then the line of trees and then the little man in the distance."

"Come on, Daddy! Guess what it represents, Daddy!"

"I really can't think," said their father in mock mystification. "Something you read about in school?"

"You're being so *stupid*, Daddy," said Hannah. Tammy released herself from the towel and wound it instead around her father's legs.

"Daddy really knows," she said scornfully. "He's just pretending."

"I don't know," said Bill.

"It's you on the Federation satellite, Daddy. Don't you see?" said Hannah eagerly. "There's you in the front with the medals, and behind's Levine and Matsuki and right in the back's the old man getting smaller and smaller. Don't you see?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I *do* see Levine and Matsuki and I just see the old man, though he's got a bit small in this picture. But I don't see me. Unless you mean this bearded monkey up front here—but he's nothing like me."

"You're so silly sometimes, Daddy," said Tammy. "Of course it's you in the picture."

"I guess they've finished their bath," said Bill's wife.

"Time for our story! Time for our story!"

"Okay, so let's be off," said Bill. He waited for the resolution of an unequal three-way struggle between Hannah and her mother and Hannah's flowered nightshirt, and then they were ready. Bill snatched his two children up into his arms, from which point they instantly started tugging at his reddish beard.

"Easy on the steering," he said, and swept them through into the nursery, where he inserted one into the bed with the elephants on the quilt and the other into the bed with the lions on the quilt. They popped straight out again like corks from a champagne bottle and, bouncing around him, changed beds. He bared his teeth and hooded his eyes Satanically. "Drat it," he said. "Where did I put those children?"

"Wrong beds," said Hannah, snuggling down into the covers until only her curly topknot showed.

"Now tell us the story of you and Levine and Matsuki on the Federation satellite."

"You don't want that old story again? I've told it to you a dozen times. And it's sort of sad."

"The Federation satellite! The Federation satellite!"

"Don't you want the one about the witch, the wolves and the little girl who lived on Endymion IV?"

"You and the Federation satellite!"

"The Federation satellite it is, then. Ready now. It was like this."

He stopped. Hannah's topknot had disappeared and he could see nothing of her except a bulge under the bedclothes like a goat in the stomach of a boa constrictor. "Did I lose you?" he asked. "Oh, I see. Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two!—um—um—One! Fire all!"

With a whining and a spluttering Hannah emerged from her boa constrictor and sat up straight with her arms above her head, grinning and giggling.

"All shipshape now? Well, I'll begin."

II

"BACKAWAYS in the dim past before you two nonsenses were thought of (he said), a ship set out from Glenn Field, New Mexico, carrying three men, a Murray and just a heap of papers and pictures. The first man was Levine, Earth's ambassador to the Galactic Federation; the second was Matsuki, a captain in the Space Police; and the third man was his engineer, as stupid, lazy and bearded a man as you could hope to meet. I'll not tell you his name.

("Daddy!" shouted Tammy and Hannah together.)

Don't interrupt. Their mission was to deliver Levine and his heap of papers and pictures to a meeting-place where he would talk to people from the Federation. Levine was going to do the talking; the Murray, as you know, just keeps the artificial gravity going; the engineer was to run the ship and Matsuki was there sort of to run the Murray and the engineer. So when the ship got to the meeting-place they found the Federation hadn't arrived. But they'd left a biggish disk-island floating there—luckily the right way up or we'd all have slipped off. And they'd left a signal beacon which guided the ship in to land. The signal beacon also said they should wait there, the Federation people would be along in about four Earth days. The engineer looked through a porthole and everything looked okay; he opened the ventilator and the air sniffed okay. So everybody got out and took a walk.

Well, you kids these days know as much about the Federation as I do, but I'll just say that in those days we knew pretty little about them. We sort of suspected they were good eggs, but it was Levine's job to find out exactly how good.

So anyway, everybody got out. The ship had landed in what looked like a clearing in a wood. Around them were trees and shrubs of all Earth varieties—more like the Botanical Gardens, really, than a natural wood. And between the trees were scattered irregular beds of vegetables and flowers. Some of them looked recently dug over. To be ex-

act about the vegetables, there were beds of tomatoes, bed of carrots, beds of onions, bed of celery and beds of lettuce. Since there were also apple trees, peach trees, lemon trees, grapefruit trees, mulberry trees and grape vines, the three men made themselves a delicious fresh salad like the one you had tonight. This, I may say they were very glad and very lucky to get after weeks in space.

(He looked sternly at the children. Tammy giggled guiltily. Hannah squirmed and giggled.)

So the sun was still high and they decided to see what the rest of the country was like. They left the ship on automatic and set off along what might have been a path through the trees. The land sloped upwards, very slightly at first, then more steeply, so that finally they came to a nearly-vertical rampart or ridge about ten feet high which curved inwards around them on both sides. Along the top of it grew a line of fir trees. They scrambled up the ridge and found themselves looking down on a flat and level plain that dipped away before them.

"I guess this is an old volcano crater," said Matsuki, who (as a good captain) liked to make classifications as firm as possible.

"Or maybe an old meteor crater?" said Levine, who (as a good diplomat) liked his classifications fluid.

"I guess so," said the engineer, who (as a good engineer) was stupid.

Beyond the ring of trees they could see countryside much like the area within the saucer—a pizza of flowers and vegetable patches, peppered with fruit trees. In some places the engineer throught he could discern paths through the trees, but they were so scattered and irregular that they might have been skeins of last year's leaves piled up by the wind between the trees. The sun was bright overhead; the light breeze was fresh and dry; the metal of the ship glinted sharply behind them across the grove. But the air in the plain beyond was misty and moist, and the horizon was lost in a faint blue haze which hid anything further than about five miles out. The engineer, with his marvelously

sharp eyes, was the first to see the figure who is the strange hero of this story.

("The old man! The old man!" shouted the children delightedly.)

The old man. This rugged figure was climbing slowly through the trees up the rim of the glade in which the Earthmen stood. He was dressed in baggy old blue denim pants and a patched tartan shirt. In one hand he carried a knobbly beechwood staff, in the other a bundle. The engineer nudged the other two Earthmen and together they stood up under the pines along the perimeter of the glade and waved and shouted to the old man. He untwisted himself as reluctantly as a 100-year old apple tree.

("Like the one in our garden?" asked Tammy. "Very much like the one in our garden," said Bill.)

The old man raised his stick in greeting, and called up to the spacemen:

"I'll be along presently. Just you wait where you are."

A few moments later the old man reached the top of the rise with a considerable puffing and blowing.

("And spitting, Daddy," said Hannah. "You forgot the spitting." And she gave a vigorous imitation of what she meant.

"Well, yes. That's true. He was spitting a bit, too. But that's no reason for you to." Bill fell silent for a moment, and cleared his throat. Hannah culminated her display in a paroxysm of sniffing and hissing, then settled back on her pillow grinning. "Well, when he got to the top, he held out his hand to Levine and said—"

" 'Welcome to the Federation, sir. My name's Gardner. Make yourself at home, sir, you and your company. I'll do what I can to make you comfortable, but don't ask no questions, I just work here,' " said Tammy all in one breath.

"That's right. Then he laid his bundle on the ground and unwrapped a striped flannel rag and fetched out the carcass of a fat hare.")

"I trapped this one in the blueberry patch in the valley. I was busy with my traps and I didn't see you arrive until

you was already here, almost. I'd better hurry and make your fire or he won't be done by dinner time."

"Well, I'm sure that's most kind of you. Mr. Gardner," said Levine. "But I don't think we need a fire. We've got a small stove built into the extension heat-engine of our ship."

"It'll be all the better done over wood, sir. And you'll need a little fire of an evening."

"Well, that's most hospitable."

"Now I hope you've everything you want. There's a spring for water to the south of your ship about 20 yards. You can tell which is south by the sun. I thought of making the fire between there and the ship. You'll see there's a couple of fallen trees there'll make comfortable seating, I think."

"Sounds like a holiday!" said Matsuki, rolling up his sleeves and taking deep breaths of the pine-scented air.

"I certainly hope it will be one, sir," said Gardner. "I'm going over now to make up your fire. Why don't you look around? I'm afraid I have to ask you not to go further out than the ridge around this dip here. Beyond there I'm not supposed to take you. And you'd need a guide."

Levine said, "Ya, sure. We'll just walk around for now."

When they got back to the ship they found the old man had picked a camp site for them. He was sitting on a fallen log, stirring a pot which hung on a tripod of sticks over a crackling fire. They crowded around the pot.

"Smells good," said Matsuki, rudely dipping his finger in. "Tastes good, too."

"It's the hare, sir," said the old man. "As a matter of fact, I added to it some juice I made last year. You take grapes, and squeeze them, and if you let them ferment—"

"That's a remarkable process," said the engineer. "Perhaps you could patent it."

" 'Patent?' I don't know the word, sir."

"Never mind," said Matsuki, who was a gluttonous eater. "What say we eat? Eh?" He looked around the group, his eyes pleading.

So the engineer was sent to get the plates and they sat down around the fire and helped themselves from the pot.

By the time they had finished the sun had gone down.

The old man collected their plates and they heard him rinse them in the spring in the darkness beyond the fire. When he came back he was carrying an earthenware jar corked at the neck.

"I've got some more of that juice I spoke of," he said. "Would you like some to drink after dinner?"

"You bet," said Matusuki, and ambled to the ship and brought mugs.

The old man uncorked the bottle. For a long time the four men sat around the little fire in a silence broken only by the sounds of the engineer's gurgling pipe, and of Matsuki smacking his lips and of Levine's restless pencil.

"What are you doing?" asked the old man.

"I'm drawing," said Levine. "I do it when I've nothing else to do."

"Can I look, please?"

"Of course. Come and sit over here."

The old man moved around and the engineer made a place for him. "I see," he said. "But that's marvelous. You're making a picture of us. There's the cooking pot very big in front, and beyond, with the light on half his face, is Captain Matsuki picking his teeth. That's marvelous. Could you draw me?"

"Of course. Sit opposite me where I can see you without the light in my eyes."

The old man went over where he pointed. He tore out the sheet he'd been working on and selected a long stick of charcoal. The old man watched his hands in fascination. Levine began to draw.

"Who are you, Mr. Gardner? How did you get here? Are you human?"

"Oh yes, sir," said the old man proudly. "I'm human, all right. I know why you ask. I've seen some clever robots. But my parents were human, all right, servants to colonists on Stoneground."

"You're looking remarkably well for your age, if I may say so, Mr. Gardner," said Levine. "I'd say there haven't been colonists on Stoneground for 70 or 80 years—not since the Damp hit the planet."

The old man didn't answer for a while. He was watching Levine's careful movements.

"Oh, yes, the Damp got my parents, and my parents' master and mistress. But I was in a kiddy-cabin the master and mistress had used for their own children and passed on to my parents. So when the Damp came I escaped."

"It's hard to believe."

"Why, sir?"

"Well, the police sent out a census force after the Damp passed on. They traced every single colonist who'd been noted in the census before. And buried them, too. I remember reading an abstract of the report. Even when colonies have to be written off, we have to find out what happened. I'm sorry if this is painful, but it's important to Earth what happens to Earthmen."

"I'm not hurt. It's so long ago now. I'm proud you should inquire, sir. The truth is I was born after the last census of the living planet, and then the Damp came. They never knew I existed."

"I see. Well, what happened then?"

"It's simple, really. When the Federation spotted the Damp on Stoneground they sent a fumigation team in right away. Now that you know about the Damp I expect you do the same."

"Yes, we do."

"You see, Stoneground's one of Earth's farthest colonies. Well, it's also on the outskirts of the Federation territory."

"I suppose it is, yes."

"I was the first human being the Federation ever met, so they tell me. I was eight years old. Well, they began to study my environment at once—fetched a whole farmhouse and everything in it from Stoneground and installed it on one of their planets, and brought along an old rancher and his wife from Stoneground's neighbor Bullrush. They were my stepfather and mother, old Mr. and Mrs. Gardner of Bullrush. They died years ago. I'm lucky to be alive myself."

"That's a strange story. How did you get here?"

"They put me here as curator. This is Eden, the Federa-

tion's gift to Earth. They feel you should have somewhere in this sector you can call home."

"It's certainly like Earth. It's a wonderful job."

"I believe it is. But it's only a mock-up. Very beautiful, of course, but it's not Earth."

"I guess not, Gardner. Home's always something special."

"I wish one day I could go to your home, Man's home. I'd like to see it once. I hope you don't mind me mentioning that? I'd so like to go in a ship back to Earth."

The old man gazed into the fire. Levine glanced at Matsuki and Matsuki looked questioningly at the engineer. When the engineer felt their eyes on him he shrugged his shoulders. "There's room," he said. "Why shouldn't there be enough room for one more?"

III

MATSUKI HAD BEEN lying all afternoon in the long grass just below the boundary ridge of the encampment. Now he came strolling back towards the ship and found the others drinking mugs of tea.

"How on Earth—?" he asked.

"It's not perhaps quite what you're used to, sir," said Gardner, who was bustling around filling the mugs. "I did what I could with the local product. I found a bush down in the valley and I took the liberty of picking some myself last year and drying it in the sun."

"You know, this is some climate. Old Gardner gets us tea. And while I was lying out there I saw a couple of flights of duck, Striped and Peking, and pigeons and even a swan. I haven't eaten swan since once in Normandy, there was a little place . . . It hurts to remember those days. I wish we had a little gun, I really do."

"It's more than my job's worth, Matsuki," said Levine. "Not even one small atomic cannon."

Silently the engineer handed Matsuki a forked stick he'd been whittling. "I think this may serve. If you ask Levine pleasantly, he might open his briefcase and give you a few of

the government's rubberbands. And even some paper clips as bullet."

"Hey, that's not a bad idea. But pebbles would make heavier bullets. What about it, Ambassador? You wouldn't lose your job over a few rubberbands?"

"I guess not. I'll get you some after tea." Levine settled back to his drawing. He only knew how to draw two ways. Sometimes he would draw things around him at that moment; sometimes he would draw his wife. She was a cheerful, dumpy woman and they had several cheerful, dark-eyed children.

Gardner roasted hedgehogs in clay for dinner that night.

The next day Matsuki frightened several pigeons and bruised a woodcock. Levine drew his wife as a tall blonde, since his imagination ran away with him when he was away from home. The engineer made Matsuki a crossbow with a telescopic sight out of some pieces of an optical scanner, a tunic-hanger and three Space Police belts.

Gardner charcoal-grilled a brace of pheasants and washed Levine's white shirts.

The next day was a bit different. It happens that this engineer was a light sleeper. Like his youngest daughter—but not like his wife and his lazybones elder daughter. (Tammy squirmed protestingly.) Anyway, he awoke the next morning around 5:00 A.M. or 5:30. Mist hung among the trees in the glade; the shadows of the trunks slanted through it, making a network of blue bars. The rail of the ship's ladder was damp with the morning dew and, running his hand along it, he swept up a stream of water. Below him the old man was poking around the campfire. A thin trickle of smoke wavered up towards the tree tops.

"Hullo, Gardner. How are you this morning?" asked the engineer, belting his woolen robe around him.

"Good morning, Mr. Wheeler, sir," said the old man. "I'm just finishing your fire. Then I'll be off and maybe find some eggs for breakfast. That would suit, I hope?"

"Excellent. I'll come with you."

"Well, to be honest, sir, I'd rather you didn't, if you don't mind me saying so, sir. The chickens usually lay in the rasp-

berry bramble that I have, and that's out beyond the perimeter."

"Come on, then. I'll come with you to the edge of the grove."

"Well, that's all right."

The two set off together, the old man switching away fiercely at nettles and ragwort in the grass, plants that hurt his professional pride. The young engineer watched him curiously.

"Why can't I go outside the glade?"

"It's not 'can't,' sir, if you understand me. It's just sort of this part has been laid out for your party and in a way the rest hasn't. I'll show you what I mean when we get there."

In a few minutes they got up onto the rampart under the pines and stopped. "I'm going over there," said Gardner, pointing to a green patch about half a mile away. "That's the raspberry patch. But I doubt you could make it out there. You'd get lost. Walk a few yards and you'll see what I mean."

The engineer smiled at the old man's distrust of his sense of direction and stepped out amiably down the slope with him. Immediately he sensed that the air outside the bowl was entirely different from that above. *It must be as steamy as a jungle,* was his first thought. He could hardly see the old man ahead of him, and the tops of the low fruit trees were lost in the swirling mist. He went forward uncertainly, tripped on the uneven ground.

When he looked up there was nothing to be seen anywhere.

He was surrounded by an even glow which cut him off from his surroundings as surely as if he had been sitting in a light globe. If this was mist, it was the thickest—and dryest—he'd ever been in.

"Hey, Gardner!" he shouted. "Get me out of this."

Nothing happened. He experimented by putting his hand close to his face. When he held it a couple of inches from his eyes it was just visible as a dark shadow. Not only could he see nothing, but he discovered with a start that he

could hear nothing except the beat of his own heart and a hiss that could easily have been in his ears as in the trees.

"All right, Gardner. I see what you mean." He had meant to speak aloud, but his words were absorbed and muffled by the pressing blankness so that he did not know whether he had actually spoken. But immediately he felt a hand on his shoulder. He got up, and the hand guided him along a winding track that led upward.

Within a few steps his vision began to clear, he saw the trees take shape like people in a Turkish bath, and a few minutes later they were standing on the ridge looking down on the deceptively inviting country.

"It's just a little hazy down there, sir."

The engineer nodded apologetically.

"I'll be off for the eggs. You stay up here and you'll be all right."

