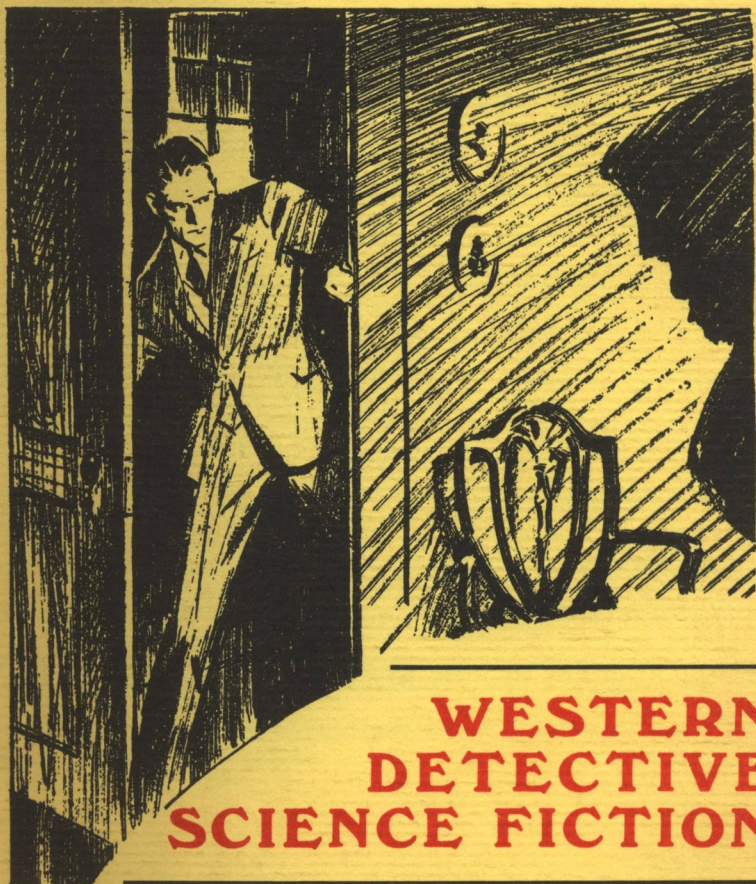


Antæus

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POPULAR LAWS

According to a health ordinance in Riverside, California, kissing on the lips is against the law unless both parties first wipe their lips with carbolized rose water.

A Louisiana law upholds your right to grow as tall as you like.

A New York judge ruled that if two women behind you in a movie house are discussing the probable outcome of a film, you can give them a Bronx cheer.

It is against the law to drive camels along Nevada's main highways.

In Hawaii, it is illegal to insert pennies in your ears.

You are not permitted to swim on dry land in Santa Ana, California.

In Idaho, you cannot fish for trout from the back of a giraffe.

A kiss can last no longer than one second in Halethorpe, Maryland.

In Baltimore, Maryland, it is against the law to mistreat an oyster.

In Indiana a mustache is illegal on anyone who "habitually kisses human beings."

In Michigan you may not hitch a crocodile to a fire hydrant.

It is unlawful for goldfish to ride on a Seattle, Washington, bus unless they lie still.

In Utah, the law requires that daylight be seen between two dancing partners.

Teaching your household pet to smoke a cigar is unlawful in the state of Illinois.

In Macon, Georgia, for a man to put his arm around a woman, he must have a legal excuse or reason.

In any place in Montana where liquor is sold, a fan dancer's costume must weigh at least three pounds, three ounces.

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Western Fiction

Edited With

Donald E. Worcester



Donald E. Worcester

Introduction

The Western short story, once the delight of thousands of uncritical readers, blossomed rapidly and then went the way of the mustang and longhorn. The Western novel, on the other hand, successor to the Dime Novel of the nineteenth century, is still flourishing. Why one proved ephemeral and the other enduring seems puzzling, but the market for all short fiction has dried up.

The Western "pulp" magazine era began with *Western Story Magazine* in 1919; as its circulation soared to 300,000 copies per issue in its first year, several dozen others were hastily established to share in the bonanza. Such a voracious market called forth literally hundreds of contributors, and some of the most popular Western novelists earned their spurs in the pulps. Among them were Zane Grey, Ernest Haycox, Max Brand, Clarence E. Mulford of Hopalong Cassidy fame, and William MacLeod Raine.

Most of the pulp writers probably had little or no first-hand knowledge of the West when they began writing, and many of them, finding that ignorance was no handicap, learned little about it along the way. The early "Western" stories were, therefore, not really about the West, but were simply herded into western settings and salted with "Golly, Ma'ams" and "Yippees." The formula was simple—good man turns bad, bad man turns good, and ACTION on every page. As Max Brand said, "There has to be a woman, but not much of a one. A good horse is much more important." The villains, the heroes, and the helpless damsels all could have been found anywhere, but the motion picture industry had made the western setting popular, and a western setting made any action-packed story "Western." There were, of course, writers such as Eugene Manlove Rhodes who knew whereof they wrote, but their stories were usually found in "slick" magazines.

During the 1920s the formula-type pulp Westerns constituted a veritable flood, but like all floods the waters ebbed and abated, and in the 1930s the

number of readers declined drastically. At the same time a new breed of writers—young westerners who had a genuine knowledge of and feel for the West—were seeking outlets for their stories. Because of the drouth in the fiction market, they explored the history of their region, and the formula-type Western story was allowed to rest in peace.

In the 1940s the Western story regained its popularity, and the new generation of western writers were ready with stories of the West they knew through tales of old-timers and a study of its history. Their characters were, to say the least, more believable than those of the pulp writers, and they had little taste for violent action. Many of these stories were told in the first person by an observer who did not comprehend all that happened, a venerable fiction technique that gave the tales an air of reality and credibility.

Once more, however, the market for short fiction, Western or other, disappeared as the reading public's preference changed to nonfiction. Today few "Western" magazines survive, and they publish only purportedly true accounts. Most of the members of Western Writers of America who were invited to contribute to this issue expressed surprise, as if they had unexpectedly heard from an old friend long gone and nearly forgotten, for they had not written short stories for two decades or more. The only short Western fiction today seems to be that written for television.

Edwin Booth

My Father and the Gunman

He rode in just at suppertime, a big, hard-faced man on a roan gelding. His left arm was tied with a bloody cloth, and his hand was stuck through an opening in his vest like a sling. There was something about his eyes that made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. My mother must've felt it too, because she said quickly, "Go in the house, Danny." The three of us, me and Ma and my father, had been eating supper when we heard him coming, but of course we had gotten up from the table to see who it was. Out in this part of the sandhills we didn't often see another white man, so it was a big thing when anyone chanced to cross our little ranch and stop to say hello.

I moved inside the kitchen door like Ma had said, but not so far that I couldn't see what was going on. The stranger stopped his horse about five yards from the doorway and looked at the three of us, and his good hand never left the grips of his sixgun. He was staring right at us, but I got the feeling that he was watching both ends of the house at the same time out of the corners of his eyes. There was no reason why he should, since there was no one else within ten miles. Then he spoke, and his voice was as unpleasant as his looks. "I'm hurt and hungry," was what he said. "Ain't anybody going to invite me in?"

Ma had put her arm around my shoulders, and it tightened up about then. She looked at my father, who was frowning a little. Maybe he was thinking about the stranger's gun, and the fact that he didn't have one himself. Probably not, though, since Pa never wore a pistol unless he thought there were varmints bothering our cattle. Anyway, from the stranger's looks, an ordinary man wouldn't have much chance against him in a gunfight, least of all my father, who didn't hold with fighting.

Pa stepped out into the yard then, looking pretty small alongside the big man on the horse. He glanced up at the rider and smiled his gentle smile. "You'll have to excuse us, stranger, for forgetting our manners. We don't often see folks out here in the sticks. Get down and come in." He hesi-

tated, then added, "I'm Jim Nicholson—that's my wife and boy in the doorway."

The big man gave my father a close look, and must've noticed that he didn't have a gun, for he raised his right hand and touched his hat. "I'm Bill Smith," he said. He looked across at my mother and grinned a little, but it wasn't the kind of a grin to make you feel good. "Pleased t'meecha, ma'am." He kept watching her for quite a while, and I could feel her arm trembling, although Ma ain't the kind to get nervous as a general thing. Finally he let his hard eyes drop to me. "Take care of my horse, bub. Rub him down good." He stepped down out of the saddle and held out the reins.

I looked at Pa, who nodded. "Go ahead, Danny. Rub him down and put him in the lean-to."

"And give him plenty of grain," Bill said.

I glanced up at Pa again, expecting him to say something about not wasting what little grain we had managed to save for the winter, but he said, "Do as Mr. Smith says, Danny. It isn't often we have a guest out here." He frowned at Bill's bandaged arm. "You'd better let me take a look at that arm of yours. Likely it ought to be washed and bandaged again."

"Don't worry about my arm." The way he said it, you would've thought Pa had done something to make him mad. Then he turned my way. "And you—don't fool around with my saddlebags!"

After the look he gave me, I wouldn't've touched those saddlebags with a ten-foot pole unless I had to. I hurried around behind the house toward the lean-to, Bill's horse holding back on the reins all the time. It appeared the horse was as mean as its owner, but I managed to get him stripped and rubbed down, and poured a coffee can of oats in the feedbox. It finished up the sack we'd been working on, and I knew without looking that there were only two sacks left for the winter, with no money to buy more unless we stole it from the sugarbowl. And we couldn't do that, since that was the money Pa planned on using to buy a bull and a little bunch of heifers come spring.

Bill was sitting in my chair when I got back to the kitchen. I didn't feel very hungry any more anyway, but Ma made me pull another chair up across the table from him, and she put my plate in front of me. "Finish your supper, Danny," she said, trying to smile a little. "We can't have you going to bed hungry."

Bill had taken his hand out of his vest and was using his fork to push food onto his knife. He grinned across at me over a knifeful of potatoes. "Yeah," he said. "A skinny kid like you oughta eat plenty." He slanted a sly look at my father. "You wouldn't want to grow up to be as scrawny as your old man."

He had no business saying that. Pa ain't very big, but I've seen him heave a sack of grain on each shoulder at the same time, and carry 'em the length of the barn without turning a hair. It's just that he never seems to put on much weight. I turned to see how he was taking it, but he didn't appear to have noticed. He forked the last piece of beef off the platter and laid it on Bill's plate. "Eat up, friend; you've probably lost quite a bit of blood."