The engineer watched the old man set off determinedly towards his raspberry patch, skirting the trees and shrubs without even looking up. When he was a hundred yards down the path the engineer turned and sprinted back to the ship. He mounted the ladder two steps at a time and skidded through the ship to the captain's cabin. Once inside he shook Matsuki awake.

"What's the matter? Can't you let anyone sleep?"

"Up, cap'n," said the engineer, saluting rudely. "Help's needed."

Matsuki leapt out of bed instantly and made for the door that led onto the control deck. The engineer put his arm across it.

"No trouble—yet. Relax. Just bring a rope, will you? And put on a robe. We're going outside."

The captain sighed. "I'll never get to sleep again now," he said grumpily. "I'll come."

Soon they both stood on the grass outside, the engineer in his matted wool gown and slippers and the captain in a quilted silk coat with a black dragon on it and his wood-soled sandals. "We'll go this way," said the engineer, and led his chief the same way he had gone earlier. When they

reached the ridge he waited for the captain to stop yawning and deep-breathing, and then pointed to the raspberry patch and the dark dot within it which was the laboring Gardner.

"Now," he said. "I'm going to hold the rope and I want you to walk down there a short way just paying out the rope as you go. Right?"

"Sure, if that's what makes you happy for today. How far do you think I should go?"

"Please yourself, skipper. You won't want to go far."

Shrugging his shoulders, the captain gave the engineer the end of the rope and set off down the hill, paying it out off his arm. The engineer saw him set off steadily enough then slow down and go more cautiously; then the captain walked straight into a bramble bush, and fell in. The engineer heard him make some rude comments on the engineer and on the bush. Then he got up again. He was moving his hands cautiously ahead of him, and shuffling his feet hesitantly.

"All right, if you're so clever!" shouted the captain. "What do I do now?"

"Come out," said the engineer. The rope was still coiled around the captain's fist, so the engineer pulled gently. "This way," he shouted. Slowly and circumspectly (that is, with caution and care) the captain climbed the hill.

"Misty down there?" asked the engineer when Matsuki reached the top.

"Misty? Are you kidding? It's absolutely impenetrable." He looked exasperated. "So what's the story?"

"Come back to the ship and I'll tell you." Together they set off over the spongy poine-needles. "Well, first, it's not misty down there. Not like with mist."

"I see what you mean. It's not at all wet."

"Second, it certainly is difficult to see. As if everything were out of focus and all energy were being absorbed."

"Hmm."

"Well, now, when we're both home at Glenn Field and I'm visiting you for the evening, what do I do first and always?"

"Kiss my wife, you slob."

"Well, second."

"Let me see. You get a drink. No, that's not it. I know! You go over to the solido cabinet and fiddle with the knobs."

"Right. And what is the result?"

"It sort of gets rid of some of the fog. I don't know how it's done."

"No. Well, I'm the engineer. But basically I'd say it stops the light running around like particles as disorganized as a herd of pigs and gets them in neat rows like waves."

"So you once told me. But I don't see any control panel."

"No, that's right, you don't. But if I run into the ship I think I can lay my finger on a device which would do the same for the landscape. You wait here and I'll look."

The engineer climbed the ladder and rummaged around as promised, and sure enough laid his hands on the thing he wanted. It was a round thingumajig with a handle on one end and a dark eye on the other. He handed it to the captain. "That's the fellow. Now one of us goes out and looks around. The other stays and watches the power gauges on the power beam to this thing, and looks after His Excellency."

"His Excellency will look after himself," said Levine from the top of the ladder. He was formally attired in a black tee-shirt and pinstripe morning shorts. His hair was combed, his chin irreproachably shaved and his teeth shone as brightly as a control board in an emergency.

"Good morning, you old liar," shouted the captain. "This morning the entertainment is provided by the engine-room."

"Since we're all here, I'll kind of assign everyone to their places," said the engineer, not at all taken aback. "Levine will sit here making us some coffee. If Gardner comes, say we're out gathering shredded wheat in the plantations and we'll be back any moment. I shall stay in the engine-room balancing the power output of the dibblefook that the captain's carrying, and the intrepid captain shall walk down into the plain and see what he can see. Everybody know their lines?"

Levine said, "I'll be boiled if I know what's going on around this camp, but don't mind me."

The captain fingered the dandleprib experimentally. "I just press this button, huh?"

"Right," said the engineer, "And point the suttleprobe at what you want to see. Give me a moment to lock the direction-finder on you, and then start walking. If you're not back by 1000 hours we'll send out the bloodhounds." He turned and disappeared into the ship. A few moments later Levine and Matsuki heard the whine of the auxiliary power come on. The captain shrugged his shoulders and set off towards the pines.

Well, for the next hour the engineer did what engineers do in engine-rooms when they're controlling ganglehubs—

("You said dibblefook before, Daddy," said Tammy.

"Suttleprobe," said Hannah.

"Hush. I said dinglegrape.")—and Levine did whatever people do with coffee. I should think he snoozed by the fire, mostly. And finally the captain came running over the edge of the ridge and down into the camp.

"The weirdest thing," he panted. "The weirdest thing! Hey, greaseball, come on out of the ship! I've got news for you."

A few moments later the engineer came grinning down the ladder. "The gimbelsone really worked. It was sure drawing some power."

"Sure it worked. It was clearing out an area about 20 foot ahead and quite a bit on both sides and beyond that —just a wall of mist like a screen. Well, I walked down from the ridge and for, oh, say a hundred yards, two hundred, the country was like you'd expect—like an earthy slope, with some stones and rocks and grass and those old trees. Well, these kept on, but I gradually had the impression the grass was getting finer and the trees were sort of stunted, or as if they were only bushes out there. Pretty soon it got so there wasn't a thing growing above knee high. Like toy trees. Or really like a Japanese garden—I remember those from when I was a kid. Well, here's the weird thing. I kept on even further and those trees got

smaller and smaller the further out I went, and about a hundred yards further on they were nothing but a fuzz on the ground and beyond that nothing at all. Just nothing at all. I was walking in a bubble of mist on bare steel plates. That's all there is out there."

IV

THE ENGINEER was the first to react. He got up and walked out towards the ridge. The others followed. When they reached the line of pines they stopped. The old gardener was halfway back from the distant raspberry patch, a hunched figure growing larger with each step.

When he got up to where they stood in line on the ridge he opened his kerchief and showed them a heap of speckly eggs and dark red fruit. "I see Mr. Matsuki and Mr. Levine got up. I hope you slept well."

"We were just going to have breakfast. Come and join us."

"Well, thank you kindly."

They walked over to the campsite in silence. Levine poured four mugs of coffee. Gardner fetched water from the spring and put the eggs on to boil.

"Reckon you'll be off in a few days," he said.

Levine nodded, "I'm afraid so. Tomorrow back to work."

"You won't forget to ask if I can come back with you, will you?"

"Of course not. You should see Earth. Earth's really something."

The engineer had been gazing into the fire without saying anything since breakfast started. Now he looked up and blurted out, "Look, I'm not sure you could come with us. It's not as simple as that!" He poked at the embers of the fire. "I think I could settle the matter, if we could do some tests."

"What would you want me to do?"

"Well, first, when you go out beyond the ridge do you find it difficult to see?"

"Yes, a little. But not so difficult as you. I'm more used to it."

"For instance, when you're out where you were this morning, could you look back and see the pines around our camp?"

"No. They'd be hidden in the mist. I'd lose sight of them after walking just a few minutes."

"Well, what I propose to do is fix up a sort of searchlight which will light up the trees on the ridge so that they can be seen from the plain. But you've got to think this over. There's a possibility that what you see may be a shock. But on the other hand we can't take you back to Earth without doing some experiment like this. You ought to think it over."

"I have thought it over," said Gardner. "I want to go and I'll do anything that's necessary. I can't believe that there's anything around here would surprise me after all these years."

"Right, then. Now here's what we've got to do. I'm going to give the trundlebib to Levine, and you and he will go out to the perimeter. I'll hook up a three-way communication link, too. We'll be able to hear anything you say, if your don't go more than 30,000,000 miles out, and you'll hear what we say. Just wait out here while I lock onto you."

The engineer refilled his mug from the pot by the fire and carried it with him into the ship. The secondary power went on, and in a moment the three men heard his voice. It buzzed in their ears with a slight penetrating whine. Matsuki realized that the engineer must have tuned his output to resonate his hearer's teeth. "Now if Levine and Gardner would walk towards the perimeter . . . Any direction will do."

Matsuki watched them walk toward the pines. Around him buzzed a few gnats attracted by the camp fire. A few late summer leaves floated down from the lemon trees. The empty billycan over the fire rattled in the breeze.

Suddenly Levine's voice buzzed in his head. "We reached the perimeter."

"Now I want you both to go down about 20 yards."

"Right. We made it."

"I want Levine to place the danderglod on the ground facing up into the trees. Press it into the soil; that won't hurt it. And go and stand under the trees where it's pointing. From here on, Gardner must go alone."

"I'm quite used to that, if you don't mind, my boy," said Gardner.

"Please go cautiously. Just go about 20 feet."

There was a pause.

"I've done that, said Gardner.

"Now look back. What do you see?"

"Well, there's the line of pines, and under them's Mr. Levine."

"Now, raise your hand and lift your little finger and see if it will cover Levine."

"Uh-huh. It just about does—all but his head."

"All right, now move on down. Now *go slow*. I don't want you to move more than 20 feet okay? Now look around you. What do you see?"

"Everything's pretty misty down here, of course. There's the three palms with the grape-vines on them, just as usual. Grapes could do with picking, I'd say. Nothing else."

"Everything look about the right size?"

"Sure thing. Mighty fine big grapes, though."

"Now look back towards Levine. See anything?"

"No. Fog's too bad at this level."

"Now, this is the important part. Keep looking towards Levine. I'm going to turn on the hubbleswope. Remember—everything may be a bit distorted."

There was silence and then suddenly a sharp intake of breath from the old man. "Quite a turn that gave me! Thought Mr. Levine was right on top of me for a moment, right next to me! But I see he's still under the pines. Looks big, though."

"I though that would be the effect. Hold up your finger and try to cover him up again."

"Well, that's kind of funny. I—let me see—I just can, well, 'cept for his head."

"Hmm. Well, walk a little further and we'll try again."

There was a long wait. "Don't go too far!"

"Hold your horses, young man," said Gardner. "There's something I want to do."

"I'm sorry," said the engineer. "Let me know when you're about ready."

There was a much longer silence, and Matsuki, looking up, noticed with a shock that the satellite's sun was dead above the trees. Their breakfast had stretched right into noontime. Suddenly Gardner spoke again.

"I'm ready to look again now if you want to turn on the power."

"Here we go again, then."

Instantly they heard the old man scream hysterically, "Oh, God—he's like a—!"

The sentence ended in a groan. There was a grinding noise and a thump and then silence.

Matsuki sprang up and upset the coffee pot into the fire, where it hissed and bubbled. The engineer came flying down the latter in one jump. He was shouting. "Everyone stay where they are! Levine, stay under the pines. Matsuki, stay by the fire and make some coffee and get the liquor out of the ship. Above all, Levine, don't go down there!" He plunged through a thicket of light pink azaleas toward the perimeter.

V

WELL, THERE WAS nothing anyone could do. Levine said that after the old man had told the engineer to hold his horses, he'd set off much further into the plain until Levine had finally lost sight of him. If he'd fallen and hurt himself, we'd probably never have found his body. And if we walked down to him and he saw us coming it would just have made things worse.

We stood together on the perimeter near the spot where the old man had left Levine, and the engineer explained what it was the old man had seen and why. They left Matsuki looking out for the old man and the other two went

back to the camp fire. Every two minutes Levine said over the telephone link, "Hullo, Mr. Gardner. Can you hear me? This is Levine. Please come up to the camp and I will explain."

Finally the old man answered. "I'll come out. Wait up there for me. I think I must have fainted."

When he came up the rampart Matsuki took his arm and helped him to the campfire. There the Earthmen gave him coffee laced with whiskey from their First Aid kit.

After a while he looked less pale. Finally he said, "It was the shock of seeing Mr. Levine—like a giant on the horizon—taller than your ship!"

"I believe it," said the engineer.

"I guess you found out something I ought to know." The engineer nodded glumly. "Something bad?" The engineer nodded again. "I can't go back to Earth with you?" Nobody spoke. "Tell me why, please."

Matsuki looked at Levine. The engineer looked into the fire. Levine took a deep breath. "I'll tell you," he said. He got up and stood opposite Gardner. "How big am I?" he asked.

"Say, five foot nine."

"Hold your hand out straight, and try and cover me with your little finger. Can you do it?"

"No."

"All right, I'm bigger than your finger." He walked several paces further off. "Can you do it now?"

"Almost."

"At this distance I'm almost smaller than your finger." He walked out towards the perimeter and stopped again. "Try now," he said.

"I can do it easily now."

Levine ran back to the fire, and took out a sheet of drawing paper. He sketched an avenue of trees marching back into the distance and disappearing at the horizon. In the avenue he put three figures, one in the foreground, one in the middleground and one a long way away. "That's me near," he said, pointing to the first figure. "I look big. And here's me further away, and here's me a long way

away. You can cover me up with just the tip of your finger. Well, when you actually look at *me* I'm always the same size—I just *look* smaller or larger. But this picture of me, this one in the front, actually *is* larger than the one in the back. Do you see?"

The old man was not looking at Levine's drawing any more; he was gazing out miserably towards the line of pines on the ridge. He nodded slowly.

Levine made a sign to the others and the three Earthmen walked unhappily back to their ship. After a while the engineer said bitterly, "We will have to thank the Federation for their hospitality. They meant very well by bringing us down in a picture of Earth. We just never got around to realizing they'd include a picture of an Earthman."

"That's not all," said Tammy after a moment. "You haven't told what the old man did."

"That's really the sad part. I didn't want to tell you a sad story at bedtime."

"I know, Daddy, but it's part of the story, isn't it?"

"Yup, I guess so. Well, after a time the old man came up to Levine holding the sketch and said, 'And when you've finished with your picture you just put it away in its folder?' Levine nodded. The old man put his brown finger in the middle of the horizon. 'What happens back there?'

" 'We call it the vanishing point. All the lines in the picture are supposed to meet there and vanish.'

" 'I'll head that way'

"I can't remember we found anything to say to that. He went off to do his work as usual, and the next morning he came in with a chicken and a couple of pineapples.

" 'A farewell present,' he said. 'I've a bit of everything out there. I'll do all right along the way.'

"So sometime after breakfast we sort of all got up together and went out to the pines. And there we just all shook hands and he tucked his old striped cloth in his belt and picked up his staff and set off down the track. It was a fantastically clear day. For a long, long time the three

men, Matsuki, Levine and the engineer, watched him getting smaller and smaller.

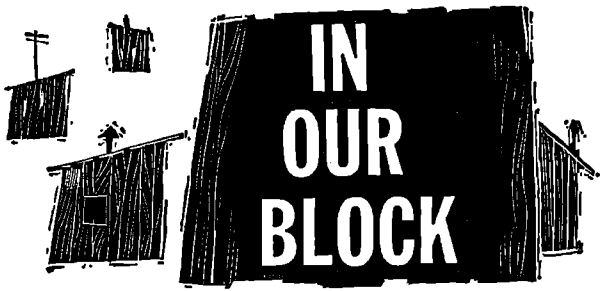
"And that *is* all."

For a short time neither of the children spoke. Then Tammy opened her eyes.

"My picture, the teacher at school said it was very advanced, the way I'd made the people get smaller toward the back of the picture. She said most children don't do that because it's not the way it looks to most children. Well, it doesn't. I just drew it how you said it happened. Didn't I?" She snuggled down under the covers.

"Sure you did, turnip. Sure." After a moment or two he said, "Hey-ho, why don't you two fellows go to sleep, hoh?" Neither answered, so he disengaged his hand from Hannah's moist fist, kissed them both on the tops of their heads, tiptoed into the hallway leaving their door ajar and ran down the stairs to look for his wife.

To the best of our knowledge, R.A. Lafferty has never yet written a serious word of science fiction. We're glad to see from this story that he still hasn't sobered up.



R. A. LAFFERTY

THERE WERE A LOT of funny people in that block.

"You ever walk down that street?" Art Slick asked Jim Boomer, who had just come onto him there.

"Not since I was a boy. After the overall factory burned down, there was a faith healer had his tent pitched there one summer. The street's just one block long and it dead-ends on the railroad embankment. Nothing but a bunch of shanties and weed-filled lots. The shanties looked different today, though, there seem to be more of them. I thought they pulled them all down a few months ago."

"Jim, I've been watching that first little building for two hours. There was a tractor-truck there this morning with a forty foot trailer, and it loaded out of that little shanty. Cartons about eight inches by eight inches by three foot came down that chute. They weighed about thirty-five pounds each, from the way the men handled them. Jim,

they filled that trailer up with them, and then pulled it off."

"What's wrong with that, Art?"

"Jim, I said they filled that trailer up. From the drag on it, it had about a sixty thousand pound load when it pulled out. They loaded a carton every three and a half seconds for two hours; that's two thousand cartons."

"Sure, lots of trailers run over the load limit nowadays. They don't enforce it very well."

"Jim, that shack's no more than a cracker box seven feet on a side. Half of it is taken up by a door, and inside is a man in a chair behind a small table. You couldn't get anything else in that half. The other half is taken up by whatever that chute comes out of. You could pack six of those little shacks on that trailer."