Bill didn't seem to like for anybody to refer to him being hurt, but he didn't say anything about it then. He jabbed a fork in the beef and began sawing on it with his knife. "This sure is tough," he said after a bit. "Did one of your bulls die?"

My mother's face got red, but Pa only smiled. "It ain't exactly a yearling," he admitted. "We don't live very high out here." He laid down his knife and fork. "Things will get better, though, one of these days." He looked at Bill politely. "Are you planning on riding in to Burwell tonight?" Burwell was the closest town, ten miles to the east.

Bill slammed his knife on the table. "Don't be pesterin' me with questions!" he said, real sharp. "I go where I please, and I stay as long as I like." He looked across at my mother and winked. "Right now, it strikes my fancy to stay where I am. Maybe tomorrow, if the notion hits me, I'll move along somewhere else."

My mother cleared her throat. "We haven't much room, Mr. Smith. I'm afraid you won't be very comfortable." She hesitated. "It's only two hours ride to town, where there's a nice hotel."

"I'll make out," Bill said. He pushed his chair away from the table. "I'm used to sleeping in the open anyway."

Pa grinned. "That's one thing we've got plenty of, Mr. Smith—plenty of open." He began stacking the plates the way he always did so they'd be easier to carry across to the dishpan. Bill Smith watched him without speaking for quite a while, but I could guess what he was thinking, that Pa was doing a woman's work. Then he got up from the table and began picking his teeth with a long-bladed knife he pulled out of his boot. He moved across to the doorway and sat down with his back against one side of the doorjamb and one boot outside the door. Sitting that way, he could watch my mother clearing the table. His eyes followed every move she made, and I began to hate him like I'd never hated anybody in my life.

Pa stayed at the table, but turned his chair to face the door. He took out his pipe and packed it in his usual slow way, then scratched a match on the sole of his boot and sucked the flame into the tobacco. Watching him, I tried hard not to feel ashamed, but I couldn't help it. Maybe fighting was

wrong, and maybe wearing a gun was wrong too, but it was even worse to let a man like Bill Smith—if that was his real name—move in on you like this, use up a lot of your grain, say mean things about the food, and stare at your wife like he was just waiting 'til you turned your back. I guess I was so mad I didn't even stop to wonder what Pa could do about it if he wanted to, being as Bill Smith was wearing a gun and looked like he'd know how to use it.

It was almost dark when Bill got up from the doorway and left us. He didn't say as much as a goodnight—just disappeared in the darkness. My mother came over next to Pa and sat down, and I moved over close to the two of them. With dark coming on, I was more scared than mad.

"Do you suppose he's coming back tonight?" my mother asked in a whisper. "The way he acts, I wonder—"

Pa reached over to lay one of his hands on her little one. "Don't get upset, Etta. Likely he's gone to bed. He must be all in after losing that blood."

We hadn't lit a lamp, so it was even darker in the house than outdoors. I had the feeling that Bill Smith might be outside one of the two windows, watching us. I edged over closer to my mother. "Maybe he'll take some more of our grain," I whispered. "We won't have enough for the winter as it is."

Pa chuckled. "I wouldn't worry about that, Danny. Too much grain isn't good for a fine animal like our guest rides. I don't reckon he'd waste the grain just to be ornery."

"It isn't any laughing matter," my mother said sharply. "For all we know, this man may be an outlaw. He might even be—" She lowered her voice. "He might be a killer. One of those men Sheriff Adams was telling us about." She caught her breath, and I could see the faint movement as she turned her head to look toward the cupboard. "If he knew about that—"

She didn't finish the sentence, but I knew she was thinking about the sugarbowl, which held the money for buying our new cattle.

"All right then." Pa's voice was solemn. "Suppose he *is* an outlaw. Suppose he's wanted by half a dozen sheriffs. That still doesn't give me the right to do anything about it. He hasn't done anything to us, except make an uncomplimentary remark about the kind of meat we serve. You can't condemn a man just for having bad manners." He sucked on his pipe, and the bowl glowed in the dark. "Even if he didn't have that gun, all we could do is keep still and hope he'd ride away in the morning. That's our best bet."

My mother let out her breath in a sigh. "I suppose so, Jim. Only I'm so

afraid—” Her dress rustled as she got up out of the chair. “Well, I suppose we may as well try to get some sleep.”

“That’s the sensible thing to do.” Pa reached out a long arm and found my shoulder. “That goes for you too, Danny.” He gave my shoulder a little squeeze. “And don’t get to imagining things.”

“No sir.” Having his hand on my shoulder was comforting, but there was something I felt like I had to know. “Can I ask you something, Pa?”

“Sure, Danny.” He left his hand on my shoulder. “What is it?”

“About his gun. Do you think he’d use it if you told him to move on?”

His hand left my shoulder. “I reckon he would, son.” He sounded tired. “Men do crazy things when they get a gun in their hands. Some men can’t seem to keep from using it.” He stood up. “Now go to bed and try to forget what we’ve been talking about. Tomorrow he’ll ride on, and we’ll laugh at ourselves for getting so worked up about nothing.”

“Yes, Pa.” I crossed the room and began undressing in the darkness. By the time I was in bed, Pa had closed the door. I heard his boots hit the floor, then the cornhusks rustled as he got into bed with my mother. After a bit my mother said something so quiet that I couldn’t make it out.

“He won’t even think of it,” my father said calmly. “Nobody’d expect to find money in a place like this. Now try to sleep.”

I doubt if my folks slept much that night, but I was asleep almost as soon as I hit the pillow. When I woke up it was daylight. Ma was buttoning her shoes, and my father was laying a fire in the stove. I started to go back to sleep again, then my eyes jerked open and I got to my knees on my pallet. “You’re wearing your gun!”

Pa looked around from the stove. His eyes were red from lack of sleep, but he grinned. “Don’t get excited, son. I’m not fixing to do anything heroic.” He glanced down at the holstered Colt, and his grin faded. “I guess a man has to make a show of protecting what’s his. If our guest has any ideas, he’ll at least think twice now.”

Suddenly I was as anxious for him to take the gun off as I’d been for him to put it on. I jumped out of bed and stood staring at him. “He’s liable to kill you!” I was about ready to cry. “You said so yourself, last night. You said some men with a gun can’t keep from using it. If you’re wearing one too, he’ll—”

“Quiet, Danny.” Pa motioned toward the door. “Here comes Mr. Smith now.” He turned to see that my mother had finished dressing, and crossed over to unbar the door and step out into the sunlight. “Good morning, Mr. Smith,” he said. “Did you have a comfortable night?”

Bill Smith growled something I couldn’t understand, and stepped through the doorway. I noticed he was moving sideways, keeping one eye

on Pa's gun, and frowning. He waited for Pa to pass him, then followed him over to the table. His own gun was tied down to his leg, and he kept his hand pretty close to it. My father's holster was high around his waist, tenderfoot fashion. Apparently Bill noticed this, because he began to grin his nasty grin. "I see you're packing an iron today, Nicholson."

My father looked puzzled for a minute, then glanced down at his gun, sort of embarrassed. "I've been having a little trouble with wolves, Mr. Smith." He motioned toward a chair. "Have a seat. Etta'll have breakfast ready in a few minutes."

Bill looked at my mother, who seemed even prettier than usual with her cheek so pale. "So that's your name," he said. "Etta." He turned a chair backwards and sat down with his right arm resting across the back. "It's a pretty name for a pretty woman."

"Thank you," my mother said, but you could see she wasn't pleased. She went about her cooking awkwardly, as though afraid to turn her back on the room. Bill Smith pivoted around toward me. "Stir your stumps, kid. My horse ain't used to waiting for his feed." His eyes hardened. "And give him more grain this time. I've got an idea you're holding out on him."

I looked at Pa, but he only nodded toward the door, so I hurried out and headed for the lean-to, where the roan gelding was raising a fuss. Before I could feed him I had to rip open another sack of grain. I didn't want to waste any, but I was scared not to. I gave him almost two coffee cans full, then crossed over to the barn where our two horses were stabled, and forked hay into the mangers. We couldn't afford grain for our own animals as long as there was grass.

When I got back to the kitchen I could see that something had happened. My mother's face was red, and Pa was frowning across the room at Bill Smith, who was standing up and had his hand on his gun. Nobody seemed to notice me there in the doorway.

"You don't have to put on an act," Bill said. "I ain't the kind of man to pass up anything I want, even if it means a little killing."

Pa was standing up too, but his hand was a long way from his gun and he didn't even seem to remember he was wearing one.

"Be reasonable, Mr. Smith," he said. "We've given you food and shelter, and offered to dress your wound. The only decent thing to do is get on your horse and move along. I don't want any trouble—all I want is to be let alone."

Bill said some words that made my mother's face even redder. He turned just then and saw me standing in the doorway, and said sharply, "Come over here, bud."

"Yes sir." I was too scared to do anything but obey.

When I got close enough, Bill Smith reached out with his right hand and grabbed my wrist, twisting it up behind my back until I had to scream. He turned it loose just as quick, and let his hand drop to his gun again. He said sharply, "Next time I'll twist his arm off. Now maybe you'll tell me where you keep your money."

He didn't appear to be watching me at all, but he saw me jerk my head toward the cupboard.

"So *that's* where it is," he said. "All right, kid; go get it."

I was so ashamed of myself that I couldn't move. After all the work and trouble we'd gone to to save that money, it had to be me that gave it away. I looked across at my father, afraid of what I'd see, but I didn't have to be. Pa just nodded his head and smiled. "It's all right, Danny. He would've found out some other way." He glanced at the cupboard. "Give it to him."

"And hurry it up!" Bill said roughly.

I got the sugarbowl and held it out for Bill to take, but he didn't move his hand away from his gun. "Set it on the table and go saddle my horse," he said. "Saddle the bay mare for your ma. We're going for a ride."

"Hold on now!" My father took a step toward Bill, and his face got as hard as rock. "You're going too far, Smith. There's a limit."

"Yeah?" Bill drew his gun and aimed it at my mother. "All right, Nicholson. Maybe you'd rather have her dead?"

My father's shoulders sagged, and I started toward the door.