"Let's measure it," Jim Boomer said. "Maybe it's bigger than it looks." The shack had a sign on it: MAKE SELL SHIP ANYTHING CUT PRICE. Jim Boomer measured the building with an old steel tape. The shack was a seven foot cube, and there were no hidden places. It was set up on a few piers of broken bricks, and you could see under it.

"Sell you a new fifty-foot steel tape for a dollar," said the man in the chair in the little shack. "Throw that old one away." The man pulled a steel tape out of a drawer of his table-desk, though Art Slick was sure it had been a plain flat-top table with no place for a drawer.

"Fully retractable, rhodium plated, Dort glide, Ramsey swivel, and it forms its own carrying case. One dollar," the man said.

Jim Boomer paid him a dollar for it. "How many of them you got?"

"I can have a hundred thousand ready to load out in ten minutes," the man said. "Eighty-eight cents each in hundred thousand lots."

"Was that a trailer-load of steel tapes you shipped out this morning?" Art asked the man.

"No, that must have been something else. This is the first steel tape I ever made. Just got the idea when I saw you measuring my shack with that old beat-up one."

Art Slick and Jim Boomer went to the run-down building next door. It was smaller, about a six foot cube, and the sign said PUBLIC STENOGRAPHER. The clatter of a typewriter was coming from it, but the noise stopped when they opened the door.

A dark, pretty girl was sitting in a chair before a small table. There was nothing else in the room, and no typewriter.

"I though I heard a typewriter in here," Art said.

"Oh, that is me," the girl smiled. "Sometimes I amuse myself make typewriter noises like a public stenographer is supposed to."

"What would you do if someone came in to have some typing done?"

"What are you think? I do it of course."

"Could you type a letter for me?"

"Sure is can, man friend, two bits a page, good work, carbon copy, envelope and stamp."

"Ah, let's see how you do it. I will dictate to you while you type."

"You dictate first. Then I write. No sense mix up two things at one time."

Art dictated a long and involved letter that he had been meaning to write for several days. He felt like a fool droning it to the girl as she filed her nails. "Why is public stenographer always sit filing her nails?" she asked as Art droned. "But I try to do it right, file them down, grow them out again, then file them down some more. Been doing it all morning. It seems silly."

"Ah—that is all," Art said when he had finished dictating.

"Not P.S. Love and Kisses?" the girl asked.

"Hardly. It's a business letter to a person I barely know."

"I always say P.S. Love and Kisses to persons I barely know," the girl said. "Your letter will make three pages, six bits. Please you both step outside about ten seconds and I write it. Can't do it when you watch." She pushed them out and closed the door.

Then there was silence.

"What are you doing in there, girl?" Art called.

"Want I sell you a memory course too? You forget already? I type a letter," the girl called.

"But I don't hear a typewriter going."

"What is? You want verisimilitude too? I should charge extra." There was a giggle, and then the sound of very rapid typing for about five seconds.

The girl opened the door and handed Art the three page letter. It was typed perfectly, of course.

"There is something a little odd about this," Art said.

"Oh? The ungrammar of the letter is your own, sir. Should I have correct?"

"No. It is something else. Tell me the truth, girl—how does the man next door ship out trailer-loads of material from a building ten times too small to hold the stuff?"

"He cuts prices."

"Well, what are you people? The man next door resembles you."

"My brother-uncle. We tell every body we are Innominee Indians."

"There is no such tribe," Jim Boomer said flatly.

"Is there not? Then we will have to tell people we are something else. You got to admit it sounds like Indian. What's the best Indian to be?"

"Shawnee," said Jim Boomer.

"O.K. then we be Shawnee Indians. See how easy it is."

"We're already taken," Boomer said. "I'm a Shawnee and I know every Shawnee in town."

"Hi, cousin!" the girl cried, and winked. "That's from a joke I learn, only the begin was different. See how foxy I turn all your questions."

"I have two-bits coming out of my dollar," Art said.

"I know," the girl said. "I forgot for a minute what design is on the back of the two-bitser piece, so I stall while I remember it. Yes, the funny bird standing on the bundle of fire wood. One moment till I finish it. Here." She handed the quarter to Art Slick. "And you tell everybody there's a smoothie public stenographer here who types letters good."

"Without a typewriter," said Art Slick. "Let's go, Jim."

"P.S. Love and Kisses," the girl called after them.

The Cool Man Club was next door, a small and shabby beer bar. The bar girl could have been a sister of the public stenographer.

"We'd like a couple of Buds, but you don't seem to have a stock of anything," Art said.

"Who needs stock?" the girl asked. "Here is beers." Art would have believed that she brought them out of her sleeves, but she had no sleeves. The beers were cold and good.

"Girl, do you know how the fellow on the corner can ship a whole trailer-load of materal out of a space, like if he made it before time."

"But he has to make it out of something," Jim Boomer cut in.

"No, no," the girl said. "I study your language. I know words. Out of something is to assemble, not to make. He makes."

"This is funny," Slick gaped. "Budweiser is misspelled on this bottle, the i before the e."

"Oh, I goof," the bar girl said. "I couldn't remember which way it goes so I make it one way on one bottle and the other way on the other. Yesterday a man ordered a bottle of Progress beer, and I spelled it Progers on the bottle. Sometimes I get things wrong. Here, I fix yours."

She ran her hand over the lable, and then it was spelled correctly.

"But that thing is engraved and then reproduced," Slick protested.

"Oh, sure, all fancy stuff like that," the girl said. "I got to be more careful. One time I forget and make Jax-taste beer in a Schlitz bottle and the man didn't like it. I had to swish swish change the taste while I pretended to give him a different bottle. 'It is the light in here, if just makes it look brown,' I told the man. Hell, we don't even have a light in here. I go swish fast and make the bottle green. It's hard to keep from making mistake when you're stupid."

"No, you don't have a light or a window in here, and it's

light," Slick said. "You don't have refrigeration. There are no power lines to any of the shanties in this block. How do you keep the beer cold?"

"Yes, is the beer not nice and cold? Notice how tricky I evade your question. Will you good men have two more beers?"

"Yes, we will. And I'm interested in seeing where you will get them," Slick said.

"Oh look, is snakes behind you!" the girl cried.

"Oh how you startle and jump!" she laughed. "It's all joke. Do you think I will have snakes in my nice bar?"

But she had produced two more beers, and the place was as bare as before.

"How long have you tumble-bugs been in this block?" Boomer asked.

"Who keep track?" the girl said. "People come and go."

"You're not from around here," Slick said. "You're not from anywhere I know. Where do you come from? Jupiter?"

"Who wants Jupiter?" the girl seemed indignant. "Do business with a bunch of insects there is all! Freeze your tail too."

"You wouldn't be a kidder, would you, girl?" Slick asked.

"I sure do try hard. I learn a lot of jokes but I tell them all wrong yet. I get better, though I try to be the witty bar girl so people will come back."

"What's in the shanty next door to the tracks?"

"My cousin-sister," said the girl. "She set up shop just today. She grow any color hair on bald-headed men. I tell her she's crazy. No business. If they wanted hair they wouldn't be bald-headed in the first place."

"Well, *can* she grow hair on baldheaded men?" Slick asked.

"Oh sure. Can't you?"

There were three or four more shanty shops in the block. It didn't seem that there had been that many when the men went into *The Cool Man Club.*

"I don't remember seeing this shack a few minutes ago,"

Boomer said to the man standing in front of the last shanty on the line.

"Oh, I just made it," the man said.

Weathered boards, rusty nails . . . and he had just made it.

"Why didn't you—ah—make a decent building while you were at it?" Slick asked.

"This is more inconspicuous," the man said. "Who notices when an *old* building appears suddenly? We're new here and want to feel our way in before we attract attention. Now I'm trying to figure out what to make. Do you think there is a market for a luxury automobile to sell for a hundred dollars? I suspect I would have to respect the local religious feeling when I make them, though."

"What is that?" Slick asked.

"Ancestor worship. The old gas tank and fuel system still carried as vestiges after natural power is available. Oh, well, I'll put them in. I'll have one done in about three minutes if you want to wait."

"No. I already got a car," Slick said. "Let's go, Jim."

That was the last shanty in the block, so they turned back.

"I just got to wondering what was down in this block where nobody ever goes," Slick said. "There's a lot of odd corners in our town if you look them out."

"There were some queer guys in the row of shanties that were here before this bunch," Boomer said. "Some of them used to come up to the *Red Rooster* to drink. One of them could gobble like a turkey. One of them could roll one eye in one direction and the other eye the other way. They shoveled hulls at the cotton-seed oil float before it burned down."

They went by the public stenographer shack again.

"No kidding, honey, how do you type without a typewriter?" Slick asked.

"Typewriter is too slow," the girl said.

"I asked How, not Why," Slick said.

"I know. Is it not nifty the way I turn away a phrase? I think I will have a big oak tree growing in front of my

shop tomorrow for shade. Either of you nice men have an acorn in your pocket?"

"Ah—no. How do you really do the typing, girl?"

"You promise you won't tell anybody."

"I promise."

"I make the marks with my tongue," the girl said.

They started slowly on up the block.

"Hey, how do you make the carbon copies?" Jim Boomer called back.

"With my other tongue," the girl said.

There was another forty-foot trailer loading out of the first shanty in the block. It was bundles of half-inch plumbers' pipe coming out of the chute—in twenty foot lengths. Twenty foot rigid pipe out of a seven foot shed.

"I wonder how he can sell trailer-loads of such stuff out of a little shack like that," Slick puzzled, still not satisfied.

"Like the girl says, he cuts prices," Boomer said. "Let's go over to the *Red Rooster* and see if there's anything going on. There always were a lot of funny people in that block."

One of the most inventive series in recent s-f is Fred Saberhagen's saga of the "berserkers," immensely powerful and adaptable robots constructed millenia ago for use in a war between alien races which ultimately destroyed each other; only the berserkers, programmed to kill anything living, remain, and now they have discovered mankind's worlds. Against this background many battles are fought—none more macabre than that related here.

MASQUE OF THE RED SHIFT

FRED SABERHAGEN

I

FINDING HIMSELF ALONE and unoccupied, Felipe Nogara chose to spend a free moment in looking at the thing that had brought him out here beyond the last fringe of the galaxy. From the luxury of his quarters he stepped up into his private observation bubble. There, in a raised dome of invisible glass, he seemed to be standing outside the hull of his flagship *Nirvana.*

Under that hull, "below" the *Nirvana's* artificial gravity, there slanted the bright disk of the galaxy, including in one of its arms all the star-systems that Earth-descended man

had yet explored. But in whatever direction Nogara looked, bright spots and points of light were plentiful. They were other galaxies, marching away at their recessional velocities of tens of thousands of miles per second, marching on out to the optical horizon of the universe.

Nogara had not come here to look at galaxies, however; he had come to look at something new, at a phenomenon never before seen by men at such close range.

It was made visible to him by the apparent pinching-together of the galaxies beyond it, and by the clouds and streamers of dust cascading into it. The star that formed the center of the phenomenon was itself held beyond human sight by the strength of its own gravity. Its mass, perhaps a billion times that of Sol, so bent spacetime around itself that not a photon of light could escape it with a visible wavelength.

The dusty debris of deep space tumbled and churned, falling into the grip of the hypermass. The falling dust built up static charges until lightning turned it into luminescent thunderclouds, and the flicker of the vast lightning shifted into the red before it vanished, near the bottom of the gravitational hill. Probably not even a neutrino could escape this sun. And no ship would dare approach much closer than *Nirvana* now rode.

Nogara had come out here to judge for himself if the recently discovered phenomenon might soon present any danger to inhabited planets; ordinary suns would go down like chips of wood into a whirlpool if the hypermass found them in its path. But it seemed that another thousand years would pass before any planets had to be evacuated; and before then the hypermass might have gorged itself on dust until its core imploded, whereupon most of its substance could be expected to reenter the universe in a most spectacular but less dangerous form.

Anyway, in another thousand years it would be someone else's problem. Right now it might be said to be Nogara's—for men said that he ran the galaxy, if they said it of anyone.

A communicator sounded, calling him back to the enclosed

luxury of his quarters, and he walked down quickly, glad of a reason to get out from under the galaxies.

He touched a plate with one strong and hairy hand. "What is it?"

"My lord, a courier ship has arrived. From the Flamland system. They are bringing . . ."

"Speak plainly. They are bringing my brother's body?"

"Yes, my lord. The launch bearing the coffin is already approaching *Nirvana.*"

"I will meet the courier captain, alone, in the Great Hall. I want no ceremony. Have the robots at the airlock test the escort and the outside of the coffin for infection."

"Yes, my lord."

The mention of disease was a bit of misdirection. It was not the Flamland plague that had put Nogara's half-brother Johann Karlsen into a box, though that was the official story. The doctors were supposed to have frozen the hero of the Stone Place as a last resort, to prevent his irreversible death.

An official lie was necessary because not even High Lord Nogara could lightly put out of the way the one man who had made the difference at the Stone Place nebula. In that battle seven years ago the berserker machines had been beaten; if they had not been, intelligent life might already be extinct in the known galaxy. The berserkers were huge automated warships, built for some conflict between long-vanished races and now the enemies of everything that lived. The fighting against them was still bitter, but since the Stone Place it seemed that life in the galaxy would survive.

The Great Hall was where Nogara met daily for feasting and pleasure with the forty or fifty people who were with him on *Nirvana,* as aides or crewmen or entertainers. But when he entered the Hall now he found it empty, save for one man who stood at attention beside a coffin.

Johann Karlsen's body and whatever remained of his life were sealed under the glass top of the heavy casket, which contained its own refrigeration and revival systems, controlled by a fiber-optic key theoretically impossible to

duplicate. This key Nogara now demanded, with a gesture, from the courier captain.

The captain had the key hung around his neck, and it took him a moment to pull the golden chain over his head and hand it to Nogara. It was another moment before he remembered to bow; he was a spaceman and not a courtier. Nogara ignored the lapse of courtesy. It was his governors and admirals who were reinstituting ceremonies of rank; he himself cared nothing about how subordinates gestured and postured, so long as they obeyed intelligently.

Only now, with the key in his own hand, did Nogara look down at his frozen half-brother. The plotting doctors had shaved away Johann's short beard, and his hair. His lips were marble pale, and his sightless open eyes were ice. But still the face above the folds of the draped and frozen sheet was undoubtedly Johann's. There was something that would not freeze.

"Leave me for a time," Nogara said. He turned to face the end of the Great Hall and waited, looking out through the wide viewport to where the hypermass blurred space like a bad lens.

When he heard the door ease shut behind the courier captain he turned back—and found himself facing the short figure of Oliver Mical, the man he had selected to replace Johann as governor on Flamland. Mical must have entered as the spaceman left, which Nogara thought might be taken as symbolic of something. Resting his hands familiarly on the coffin, Mical raised one graying eyebrow in his habitual expression of weary amusement. His rather puffy face twitched in an overcivilized smile.

"How does Browning's line go?" Mical mused, glancing down at Karlsen. " 'Doing the king's work all the dim day long'—and now, this reward of virtue."

"Leave me," said Nogara.

Mical was in on the plot, as was hardly anyone else except the Flamland doctors. "I thought it best to appear to share your grief," he said. Then he looked at Nogara and ceased to argue. He made a bow that was mild mockery

when the two of them were alone, and walked briskly to the door. Again it closed.

So, Johann. If you had plotted against me, I would have had you killed outright. But you were never a plotter; it was just that you served me too successfully; my enemies and friends alike began to love you too well. So here you are, my frozen conscience, the last conscience I'll ever have. Sooner or later you would have become ambitious, so it was either do this to you or kill you.

Now I'll put you away safely, and maybe someday you'll have another chance at life. It's a strange thought that someday you may stand musing over my coffin as I now stand over yours. No doubt you'll pray for what you think is my soul. . . . I can't do that for you, but I wish you sweet dreams. Dream of your Believers' heaven, not of your hell.

Nogara imagined a brain at absolute zero, its neurons super-conducting, repeating one dream on and on and on. But that was nonsense.

"I cannot risk my power, Johann." This time he whispered the words aloud. "It was either this or have you killed." He turned again to the wide viewport.

II

"I SUPPOSE Thirty-three's gotten the body to Nogara already," said the Second Officer of Esteeler Courier Thirty-four, looking at the bridge chronometer. "It must be nice to declare yourself an emperor or whatever, and have people hurl themselves all over the galaxy to do everything for you."

"Can't be nice to have someone bring you your brother's corpse," said Captain Thurman Holt, studying his astrogational sphere. His ship's C-plus drive was rapidly stretching a lot of time-like interval between itself and the Flamland system. Even if Holt was not enthusiastic about his mission, he was glad to be away from Flamland, where Mical's political police were taking over.

"I wonder," said the Second, and chuckled.

"What's that mean?"

The Second looked over both shoulders, out of habit formed on Flamland. "Have you heard this one?" he asked. "Nogara is God—but half of his spacemen are atheists."

Holt smiled, but only faintly. "He's no mad tyrant, you know. Esteel's not the worst-run government in the galaxy. Nice guys don't put down rebellions."

"Karlsen did all right."

"That's right, he did."

The Second grimaced. "Oh sure, Nogara could be worse, if you want to be serious about it. He's a politician. But I just can't stand that crew that's accumulated around him the last few years. We've got an example on board now of what they do. If you want to know the truth, I'm a little scared now that Karlsen's dead."

"Well, we'll soon see them." Holt sighed, and stretched. "I'm going to look in on the prisoners. The bridge is yours, Second."

"I relieve you, sir. Do the man a favor and kill him, Thurm."