"Put a halter on the black horse and bring it along," Bill said. "I ain't planning on being followed."

My mouth was so dry I could hardly swallow, but I was scared not to do what he'd said. I saddled his gelding and led it over to the barn, then saddled Pa's bay mare and put a halter on my own black. It was easy to see that Bill had scouted around long enough to know just how many horses there were on the place. By the time Pa could walk ten miles to the nearest neighbor, it'd be too late to do any good. I got to thinking about my mother then, with Bill's gun pointed at her, and I dragged the three horses back to the kitchen door at a trot. Our two animals would stand, but there was no place to tie the gelding, so I stood in the doorway holding the reins.

Pa was still standing with his arms hanging at his sides, and my mother hadn't moved from beside the stove. Bill Smith had put his gun back in the holster, but he was ready to draw as soon as anybody made a move against him. He saw me without turning his head, and said loudly, "All right, woman—get over to the door."

My mother looked at Pa for some sign. He nodded toward the door. "Go ahead," he said. "Do as he says."

Ma looked like she couldn't believe her ears. "You're going to let him—"

"Don't stop to argue," my father said. "He'll kill all of us."

She crossed over to the doorway and stood there waiting.

Bill Smith edged over close to where we were standing. "All right, kid; get that money and put it in my saddlebags."

Pa nodded, and I went over to get the sugarbowl off the table. I took it outdoors, wanting to run with it and hide, but afraid of what would happen. If Pa was scared to stand up against Bill Smith, there was nothing I could do. I emptied the money into Bill's saddlebags, then went back to the doorway.

"All right, girlie," Bill said. "You climb aboard that mare, but don't get the idea you can light out and leave me. My gelding could give you a mile's start and still catch up with you in half an hour."

My mother walked hopelessly out into the yard and got into the saddle. I was too scared to do anything but stand in the doorway with my eyes bugged out.

Pa cleared his throat nervously. "You might give it a little thought, Mr. Smith," he said. "What you're doing is a terrible thing. If you'll just take the money and ride, I'm willing to let you go and forget all about it."

"You're willing!" Bill laughed harshly. "I'd like to see you try to stop me!"

Pa's eyes sort of half closed, and he bent forward a little at the waist. "That's what I've been trying to do, mister. You don't leave me much choice." His hand moved toward his gun.

I whirled around toward Bill, wanting to stop him somehow, but not knowing what to do. Bill's hand swung up, bringing the gun with it. The gun started to level off, then Bill rocked back on his heels as Pa's bullet slammed into his chest. Bill's eyes widened and his mouth sagged open. You could see that he was still trying to bring the gun up. Before he could make it, two more shots smashed into him, knocking him over on his back. His gun flew out of his hand. He lay there staring up at the ceiling.

I turned my neck stiffly to see what had happened to Pa. He was looking down at his smoking Colt as if he wanted to sling it as far as he could throw. Then my mother pushed past me and into the room. "Jim!" she cried. "Are you all right?"

Pa looked at her and some of the hardness left his eyes. "I'm all right, Etta. I'm all right." He holstered his gun and moved up to put his arm around Ma. "I didn't want it this way, Etta. God knows I tried to prevent it."

My mother reached up to lay a hand on his cheek. "Don't punish yourself, Jim. You did everything you could." She turned to look at Bill Smith. "Is he dead?"

Pa nodded. "He's dead, all right. I'll have to load him on his horse and take him to Burwell. Sheriff Adams will want to know about this." He saw me standing in the doorway, still holding the gelding's reins. "Pull yourself together, Danny. It's all over now."

I pointed a shaking finger at his gun. "But you—you—" My voice wouldn't go any farther.

"I outdrew him, you mean?" He nodded. "That wasn't hard, son, compared to some of the others." He rubbed a hand across his cheek. "Try to forget about it, Danny. That's what I'll be doing."

"Yes sir." The gelding jerked on its reins, and I turned and noticed the saddlebags. It reminded me of our money. I reached up and unbuckled the bags and reached inside. Part of the cash had slid down behind some folded paper where I couldn't reach it very well. I pulled out the paper and dropped it to the ground. As it came unfolded, I saw that it bore the picture of a man. I let out a yell, and my folks came running.

"It's him!" I said. "Bill Smith! He's the bank robber!"

Pa stared at the paper.

"So it is," he said. "In spite of the different name." He looked quickly at my mother. "A thousand dollars' reward, dead or alive. That seems like a lot of money." He shook his head uneasily. "I don't like the idea of killing for money, though."

My mother looked at him solemnly. "You didn't do it for money, Jim. You didn't even know he was wanted." She smiled, and added, "We could certainly use it."

"There's no question about that, Etta," my father said. He thought about it for some time, then stared off across the ranch, and I knew he was thinking what it would be like with a windmill and some more cows, and maybe a pump right in the kitchen. He turned back toward my mother. "I guess we're entitled to it, Etta. Fair and square."

"Of course we are."

Pa looked at me. "You'll have to stay here and watch out for your ma, son. I'm going to Burwell and claim that reward."

"Yes, sir." I was so proud I could hardly stand still. I reached up to brush some oats off the gelding's muzzle, then turned to see my father watching me. He smiled.

"Fetch me some rope, Danny," he said. "As long as I'm going into town I might as well bring us back a sack of grain."

Wayne C. Lee

Summons to Death

The strange urgency that had driven Brad Logan all the way from the mountains of western Colorado burned stronger than ever in him as he reined up his weary horse to look down into Storm Valley. Jess Logan had said to come as quickly as possible, but that couldn't account for the chill traveling down Brad's spine now.

Two ranches were in sight below him. From the descriptions in his Uncle Jess's letters, Brad knew that the one directly below him was Jess's Rafter P. A little to the east and across the twisting green ribbon that was Storm River was Hube Cloud's big Circle C Dot. Farther downstream sprawled the town of Jericho, the county seat.

Brad put his black gelding down the crooked trail to the valley floor, thinking of Uncle Jess's letter that had urged him to come and take charge immediately of the ranch that he would inherit from Jess someday anyway. Brad didn't know what threatened the ranch, but there was an urgency in Jess's letter that he couldn't ignore.

He turned into the lane leading to the big and well kept Rafter P buildings. Close-growing poplars marched in a row along the front of the house. Red hollyhocks bordered the walk that led from the poplars to the house; the grass was green and carefully trimmed.

Brad frowned as he surveyed the yard. Uncle Jess had never been a tidy man. This place was too neat. Brad knew a woman was here even before he saw the washing on the line back of the house. Jess hadn't said anything in his letters about a woman.

There was no one in sight now. Everything was still—too still. Dismounting, he instinctively loosened the gun in his holster. As he moved up the gravel walk to the porch, his mind paraded pictures of Jess Logan before his eyes. A great black beard, sharp eyes, a colorful vocabulary, the smoke-blackened coffee pot always at his elbow.

Brad rapped on the door but got no answer. He had expected Jess to be

here. Somehow he'd had the feeling that Jess was almost afraid to leave his house. The door wasn't locked, so he pushed it open and went inside.

It was a big room, long and deep, with a huge stone fireplace at one end. There were the familiar pine table in the center of the room that Brad remembered from the ranch over on the Gunnison, and the rag rug that Aunt Nettie had made the first year she and Jess had been married.

Even here, he saw the touch of a woman's hand and resentment burned in him. Jess had always growled at Nettie for picking up things after him. She had been dead six years now and it seemed only fair that if Jess wanted to live in a mess, he should have that privilege.

Across the big room was an open door that looked to Brad like an office. As he moved toward it, his eyes picked up the frayed horsehair couch inside the room, the roll-top desk and the swivel chair with the blade-scarred arms Jess had whittled on until they were only shadows of what they had once been. On one corner of the desk was the smoke-blackened coffee pot. Brad had found Jess's sanctuary.

As he reached the doorway, however, he stopped, a sudden lump in his throat threatening to choke him. He saw the overturned coffee cup first, the brown stain on the open tally book. Then his eyes dropped to the floor beyond the swivel chair. Jess was there, his great black beard spread over a chest that no longer stirred with life.

Brad dropped to his knees beside his uncle, fingers touching the motionless wrist. There was no pulse. Brad looked for a bullet or knife wound, but there was no mark on him. The coffee! It must have been poisoned.

A sudden gasp at the door spun him around, and his body tensed to meet this new danger. But there was no gun trained on him, no knife poised to strike. A tall brown-haired girl stood in the doorway, horror in her blue eyes as she looked past Brad to Jess Logan, sprawled on the floor. When her eyes refocused on Brad, he saw the sudden suspicion in them.

"Is he dead?" Her voice quivered.

"He's dead," Brad said, getting to his feet. "Looks like poison—in the coffee. Who made that for him?"

"I made it. But I didn't put poison in it." Her eyes frosted over as she got a grip on her emotions. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Brad felt the force of her suspicion. "I'm Brad Parker," he said slowly, using the first name that came to mind. "What about you?"

"I'm Nola Fiske. I live here on the Rafter P. My stepfather is foreman of the ranch."

Brad frowned. This must be the woman who had hounded Jess Logan's last days, keeping things tidy in direct defiance of Jess's nature. There must

have been bitter feelings between Jess and this woman—enough, perhaps, that she would want to kill him.

“We’ve got to report this to Sheriff Sanders,” Nola Fiske said. “Will you come with me?”

He’d rather tell the sheriff without this suspicious girl along. But he was a stranger here. If he refused to go with Nola Fiske, the sheriff would surely jump to the conclusion that he had murdered Jess Logan. Everyone in Storm Valley would probably agree.

“Sure, I’ll go,” he said and followed Nola out the door.

He learned little from Nola on the way to town. She stared straight ahead, her lower lip folded between her teeth most of the time. She was young, entirely too young, Brad thought, to have stirred an interest in Jess Logan. With a smile on her face, though, she could hold any man’s eye.

Jericho was deep in its siesta. The blistering heat reflected from the weather-cracked storefronts drove everything into the shade. Nola reined in at the hitch rail in front of a small unpainted building with one window-pane missing, a grain sack stuffed into the hole.

They dismounted and went inside, still without a word. The inside of the building was even less inviting than the outside. The dirt on the floor didn’t look as if it had been disturbed by a broom for weeks. Papers were scattered haphazardly over the spur-scarred desk. A stubby, heavy-set man was sprawled on the cot under the window, a sheriff’s badge sagging from his worn vest. Lounging in a chair next to the desk was a broad-shouldered, semi-bald man, toying with a pencil.