A minute later, looking through the spy-plate into the courier's small brig, Holt could wish with honest compassion that his male prisoner were dead.

He was an outlaw chieftain named Janda, and his capture had been the last success of Karlsen's Flamland service, putting a virtual end to the rebellion. Janda had been a tall man, a brave rebel, and a brutal bandit. He had raided and fought against Nogara's Esteeler empire until there had been no hope left, and then he had surrendered to Karlsen.

"My pride commands me to conquer my enemy," Karlsen had written once, in what he had thought was to be a private letter. "My honor forbids me to humble or hate my enemy." But Mical's political police operated with a different philosophy.

The outlaw might still be long-boned, but Holt had never seen him stand tall. The manacles still binding his wrists and ankles were of plastic and supposedly would not abrade human skin, but they served no sane purpose now and Holt would have removed them if he could.

A stranger, seeing the girl Lucinda who sat now at Janda's side to feed him, might have supposed her to be his daughter. She was his sister, five years younger than he. She was also a girl of rare beauty, and perhaps Mical's police had motives other than mercy in sending her to Nogara's court unmarked and un-brainwashed. It was rumored that the demand for certain kinds of entertainment was strong among the courtiers, and the turnover among the entertainers high.

Holt had so far kept himself from believing such stories. He opened the brig now—he kept it locked only to prevent Janda's straying out and falling childlike into an accident—and went in.

When the girl Lucinda had first come aboard his ship her eyes had shown helpless hatred of every Esteeler. Holt had been gentle and as helpful as possible to her in the days since then, and there was not even dislike in the face she raised to him now—there was a hope which it seemed she had to share with someone.

She said, "I think he spoke my name, a few minutes ago."

"Oh?" Holt bent to look more closely at Janda, and could see no change. The outlaw's eyes still stared glassily, the right eye now and then dripping a tear that seemed to have no connection with any kind of emotion. Janda's jaw was as slack as ever, and his whole body as awkwardly slumped.

"Maybe—" Holt didn't finish.

"What?" She was almost eager.

Gods of Space, he couldn't let himself get involved with this girl. He almost wished to see hatred in her eyes again.

"Maybe," he said gently, "it will be better for your brother if he doesn't make any recovery now. You know where he's going."

Lucinda's hope, such as it was, was shocked away by his words. She was silent, staring at her brother as if she saw something new.

Holt's wrist-intercom sounded.

"Captain here," he acknowledged.

"Sir, reporting a ship detected and calling us. Bearing five o'clock level to our course. Small and normal."

The last three words were the customary reassurance that a sighted ship was not possibly a berserker's giant hull. Berserkers all looked much alike, and what Flamland outlaws were left had no deep space ships, so Holt had no reason to be cautious.

He went casually back to the bridge and looked at the small shape on the detector screen. It was unfamiliar to him, but that was hardly surprising, as there were many shipyards orbiting many planets. Why, though, should any ship approach and hail him in deep space?

Plague?

"No, no plague," answered a radio voice, through bursts of static, when he put the question to the stranger. The video signal from the other ship was also jumpy, making it hard to see the speaker's face. "Caught a speck of dust on my last jump, and my fields are shaky. Will you take a few passengers aboard?"

"Certainly." For a ship on the brink of a C-plus jump to collide with the gravitation field of a sizable dust-speck was a rare accident, but not unheard-of; and it would explain the noisy communications. There was still nothing to alarm Holt.

The stranger sent over a launch which clamped to the courier's airlock. Wearing a smile of welcome for distressed passengers, Holt opened the lock. In the next moment he and the half-dozen men who made up his crew were caught helpless by an inrush of man-sized machines—they were a berserker's boarding party, cold and ancient, merciless as nightmare.

The machines seized the courier so swiftly and efficiently that no one could offer real resistance, but they did not immediately kill any of the humans. They tore the drive units from one of the lifeboats and herded Holt and his crew and his erstwhile prisoners into the boat.

"It wasn't a berserker on the screen, it wasn't," the Second Officer kept repeating to Holt. The humans sat side

by side, jammed against one another in the small space. The machines were allowing them air and water and food, and had started to take them out one at a time for questioning.

"I know it didn't look like one," Holt answered. "The berserkers are probably forming themselves into new shapes, building themselves new weapons. That's only logical, after the Stone Place. The only odd thing is that no one foresaw it."

A hatch clanged open, and a pair of roughly man-shaped machines entered the boat, picking their way precisely among the nine cramped humans until they reached the one they wanted.

"No, he can't talk!" Lucinda shrieked. "Don't take him!"

But the machines could not or would not hear her. They pulled Janda to his feet and marched him out. The girl followed, dragging at them, trying to argue with them. Holt could only scramble uselessly after her in the narrow space, afraid that one of the machines would turn and kill her. But they only kept her from following them out of the lifeboat, pushing her back from the hatch with metal hands as gently resistless as time. They were gone with Janda, and the hatch was closed again. Lucinda stood gazing at it blankly. She did not move when Holt put his arm around her.

III

AFTER A TIMELESS period of waiting, the humans saw the hatch open again. The machines were back, but they did not return Janda. Instead they had come to take Holt.

Vibrations echoed through the courier's hull; the machines seemed to be rebuilding her. In a small chamber sealed off by a new bulkhead from the rest of the ship, the berserker computer-brain had set up electronic eyes and ears and a speaker for itself, and here Holt was taken to be interrogated.

Speaking with a collection of recorded human words, the berserker questioned Holt at great length. Almost every

question concerned Johann Karlsen. It was known that the berserkers regarded Karlsen as their chief enemy, but this one seemed to be obsessed with him—and unwilling to believe that he was really dead.

"I have captured your charts and astrogational settings," the berserker reminded Holt. "I know your course is to *Nirvana,* where supposedly the non-functioning Karlsen has been taken. Describe this *Nirvana*-ship used by the life-unit Nogara."

So long as it had asked only about a dead man, Holt had given the berserker straight answers, not wanting to be tripped up in a useless lie. But a flagship was a different matter, and now he hesitated. Still, there was little he could say about *Nirvana* if he wanted to. And he and his fellow prisoners had had no chance to agree on any plan for deceiving the berserker; certainly it must be listening to everything they said in the lifeboat.

"I've never seen the *Nirvana,*" he answered truthfully. "But logic tells me it must be a strong ship, since the highest human leaders travel on it." There was no harm in telling the machine what it could certainly deduce for itself.

A door opened suddenly, and Holt stared in surprise as a strange man entered the interrogation chamber. Then he saw that it was not a man, but some creation of the berserker. Perhaps its flesh was plastic, perhaps some product of tissue-culture.

"Hi, are you Captain Holt?" asked the figure. There was no gross flaw in it, but a ship camouflaged with the greatest skill looks like nothing so much as a ship that has been camouflaged.

When Holt was silent, the figure asked, "What's wrong?" Its speech alone would have given it away, to an intelligent human who listened carefully.

"You're not a man," Holt told it.

The figure sat down and went limp.

The berserker explained: "You see I am not capable of making an imitation life-unit that will be accepted by real ones face to face. Therefore I require that you, a real life-unit, help me make certain of Karlsen's death."

Holt said nothing.

"I am a special device," the berserker said, "built by the berserkers with one prime goal: to bring about with certainty Karlsen's death. If you help me prove him dead, I will willingly free you and the other life-units I now hold. If you refuse to help, all of you will receive the most unpleasant stimuli until you change your mind."

Holt did not believe that it would ever willingly set them free. But he had nothing to lose by talking, and he might at least gain for himself and the others a death free of most unpleasant stimuli. Berserkers preferred to be efficient killers, not sadists, though during the long war they had become experts on the human nervous system.

"What sort of help do you want from me?" Holt asked.

"When I have finished building myself into this courier we are going on to *Nirvana,* where you will deliver your prisoners. I have read the orders. After being interviewed by the human leaders on *Nirvana,* the prisoners are to be taken on to Esteel for confinement. Is it not so?"

"It is."

The door opened again, and Janda shuffled in, bent and bemused.

"Can't you spare this man any more questioning?" Holt asked the berserker. "He can't help you in any way."

There was only silence. Holt waited uneasily. At last, looking at Janda, he realized that something about the outlaw had changed. The tears had stopped flowing from his right eye.

When Holt saw this he felt a mounting horror that he could not have explained, as if his subconscious already knew what the berserker was going to say next.

"What was bone in this life-unit is now metal," the berserker said. "Where blood flowed, now preservatives are pumped. Inside the skull I have placed a computer, and in the eyes are cameras to gather the evidence I must have on Karlsen. To match the behavior of a brainwashed man is within my capability."

"I do not hate you," Lucinda said to the berserker when

it had her alone for interrogation. "You are an accident, like a planet-quake, like a pellet of dust hitting a ship near light-speed. Nogara and his people are the ones I hate. If his brother was not dead I would kill him with my hands and willingly bring you his body."

"Courier Captain? This is Governor Mical, speaking for the High Lord Nogara. Bring your two prisoners over to *Nirvana* at once," he ordered.

"At once, sir."

After coming out of C-plus travel within sight of *Nirvana,* the assassin-machine had taken Holt and Lucinda from the lifeboat; then it had let the boat, with Holt's crew still on it, drift out between the two ships, as if men were using it to check the courier's fields. The men on the boat were to be the berserker's hostages, and its shield if it were discovered.

And by leaving them there it doubtless wanted to make more credible the prospect of their eventual release.

Holt had not known how to tell Lucinda of her brother's fate, but at last he had managed somehow. She had wept for a minute, and then she had become very calm.

Now the berserker put Holt and Lucinda into the crystal globe that served it for a launch, for the trip to *Nirvana.* The machine that had been Lucinda's brother was aboard the launch already, waiting, slumped and broken-looking as the man had actually been in the last days of his life.

When she saw that figure, Lucinda stopped. Then in a clear voice she said, "Machine, I wish to thank you. You have done my brother a kindness no human would do for him. I think I would have found a way to kill him myself before his enemies could torture him any more."

IV

THE *Nirvana's* airlock was strongly armored, and equipped with automated defenses that would have repelled a rush of boarding machines, just as *Nirvana's* beams and missiles would have beaten off any heavy-weapons attack a courier,

or a dozen couriers, could launch. The berserker had foreseen all this.

An officer welcomed Holt aboard. "This way, Captain; we're all waiting."

"All?"

The officer had the well-fed, comfortable look that came with safe and easy duty. His eyes were busy appraising Lucinda. "There's a celebration under way in the Great Hall. Your prisoners' arrival has been much anticipated."

Music throbbed in the Great Hall, and dancers writhed in costumes more obscene than any nakedness. From a table running almost the length of the Hall, serving machines were clearing the remnants of what had been a feast. In a throne-like chair behind the center of the table sat the High Lord Nogara, a rich cloak thrown over his shoulders, pale wine before him in a crystal goblet. Forty or fifty revelers flanked him at the long table, men and women and a few of whose sex Holt could not at once be sure. All were drinking and laughing, and some were donning masks and costumes, making ready for further celebration.

Heads turned at Holt's entrance, and a moment of silence was followed by a cheer. In all the eyes and faces turned now toward his prisoners, Holt could see nothing like pity.

"Welcome, Captain," said Nogara in a pleasant voice, when Holt had remembered to bow. "Is there news from Flamland?"

"None of great importance, sir."

A puffy-faced man who sat at Nogara's right hand leaned forward on the table. "No doubt there is great mourning for the late governor?"

"Of course, sir." Holt recognized Mical. "And much anticipation of the new."

Mical leaned back in his chair, smiling cynically. "I'm sure the rebellious population is eager for my arrival. Girl, were you eager to meet me? Come, pretty one, around the table, here to me." As Lucinda slowly obeyed, Mical gestured to the serving devices. "Robots, set a chair for the man—there, in the center of the floor. Captain you may return to your ship."

Felipe Nogara was steadily regarding the manacled figure of his old enemy Janda, and what Nogara might be thinking was hard to say. But he seemed content to let Mical give what orders pleased him.

"Sir," said Holt to Mical. "I would like to see—the remains of Johann Karlsen."

That drew the attention of Nogara, who nodded. A serving machine drew back sable draperies, revealing an alcove in one end of the Hall. In the alcove, before a huge viewport, rested the coffin.

Holt was not particularly surprised; on many planets it was the custom to feast in the presence of the dead. After bowing to Nogara he turned and saluted and walked toward the alcove. Behind him he heard the shuffle and clack of Janda's manacled movement, and held his breath. A muttering passed along the table, and then a sudden quieting in which even the throbbing music ceased. Probably Nogara had gestured permission for Janda's walk, wanting to see what the brainwashed man would do.

Holt reached the coffin and stood over it. He hardly saw the frozen face inside it, or the blur of the hypermass beyond the port. He hardly heard the whispers and giggles of the revelers. The only picture clear in his mind showed the faces of his crew as they waited helpless in the grip of the berserker.

The machine clothed in Janda's flesh came shuffling up beside him, and its eyes of glass stared down into those of ice. A photograph of retinal patterns taken back to the waiting berserker for comparison with old captured records would tell it that this man was really Karlsen.

A faint cry of anguish made Holt look back toward the long table, where he saw Lucinda pulling herself away from Mical's clutching arm. Mical and his friends were laughing.

"No, Captain, I am no Karlsen," Mical called down to him, seeing Holt's expression. "And do you think I regret the difference? Johann's prospects are not bright. He is rather bounded by a nutshell, and can no longer count himself king of infinite space!"

"Shakespeare!" cried a sycophant, showing appreciation of Mical's literary erudition.

"Sir." Holt took a step forward. "May I—may I now take the prisoners back to my ship?"

Mical misinterpreted Holt's anxiety. "Oh ho! I see you appreciate some of life's finer things, Captain. But as you know, rank has its privileges. The girl stays here."

He had expected them to hold on to Lucinda, and she was better here than with the berserker.

"Sir, then if—if the man alone can come with me. In a prison hospital on Esteel he may recover—"

"Captain." Nogara's voice was not loud, but it hushed the table. "Do not *argue* here."

"No sir."

Mical shook his head. "My thoughts are not yet of mercy to my enemies, Captain. Whether they may soon turn in that direction—well, that depends." He again reached out a leisurely arm to encircle Lucinda. "Do you know, Captain, that hatred is the true spice of love?"

Holt looked helplessly back at Nogara. Nogara's cold eye said: One more word, courier, and you find yourself in the brig. I do not give two warmings.

If Holt cried berserker now, the thing in Janda's shape might kill everyone in the Hall before it could be stopped. He knew it was listening to him, watching his movements.

"I—I am returning to my ship," he stuttered. Nogara looked away, and no one else paid him much attention. "I will —return here—in a few hours perhaps. Certainly before I drive for Esteel."

Holt's voice trailed off as he saw that a group of the revelers had surrounded Janda. They had removed the manacles from the outlaw's dead limbs, and they were putting a horned helmet on his head, giving him a shield and spear and a cloak of fur, equipage of an old Norse warrior of Earth—first to coin and bear the dread name of berserker.

"Observe, Captain," mocked Mical's voice. "At our masked ball we do not fear the fate of Prince Prospero. We willingly bring in the semblance of the terror outside!"

"Poe!" shouted the sycophant in glee.

Prospero and Poe meant nothing to Holt, and Mical looked disappointed.

"Leave us, Captain," said Nogara, making a direct order of it.

"Leave, Captain Holt," said Lucinda in a firm, clear voice. "We all know you wish to help those who stand in danger here. Lord Nogara, will Captain Holt be blamed in any way for what happens here when he has gone?"

There was a hint of puzzlement in Nogara's clear eyes. But he shook his head slightly, granting the asked-for absolution.

And there was nothing for Holt to do but go back to the berserker to argue and plead with it for his crew. If it was patient, the evidence it sought might be forthcoming. If only the revelers would have mercy on the thing they thought was Janda.

Holt went out. It had never entered his burdened mind that Karlsen was only frozen.

V

MICAL'S ARM WAS about her hips as she stood beside his chair, and his voice purred up at her: "Why, how you tremble, pretty one . . . it moves me that such a pretty one as you should tremble at my touch, yes, it moves me deeply. Now, we are no longer enemies, are we? If we are, I should have to deal harshly with your brother."

She had given Holt time to get clear of the *Nirvana.* Now she swung her arm with all her strength. The blow turned Mical's head halfway around, and made his neat gray hair fly wildly.

There was a sudden hush in the Great Hall, and then a roar of laughter that reddened all of Mical's face to match the handprint on his cheek. A man behind Lucinda grabbed her arms and pinned them. She relaxed until she felt his grip loosen slightly, and then she grabbed up a table knife. There was another burst of laughter as Mical ducked away and the man behind Lucinda seized her again. Another man came to help him and the two of them, laughing,

took away the knife and forced her to sit in a chair at Mical's side.

When the governor spoke at last his voice quavered slightly, but it was low and almost calm.

"Bring the man closer," he ordered. "Seat him there, just across the table from us."

While his order was being carried out, Mical spoke to Lucinda in conversational tones: "It *was* my intent, of course, that your brother should be treated and allowed to recover." He paused to see the effect of that statement on her.

"Lying piece of filth," she whispered, smiling.

Mical only smiled back. "Let us test the skill of my mind-control technicians," he suggested. "I'll wager that no bonds will be needed to hold your brother in his chair, once I have done this." He made a curious gesture over the table, toward the glassy eyes that looked out of Janda's face. "So. But he will still be aware, with every nerve, of all that happens to him. You may be sure of that."