The sheriff lurched to a sitting position as his visitors came in. He squinted watery eyes at them and reached in his pocket for a haggled plug of tobacco.

“Howdy, Nola,” he said, “What’s important enough to make you ride into town this time of day?”

“Jess Logan has been murdered.”

The big man at the desk bounced out of his chair. “Murdered?”

Nola turned to him. “Yes, Mr. Duncan. He was poisoned.”

Brad took a closer look at the big man whose small head was set with piercing black eyes that darted nervously over everything that came in their range. Nola had called him Duncan. In his letters, Jess had mentioned his lawyer, Grant Duncan.

“Any idea who did it?” the sheriff asked Nola.

“Yes.” She turned to Brad. “This is the man, sheriff, Brad Parker.”

Sheriff Sanders came to his feet with the ponderous grace of a spavined horse, his chew almost falling out of his mouth. His hands automatically gave a hitch at his sagging pants.

"Hold on, sheriff," Brad said quickly. "I hadn't been in the room with Jess Logan more than a minute when she came in. It looks like he was poisoned, and no poison works that fast. She admits she gave him that coffee."

Sanders turned back to Nola. "Who else was on the ranch?"

"Nobody," Nola said, her breath coming fast. "I was alone after Pa left for work. Even Ma had gone over to see Mrs. Jolling. Nobody could have put poison in Jess's coffee except this man."

"That's good enough for me," Sanders said. While Brad had his attention on Nola, the sheriff had picked up his gun from the cot. Now it was trained on Brad. "Get his gun, Grant."

Grant Duncan slid in behind Brad and lifted his gun from its holster. As the lawyer took the gun around to the sheriff, there was a glint of satisfaction in his eyes that sparked an instant dislike in Brad.

The sheriff prodded Brad toward the rear of the office where a small room was divided into two barred cells. Brad was shoved into one cell and the door locked.

After the sheriff was gone, Brad paced his little cell, mentally rowelling himself. He'd have been better off if he'd run the moment he saw the suspicion in Nola's eyes. She couldn't have stopped him.

Maybe he should have told the sheriff that he was really Brad Logan, Jess's nephew. But when the will was opened and it was disclosed that Brad was to inherit Jess's ranch, that fact would be just another club to use against him. Grant Duncan was Jess Logan's lawyer, and he'd insist that Brad had been impatient to get his hands on that ranch. Or maybe he'd try to prove that Jess was about to change his will and Brad had killed him to prevent it.

Dusk crept into the cell as the sun went down. Suddenly what little light was filtering into the cell was blocked out. Brad jerked his eyes to the barred window.

"In trouble, cowboy?" a voice asked softly.

Brad couldn't see the woman's face very well. He knew she had black hair and he guessed she was small from the size of her heart-shaped face.

"I'm not in here to improve my health," he said, crossing to the window.

"I'm Renna Cloud," the woman said. "Dad owns the Circle C Dot. I heard that the Fiskes are accusing you of killing Jess Logan. I don't know whether you did or not and I don't care. As long as you're against the Fiskes, you're on our side. Here." She shoved a gun through bars. "Someone will bring you your supper before long. I'll be waiting with an extra horse in the cottonwood grove west of town."

Then she was gone and Brad stared at the gun in his hand. He had failed

to run once today when he'd had the chance, thinking he could prove his innocence. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

The deputy who brought Brad his supper obeyed in pop-eyed fear as Brad backed him to the cot and bound and gagged him with strips torn from the sheet. Locking the cell door behind him, Brad went out through the sheriff's empty office. No one challenged him as he turned into the alley and hurried toward a grove of trees silhouetted against the fading light in the western sky.

Renna Cloud was waiting, holding an extra horse. Brad took the reins. "You'll come to the Circle C Dot first," Renna said. "I want you to meet Pa. Then you'll probably want to even the score with Matt Fiske."

Brad tried to get a close look at Renna in the growing darkness. "It's the stepdaughter of Matt Fiske that I have a crow to pick with."

Renna's dark head nodded. "Maybe. But if Nola had anything to do with Jess Logan's murder, it was Matt's idea."

Brad didn't argue. Renna's statement wasn't made for argument.

The Circle C Dot was a big spread, the buildings scattered over a dozen acres. That much Brad made out in the starlight before they reined up in front of the lighted house.

Hitching his horse, Brad followed Renna up the gravel walk to the veranda. A booming voice challenged them from the doorway.

"Who's with you, Renna?"

"Don't know his name, Pa. But he's got a score to settle with the Fiseses."

"Then bring him in."

Brad followed the girl into the lighted room. A huge man whose head seemed to set down into a bull neck was standing back from the door, scrutinizing Brad even before he crossed the threshold. Two bearskin rugs covered the floor in front of the fireplace. Standing on one of the rugs, watching them closely, was Grant Duncan. Brad smothered the shock that ran through him. He certainly hadn't expected to find Grant Duncan here.

"What's your name?" Hube Cloud demanded.

"Parker," Brad said.

Grant Duncan slid over to Renna. "When did you start breaking murderers out of jail?" he asked softly.

Brad looked at the girl for the first time in the light and caught his breath. He hadn't seen the equal of her beauty in a long time. But there was a hardness in her eyes as she looked at Grant Duncan that blighted the soft radiance that could have been there.

"I'll take care of my business, Grant. You do the same."

Duncan's shifty eyes, steadied now by anger, squinted at Renna. "This happens to be my business. I think you need straightening out."

Her smile was icy. "Well, start straightening."

"In private," he said and motioned toward the veranda.

"Make it short," she said, preceding him toward the veranda. "And don't get the idea you're bossing this outfit."

Brad's face mirrored his rage as he watched Duncan leave. There obviously were pieces of this puzzle that Brad didn't have. How did Grant Duncan, Jess Logan's lawyer, fit in with the Clouds, who were fighting Matt Fiske, Jess's ranch foreman?

Renna came back into the room alone after a minute. Her father frowned.

"Where's Duncan?" he demanded.

"I sent him on an errand. He won't be back here tonight." She turned to Brad. "Are you ready to go after Matt Fiske now?"

"I want to find the one who killed Jess Logan," Brad said. "If I don't, I'm liable to swing for it. But all I have is your word that Matt Fiske is the one behind Jess's murder."

Her smile didn't leave her face, but now it had the hard polish of a hand-rubbed doorknob. "You don't know Matt Fiske. He probably put that poison in the coffee pot before Nola made the coffee. Everybody knows that Jess always drank coffee in the afternoon. When Jess got the poison, Matt was gone."

"But if I hadn't happened along, that would have left Nola to take the blame."

"That wouldn't have bothered Matt a bit. He'd tramp on his own grandmother if it would help him get to be kingpin of Storm Valley."

"Why does he want to be kingpin of this valley?" Brad demanded.

Brad didn't miss the quick exchange of glances between father and daughter. It was Hube Cloud who answered.

"Matt Fiske has big ideas and ways of making them work. Once he gets Jess Logan's place, he'll come after the Circle C Dot. That's our main interest in stopping him."

"If you want to clear yourself of Jess Logan's murder, you'd better plan to talk to Matt Fiske at the point of a gun," Renna said.

"It's hard to believe a hired hand would have such big ideas. If I did look for him, I'd probably find him at the Rafter P, wouldn't I?"

"I doubt it," Renna said. "At least, not at this time of night. Lately Matt seems to be having some trouble with his family, and he's been spending his nights at an abandoned homestead down by the south spring. You might surprise him there. Getting the drop on him is the only safe way to approach him."

"How can I find this place?"

“Matt and Jess Logan built a drift fence along the south side of the spring to keep the nesters’ cattle from coming down to water. Just head south from here till you hit the fence, then ride west. You can’t miss it.”

Brad thought that both Renna and Hube Cloud were too anxious for him to go looking for Matt Fiske. Of course, if Hube was right in saying that Fiske was trying to take over all of Storm Valley, he would have a keen interest in seeing Matt Fiske convicted of Jess Logan’s murder.

As Brad rode out of the yard, a dozen questions rode with him. He didn’t trust Hube Cloud and his daughter. For that matter, he hadn’t met anyone here in Storm Valley that he really trusted—not Grant Duncan, not Nola Fiske who had landed him in jail on a murder charge, not even the watery-eyed sheriff, Jug Sanders.

He had misgivings about this trip to the deserted homestead to find Matt Fiske. But it was the only lead he had, and somehow he must find Jess Logan’s killer and prove him guilty. If he didn’t, his own future could terminate abruptly at the end of a rope.

Finding the drift fence, he followed it to the spring. So far, everything was just the way the Clouds had said it would be. He located the dark bulks of a cabin and a tumbledown barn nearly a hundred yards up the slope. Finding a cottonwood tree near the spring, he tied his horse and made his way up the hill, circling around the cabin so anyone inside would not see him in the starlight.

The cabin looked deserted. Maybe Matt Fiske was inside asleep. And maybe this was a trap. Carefully, he lifted his gun and checked it. He hadn’t really looked at the gun Renna Cloud had pushed through the jail bars to him. He found it in good shape and fully loaded.

Moving as silently as possible, he reached the corner of the cabin. He listened but heard no sound inside. If Fiske was there, he was either a silent sleeper or was deliberately waiting for Brad to show himself so he could spring a trap instead of being caught in one.

Edging around the cabin, Brad reached the door without passing a window. Still there was no sound inside, so he pushed the door. It swung back on protesting hinges. Brad waited. The noise had brought no shot, but maybe he was dealing with an iron-nerved man who would wait until he was sure he had the advantage before he revealed his presence.

With the cocked gun in his hand, Brad plunged through the doorway and flattened himself against the wall. He waited with held breath. Deathly silence was his only reward. Slowly he let his breath hiss out through set teeth as he reached for a match.

The match stopped as it touched the wall. The noise he heard was outside against the cabin wall. He dropped the unlighted match and his

grip tightened on the gun as he followed the sound along the wall toward the door.

He wasn't prepared, however, for the figure that catapulted through the doorway, hitting him just as he pulled the trigger. The bullet missed its target. As he went down, he tried to bring the gun around like a club. That move was stopped short by the scream that rocked the room. The dim starlight sifting through the open doorway glinted dully off sandy brown hair.

"Nola Fiske!" he exploded, scrambling away from her and getting to his feet. "What are you doing here? You came within a whisker of being killed."

Nola was on her feet now, glaring through the gloom at Brad. "You! So you're the one who pinned that note to our door."

"What note?" he demanded.

"The one that brought Matt here. How did you get out of jail?"

"That's a long story," Brad said. "Is Matt here?"

"I think so." The suspicion hadn't left her voice. "If you didn't write that note, why are you here?"

"I was told Matt would be here and he could shed some light on Jess Logan's death."

"Who told you that?"

"The Clouds. They said Matt spent his nights here."

"That's a lie. Matt stays home every night." The suspicion in her voice was losing its edge. "Somebody pinned a note to our door with a knife while we were eating supper. We didn't get to see who did it. The note said that Matt was to meet someone here at this cabin who could prove who put the poison in Jess's coffee."

"And he came?"

Nola shot a nervous glance at the door. "Yes. He was mad and seemed scared. I came here, thinking I'd find out for sure who did kill Jess."

"You acted this afternoon like you already knew," Brad said.

"I changed my mind after I thought about it. I think Matt did do it."

"Your stepfather?"

Her head bobbed. "He could have put the poison in the pot before I made the coffee. He hated Jess ever since Jess sent him to prison for cattle rustling over on the Gunnison. Jess didn't recognize Matt when he hired him here in Storm Valley. I found out about it when I overheard Matt and Grant Duncan talking one night. Matt and Duncan were in prison together. Matt threatened to kill me if I ever told Jess."

Brad sucked in a long breath. "Then Matt hired on just to get revenge on Jess?"

Nola shrank against the dark wall. "Yes. Matt has been stealing cattle from Jess. Then, ever since word leaked out that the railroad was planning to build through Storm Valley and land prices would go sky high, Matt and Duncan have been planning to take over the Rafter P. I think Jess was suspicious of Matt."

Brad understood a lot now that he hadn't before, and he agreed that Matt was the logical suspect in Jess's murder. Since Nola had told him the truth, she deserved the truth in return.

"My name's not Parker," he said. "It's Logan. Jess Logan was my uncle. He sent for me because he needed my help, he said."

"I suspected that," she said without surprise. "Jess told me about you. But I didn't think of it this afternoon when I found you kneeling over Jess's body. Matt may suspect who you are, too. If he does, he'll try to kill you. Matt and Duncan have plans to own the land the railroad will have to buy."

"They're not doing this alone," Brad said. "The Clouds figure in it, too. Grant Duncan was Uncle Jess's lawyer, so he knows about me. He probably has guessed who I am. That's probably why I was sent here. It must have been Duncan who left that note for Matt. But why would he want Matt to come here?" Brad suddenly leaned forward. "You say Matt came here ahead of you tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then he must be here now." He touched her arm. "You stay here while I take a look."

Brad struck a match against the wall, cupping the blaze from the door. The room, revealed in the flickering glare, was small. An old stove stood in one end. Empty shelves sagged against the wall across from the stove. There was no furniture, but there was a door directly across from Brad.

A furrow plowed through the deep dust on the floor where some heavy object had been dragged to that door. Little dark balls of dust dotted the furrow.

Brad saw the whiteness in Nola's face before the match burned out and he had to drop it. Nola had seen the bloody path in the dust, too.

"Stay here," he said gently. "I'll look."

He struck another match and crossed the room, aware that Nola had ignored his suggestion and was just one step behind him. Swinging the door open, he found a small bedroom with a broken bedstead. Pack rats had made nests of the bedding. He knelt beside the man on the floor long enough to make certain that the knife wound in the back had done its job, then got up and backed out of the room, closing the door.

"Matt?" he asked, turning to Nola.

The match burned out, leaving a vision in his memory of her bloodless face as she nodded.

"One less to share in their spoils," Brad said. "Let's get out of here before—"

As he reached the outside door, a bullet splintered the door casing a foot above his head. He lurched backward, shoving Nola against the far wall. Lifting his gun, he fired aimlessly through the open door. A rifle responded instantly from the ramshackle barn.

"Who would be trying to kill us?" Nola half whispered, crouching in terror against the wall.

"Nobody, I'm guessing," Brad said. "If he'd wanted to kill us, he could have sneaked up to the window and shot us while we were looking for Matt. That must be Grant Duncan out there. He left the note at your place, then came on and waited here to knife Matt. Now he's holding me here till the Clouds bring the sheriff. He wants me found with a dead man practically in my lap."

"That would get rid of both you and Jess," Nola said. "With Matt dead, it would be just Duncan and the Clouds controlling both the Circle C Dot and the Rafter P. There would be no way the railroad could get through the valley without going through their land."

The drum of hoofbeats came from down the valley. That would be the sheriff, Brad thought, spurred on now by the sound of the gunfire.

"We're caught like fish in a net," Brad muttered. "Got a gun, Nola?"

"I've got this," she said, taking a small caliber revolver from her pocket.

He shoved his .45 into her hand and grabbed the little gun. "Duncan might notice the different sound of this pea shooter. Make him think I'm still here."

Before she could stop him with questions, he wheeled toward the window on the back side of the cabin. He squeezed through and dropped to the ground out of sight of the barn. A lopsided moon was just coming up, making grotesque, shapeless shadows, showing nothing clearly.

Brad glided around the corner of the house and ran for the rear of the barn, hoping Duncan had heard the hoofbeats, too, and was concentrating on them. He reached a rear window that had a wind-shredded grain sack nailed over it.

Brad heard someone across the barn, near the door, and could barely make out his figure. Silently, he slipped through the window, pushing the shredded sack out of his way. Just as he stepped down on the dry litter on the barn floor, he heard a shout outside.

"You in the house! It's Sheriff Sanders. Stop shooting and come out."

Grant Duncan stepped to the door of the barn. "He's in there, sheriff. I kept him bottled up after I saw him kill Matt Fiske."

Brad glided swiftly across the barn and jabbed the little gun against the base of Duncan's neck.

"Now we're going out there and you're going to tell him the truth," Brad said softly.

For a moment, the lawyer stiffened, then wilted like an uprooted sunflower. "The sheriff is after you," he blustered finally.

"For a murder I didn't do," Brad said. "So if it comes to a showdown, I might as well swing for one I did do. I think I'd enjoy killing you."

"Come out of the house, Parker or Logan or whoever you are," the sheriff called again. "And be quick about it."

"I'm coming," Brad called, pushing Duncan through the barn door and keeping behind him. "I'm bringing out the man who killed Matt Fiske."

It was then Brad saw that the sheriff was not alone. He was flanked by Hube Cloud on one side and Renna on the other. They had all turned from the house to stare at Duncan coming out of the barn without his rifle, his hands shoulder high.

"You said you had him bottled up in the house," the sheriff growled at Duncan.

"Tell him what really happened," Brad said, boring the muzzle of the little gun into the lawyer's neck. "Tell him who killed Matt Fiske and who ordered Fiske to poison Jess Logan's coffee."

Duncan said nothing, and Renna nudged her horse to within three feet of Duncan. Brad tensed his gun hand, prepared to swing the muzzle toward the girl. He wouldn't put it past her to try to shoot him.

"You botched it again, didn't you?" Renna shouted furiously at the lawyer. "Couldn't you even keep him inside the house with a rifle?"

"Back off, Renna," the sheriff said. "I want to hear what Duncan has to say." He rubbed his watery eyes with his free hand.

Tears of fright were in Duncan's eyes, and the words gargled in his throat when he spoke. "I had to do it, sheriff," he said. "She'd have sent me back to prison if I hadn't done what she said."

Renna's hand darted into her pocket. "You sniveling dog!" she screamed.

Brad gave Duncan a hard push into Renna's horse. The horse snorted and lunged backward. Renna yanked on the reins. In that moment, before she could regain control of her horse and jerk out her gun, Brad lunged forward and caught her wrist. The horse snorted again and wheeled. Brad hung on, dragging Renna out of the saddle.

Brad heard the sheriff shout, "Just sit tight, Hube! Duncan, stand clear where I can see you."

With a jerk that brought a scream from Renna, he twisted her arm till she dropped the gun. For a moment she kept fighting, but then he wrapped his arms around her, pinning her hands to her sides. Suddenly she stopped fighting, still breathing hard, black eyes spitting her fury.

"Get over there by Duncan," the sheriff ordered Hube Cloud, and Cloud reluctantly dismounted and moved over beside the lawyer.

Nola came out of the house and the sheriff tossed down his rope. "Here, Nola. Tie up that hellcat Logan is holding, then he can wrap up these two jiggers."

As Nola moved to carry out his orders, the sheriff grinned, the weak moonlight revealing a twinkle in his misty eyes. "After this is over, maybe you'd ought to show Logan that all the girls in Storm Valley don't fight like that when he gets his arms around them."

Stephen Overholser

Rainbow Captive

The fight on Rainbow's main street raised so much dust that the dozen onlookers stood upwind in a tight, quiet semicircle. Behind them three dogs paced back and forth in the rutted street, nervous as the gusting prairie wind.

Young Eagle, an Arapahoe boy of eight summers, sat in the bed of a farm wagon, watching the fight between the bearded man and the cowboy. The farm wagon was stopped across the street from Rainbow's one remaining business with any claim to prosperity, the Shoo-fly Saloon.

Rainbow was an eastern Colorado Territory town whose life had been drained by a route change in the Union Pacific rail line. False-fronted buildings along the narrow main street stood empty; clapboard houses that clustered near to what was to have been the heart of a new Western town were now stripped of all furnishings and most doors and windows.

Young Eagle was naked beneath the tattered blanket that he pulled around himself against the wind. These prairie winds smelled of snow. The blanket also covered Young Eagle's broken right leg, a leg that was now swollen and dark below the knee.

Young Eagle watched the fight without knowing the sense of it. He spoke no words in the white man's language. He understood only a few cuss words he had heard at the Indian agent's store, enough to make him believe that white men despised their women. Young Eagle could often guess the whites' meaning by their exaggerated gestures or by their tone of voice, but this fight made no more sense to him than why he had been brought here.