She had planned and counted on something like this happening, but now she felt as if she were exhausted by breathing evil air. She was afraid of fainting, and at the same time wished that she could.

"Our guest is bored with his costume." Mical looked up and down the table. "Who will be first to take a turn at entertaining him?"

There was a spattering of applause as a giggling effeminate arose from a nearby chair.

"Jamy is known for his inventiveness," said Mical in pleasant tones to Lucinda. "I insist you watch closely, now. Chin up!"

On the other side of Mical, Felipe Nogara was losing his air of remoteness. As if reluctantly, he was being drawn to watch. In his bearing was a rising expectancy, winning out over disgust.

Jamy came giggling, holding a small jeweled knife.

"Not the eyes," Mical cautioned. "There'll be things I want him to see, later."

"Oh, certainly!" Jamy twittered. He set the horned helmet gingerly aside, and wiped the touch of it from his

fingers. "We'll just start like this on one cheek, with a bit of skin—"

Jamy's touch with the blade was gentle, but still too much for the dead flesh. At the first peeling tug, the whole lifeless mask fell red and wet from around the staring eyes, and his steel berserker-skull grinned out.

Lucinda had just time to see Jamy's body flung across the Hall by a steel-boned arm before the men holding her let go and turned to flee for their lives, and she was able to duck under the table. Screaming bedlam broke loose, and in another moment the whole table went over with a crash before the berserker's strength. The machine, finding itself discovered, thwarted in its primary function of getting away with evidence on Karlsen, took as its secondary goal the old berserker one of simple killing. It moved through the Hall, squatting and hopping grotesquely, mowing its way with scyth-like arms, harvesting howling panic into bundles of bloody stillness.

At the main door, fleeing people jammed one another into immobility, and the assassin worked among them, methodically mangling and slaying. Then it turned and came down the Hall again. It came to Lucinda, still kneeling where the table-tipping had exposed her; but the machine hesitated, recognizing her as a semi-partner in its prime function. In a moment it had dashed on after another target.

It was Nogara, swaying on his feet, his right arm hanging broken. He had come up with a heavy hand-gun from somewhere, and now he fired left-handed as the machine charged down the other side of the overturned table toward him. The gun-blasts shattered Nogara's friends and furniture but only grazed his moving target.

At last one shot hit home. The machine was wrecked, but its impetus carried it on to knock Nogara down again.

There was a shaky quiet in the Great Hall, which was wrecked as if by a bomb. Lucinda got unsteadily to her feet. There were sobs and moans and gropings everywhere, but no one else was standing.

She picked her way dazedly over to the smashed assas-

sin-machine. She felt only a numbness, looking at the rags of clothing and flesh that still clung to its metal frame. Now in her mind she could see her brother's face as it once had been, strong and smiling.

Now there was something that mattered more than the dead, if she could only recall what it was—of course, the berserker's hostages, the good kind spacemen. She could try to trade Karsen's body for them.

The serving machines, built to face emergencies on the order of spilled wine, were dashing to and fro in the nearest thing to panic that mechanism could achieve. They impeded Lucinda's progress, but she had the heavy coffin wheeled halfway across the Hall when a weak voice stopped her. Nogara had dragged himself up to a sitting position against the overturned table.

He croaked again: "—alive."

"What?"

"Johann's alive. Healthy. See? It's a freezer."

"But we all told the berserker he was dead." She felt stupid with the impact of one shock after another. For the first time she looked down at Karlsen's face, and long seconds passed before she could tear her eyes away. "It has hostages. It wants his body."

"No." Nogara shook his head. "I see, now. But no. I won't give him to berserkers, alive." A brutal power of personality still emanated from his broken body. His gun was gone, but his power kept Lucinda from moving. There was no hatred in her now.

She protested, "But there are seven men out there."

"Berserker's like me." Nogara bared pain-clenched teeth. "It won't let prisoners go. Here. The key. . . ." He pulled it from inside his torn-open tunic.

Lucinda's eyes were drawn once again to the cold serenity of the face in the coffin. Then on impulse she ran to get the key. When she did so Nogara slumped over in relief, unconscious or nearly so.

The coffin lock was marked in several positions, and she turned it to EMERGENCY REVIVAL. Lights sprang on around the figure inside, and there was a hum of power.

By now the automated systems of the ship were reacting to the emergency. The serving machines had begun a stretcher-bearer service, Nogara being one of the first victims they carried away. Presumably a robot medic was in action somewhere. From behind Nogara's throne chair a great voice was shouting.

"This is ship defense control, requesting human orders! What is nature of emergency?"

"Do not contact the courier ship!" Lucinda shouted back. Watch it for an attack. But don't hit the lifeboat!"

The glass top of the coffin had become opaque.

Lucinda ran to the viewport, stumbling over the body of Mical and going on without a pause. By putting her face against the port and looking out at an angle she could just see the berserker-courier, pinkly visible in the wavering light of the hypermass, its lifeboat of hostages a small pink dot still in place before it.

How long would it wait, before it killed the hostages and fled?

When she turned away from the port, she saw that the coffin's lid was open and the man inside was sitting up. For just a moment, a moment that was to stay in Lucinda's mind, his eyes were like a child's, fixed helplessly on hers. Then power began to grow behind his eyes, a power somehow completely different from his brother's and perhaps even greater.

Karlsen looked away from her, taking in the rest of his surroundings, the devastated Great Hall and the coffin. "Felipe," he whispered, as if in pain, though his half-brother was no longer in sight.

Lucinda moved toward him and started to pour out her story, from the day in the Flamland prison when she had heard that Karlsen had fallen to the plague.

Once he interrupted her. "Help me out of this thing; get me space armor." His arm was hard and strong when she grasped it, but when he stood beside her he was surprisingly short. "Go on, what then?"

She hurried on with her tale, while serving machines

came to arm him. "But why were you frozen?" she ended, suddenly wondering at his health and strength.

He ignored the question. "Come along to Defense Control. We must save those men out there."

He went familiarly to the nerve center of the ship and hurled himself into the combat chair of the Defense Officer, who was probably dead. The panel before Karlsen came alight and he ordered at once, "Get me in contact with that courier."

Within a few moments a flat-sounding voice from the courier answered routinely. The face that appeared on the communication screen was badly lighted; someone viewing it without advance warning would not suspect that it was anything but human.

"This is High Commander Karlsen speaking, from the *Nirvana*." He did not call himself governor or lord, but by his title of the great day of the Stone Place. "I'm coming over there. I want to talk to you men on the courier."

The shadowed face moved slightly on the screen. "Yes, sir."

Karlsen broke off the contact at once. "That'll keep its hopes up. Now I need a fast launch. You, robots, load my coffin aboard one. I'm on emergency revival drugs now and if I live I may have to re-freeze for a while."

"You're not really going there?"

Up out of the chair again, he paused. "I know berserkers. If chasing me is that thing's prime function it won't waste a shot or a second of time on a few hostages while I'm in sight."

"You can't go," Lucinda heard herself saying. "You mean too much to all men—"

"I'm not committing suicide; I have a trick or two in mind." Karlsen's voice changed suddenly. "You say Felipe's not dead?"

"I don't think so."

Karlsen's eyes closed while his lips moved briefly, silently. Then he looked at Lucinda and grabbed up paper and a stylus from the Defense Officer's console. "Give this to Felipe," he said, writing. "He'll set you and the captain free

if I ask it. You're not dangerous to his power. Whereas I . . ."

VI

FROM THE Defense Officer's position, Lucinda watched Karlsen's crystalline launch leave the *Nirvana* and take a long curve that brought it near the courier at a point some distance from the lifeboat.

"You on the courier," Lucinda heard him say. "You can tell it's really me here on the launch, can't you? You can DF my transmission? Can you photograph my retinas through the screen?"

And the launch darted away with a right-angle swerve, dodging and twisting at top acceleration, as the berserker's weapons blasted the space where it had been. Karlsen had been right. The berserker spent not a moment's delay or a single shot on the lifeboat, but hurled itself instantly after the launch.

"Hit that courier!" Lucinda screamed. "Destroy it!" A salvo of missiles left the *Nirvana*, but it was a shot at a receding target, and it missed. Perhaps it missed because the courier was already in the fringes of the distortion surrounding the hypermass.

Karlsen's launch had not been hit, but it could not get away. It was a glassy dot vanishing behind a screen of blasts from the berserker's weapons, a dot being forced into the maelstrom of the hypermass.

"Chase them!" cried Lucinda, and saw the stars tint blue ahead; but almost instantly the *Nirvana*'s auto pilot countermanded her order, barking mathematical assurance that to accelerate any further in that direction would be fatal to all aboard.

The launch was now going certainly into the hypermass, gripped by a gravity that could make any engines useless. And the berserker-ship was going headlong after the launch, caring for nothing but to make sure of Karlsen.

The two specks tinted red, and redder still, racing before an enormous falling cloud of dust as if flying into a

planet's sunset sky. And then the red shift of the hypermass took them into invisibility, and the universe saw them no more.

Soon after the robots had brought the men from the lifeboat safely aboard *Nirvana*, Holt found Lucinda alone in the Great Hall, gazing out the viewport.

"He gave himself to save you," she said. "And he'd never even seen you."

"I know." After a pause Holt said, "I've just been talking to the Lord Nogara. I don't know why, but you're to be freed, and I'm not to be prosecuted for bringing the damned berserker aboard. Though Nogara seems to hate both of us. . . ."

She wasn't listening; she was still looking out the port.

"I want you to tell me all about him someday," Holt said, putting his arm around Lucinda. She moved slightly, ridding herself of a minor irritation that she had hardly noticed. It was Holt's arm, which dropped away.

"I see," Holt said, after a while. He went to look after his men.

A tale of an Earthman triumphant over some of the most engaging alien heavies we've read about in a long time.

CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

GUARD CAPTAIN Skeerig Klith looked up as Senior Guard Lieutenant Ladigan Grul came in looking smug.

"Sir," said Grul, holding out a sheaf of papers, "the combat crews just dragged in an outworlder." Grul smiled, baring canine teeth an inch and a half long.

Klith reached out for the report, and in his excitement ran his claws completely through the papers.

"It seems too good to be true," he said, flattening the report on his desk. "The cowardly vermin always use their magic powers to get away."

"This one slipped up somewhere. And with due respect, sir, it isn't *magic*. The best opinion is that all they've got is a more advanced science than ours."

"When it gets that advanced, what's the difference?"

"Sir," protested Grul, "no matter *how* advanced it gets, science is not sorcery."

Klith snorted. "These outlanders came down out of the

sky. They go through the air at 16,500 laps to the sneeze. If they want something, they aim a rod at it and it comes. To get rid of it, they point a rod at it and it goes. We've seen them control their machines by *voice*. That's not sorcery?"

"By a perfectly natural process of scientific development, one step at a time—"

"Maybe wizards *get* their powers by a natural process of development, one step at a time. Anyway, what's the difference to me? If you don't understand something, it's magic, right?"

"Sir, in that case, basically everything is magic."

"Exactly," said Klith, "and in *that* case, as I said, what they use is *magic*. Now where's the prisoner?"

Grul opened his mouth, then shut it. In a choked voice, he said, "The prisoner is in the Central Cell Block, New Tier, sir."

"Hm-m-m." Klith glanced through the report. "The vermin was captured at the foot of Mount Daggeredge. His vehicle had apparently malfunctioned, and was taken to the District Technological Laboratory for study." Klith looked up. "I suppose you know, Grul, that our offensive to smash the main nest of these clawless cowardly outworlders has run into a little embarrassment?"

Grul's ears swiveled around. "No, sir. All I know is that our bombardment is so intense it can be heard a hundred and twenty laps away."

"Unfortunately, it makes just as much noise when you miss as when you hit."

"But their base is in clear sight."

"And there's something like thick, elastic, invisible armor-glass between our artillery and their base.

Grul shook his head in disgust. "There's always something."

"This prisoner may be very useful to us."

"You mean, we can question him about the barrier?"

"Exactly. In fact, we can question him about *all* their arrangements. Possibly we can find out why they're really

here. That business about the goroniuk mine is obviously a cover-up."

Grul nodded. "Who would want such worthless stuff? Merely to be around that goroniuk makes a man sick, and his fur falls out in patches. Shall I bring the outworlder up now?"

"Play zango with him for a while. It will put him in a cooperative frame of mind, and if Higher Headquarters should send for him, he is unhurt."

Grul grinned and displayed his canines. Zango was played with a dozen pieces on each side. All the men moved by jumping, and all the jumps were long.

Hedding was sitting in the cell sourly eyeing the furnishings. The cot was so short and wide he could only rest on it curled up. Beside the cot was a scratched-up post, obviously convenient for sharpening one's claws. In the corner was a box of sand. In the back wall of the cell was a neat round hole six inches across, covered by a small iron door. The function of this was a mystery to Hedding. For food, he'd received a small piece of some kind of ground-up fish and cheese, called *sznivtig*, with a powerful odor. He'd also been handed a bowl of water. Hedding drank the water, looked the food over closely, and buried it in the sand. He lay back on the cot with his feet hanging over the edge, and noticed the small dull bulb in the ceiling. The metallic deposit on the inside of the bulb suggested the stage of the planet's science. It occured to Hedding that there ought to be some kind of opportunity there. But what?

Just then, there was a rattle at the door.

A creature with large round pupils twitched its whiskers and pointed a gun at him. The gun had a bayonet that curved down at the end, like a claw.

Hedding, despite his conditioning, could barely understand the grating voice:

"Did you eat?"

"Not yet. I wasn't hungry."

"You had good luck, then?"

Hedding squinted around the cell. "Good luck? Not that *I* know of."

The jailer looked blank, then shrugged. "Bring your *sznivtig* and follow me."

"Where to?"

"Cell block 'C.' Get your claws out of the mat, and let's go."

Hedding followed the jailer through half a mile of dim corridors, and wound up inside an identical cell with exactly the same fittings. Fifteen minutes later, there was a rattle at the door and a new voice:

"You in there! Follow me!"

Grumbling to himself, Hedding followed the guard down a winding staircase for ten minutes, and found himself inside an identical cell fitted in exactly the same way. Twenty minutes later, there was a rattle at the door.

"Prisoner! *Attention!* Follow me!"

"What's wrong with this cell, for Pete's sake?"

"*Silence!* You will not question! *You will obey!*"

Cursing to himself, Hedding trailed off after the guard, tramped for twenty minutes along corridors lit with dim bulbs, then went around and around and around and around up a circular staircase, along another circular staircase, along another corridor and into a new cell, where the door clanged shut behind him, and fifteen minutes later a fresh voice spoke jovially:

"Prisoner. Ears up! We are taking you to a new cell. Get your *sznivtig* and follow me!"

Guard Captain Skeerig Klith shoved the message across the desk to Senior Lieutenant Grul, who read aloud, "Imperative prisoner be interrogated by scientific methods. Dismemberment, red-hot irons, hauling over the walls, and similar methods that impair clarity of mind are contraindicated. Only preliminary questioning is permissible pending my imminent arrival. Queel Snnorriz, Staff Psychologist."

"That boob," said Klith. "Obvisouly he's going to baby the outworlder. You remember when they put the cretin in charge of that gang of hardcase prisoners? He was go-

ing to 'unlatch the bound memories that caused their amoral and antisocial behavior'."

"Who could forget it?" said Grul "The prisoners made Central into a fortress, had this grass-eater Snnorriz hung up by his tail, and threatened to slice the guards up an inch at a time if they didn't get their way."

Klith nodded gloomily. "And then, when the Iron Division went in and straightened the mess out, the boob complained that his *therapy* had been interrupted."

"They should have accidentally finished him off in the fight."

Klith shrugged. "There's no getting around the fact that he's the Emperor's cousin, and also way up in the Scholastic Hierarchate."

"Regarding which," said Grul, "I say, get them all together in one place, and set off a good strong—"

"*Sh-h,*" said Klith, glancing around nervously. "None of that." He cleared his throat, dropped off the bench, and exercised his claws on the nearby sharpening post. "Our immediate problem is this prisoner. How's he coming along?"

Grul's lips stretched in a grin. "He was patient the first four or five . . . ah . . . moves in the game. But then he disarmed a guard, got laid out by the guard's mate, and is now trailing around in a bad frame of mind."

Klith nodded. "Except for that fight—which he started himself—none of it will leave any marks. Run him on down to the bottom floor of the Old Tier. Let him get a look at where we can put him if we feel like it. I'm going to take a nap. After I wake up, I'll want to have him up here."

Hedding, feeling of the bump on his head, followed the dim figure down the faintly-echoing corridor past the rows of silent cells. He cleared his throat, and tried to remember if this guard was friendly. There had been so many guards, and so many cells, that they were starting to run together in his mind.

"Say," he said, "are these cells occupied?" An echo bounced back from somewhere, then another, fainter, echo.

"*Arnh?*" said the guard.

Hedding waited till the echoes died down, and repeated the question.

The guard grunted. "Oh, most cells in this block are empty. Watch your head. We're going down lower."

They started down a spiral staircase, going around and around and around and around, and they went down so far into the gloom that Hedding began to suffer from the illusion that the staircase was circling upward under his feet and all he was doing was moving his legs to stay in the same place.

The guard coughed apologetically.

"No need to put your *sznivtig* out down here. They'll come right out after *you*."

Hedding, traveling around and around in a daze, said stupidly, "They will?"

"Sure as death and demerits," said the guard. "See you don't go to sleep. Pick off a few now and then, snap their necks, and toss them into the pack. Keep them busy. If it gets too thick in there, climb up the clawpost and take a breather. Be sure you get your tail up. These things can jump."