Fourteen days ago the bearded man had stolen Young Eagle from Soaring Eagle's camp on the reservation. For five days Young Eagle was bound hand and foot in the bed of the bearded man's farm wagon. He traveled only by night, leading Young Eagle to believe he was the spirit of death. By day the bearded man concealed the wagon in trees or in heavy

brush while he ate jerked venison, drank from one of the jugs he kept beneath the wagon seat, or slept.

On the sixth day of his captivity, Young Eagle had managed to work the ropes off his feet. He had tried to escape, but was in such a weakened condition that the bearded man easily caught him. The bearded man threw Young Eagle to the earth and stomped on his shin with one hobnailed boot.

When they reached the open prairie, they traveled by day. The first town they came to was Rainbow. Young Eagle felt mystified here, and frightened. Most of the whites' frame dwellings, squat and ugly to his eye, were obviously abandoned. Even on the street where the bearded man stopped the wagon, Young Eagle saw few signs of life. Aside from the Shoo-fly Saloon, the store buildings were dark-windowed and apparently empty.

Young Eagle had watched the bearded man enter the saloon. Half a dozen horses were tied at the rail outside, all branded *Circle B*. As the bearded man opened the door, Young Eagle heard a woman's shrill laughter, but that one human sound was cut off by the closing door.

Presently the bearded man came outside, followed by six cowboys and an equal number of townspeople. The cowboys were slender men who wore boots with pointed toes, chaps over their trousers, dark flannel shirts, and large, sweat-stained hats. The six townspeople, all men, were not so distinctive. One was pudgy and red-faced, another was lanky. One wore patched clothes, another wore a dark suit and a derby hat. In the open doorway of the Shoo-fly Saloon stood a huge white woman. She was nearly as wide as the doorway. Young Eagle noticed that she wore bright red coloring on her cheeks and lips, and while he stared at her, their eyes met and held until Young Eagle looked away.

Young Eagle saw no sign of anger in any of the white men, only silent determination. Was this the secret of their strength? he wondered as he watched the bearded man and one thick-necked cowboy face one another, circling, fists raised.

The cowboy, hatless now, was quick and agile. He feinted, then punched the bearded man in the face. The bearded man was rocked back, but kept his footing.

The bearded man charged, swinging both fists in wide arcs. Even though the cowboy managed to slug the bearded man once, he was driven back by the attack. The bearded man pressed his advantage and punched the cowboy in the nose, with all of his weight behind the blow. A gasp came from the onlookers, as though they themselves had been struck.

The cowboy went down, but was quickly back on his feet. He bled steadily from his nose. The bearded man, sensing victory, charged again,

but this time the cowboy smoothly sidestepped him and slugged him on the temple as he stumbled past.

Every time the fighting whites came together, Young Eagle noticed, their feet stirred powdery dust in the street as if the men had plunged their boots into dry puddles. Gusts of wind took the dust away in a brown streak, away from the silent onlookers, and away from the dogs.

The cowboy had lost none of his quickness from being knocked down. He rapidly punched the bearded man with his right fist, followed by a left. The bearded man tried to rush him, but the cowboy eluded him.

For a time the fight became a pursuit of the cowboy by the bearded man. The semicircle of onlookers, maintaining a safe distance, followed the fighters as they came close to the farm wagon, then moved back across the street near the Shoo-fly Saloon.

Even though the bearded man was the pursuer, he got the worst of the fight. The cowboy chose openings and hit his adversary with smooth combinations of rights and lefts before ducking away.

Then the bearded man, his face puffy and bleeding, stepped close to the cowboy and planted his hobnailed boot on the cowboy's foot. The bearded man drew his right arm back and swung, underhanded. He struck the cowboy below his belt buckle, very hard. The cowboy fell to the street. He writhed. The bearded man, aiming for the crotch, kicked him. The cowboy cried out hoarsely.

Several onlookers cursed the bearded man. The oldest among them, a cowman whose hair streamed out from under his battered hat like fine silver, spoke in a low, growling voice:

"Let him up, you bastard. Don't kick him no more."

The bearded man, breathing raggedly, backed away a step, warily watching the cowboy struggle to his feet. Someone shouted encouragement, but the cowboy was clearly hurt. He straightened up and tried to raise his fists, but could bring them no higher than his waist.

The bearded man moved in close. Half-turning, he drew his right arm back and swung. His fist came around in a great, wind-ripping arc, striking the cowboy squarely on the jaw.

The blow sent the cowboy tumbling to the street. He rolled through the dust and came to rest against the hind legs of the horses tied at the rail. One speckled gelding squealed in panic and reared. The horse beside him, a muscular stallion whose eyes rolled wide, lashed out with his hoofs at the prone man. One shod hoof struck the cowboy's head with a report that Young Eagle heard over the sound of the wind.

The fat woman in the doorway of the Shoo-fly Saloon shrieked. All of the onlookers, until then hushed in a moment of shock, rushed to the

fallen cowboy. They pulled him away from the horses. Young Eagle caught a glimpse of the cowboy's face and saw that it was open-mouthed and still.

The silver-haired cowman knelt beside the cowboy, then stood. He pulled off his hat and slapped it against his thigh. "Skull's mashed in."

The bearded man, standing spread-legged in the street, wiped a hand through his shaggy beard. The hand came away red. "Is he dead?" he asked in a blurred voice.

Several of the onlookers nodded, but none spoke. They stared down at the cowboy in disbelief.

"I whupped him," the bearded man said. "You seen me whup him. The bet's still good."

All of the townspeople and cowboys ignored the bearded man. In a louder voice he went on: "We had twenty-five dollars riding on this fight—"

The silver-haired cowman whirled and faced the bearded man. "Shut your mouth, mister. The man's dead. Show some respect."

"Wasn't my fault he got kicked," the bearded man said. "All I'm saying is that I got twenty-five dollars coming to me."

The old cowman switched his battered hat from his right hand to his left and drew his revolver from the holster on his hip. He aimed it at the bearded man. "Goddamn it, I told you to shut your mouth. You shut it, or I'll shut it for you—permanent."

A tense moment passed while the bearded man and the cowman stared at one another. Then the bearded man abruptly turned and walked across the street to his wagon. Behind him, the cowman holstered his revolver. The four cowboys gathered around him.

The bearded man, mumbling to himself, reached under the wagon seat. He tried to lift out a brown jug with his right hand, but winced with pain. He brought the jug out with his other hand and pulled the cork with his teeth. Young Eagle saw blood on the cork when he dropped it. Young Eagle watched him tip the jug over his forearm. The bearded man filled his mouth and spat reddened whiskey into the street. Then he tipped the jug to his mouth and drank.

Young Eagle turned and looked at the cowboys. They listened intently to the silver-haired cowman, then all of them walked slowly to the fallen cowboy. They lifted the body and placed it over the saddle of one of the horses. The silver-haired cowman ran a lariat over the body and beneath the horse, tying the ends to the saddle horn. The cowboys swung up into their saddles. Young Eagle saw that the silver-haired cowman rode the stallion that had kicked the cowboy.

The five men of the Circle B Ranch rode out of Rainbow, leading the horse that carried the body of the cowboy. The bearded man watched them go, softly cursing them. He drank from the jug again. Across the street the fat woman stood on the boardwalk, looking in his direction. The men of the town stood in a knot a short distance away. Near them the three dogs sat with their backs against the wind.

The bearded man called across the street to the woman. "Well, I just got robbed out of twenty-five dollars. Ain't there law in Rainbow?"

The fat woman said, "I'd be surprised if you had two dollars to your name, mister."

"That ain't what I asked you, woman," he said. "I said, ain't there law here?"

"There ought to be a law against a man like you being alive," the fat woman said. "I reckon every man here would vote in favor of that."

"I ain't asking you to like me," the bearded man said. "You don't have to stand there looking at me, either."

"I'm not looking at you," she said. "I'm looking at that boy in your wagon. Full-blood Indian, isn't he?"

The bearded man glanced back at Young Eagle, then nodded once in reply.

"What are you doing with him?" she asked.

"You look after your business, woman," he said. "I'll do the same."

The fat woman came off the boardwalk with surprising speed and grace and strode to the bearded man, her lace-up shoes sending up clouds of dust before her.

"Don't use that kind of talk on me, mister," she said. "I asked you a question. I want an answer."

Under her glare and threatening bulk, the bearded man retreated a step. "That injun's off the reservation down south. I brung him up here."

"What for?" she demanded.

"Reasons of my own," the bearded man said.

The woman turned away from him and moved down the length of the wagon bed. She lifted a corner of the tattered blanket.

"Hell, he don't have a stitch on!" she exclaimed.

"Don't matter," the bearded man said. "Injun's skin is thick as rawhide."

Young Eagle was frightened. He tried to pull away from the woman and cover himself. She spoke soothingly to him. Then she lifted the edge of the blanket that covered his right leg.

"Oh, my God, he's hurt," she said.

The bearded man set the jug down on the wagon seat. "Leave him be."

The fat woman caught him by surprise when she pulled up her long skirt, exposing one thick white leg. Above her calf a small holster was strapped to her leg. She stooped and pulled out a double-barreled derringer. She pointed the weapon at the bearded man's face.

"I can see there's only one language you understand, mister," she said. "I've never killed a man before, but I know I could blow a hole in your face and never lose a minute's sleep over it."

The bearded man swallowed hard. He held up both hands in front of him. "Don't . . . don't . . ."

The fat woman called to the townspeople and asked for help. Then she motioned downward with the derringer. "Mister, sit down right there. Sit up against the wheel of your wagon."

The bearded man dropped to one knee and sat down. He looked up sullenly as the fat woman spoke to one of the men.

Pointing to a length of rope in the wagon bed, she said, "Take that rope and tie this gent to the wheel. Maybe that'll keep him out of trouble for a while."

The fat woman aimed her derringer at the bearded man while he was being tied. The rope that had been used to bind Young Eagle's hands and feet now was looped around the bearded man's chest and through the spokes of the wagon wheel. When the rope was knotted, the fat woman raised her skirt, to the great interest of all the men present, and put the derringer back in its holster.

At first Young Eagle fought when the fat woman tried to lift him out of the wagon. But she spoke softly to him and calmed him. She lifted him slowly and carefully so that none of his weight rested on the injured leg. She carried him across the street into the Shoo-fly Saloon.