A little of this seeped through into Hedding's consciousness. He came awake, aware of the gritty rust underfoot, and the change in the occasional lighting fixtures. Down here, they had gas lamps, with wavering luminous flames.

Suddenly there was a scuttling noise, the guard bent over, there was a squeak, a *snap*, a *thud*, and a multitudinous scurrying sound.

"Just a few levels more," said the guard.

By now, cold dew was dripping from the steps overhead, the air was dank, and the lights showed dark walls trickling moisture.

"Careful," said the guard; "watch this next step."

Hedding edged down warily. From up above came a thump. Behind them, the guard's mate was following, just in case Hedding should try anything.

The guard in front said, "Inside this tier of cells—what

we call the Old Tier—the lights are gaslights. Watch your footing."

They stepped off the staircase with a splash. Directly in their path, a black hairy thing the size of a man's hand slid up on a thread.

The guard ducked aside, and led the way to a cell with water on the floor, a dead thing covered with orange mold in the water, a bare squarish cot with toadstools growing out of the wood, and the post leaning against the rear wall. Here and there in the dimness, eyes glowed. A cold dank draft smelling like garlic blew in the direction from which they'd come, and made the overhead gas flames waver, so that long shadows flickered over walls and floor.

Hedding looked around incredulously.

The guard scratched at a metal plate affixed to the bars, and glanced at a slip of paper. "It's the right cell, all right. But that's the worst mess I've seen since Snnorriz took over Central Prison."

The second guard was now standing just inside the corridor. "Stick him in, and let's get out of here."

"Look at those stobclers with their eyes glittering in the light."

"What do you think I *am* looking at?"

"If we leave him here, what'll be left when we get back?"

"That's *his* lookout, not ours. We got our orders: Put him in Cell 6t42e, Old Tier. There's Cell 6t42e, Old Tier. Orders are orders."

The first guard frowned, and reluctantly shoved a large key in the lock. He turned it, to the squeal of rusty metal.

Hedding was now fully awake. A quick glance at the guards showed that he could only hope to overcome one, and would have to fight the other at a disadvantage, since their weapons were long knives and he was unfamiliar with them. Victory would leave him inside a labyrinthine prison, where he could be recognized on sight. Escape didn't seem in the cards, but maybe talk would help.

"Sure as death and demerits," he said reasonably, "they're going to want to question me later."

The second guard had a knife out, and was looking around nervously.

"That's not *our* worry."

"No?" said Hedding. "If they want to question me and can't, who will they pin the blame on?"

There was a thoughtful quiet, in which could be heard the scratchings of many small claws.

Guard number one looked at number two. "What then?"

"We got our orders."

"To lock him up, not execute him."

"If we *don't,* we're disobeying orders to lock him up."

Hedding said. "One of you stay here. The other go up and tell them."

"Regulations say we stick together. Otherwise, you might overpower one of us, get the short-sword and uniform, and get out."

"I'm an outworlder. I could never get past the guards."

"It wouldn't matter if you were a sixteen-legged crab with eyestalks. It's what regulations say, and you don't argue with regulations."

"Regulations must say something about putting prisoners in cells unfit for occupancy, and killing prisoners wanted for interrogation."

The first guard swore. He shoved Hedding into the cell, clicked the lock, and turned to the second guard. "Go out and start up the steps."

As soon as the second guard was out, the first grunted, "Ah, these stobclers are all *over* the place! I better kill a few to keep the rest busy." He whipped out his long knife, slashed here and there, then shouted. "There it goes! *Run for it! Here come millions of them!*"

As a matter of fact, the glowing eyes were at almost the same distance as before, though in continually increasing numbers. The knife, however, now lay inside Hedding's cell.

The guard shot out the door. The clatter on the staircase told Hedding the other guard needed no urging.

Gratefully, he picked up the knife and looked around.

Slithering wetly over each other, the things began to move in on him.

Guard Captain Skeerig Klith kept his hands flat on the desk, and sought to keep his claws from biting into the wood.

"Yes," he growled. "The prisoner is roughly our size, and has the same general build."

Senior Guard Lieutenant Grul added, "His fingers are longer and thinner, Learned Sir, and without retractile claws. But he seems to handle things well just the same."

"I see." Their guest sprawled on the bench, hind paws thrust over the edge, holding in one forepaw a fume-generator stuck on the end of a large silver pin. This fume-generator was a black, waxy-coated cylinder, about as long and thick as a man's first finger. Wound around the outside were spiral strips of decorative silver and gold fabric, which burnt up slowly as the generator was consumed, and added their own peculiar fragrance to the general smudge.

Guard Captain Klith edged his bench back from the desk, and glanced around at the windows. They were open, but there wasn't the slightest suggestion of a breeze.

Klith cleared his throat.

"If you'd prefer to enjoy your generator outside by the parapet, Psychologist Snnorriz, we'd be glad to continue this later on."

Snnorriz didn't answer at once. Instead, he applied his pursed lips to the near end of the fume generator. A look of exquisite refinement appeared on his face as the far end glowed red, and silver and gold strips burned away in clouds of gray smoke.

Klith glanced around desperately. The room had a ventilator chimney, left over from the days when it, like the cells had been lit by acetylene and the fumes had had to be drawn up and out. But the ventilator got most of its draft from a jet of flame burning in the chimney. And this flame had to be lit. Klith groped under the desk till one extended foot found the dusty push-pedal that, assuming it was in working order, would ignite the ventilator flame.

The psychologist, meanwhile, with a look of ineffable wis-

dom, slowly exhaled a boiling gray-green cloud at the guard captain.

Klith shoved down hard on the pedal. There should be a little *pop* followed by a faint roar. Nothing happened. The valve might be stuck, or, worse yet, the valve could have opened, but the worn flint might have failed to strike the scratch-plate. He shoved again harder.

There was a flash.

BANG!

The room jumped. A cloud of dust particles intermingled with chips of stone and bits of mortar showered down, followed by a flaming nest the size of a man's two fists, and filled with odd bits of tin, old rings, and shiny coins, from which a small purple bird flew screaming out the nearest window. By a stroke of supreme good forture, the burning nest and its load of trash landed on the psychologist's head.

In the chaos of the next few minutes, with Snnorriz bounding around the room like a madman, it was a simple job for Klith to get rid of the fume-generator, pin and all.

As he was congratulating himself, a guard corporal appeared in the doorway, regarded the screaming Snnorriz with amazement, then faced Klith and saluted.

"Sir, we've got a couple of guards out in the anteroom. According to them, that outworld sorcerer is down in the Old Tier getting eat up by hordes of stobclers. You want I should give 'em what-for for bothering you about it?"

Snnorriz hit the floor and screamed, "You *barbarians!* You prehistoric *reptiles!* You'll get that prisoner up here unhurt, or *my cousin the Emperor will hear of it!*"

Hedding by now was up sidewise on the bars, resting on the crosspiece of the heavy doorframe, his left arm and both legs hooked through the vertical bars, his right arm reaching down with the long knife as he picked off enough of the vermin to keep the rest happy.

Somewhere outside, he knew, the expedition would have automatic monitoring devices hunting for him. A tiny transmitter inside his body-cavity was giving off a faint signal

that should be detected sooner or later. The trouble was that even after they found him, they would have to *reach* him. If he could get outside, his chances of being spotted and picked up would be much better.

Just then, out in the stairwell, the shouted warnings and clank of metal told of the cautious descent of a sizable body of guards.

"Back there!" shouted a familiar voice. "You four in the rear, hold the entrance. In the lead, there! Shove past the sixth cell in the tenth row, kill as many of these vermin as you can reach, and pitch them down the corridor. Keep moving!"

The clank, splash, and jangle drew closer. Then, peering down the corridor, Hedding saw the feline guards in the wavering glare of the gaslights. His urge to escape took on urgency as he saw one of the guards pause to eat a large stobcler. Those holes in the cell walls were beginning to add up for Hedding.

"All right," shouted the familiar voice, "step out down that corridor!"

There was a rattle of keys, and the creak of the cell door.

"Now, where in—"

Hedding dropped to the floor. His cramped muscles nearly gave way, as he whispered, "Thanks for your knife," and handed it back.

The guard gave a quick glance around. "What a place," he muttered, and stepped forward to clang a small rusty door shut over a hole where several pairs of beady eyes were gleaming. "Agh! It's enough to spoil a man's appetite. So many at once make one's hide quiver. In the corridor there! Back toward the stairs. *Move!*" He guided Hedding out of the cell by the arm, and locked the door. "All right, mates, we've got the prisoner, and we may get out of this without a demerit. But nobody better panic on those steps, or I'll turn him in myself! Let's go!"

Hedding looked overhead curiously.

"What do you use in those gas lamps? What kind of gas is that?"

"Glow-gas," said the guard. "They ship in drums of gas-

rock, and the engineers sink the stuff in big water tanks. When water hits the gasrock, it boils off glow-gas. They used to light the whole prison that way. You there, up ahead! Are you stuck to the steps? *Move!*"

The procession wound up toward the top floor.

There, in the guard captain's office, Queel Snnorriz flared up again.

"The Empress herself gave me that platinum pin. She's going to be *distressed* if I show up without it. Of course, I *can* tell her the circum—"

Guard Lieutenant Grul said earnestly, "When you jumped up, Learned Sir, it seems to me the generator and pin went out the window together."

Guard Captain Klith was relievedly breathing fresh air again, but Snnorriz's hints and threats about the Imperial Court were starting to get on his nerves.

The psychologist cleared his throat. "I was in the Throne Room the other day, when His Imperial Majesty was accepting the Semi-Annual Efficiency Lists from the Heads of Service. The Emperor put his thumb by one of the names and said, 'What do you think of this fellow?' I turned to him, and—"

A guard corporal stepped in, cast a fishy look at the psychologist, and saluted Klith. "Sir, they've got that outworlder out here."

"The Crown Prince," Snnorriz was saying, "admired that pin—"

Klith, normally a patriotic man, had never felt more like an anarchist. Angrily, he jumped to his feet, looked out the window, and pointed.

"Lying on the parapet there, one floor down, is your precious pin. I'll just send a guard down to—" Klith blinked.

The pin, its faceted silvery head glittering, was obscured by a small purplish blur. A triumphant squawk sounded and the parapet was bare.

"*Where is it?*" shouted Snnorriz, at Klith's elbow. "You said—"

"A pack-bird just flew away with it. Can I help that?"

"Do you expect me to believe—"

In the background, Senior Lieutenant Grul could be heard speaking urgently to the corporal. "Get him in here, quick!"

Klith and Snnorriz were now shouting at each other.

"*Sirs!*" said the corporal, in a voice suited to an outdoor amphitheater, "*here is the ALIEN SORCERER, under guard!*"

Snnorriz and Klith turned as if on pivots.

Hedding was trying to deduce what was going on when the guards suddenly shoved him forward.

The ALIEN SORCERER," roared a voice, "*under guard!*"

Hedding stared at a tough-looking feline in leather tunic, accompanied by an overbred dandy in scorched black velvelt and white ruff, a slender dagger with jeweled hilt at his side, his whiskers upcurled at the ends, and a faint wisp of smoke drifting up from the fur just over his right ear.

Hedding glanced around the many-windowed room, looked up at a faint roar emanating from the ceiling, and was about to speak when a droning noise passed overhead. Hedding would have given a good deal to get to the window, but a guard had him by either arm.

The tough-looking feline glanced at the window. "What's that noise?"

A guard presented himself at the door. "The skywatch lookout just yelled down the voice-tube, sir. There's one of the outworlders' flying machines making slow circles high overhead."

Hedding congratulated himself that he'd been located so quickly. But the device couldn't come in and get him. He had to show himself.

The feline in leather tunic said, "Tell the lookout to let us know if it comes lower. You see, gentlemen, the outworlders are searching for this one here. The fact that they're just circling overhead shows they don't know exactly where he is. We want to keep it that way."

"That should be easy, sir," said a second feline in leather, with different insignia. "The fellow has no tools, equipment, or weapons. He doesn't even have claws, sir."

"Remember—he is a *sorcerer.*"

This time it was the feline in velvet who spoke, after delivering himself of a condescending laugh. "You of the military may, of course, use such inaccurate terminology if it suits your natures. We of the Priestly Hierarchate of Scientific Wisdom speak more accurately." The thickening of the atmosphere following this little speech seemed to be lost on the speaker, who went on, "All that these outworlders have is merely our own knowledge, carried a bit further. They've just refined it some more. 'Sorcerer.' There is no such thing as a 'sorcerer'! Why, I wager you that this fellow here, common as he looks, would fit right into one of our own Lesser Guilds. Come, fellow, to which Great Branch of the Mother Tree do you cling—Matter, Energy, Body or Mind? Speak up, now."

Hedding decided a mining engineer was closer to matter than to the other three, and said obediently, "Matter, sir."

"And what might be your specialty?"

"Goroniuk mining."

The feline in velvet looked indulgent. "So you say. But what would anyone want goroniuk for?"

High overhead, there was a rumble. If Hedding could attract attention, the controller at his distant board would bring that spotter down. Each spotter had a roomy passenger compartment, and carried food, water, and weapons.

But first he had to get its attention.

The tough-looking feline in leather tunic pulled out a length of strap with steel studs on one end.

"You are being questioned, Prisoner. The question was, 'What would anyone want goroniuk for?' "

"Tush," said the feline in velvet. "Spare me this crudity. I have come prepared to handle this my way."

"You don't get anywhere by coddling prisoners. Raise a few welts, and they'll listen closer the next time you speak."

"Nonsense. That way you consolidate their opposition, or drive it underground. *My* method raises the submerged resistances to the surface where we can deal with them psy-

chologically." He glanced at Hedding. "Which method seems more scientific to *you*?"

"Yours, unquestionably."

The feline in leather snorted contemptuously.

The feline in velvet turned to Hedding, a brotherly smile displaying his teeth to great advantage.

"Come with me, fellow. Regard me as your friend."

Guard Captain Skeerig Klith spent the next hour in a state of profound boredom. As he worked at his desk, he could hear Snnorriz carrying out his interrogation in an adjoining room. It was unlike any interrogation Klith had ever carried out. Instead of snappy questions and answers, with occasional screams from the prisoner, there was comradely laughter, and endless conversation. In short, Snnorriz was a good deal more friendly with the prisoner than he was with Klith. At one point, when Lieutenant Grul was with him, Klith commented on a peal of laughter from the other room:

"Listen to that. The fop is happier with an outworld alien than he is with us."

Grul grunted agreement, and glanced back through the doorway. "Now they're taking turns smoking through a *chomizar*."

Klith took a look. Sure enough, there was the bubbling glass pot, with its forty feet of flexible tubing lying in coils all over the place. The psychologist smoked through one mouthpiece as the outworlder admired the workmanship of another.

Klith growled, "It's enough to make a man sick. I will admit, though, that he's getting some information."

The outworlder's voice was saying, "Yes, the air on this planet *is* close to that on our home planet. There the composition is roughly twenty per cent oxygen, seventy per cent nitrogen, two per cent ammonia, and the rest carbon dioxide, water vapor, and inert gases."

"Interesting," said a strange voice. "We don't have any free ammonia. I wonder why—"

Grul squinted. "Who's that?"

Klith peered in, and saw a slender individual with discolored fur, and a badly singed ear, wearing a black robe covered with white planets, stars, and comets, with a silver chain around his neck from which dangled a gold distilling flask.

Klith growled. "It's some chemist. He looks high up in the Hierarchate."

The outworlder was saying, "It rises from volcanic fissures. I don't know why. I'm only a practical mining engineer, myself."

"Nevertheless," came the chemist's voice, "your testimony can be interesting to us. We, for instance, suffer tissue injury from a trace of ammonia."

"Strange," said the outworlder. "On this planet, we carry bottles of it around with us to sniff every now and then. The absence of it makes our mucous membranes dry up. Unfortunately, I got separated from mine when I was captured."

A droning noise passed overhead.

"That damned thing," said Klith.

"Sir," said a voice from the outer door, "the sky-watch reports the flying-machine circling overhead again."

"I hear it," said Klith shortly.

The chemist's voice drifted in: ". . . glad to get you a bottle to carry around with you. I'll send for it now."

Klith shot off his bench, cursing.

"Listen, you," he snapped. "No bottles of ammonia are to be carried around by that outworlder. He could blind the lot of us with it, jump outside, and before we knew what was going on work some wizardry that would call down that flying machine!"

Snnorriz stood up angrily. "I'm sure such a thing would never occur to a *scientist.* Now you've mentioned it, of course—"

"But," cried the outworlder pathetically, "I'll dry up! We can't *exist* without ammonia!"

"Too bad," snarled Klith.

"This," said Snnorriz, his tail lashing, "is *inhuman,* an example of the military psychology that—"

"Oh," said Klith, sliding out his claws, "is that so?"

A colossal uproar took place, in the course of which it somehow came to be agreed that the alien could have a bottle of ammonia by his bed at *night,* but must surrender it each morning to the guard.

Klith returned, fur on end, to his bench, then got up and tore a section of the clawpost to splinters. Grul discreetly eased out the door. From the other room came the alien's voice:

". . . can understand just what you're up against, dealing with a military mind like that. They're all so *suspicious.* But I must say, you've shown great foresight in combining the priesthood and the scientific community into one solid hierarchate—"

Klith leaned forward, gripping the desk with his claws.

The conversation, however, now drifted off down an obscure technical sidetrack, and Klith, bored, went back to work. Then Grul came in, looking serious.