Inside, the saloon was long and narrow and high-ceilinged. Lanterns were suspended overhead on wires. Young Eagle saw a pot-bellied stove in the middle of the room. A bar with a dully gleaming brass rail at its base ran the length of the room. In front of the bar, all the way to the wall and the back of the saloon, were round gaming tables, captain's chairs, and a roulette wheel. Young Eagle's eye was caught by the roulette wheel. He wondered if it was a symbol of the whites' spiritual beliefs, as he had been told the cross was.

Young Eagle felt a glow of warmth from the pot-bellied stove when the fat woman set him down on a table that was nearby. She pulled the blanket off him and dropped it to the floor. She inspected Young Eagle's swollen leg by poking it with her fingers and watching his face. Young Eagle fought the pain. But tears streamed from his eyes as the fat woman probed and pressed her hands against his leg.

“Leg’s swolled up so bad that I can’t tell if it’s busted,” she said. She thought a moment. “Better put a splint on it. If the bone’s busted, it’ll heal straight.” She rummaged through the kindling box beside the pot-bellied stove until she found two short boards. She set them on the table beside Young Eagle’s leg.

The fat woman walked behind the bar. She stooped down and came up with a dark blue flannel shirt and a piece of torn bar towel. She returned to the table and put the shirt on Young Eagle and buttoned it. The flannel shirt was man-sized and reached to his knees. The fat woman rolled the sleeves up above Young Eagle’s hands.

Young Eagle watched the fat woman tear the towel into strips. With the help of one of the men, she placed the boards on either side of Young Eagle’s leg, pressed them tight against the swollen flesh, and tied them in place with the strips of cloth.

Pain made Young Eagle sweat. Now he chilled. The fat woman made him lie back on the table. She gathered the shirt around him and tucked it beneath him. In a few minutes Young Eagle felt warm and drowsy.

The fat woman picked up the tattered blanket and left the saloon through the front door. Outside, the three dogs intercepted her and followed across the street. The bearded man sullenly watched the fat woman. His beard was caked with drying blood. The dogs bounded ahead of the woman and sniffed cautiously around the bearded man, but slunk away when he spoke.

“You ain’t going to get away with this,” he said.

“I’ll turn you loose,” she said, dropping the blanket at his feet, “when you answer some questions.”

“Such as what?” he asked.

“When was the last time that boy had anything to eat?” she asked.

“I fed him regular,” he said.

“You didn’t overfeed him,” she said sarcastically. “He’s thin as wire.” When the bearded man only shrugged in reply, she said, “You never did answer my question. Why did you take that boy off the reservation? Is he yours?”

“Hell, no,” the bearded man said. “I had my reasons. That’s all you need to know.”

The fat woman looked at the team of horses hooked to the farm wagon. “Be a real shame if someone spooked that team while you’re tied to the wheel.”

The bearded man stared at her. “Goddamn, you’re a hard one, ain’t you?”

“Answer my questions,” she said. “I’ll be easier to get along with.”

After a moment the bearded man said, "Hand me down that jug."

She lifted the jug from the wagon seat and gave it to him. She watched him drink by tipping the brown jug over his left forearm. His right hand was swollen and appeared immobile.

"Savages killed my brother," the bearded man said. "I was out hunting and came back to camp and found him. They cut him to pieces. Cut his balls off and stuffed them in his mouth."

He muttered, "Savages," and drank again. He set the jug on his thigh. "I knew where their camp was. I watched it for two days, figuring a way to get back at them. Then I seen this boy swimming in a water hole. He was all by hisself. I grabbed him and brung him north."

"What were you doing on the reservation?" the fat woman asked.

"Prospecting," the bearded man said. He added defensively, "It's a free country. We never done those savages harm. . . ."

He was interrupted by the drumming sounds of running horses. The fat woman looked up the street and saw the five cowboys from the Circle B Ranch coming at a dead run. The last horse carried the flopping body of the dead cowboy. A cloud of wind-swirled dust rose up behind them like a dark ghost in pursuit.

The silver-haired cowman pulled his stallion to a sliding halt near the fat woman. "The country's crawling with Indians. Must have broke the reservation. There's a war party of maybe fifty, sixty braves headed this way. Take cover. Between us, maybe we can hold them off."

"Cut me loose," the bearded man said, struggling against the rope. "Cut me loose!"

"That war party must be tracking him," the fat woman said to the cowman.

"What for?" he asked.

"He stole a boy off the reservation," she said.

The bearded man demanded, "Ain't you white, too? Cut me loose!" He looked around frantically. "Give me a running chance!"

"You kidnapped that boy?" the cowman asked him. "What'd you do a fool thing like that for?"

"I aimed to let him go," the bearded man said. "Set him loose now. The savages will take him and go. They won't bother you folks."

One of the cowboys across the street shouted, "I seen one! An Indian ran between those buildings!"

The cowman looked up the street where the cowboy pointed. "A scout, likely. They're coming."

"Cut me loose!" the bearded man cried.

The cowman ignored him and called to his men. "Grab up your rifles

and get into the saloon. We'll fort up there." He turned to the fat woman. "Come on."

They walked across the street. The bearded man, sobbing, pleaded with them to release him, then cursed them as they entered the saloon.

Three mounted Indians appeared at the far end of the street. They rode slowly toward the saloon. Behind the three, and on either side, were between forty and fifty Arapahoe warriors on foot. They were armed with rifles, bows and arrows, or war clubs. All were painted and stripped for combat.

The tallest of the three mounted warriors wore a single eagle's feather in his hair. He carried a repeating rifle, a rare prize among this tribe. The man was Soaring Eagle, leader of the war party.

"Here they come!" shouted a cowboy who peered out of a saloon window that faced the street.

The silver-haired cowman had positioned all of the men at the front and rear doors and windows of the Shoo-fly Saloon. They were well armed, but had little ammunition. The cowman had told the men not to shoot until the Indians were very close. An immediate, devastating show of force might rout them.

The fat woman strode to the table where Young Eagle lay. Despite the commotion, he had not awakened. When the fat woman scooped him up into her fleshy arms, Young Eagle blinked and opened his eyes.

"What's happening?" he asked in Arapahoe.

The question was almost echoed in English by the silver-haired cowman. "What the hell are you doing?"

The fat woman did not reply. She pushed her way past a cowboy stationed at the saloon's front door. She shoved the door open with her foot and went outside.

The fat woman crossed the boardwalk and walked into the street. The advancing Arapahoes, less than a hundred feet away now, stopped. Across the street the bearded man sobbed and babbled senselessly.

"Father!" Young Eagle exclaimed.

Soaring Eagle nodded at his son, but made no move to dismount. He looked at the bearded man, then at the saloon windows. Behind the front glass, white men peered out. One aimed a rifle at him through the open door.

Soaring Eagle asked his son, "What has happened to you? Did the white woman injure you?"

"No, Father," Young Eagle said. He pointed over the fat woman's shoulder. "The white man took me. He hurt my leg. Father, he is the spirit of death who travels by night."

The fat woman came a few steps closer and held out the Indian boy. "Here, take him," she said.

Soaring Eagle swung a leg over his pony and slid to the ground. He handed his rifle to the mounted warrior who rode next to him, and walked to the fat woman. He examined the splint, then took his son in his arms. He carried the boy to his horse and placed him on the war pony's back.

Soaring Eagle walked to one of the warriors who carried a war club. The club was a fist-sized stone wrapped in buckskin and attached to a length of tree limb. Soaring Eagle took the club and walked to the bearded man.

The bearded man sobbed uncontrollably as Soaring Eagle stood over him. Soaring Eagle raised the war club high over his head. He paused a moment, then swiftly brought the war club down, striking the bearded man's outstretched leg below the knee. The bearded man cried out.

Soaring Eagle returned the war club to its owner, then mounted his pony behind Young Eagle. The Indian beside him handed the repeating rifle to him. Soaring Eagle turned and led the Arapahoe war party down the street the way they had come.

The fat woman watched the Indians go. The three dogs, tails buried between their legs, came out of hiding and sniffed the ground around the fat woman. The silver-haired cowman, followed by the cowboys of the Circle B and the men of Rainbow, came out on the boardwalk. Across the street the bearded man's cries had turned to low moans.

A short distance away from the white man's village, Soaring Eagle halted and gathered his warriors around him. He asked Young Eagle to tell what had happened to him and to describe what he had seen during his captivity. While Soaring Eagle listened to his son, he looked back at the square buildings on the prairie. When Young Eagle finished, Soaring Eagle spoke.

"Listen while I tell what I have learned. Many summers ago the white tribes came to the land of our fathers. The whites fought us and defeated us with their weapons and their diseases. They dug into the sacred earth. They brought the iron horse and the singing wires. They sent us to barren lands far away where we were told to live forever.

"But now see what has happened to the white tribes. All but a few have gone away. The whites left behind fight among themselves. Soon all the whites will be gone, victims of their own cruelty. The lands of the Arapahoe will be ours once again."

Matthew Braun

The Road to Hell

The sun dipped lower, splashing great ripples of gold across the water. Overhead a hawk veered slowly into the wind and settled high on a cottonwood beside the stream. The bird sat perfectly still, a feathered sculpture, flecked through with bronzed ebony in the deepening sunlight. Then it cocked its head in a fierce glare and looked down upon the intruders.

There were five men: lean and hard, weathered by wind and sun, all of them scorched the burnt mahogany of ancient saddle leather. Their faces glistened with sweat as they wrestled a stout log onto their shoulders, lifted it high, and jammed the butt end into a freshly dug hole. Small rocks and dirt were then tamped down solidly around the log until it stood anchored to the earth as if set in stone. This was the last in a rough circle of wooden pillars embedded in the flinty soil. The men stood back a moment, breathing hard, and inspected their handiwork with a critical eye.

One of them, somewhat older than the others, pulled out a filthy bandanna and mopped his brow. "Jest might hold 'em. If we get lucky."

The man next to him squirted a post with tobacco juice. "Who you funnin', Ben? A goddamn grizzle bear with dynamite in both fists couldn't move them logs."

"That a fact? You ever seen a bunch of mustangs when they was spooked?"

"What the sam hill's that got to do with anything? They're just critters. One got four legs, same as a cow."

"Lord God A'mighty! Ain't you in for a s'prise. A mustang ain't no critter, Turk. It's a freak o' nature. Like a blue norther, 'cept it's got legs."