"Sir, word just came from the District Technological Laboratory. They started to disassemble the outlander's flying machine—"

"*Started?* What happened?"

"The whole thing disintegrated into a pile of black dust."

Klith could feel his fur bristle.

"Oh," he growled sarcastically, "*they're* not sorcerers! All *they've* got is science, only a little bit more advanced! Double the guard outside the doors here. Bring up A Section of the Riot Platoon, and see that they're always in reach when that outlander is here. And when he's down below, keep them on the floor above him. Between him and us."

"Yes, sir. But he's completely disarmed, sir."

"How do you disarm a sorcerer? He's still got his knowledge, hasn't he? Do as I say!"

"Yes, sir."

From the other room came Snnorriz's proud voice: ". . . *That* was devised in the early days of the Hierarchate. The runs are *built-in,* so the stobclers have easy access past each cell. The runs intercommunicate, so the prey soon

catch the scent of the *sznivtig*. But of course, it's highly problematical just when a stobcler will pop out of any particular hole. This keeps the prisoners on edge, constantly crouched at the holes, waiting. That way, they don't have time to make trouble."

"An ingenious system," said the outworlder admiringly. "The . . . er . . . stobclers in *our* prisons are let in on a highly unsystematic basis."

"You see, in some things we are ahead of you! How do you like our stobclers? Are they congenial to your palate?"

The outworlder hesitated, possibly reluctant to give offense. "At first, the flavor seemed a trifle . . . ah . . . 'off' to us, but by adding plenty of 'lunar caustic' as seasoning —"

" 'Lunar caustic'?" Snnorriz sounded puzzled. "We may know it under some other name."

The chemist said, "How is it composed?"

"Three atoms of oxygen to one of nitrogen, and this combined with one atom of silver. I hope I've got your names for the elements right."

"Oh, yes. Let's see— *Angh!* What you are talking about is what we call 'burning chellery.' Now are you quite sure —"

"I'm almost certain—"

"We will get you some—"

As Klith erupted into the doorway, Snnorriz burst out, "All *right!* Only in his *cell!* You don't want him to *starve,* do you?"

After a violent exchange with Snnorriz, Klith got the prisoner to promise on his word of honor not to throw ammonia or burning chellery in anyone's face, and to put the containers outside his cell in the morning. The prisoner then embarrassedly said that he had a favor to ask.

"Now what?" snarled Klith.

"My . . . er . . . claws . . . aren't very efficient for catching these stobclers—"

"You catch them at home, don't you? I mean, them or something similar?"

"But the thing is, *these* are so *fast!* Generally, we use some artificial means—"

"You want a *knife?* Nothing doing! We'll put you in the Old Tier where they're thicker—" Klith waved a hand to silence Snnorriz. "Not on the bottom floor. Higher up."

This satisfied everybody, and, cursing to himself, Klith went out to meet Grul coming into the office.

"The extra guards are outside, sir. A section of the Riot Platoon is on its way."

"Good." Klith spat out an angry epithet. "*Listen* to them in there! They're practically crawling into each other's pockets."

The friendly voices drifted out from the other room.

"Since you like the *chomizar* so much," said Snnorriz, "you can take it to your cell with you. It's soothing to smoke while you crouch at the stobcler hole. We Hierarchates, of course, aren't restricted to any such time-consuming method of feeding. But a little primitivism is healthy now and then."

The outworlder's voice rose in gratitude. "You are so considerate! Is there anything *I* can do for you?"

Snnorriz purred, "We *would* be interested, for purely . . . ah . . . industrial reasons . . . to have a few questions answered about that . . . ah . . . flexible force-screen you have outside your main base. If you could—"

"I'd be glad to tell you what I—" The outlander made a choking noise. "Excuse me. My tissues are suffering from lack of ammonia. Perhaps if you could prepare a list of questions . . . After I"—he choked again—"after a good rest, and a tasty stobcler seasoned with plenty of burning chellery—"

"Certainly," purred Snnorriz. "We understand exactly. We'll have the list ready for you in the morning."

The prisoner was led, proclaiming his gratitude, out into the corridor. Snnorriz appeared at Klith's door, tweaking his whiskers and looking superior. "Psychology, my boy. Just make them grateful to you."

"Listen," said Klith, ignoring Snnorriz, and taking the chemist by his robe. "Is there anything this outworlder can

make out of a *chomizar,* a bottle of ammonia, and this burning chellery, or whatever it is?"

"Nothing whatever," snapped the scientist, glaring at Klith's hand on his arm.

Klith and Grul suddenly found themselves alone.

"Well," said Grul, "it *seems* to be working out all right."

Klith jabbed a pedal under his desk to shut off the ventilator. "If only it doesn't turn out like that time Snnorriz took over Central Prison."

Hedding was delighted to see that Snnorriz himself caught up with the guards and accompanied him to the cell in the echoing Old Tier.

"How's this one, Hedding, my boy?"

"Could I have one closer to a lamp? My night vision—"

"Certainly. How's this?" The gas lamp sent out twin plumes directly outside the cell door.

"Fine. Thank you, very much."

Snnorriz beamed, then waited solicitously till a water bowl, the *chomizar,* a good supply of burning chellery, and a large tightly stoppered bottle of ammonia arrived. He opened the iron cover over the stobcler hole, and superintended the placing of the *sznivtig,* to give Hedding a good spring at the stobcler. Snnorriz and Hedding then clasped forepaws emotionally. Hedding coughed a few times as the cell door clanged shut, drew a deep breath, and removed the stopper from the ammonia bottle.

"Ah-h-" he murmured.

Snnorriz and the guards gagged and shot down the corridor.

Hedding hastily restoppered the bottle, looked around, and eyed the *chomizar* with its lengths of flexible hose. He picked up the amber bottle of "Burning chellery" and thoughtfully unscrewed the lid.

Klith awoke after a fitful night's sleep, exercised, washed, brushed himself, ate breakfast, and walked down the hall to his office. He was scarcely inside when Grul showed up.

"What's wrong?" said Klith.

"Snnorriz's pet," said Grul, "was found replacing a fitting to the right-hand lamp-jet near his cell. He had a little rubber plug made from the *chomizar* head in place while he screwed on the first reducer to the jet."

"Plug? You mean he cut it from the *chomizar* stopper? What did he cut it *with?*"

"He broke off the end of one of the glass bar-handles and used that."

Klith could feel his fur tingle. "Why?"

"He claims the light bothered him."

"Get him up here. *Fast.*"

"He's on the way."

Klith took out his length of strap.

Hedding was marched in with a pair of curved bayonets hastening his steps.

Overhead, a droning sound traveled around patiently.

"Now," growled Klith, "you did *what?*"

"Cast a spell," said the outworlder, beaming. "And if the feet of *sznivtig*-seeking rats chance to cross the dried white powder made in the dark of the night by the light of a carbide lamp with a hose from a *chomizar* brewing glow-gas in spirits of ammoniacal moon silver, then—"

A sudden jar shook the building.

There was a sound like a *chomizar* mouthpiece crushed underfoot and abruptly the room filled with ammoniacal vapors.

Hedding was out the window while they were still choking. He stood by the parapet and waved frantically.

The spotter dove, to hover nearby. Hedding jumped inside.

"How," said a voice from a small speaker, "did you work *that?* This place is built like a fortress."

"Don't talk. *Climb.* I got hold of the stuff to make a batch of silver acetylide—from ammoniacal silver nitrate the acetylene bubbled through it. You know how sensitive the dry stuff is. I piped some acetylene gas into closed runs, put the acetylide inside, and stuck in a kind of bait that

brings rats in a hurry. Happily, I was away from there before a rat hit the acetylide."

"You made a big crack in their wall. They won't like you for it."

"Keep climbing. I don't think you appreciate this. Acetylene is great for lots of purposes. But here, they've got it *piped* into a big section of that building."

"So?"

"That explosion will crack some of the pipes."

"I still don't get it."

"A few of those lights should stay lit. And acetylene has an unusual property. Mixtures of anywhere from three to eighty per cent with air are explosive."

The spotter abruptly speeded up its climb.

Guard Captain Skeerig Klith crawled painfully out from the tangle of timbers, rocks, and hunks of plaster, and glared at the dazed Senior Lieutenant Ladigan Grul.

The emergency-aid workers were putting Grul's splinted left forearm into a sling. Here and there were others, plentifully covered with patches of shaved fur and bandages.

Klith eyed Grul balefully.

Grul sensed the stare.

"Sir?" croaked Grul.

Klith snarled, "Take a look at this mess and say it again."

"Say what, sir?"

" 'No matter how advanced, *science isn't sorcery.*' "

Grul opened his mouth.

But he couldn't get the words out.

The image of Mother in the 20th Century has metamorphosed from That Sweet Silver-haired Lady to the ogre-figure of Momism to, most recently, the tyrannical sentimentalist typified in a spate of novels about the Jewish Mother. Here Fritz Leiber, in prose rich as his Shakespearean background, pits that Mother-figure against the nonsensical realities of the 21st Century, and suggests the inevitable winner.

FRITZ LEIBER

"THEY DON'T BUILD slums like they used to," Whitey Edwards told me, reaching up for a loose corner of the flexo and pulling it down to prove his point. It domed springily over our dreg-bottomed coffee cups, revealing in the hidden space behind it the limp multicolored spaghetti of the utilities piping: gas, water, metered syntho-milk, sewage, coaxed TV, med-mist, Musik, robo-talk, robo-juice, tele, vele, elec, gelec, and such. Few of them running fat with their peculiar contributions to the good life, I judged.

"That may be so," I answered, slapping aside the dodderer's hands and thumbing the blue elastic panel back in place with a fast rub along its adhesive edge. Again it decently covered the flaccid tangle of what looked like rain-

bow-hued sheep's gut and rubber unmentionables. "But they built Ma like a bull and she'll gore and trample you if she finds you tearing down her kitchen. It's bad enough what the giant centipedes are doing."

The jumbo TV, jammed between sink and fridge, flickered weak and ghostly. A gaggle of five-job wives and eight-job men were having a closed-end discussion of everything in creation on the executive patio edge of a swimming pool big enough to hide a space-to-seabottom cruiser. Their sweet eldritch cackle was unintelligible, but their state of undress was a slight counter-irritant to boredom.

Whitey Edwards sighed, not looking at these suburban goddesses, but squinting his rheumy eyes against the Monday sun coming up like doom over the dusty flats between Beatsville and the Henleys' happy if fragile little family castle. Earth's spotted, spitting, seething star shot its angry rays under the great awning rigged in front of our windows and door.

"Once," the old boy said, shaking the head-topping that gave him his name, "they built slums solid with steel beams and heavy lath and great bloody pipes of iron and tile and lead that made 'em think twice before they tore 'em down. But now . . ." He sighed his wheezy grief. Whitey'd used to be a con-and-destruction worker decades back, before the robots took that over, before I was born.

The TV zoomered in on a taut little job in bolero jacket and loincloth. The sound cleared for her fast, happy words ". . . caring for this pool put my husband and I in the pool-counselor raquette . . ." and died.

I started to tell Whitey I had even more current job-sorrows than his. Since Thursday I'd been terminated from my street-smiler's job for competing with the psychiatrists, robot and human, and for all I know with the giant centipedes. Just then my brother Dick erupted from the bed-closets, throwing clothes over his sallow nakedness like a Gypsy escaping from a Nazi gas chamber—or as if he were a sprint-in-the-gutter one-jobber. And with that job only since Friday night after being three weeks on probationary relief.

I called sweetly at him, "Are you scared a customer will put a gush of quarters into one of your metal bandits with her own little pinkies if you're a minute late?"

Dick scowled, gyrating around a stubborn trouser leg. "Don't you worry, Dickie," I kept on. "All the women I illicitly psyched were as nervous of machinery as sex; they wanted a man to do it for them."

Society, graciously, used to let people work vending and other coin-operated machines, like laundromats. But now, like laundromats too, you have to pay an attendant to do it for you—because machines are temperamental and individual enterprise is almost as holy as money and anyway, there aren't enough jobs to go around more than two or three times.

Dick groggled something at me and got the door open, all set for a spring-heel takeoff. But there in his way was a tiny man, dressed like a respectable beetle, with dimpled fist raised to knock. He had glasses with zoomer lenses; silver antennae quivered out of his gray hat; a flat black belly-box was his ventral carapace. He looked around, especially at the cluttered floor, as if we were a touch unsavory, but he held his ground.

As Dick paused at this coleopterous apparition, Ma came charging out of the bed-closets, red in the face and black was the rest of her. She grappled Dick around the elbows and roared, "Stop! No son of mine is going out to give battle to the 21st Century on an empty stomach." Grabbing a quarter orange she shoved it between his teeth like a boxer's mouthpiece and then snatching this way and that she slammed a sandwich in his one hand and a cup in the other and on the next time around poured it steaming full.

No one can deny that Ma stands squarely in back of her four sons, like the manager of a quartet of fistic champions, conscious of our genius and determined that it get recognition in the form of seven- or eight-job careers. Though at the moment Dick was the only one of us with any job at all, except for Tom, who lives away with his wife and two kids. But obstructions and setbacks never daunt Ma. It's

not the money she's after, mostly, it's the glory of the House of Henley pitted against the whole bloody world.

Pricked by tender filial warmth, I eyed her—a murderous son-punishing behemoth but my blessed mother—while Whitey gave her an unseen wave. He's an old admirer she tolerates ever since Pa recognized her superior nuclear power and died.

Dick bit out and swallowed the meat of the orange and tongued aside the peel so as to yell that the coffee was burning his hand and what would it do to his throat? Ma ripped the fridge open against the pull of the great spring I'd fixed outside to keep it shut since the latch broke. She whisked out an ice-cube and tucked it in Dick's cup. The fridge door thudded shut and the spring whirred like a rattlesnake about to jump loose and strike, but it didn't.

Then Dick gulped his coffee while Ma held him and screeched in his ear about using lunch hour to scout for a second job and not stalk girls. When he'd finished his drink, she gagged him with his sandwich and let him go.

The beetle-man dodged aside. Dick took off with a straight-line velocity that would have broken his neck and scattered his bones if we'd still been living on the twentieth floor and not in this ground-level flat they tricked us into exchanging for.

The TV blinked and—presto—there was a soldierly file of eight-job men (tabbed for that by the digit on their left shoulder) single-footing with pleasant monotony past the golden plastic statue of a twelve-jobber. Each as he reached screen-center turned head and shouted an inaudible but optimistic something at me and bared all his perfectly tended teeth in a dazzling grin.

I breathed a happy sigh and got set for a spell of quiet—at least until the centipedes decided to start scuttling—but just then the beetle-man poked his head in and piped politely at Ma. "Good morning. Mrs. Henley, I'm your area med statistician, come to take your blood-pressure and photo-snap your insides and all for posterity, like we arranged for a week ago."

Ma slowly turned her head and glared at him like a bull

that spots the matador, or, more likely, a peanut-vendor strolling across the ring. The red in her face went purple and she slowly reached for the bubbling coffee flask and slowly lifted it. The beetle-man innocently watched the lethal globe ascend with its tip-tilting seething brown hemicore, as if all this were a job-indoctrination demonstration in astrophysics.

Whitey started up, but I pushed him back in his chair, saying rapidly, "Not you. Even being an old friend of the family wouldn't save you from the horns at this moment."

Then I rasped loud as ambulance-brakes at Ma, "Hold your hand, you murdering old frump!"

She turned at once, as I'd known she would. I cited her and she charged me with the coffee flask high, very much like a small Miura, but armed in a fashion to have made Manolete himself turn pale. But I slipped her with a half veronica and as she went past I kissed her low on the back of the neck, just at the spot where the matador's sword goes in. I whisked my arms around her beloved thick waist, and the next instant she and Whitey and I were as happy as tin larks together flitting through a sparkling star cluster, and she was pouring fresh coffee for us.

But the beetle-man, never dreaming the deadly peril he'd been in, advanced another step into the kitchen and called, "Mrs. Henley, it's very needful you have your medical inspection. You're distorting area med statistics and there are drastic penalties for evading med census. No need for you to undress, just hold still now—"

I pushed the coffee flask back against the wall and I stroked Ma as I held her tight, so she didn't go quite as purple as she howled at him, "You filthy med-spy!—do you think I'll submit to your peepings and be stuff for your filthy pictures when I'm not granted decent human med service if I do sicken? Here I have four grand sons, supermen all—Meaghan here, who's a master mind doctor, and Harry who's still in bed, the greatest poet in the world, and Dick the Prince of Personalities, whom you saw speeding to work and I need not comment on, and Tom, who's a bloody wonder—and the filthy world takes so little

note of them that if I go to the clinic it's only robot doctors who'll see me and never a flesh-and-blood physician!"

Whatever the topic of her rant, Ma always gets in a commercial for her boys.

The beetle-man quivered back a little at all that, but not very far, and piped soothingly, "Mrs. Henley, there's nothing vulgar or inferior about robo-med. The Secretary of Mental Health himself prefers—" He started to take another step into the room.

"That old sham!" Ma roared, palpitating in my grasp and purpling dark. "He's the same one whose minions are forever sentencing my genius son Harry to the clutches of the remedial psychiatrists."

"But Mrs. Henley," the little fellow went on with rash courage, "I can see with my own eyes you're not in the best of health. An immediate med-check—"

That gave me my opening and I shoved Ma into Whitey's arms and advanced on the beetle-man quickly, waving my finger like a sword between his bug eyes. "You watch yourself, lad," I cried, "or they'll be terminating you for making diagnoses who are only census-taker. That's what the licensed psychers did to me for adding only a few words of insight and wisdom to my street-smiling."

At that very moment a ghostly pattering began and swiftly grew louder. It seemed to come from everywhere.

"What's that?" the little chap asked wonderingly.

"The giant centipedes," I told him.

He paled and his zoomered eyes searched the shadows under table and sink as he scuttled backwards, and just at that moment, perhaps from the floor being swayed by our movements, the great spring on the fridge came loose and went klishing across the floor very close to his feet—a twenty-inch coil of gray wire. He leaped for the lintel of the doorway to hoist himself out of reach of the venomous monster of his imagination, but he missed and fell and went leaping off as if old Fu Manchu's whole blessed menagerie were at his heels. In pure pity I followed him under the great awning, polka-dotted now by the shadows showing

through of the stuff pattering down on it, and caught up with him just beyond the mounting flake-drift.

"Don't be frightened," I told him, grappling him gently and forcing him to lift his zoomers to the ragged-topped wall behind, now only four to six stories high instead of the thirty it had been a week ago. Along its roller coaster margin two sinuous many-legged great silver beasties scampered, chomping great bites out of it and raining the digested fragments down from their rear ends in concrete cornflakes.

"Those are the giant centipedes," I explained. "Demolishment robots, only."

I was thinking of how Harry might make a shuddery poem of them—glittery cosmic crawlers nibbling the gray rim of infinity, eating their way in toward us from the ends of the universe—when at that instant a weightier chunk, rejected by one of the creature's delicate digestive apparatus, no doubt, came thunking down like a meteor not four feet from us, denting the hard ground and raising a geyser of dust. The beetle-man darted off a dozen more steps while I ducked back under the awning, calling to him, "Now be off with you, little official, and trouble Ma no more. She's too much for you, but let that not cast you down. Look on her as a revenant from a hardier, crueler age—a duchess out of place."

I'd no sooner got back in the kitchen, where Ma and Whitey were chatting over their coffee, than Ellie, Dick's wife, came out of the bed-closets full-dressed with bright suitcases in her hands and a dirty dark look in her eyes. She was saying, "Listen all of you, for I'll not tell it twice: I'm leaving that one-job no-good and going back to my last husband, who's still got the three jobs I left him with when I thought to better myself by entering this house of mad pride and sloth and poets snoring," and she brushed past me, the silver spring twinging again as she chanced to kick it.

"Meaghan, let her go, who can't appreciate the Prince of Personalities," Ma said to me loftily, her color down to ladylike bright pink again, but I still would have followed and argued with Ellie—Dick didn't deserve to be deserted

when he'd just got a toe on the bottom rung of the ladder, which of course was why she was leaving him though she didn't know it, a jealous no-job little wifey—except that just then who should appear in the doorway but my eldest brother, Tom, filling it with his big grin and his great shoulders and his aura of three-job success—or would it be four now?—and saying, "Hi, Ma. Ellie leaving Dick again? Who's the tiny one hanging around outside? Housing official come to coax you once more from this death trap? Hello, Whitey. No, no coffee, Ma, I want to talk to Meaghan here. I've got something for the lad!"

I knew what that meant, of course, and I was already hunched on my hands and knees, starting to fix the spring to the fridge again—a job that might easily take the rest of the day, I decided—when I felt Ma's kindly talons on my shoulder, lifting me up, and she saying, "Whitey'll fix that, Meaghan," and then her beloved claws were propelling me to a seat at the table flush against the blue flexo, with my cup in front of me and beyond that Tom's great face as full of a smile of eager elder-brother benignity as my cup was of steaming coffee—Ma having poured again and dropped in a pinch of dexy (I saw her) to give me spirit.

All the while I was thinking chiefly, *What job's he found now that's so bad he won't take it himself but offer it to me?* It'd have to be pretty bad, for at last count Tom's three jobs were grinding mirrors for leisure-time astronomers who hadn't time to grind their own—that's one—and selling retailers a brand of all-cornsilk cancer-free cigarets with the genuine coal-tar taste and the nicotine life—that's two—and answering for a robot answering service whenever the decibal-rating of the caller's voice began to indicate extreme rage. He still had the third job, at any rate, by the phone-rig hanging around his neck.

"Meaghan," he beamed, "next to an all-girl squad of revivalist angels, there's naught so wondrous as brother-love. I got something great for you. By the by, I have Number Four myself now—I travel in ladies' glow-in-the-dark underthings."

As Ma raised a cheer at that, I looked around for escape,

but Whitey was squatting at the fridge and blocking the door to the outer world, as happy with his tinkering as a great-grandfather cockroach (one of which was walking up his leg) while Ma, cheering still but with a policeman's eye on me, was taking a cup of coffee big and smoking as a volcano into the bed-closets—to fire Harry's poetic genius, no doubt, or in lieu of that toss him on his lazy feet.

"Meaghan—" Tom began, but just then his neck phone rang and he twitched it on and I could hear a voice like angry wasps. Tom listened and his face grew pink—he takes after Ma in that—and he said, "Certainly, maadm. However—" and then his face grew purple and he began to bubble his mouth like a fish.

I leaned across the table and put my lips to the mouthpiece and shouted, "I love you dearly, unknown, indeed I do: I love you dearly, madam, brood upon that," and I twitched the thing off.

"That won't satisfy her," Tom said when he got his right color back and his breath.

"It will for twenty minutes," I told him, "and what in this world is good for any longer?" And then I added, reckless in my light-heartedness, "You were saying . . . ?"

"Meaghan," Tom began again, "I know you had this trifling street-smiler's job—"

"Not so trifling or little," I defended, though I hadn't intended to. "The sociologists decided people looked too tense and glum going back and forth to work and shopping and so on, so they hired folk like myself to mingle among 'em and strike up talk, casual-like, to cheer 'em up. Not quite the worst idea in the world, either."

"Yes, but you went too far," Tom reminded me. "You pried into people's minds to find their real troubles and set 'em straight. That's psychers' work, my lad, and you can't blame that august profession for resenting your competition and having you terminated."

"I helped the people I talked to," I countered stubbornly. "I couldn't have talked to them at all, Tom, if I hadn't something solid to say."

"I love you dearly, madam, brood upon that," Tom said. "Solid!"

"I don't worry 'em or push any of their desperation buttons, though I glimpsed banks of those," I protested on. "I just encouraged 'em to widen their minds and feelings a little and get some of the comic side-wash of others' troubles and cheer up naturally."

"There you've hit the nub of it," Tom asserted, wagging a finger in my face. "You tried to deliver more than your job called for, instead of learning to do it with a minimum of effort and finding another job to go with it, to swell your income—and then another after that." He gave a quick look around—to make sure Ma hadn't come back, I soon realized—and then, leaning forward, said with a confidential hush, "Oh, Meaghan, my boy, I've learned so much of the world since I got away from here and Ma's no longer firing me with resentments and wild ambitions. The world's a very tidy comfortable place if only you'll remember there are three billion other lunatic climbers in it—and do no more than you're told and watch the smiles and frowns of your superiors and keep your eyes open and your nostrils flared for flicker or scent of another chance to make money. Step fast, keep adding one little job to the next like beads on a necklace, and forget Ma and her wild dreams. Oh, and did I tell you my Katie's got two jobs herself now too? —and never a one she'd have had with Ma around to hold her down."

"Ma's all right," I told him sharply. "She's got more courage and determination and vision than the four of us'll ever have together. And such a fierce self-punishing drive I wonder she's still alive. How would you ever have got out of here to a place of your own without Ma booting you?"

"True, true," he agreed. "Nevertheless, Ma's a hopeless romantic. She wants her four sons to be Dukes of the World, lording it over all."

I couldn't help chuckling at that. "When I was still street-smiling," I confided, "a little man, who thought he was a great romantic, opened his mind to me wanting only

to escape from the prison of his life and aim a flashing sword at other men and capture with love their women—and corral all the single girls going around loose, too. After we both looked at this stirring picture a while, we realized that what he really wanted was to have all women mother him and puff him up and lead him through life like a great bobbing red balloon."

"That's the way with all romantics, including Ma," Tom said, taking advantage of me straightway. "She wants her sons to be princes and kings, or board chairmen at all events, not realizing there's a billion others starting up the success-ladder with them—and not one with a genuine ion drive. Not realizing that the competition's too stiff for any man to dream of being more than an eight-job statistic with his peers. Or ten at most."

The TV now was sailing over a great pile of gently crumpled bedclothes, which struck me as most pleasant and unlikely. Then I realized it was orbiting the Earth high above the clouds and there low in the foreground were the backs of beautifully barbered heads and now a sign flashing across the clouds: "Vacation Jaunts through Space for Nine-Job Heroes of Democracy."

"You're right about the competition," I agreed quickly with Tom. "I'm no enemy of democracy, I'm one of its darlingest friends, but there's no question it's upped the competition more than ever it was in Earth's history. We've got more machines, more health, more freedom of movement, more education, more leisure, more time for making money in our spare time, more almost equal people, *and* more incentives, more quick showy rewards for the quickly successful—with the result that the competition burns us out fast enough to equalize all the longevity created by medical advance."

"It doesn't seem to be burning you out," Tom observed.

"Now listen here, Tom my boy," I continued, warming to my subject. "Isn't there something altogether crazy about a world that wants to turn everyone into merchants no matter what their natural psychological class—a world that's turned even scientists and poets and adventurers and

soldiers and priests into merchants busy selling themselves—a world that's feared so much that the machine would take away all jobs that it's gone ape creating jobs and financial ventures by the billions. With each reduction in working hours paralleled by an equal or greater increase in time spent on a part-time and side-line jobs—a world that's so money-conscious that a man who takes his eyes off the dollar for a month or a day or even ten seconds—"

"Your eyes don't look red with squinting at silver," Tom observed like a lemon. "Besides, you're deafening me."

Just then Ma came lumbering daintily in again and asked Tom, "What's this wondrous job you've got for Meaghan? I can't wait any longer to hear." Just as if she hadn't been hearing every word and writhing at my negativisms.

I groaned as if on the verge of defeat. Tom laughed and said, "I was forgetting about that. What with Mea talking of billions of jobs, my one got lost in the stampede. Well, it seems that the repair robots are getting unpredictable everywhere, spending too much time on some jobs and not enough on others, and passing up still others altogether. One repaired a leak so well it built an armor wall six feet thick around the leak and himself— Fortunata, they called that one. Another found a leak and did nothing but start making identical leaks in all the pipes he followed—until thousands of them were squirting behind him. A demolition robot started shooting rocks at a new-risen glastic building. Yet the circuits of these robots are in perfect order and they always behave properly under factory tests. So what must be done is to have a man follow each metal trouble-shooter and note every move he makes, watch his behavior day after day—taking weeks if necessary so the robot will get used to his presence and not vary his behavior to please or confuse or harm the watcher. Oh, it's a fine sort of job—no work at all—sort of like what they called Sidewalk Inspecting back in the depths of history."

I said, "I suppose the robots they're having the most trouble with are the ones that repair heat-tunnels and sewers and other delightful underground conduits."

"How did you know that?" Tom asked me very quickly. "Old sunken spillways and aquaducts and chimneys too, though—some of the last poking thousands of feet high into the clear heady air. A most healthful job, my boyo—a regular mountain-climging and spelunking vacation."

I said softly, "I think I'd rather drown parboiled in this coffee cup than play psychiatric aide to a manic genius robot with a breakneck wander-urge who's waiting for his metal consciousness to brighten with its first jeweled unhuman pictures and electricity-loving impulses. The machines are coming awake, did you know that, Tom? All the machines—"

"No, it's but one machine," a softer dreamier voice, mournful as a breeze through dead leaves, cut in on me. The adolescent wraith with hair like blond spiderweb, who was Ma's poet genius and my youngest brother Harry, came drifting in from the bed-closets as if blown rather than walking. I could tell from the light-year look in his blue eyes that he'd conned his remedial psycher out of some pills.

He went on, "The whole Earth is one great metal machine, a dull steel marble amongst the aggies and glassies of the other planets. If anyone ever went out there with earth-eyes and not a spaceman's, he'd see it rolling along, over and over, like a great silver shop-made tumblebug spotted with cities and wet here and there with oceans, blinking the eyes of its ice-caps and smoking its volcanos and folding and unfolding its harrow-footed space-crazy legs in time with the phases of the moon. And if you looked real close you'd see millions of fleas jumpin' off it and beginning the long fall to the nadir."

At that moment the TV jumped to a 24-hour satellite starward of Terra and showed us the whole moonlit Earth backed by the Milky Way, as if snarled by a diamond-dewy spiderweb. Ma squeaked a proud sigh at Harry's words thus coming out illustrated.

"Will you take the job?" Tom rasped at me.

"Tomorrow I will for sure," I told him. "And that's all

the answer you'll ever get from me—tomorrow or any other day."

Ma tapped her hoof and flashed a rageful eye at me. "Tom," she said to him, "if Meaghan scorns it, how about Harry? Think of it, Harry, you always claim you want to be alone. Roaming those cool tunnels and sewers all by yourself except for some witless machine you'll catch onto in ten minutes. You'll have all the time and quiet in the world to create your poetry. Why, underground your poetry will sprout like roots, I'm sure, and run fast as crabgrass."

"Ma," Harry said, "sooner than take that job I'd head for Beatsville today rather than tomorrow."

"You wouldn't do that, Harry," Ma wailed menacingly. "Tell me you wouldn't." Ma's always prided herself that no matter how slumlike we live and close to Beatsville, we'd never get there. In Beatsville they pretend even worse than in the suburbs, pretend to be supermen and pretend to be animals, and creep each night to the electrified boundary to pick up the food and drink left for them.

But Harry nodded again and then Ma began yelling at Tom that he was trying to break up what was left of her family, having splintered himself off first. Whitey came alive and flapped his hands at her cautiously, like a torero ready to jump the fence. I slitted my eyes as if I were falling asleep. Tom got red as Ma and said the hell with us, he was going for good. So Ma stamped this way and that, now roaring at Harry and me for our sloth, now bellowing at Tom for his disloyalty. Then she lifted her arms to heaven and froze.

At that instant the beetle-man popped into the doorway and pointed his antennae at her. No one saw him but me.

Tom's face grew redder and he gave a snort and turned on his heel toward the door just as the beetle-man ducked out of sight. Tom had no sooner stamped out than the beetle-man popped in again behind him, waving a gray-black transparency he'd whipped from his black belly-box.

"Mrs. Henley," he piped rapidly, "I got a perfect shot of all your insides, but that's all that's perfect about it. You

must come to the clinic right away with me. Your heart's like a watermelon and your aorta and pulmonary like summer squash." He waggled a finger at me. "Diagnosis by a medspector is permissable in dire emergencies."

Ma's face went purple. At that instant I felt the building quiver from the top down and a heartbeat later something burst through the awning and struck Tom as if he were a very thick spike and it a hammer driving him into the ground.

Ma screamed a great single scream and took a step forward and then stiffened and fell back, and I caught her in my arms and lowered her to the floor and pillowed her head. Outside I could hear the beetle-man buzzing into his neckphone for an ambulance like the fool he was—for Tom's head was smashed to the neck. Then I was wondering how Tom's blood could have got on Ma, for there was blood on her chest and then more and more of it, like a bull fallen from the final thrust and pumping his heart out, and then I realized it was Ma's blood from her lungs, gurgling with her Cheyne-Stokes breathing.

Whitey came fluttering down at her other side.

Harry was standing looking at us and he was trembling, and then we heard the siren far off, and then another, and then the two of them coming closer fast, and as they came closer and their angry wailing grew louder, Harry began to tremble more, and as their sound burst into the open of the razed blocks, he cried, "I'm off to Beatsville," and he was sprinting by the time he went through the door.

I knew what was coming, although there was nothing I could do but hold Ma. Then I knew that what was coming had come, for there was a shout and a great squealing of brakes and a scream and a thud and the brakes still squealing.

Then Ma stopped breathing, but she still looked angry.

It was a long time before anyone came in. I went on holding Ma and wiping her face clean, though it stayed red for all that. I heard one ambulance leave and then the other. Finally a doctor came in, and the beetle-man too, and the doctor looked at Ma and shook his head and said that

if only she'd been med-checked regularly it need never have happened, but I told him, "You didn't know Ma." And the beetle-man buzzed into his neckphone for an ambulance back.

I said chokily, "She died brave, charging the muleta dead on, and I'm damned if I'll award society a single hoof of her, let alone the horns or the tail." No one got it. The beetle-man eyed me and took a surreptitious note.

Then for a while I was signing papers and listening to this and that, but finally they were all gone, the living and dead, and I was alone with Whitey and I remembered we ought to tell Dick.

The TV was showing a great musical review with hundreds of highly talented actors and actresses, all of them seven-job folk and this the eighth job for all of them. Flights of smiles were going back and forth across the screen, like seagulls wheeling at sunset.

The concrete cornflakes were still pattering on the awning. I marched us straight under the hole the rock had made that killed Tom, and they pelted on our hair and shoulders and necks like feathery hail.

We climbed the flake-drift and I paused and turned around. The giant centipedes were busily crawling back and forth, the one swinging aside most cleverly to let the other pass. They'd chewed their way here and there down to the second floor.

I looked down to our shadowed doorway with the faintest flicker of TV still coming out of it, and I thought I'd like to drive a nail a mile long down through the center of that room, pinning it there forever, and engrave in the head of the nail, in letters a foot deep, "A Family Lived Here."

But that was a little beyond the scope of my engineering, so, pushing Whitey ahead of me, off I went to tell Dick, laughing and crying.

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