"What a crock! A critter is a critter. Hoss or cow don't make no nevermind."

"Boys, we got about an hour of daylight left. Little less jabber and come dark we might just have ourselves a corral."

The men turned to look at the rawboned youngster who paid their wages. While they were older, and perhaps more experienced, everyone understood who was boss. There was a quiet undercurrent of authority to his words, and when his eyes settled on a man, they seemed to bore right through. It was uncanny, spooky in a weird sort of way—as if he could read the other fellow's mind. Leave him stripped and vulnerable, his secrets a secret no longer.

They knew little or nothing of this youngster with the brush mustache and the cold eyes. He was called Earl Stroud. So far as they could determine, he had neither family nor past. He volunteered nothing, and having looked him over, the men felt no great urge to ask questions. From his speech and manner of dress, they pegged him as a Texan; anything else was pure speculation, and best left that way. Yet there were many things they did know about him, bits and pieces gleaned from observation—a thinly sketched mosaic that told them not all, but perhaps as much as they wanted to know.

Earl Stroud had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of double eagles. After hiring them in Fort Worth, he had outfitted them with extra horses, bought a wagonload of tools and gear, and laid in enough grub to feed a pack of wolves through the winter. He had asked few questions, satisfying himself that they were unmarried, in good health, and acquainted with the quarrelsome nature of cow ponies. In return, he told them he was outfitting a crew to hunt mustangs. The pay was forty a month and food, which was generous, although not unusual, considering the hazards of the job.

But the oddest thing about Earl Stroud, and perhaps the most revealing, was that he evidenced not the slightest fear of being robbed. Not by them—though he had hired them out of saloons and knew nothing of their character—or by anyone else. Among themselves, when Stroud wasn't around, the men estimated his saddlebags contained upward of three thousand dollars. A handsome sum by any yardstick, more than most men earned in a decade of backbreaking toil. Yet his attitude was cool and collected, utterly devoid of concern, as if he couldn't imagine anyone foolish enough to try robbing him. That alone told them much about their boss. The cocksure manner, the pale gray eyes, and the care he lavished on his worn Colt simply rounded out the tale.

Earl Stroud was a man who played for keeps.

All of the men had seen their share of hard cases. In Texas there was no scarcity of the breed. The young man who led them now was cast from a similar mold, and yet there was something different about him. If anything, more deadly. He never raised his voice, nor did he attempt to bully

or browbeat, tactics commonly employed by self-styled bad men. Instead, there was an inner calm about him. That quiet, cocksure certainty was more menacing than a bald-faced threat. It was a warning sign, a simple statement of fact. He was one of those oddities of God's handiwork, a man who had purged himself of fear. Looking into his eyes, they knew that if he were aroused, he would kill. With icy detachment, like an executioner.

Still, as Earl Stroud led them west along the Brazos, they came to like and respect him. Though he was a hard taskmaster, he demanded less of the men than he did of himself. Moreover, he was damned fine company, standoffish at first, but slowly warming as he got to know them. By the time their little column skirted Fort Griffin, which Stroud insisted be done at the crack of dawn, they discovered that he had a dry incisive wit and a natural flair for leadership. His orders were generally in the form of a request, stated in a tone that was at once pleasant and persistently firm. He chose good campsites, was constantly on the scout for Indians, and rotated the men on night watch without a hint of favoritism. Their respect increased manifold when it became apparent that he had permanently assigned himself to the dawn watch. Hostiles were partial to the early morning hours for surprise attack, and every man in the crew knew it to be the most dangerous time. It was still another clue to Stroud's character. But while the men's trust and regard steadily multiplied, they never lost sight of the fact that he was different.

West of Fort Griffin, where the Brazos split, Stroud led them along the Double Mountain Fork. This was virgin country, unknown to white men except for the military and buffalo hunters. These rolling plains were the ancient hunting grounds of the Comanche and Kiowa, abounding with wildlife. A vast, limitless land that swept westward in an emerald sea of grass. The party moved at a snail's pace, for the wagon slowed them considerably, and in a fortnight of travel they sighted not a single human being. In an eerie sort of way, it was as if they had entered another world, where man was the outsider, marching backward in time and space into a land where an older law prevailed. An atavistic law, founded on that most ancient expedient. Survival.

Toward the end of July, near the headwaters of the Double Mountain Fork some hundred miles west of Fort Griffin, Earl Stroud found what he was looking for. A wide expanse of woodland, with cottonwoods along the river and a grove of live oaks stretching southward for a quarter mile. Bordering the shoreline was a natural clearing, with a rocky ford and stunted hills to the north, which would protect it from the chill winter blast of a plains blizzard. He called a halt and announced to the crew that their journey had ended.

Standing there, gazing around the clearing, he knew the spot was made to order. Somehow sensed the rightness of it. Perhaps of greater significance, though he was scarcely the superstitious type, he felt that time and place had joined hands to give him a sign. That morning Earl Stroud had turned twenty-six.

The ensuing month passed quickly, a time of sweat, excruciating labor, and immense progress. Stroud drove himself and the men at a furious pace, working from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. At the head of the list was a project that left the crew more puzzled than ever about this strange young man who had led them into the wilderness. He informed them that two buildings must be erected, a main house and a bunkhouse. Again, the men asked no questions. They felled trees, snaked logs to the clearing, and worked like demons under his relentless urging. Both buildings were completed, including rough-hewn floors and stone fireplaces, within three weeks, although there still remained the moot question of who, besides Stroud, was to occupy the main house.

Afterward, erecting the corral was child's play. Stroud inscribed a circle on the ground, large enough to hold a hundred horses, and the men set about digging post holes. Once more, he drove them like a man possessed, never sharp or ill-tempered, but merely determined to see his vision a reality at last. For every drop of sweat they shed he shed double, and somewhere along the line a strange thing happened. He was still boss, and what he wanted was what he got, but curiously enough, the men came to feel that they were working not so much for him as with him. They had become a team.

Now, as dusk settled over the clearing, they stood back, weary and exhausted, and marveled on the fruit of their labors. Set off away from the river, shaded by tall cottonwoods, was a sturdy, shake-roofed log cabin. It had three rooms with windows overlooking the stream and an oak door four inches thick. Thinking back to the day they had hung that massive slab in the entranceway, the men still weren't sure if Stroud meant to keep somebody on the outside from getting in or somebody on the inside from getting out. With time, they had come to accept these little mysteries as part of Stroud's character—simply another riddle to be dusted off occasionally and inspected as a child would scrutinize an old and treasured toy.

Across the clearing from the cabin, set flush with the tree line, was the bunkhouse. It was large but compactly built, with bunks on one side and the fireplace and a dining area on the other. Behind it, off in the woods, sat the men's pride and joy: a spiffy two-holer. So far as they knew, it was the first outhouse ever erected on the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos—an elegant, if somewhat breezy, contribution to the advancement of civilization.

The corral sat squarely in the middle of the clearing, a short distance from the river. The cross posts were springy young logs, designed to absorb punishment from milling horses without breaking. They had been lashed to the ground posts with wet rawhide, and as the leather dried and shrank, the corral was fused solid, as though girded with steel bands. Looking at it now, the men agreed that Turk Jordan might have been right after all. Nothing short of a cyclone on wheels would bust out of there. Common ordinary horseflesh wouldn't stand a chance.

Bunched in a loose knot, the five men stood there for a long while, recalling a grueling month comprised of aches and sprains and sweat-drenched days. They didn't say much, just nodding and looking; none of them especially felt the need for words. Their creation spoke eloquently for itself. It wasn't fancy, but it was built to last.

Ben Hall finally grunted and flashed a mouthful of brown teeth. "I got a notion Gawd never worked no harder buildin' the world. My bones feel like somebody beat me with a iron switch."

That got a chuckle, and heads bobbed in agreement. Not a man among them had energy left to work up a good spit. There was a moment of silence, as if everybody was waiting, and at last Earl Stroud cleared his throat.

"Gents, you done yourselves proud. I'm beholden."

Looking from one to another, he held each man's gaze for a second and smiled. Then he turned and walked toward the main house. They stared after him, and when he went through the door they still hadn't moved. None of them quite understood why, but his words had touched a nerve.

It was the finest compliment they'd ever been paid.

A week later they came to the escarpment that guarded *Llano Estacado*. Ben Hall was in the lead, for of the five men, he alone had seen the barren land that lay above. It was for this reason Earl Stroud had hired him back in Fort Worth. Twice before he had trapped wild horses on the Staked Plains and returned to tell the tale. Locked in his brain was a map of this uncharted wilderness, their key into and out of a deadly hostile land. Without Ben Hall, or someone like him, venturing onto the high plains was a hazard few men cared to risk.

Late that afternoon they emerged from the steep, winding trail onto the plateau above. They halted to give the horses a breather and the men had their first look at *Llano Estacado*. Ben Hall had talked of little else since departing the Brazos, but nothing he'd said could have prepared them for the sight itself.

The plains stretched endlessly to the horizon, flat and featureless, evoking a sense of something lost forever. A thick mat of mesquite grass

covered the earth, but hardly a tree or a bush was to be seen in the vast emptiness sweeping westward. It was a land of sun and solitude, a lonesome land. As if nature had flung together earth and sky, mixed with deafening silence, and then simply forgotten about it. Nothing moved as far as the eye could see, almost as though in some ancient age the plains had frozen motionless for all time. A gentle breeze, like the wispy breath of a ghost, rippled over the curly mesquite, disturbing nothing. Perhaps more than anything else, it was this silence, without movement or life, that left a man feeling puny and insignificant. A mere speck on the sands of the universe. The Staked Plains did that to men, for in an eerie sense, it was like the solitude of God: distant, somehow unreal, yet faintly ominous.

Farther west, the high plateau was broken by a latticework of wooded canyons, and it was in this direction that Ben Hall led Stroud and his crew. These rocky gorges were all but invisible from a distance; a man sometimes found himself standing on the edge of a sheer precipice where moments before there had been nothing but solitary space. Within these canyons was the breath of life—water—the only known streams in *Llano Estacado*. The men rode west not for water itself, but because it served as a lure. A bait of sorts. It was near these streams that the wild horses roamed.

As they moved deeper into the trackless plains, Earl Stroud had reason to feel pleased with himself. Back in Fort Worth, rather than hiring men at random, he had taken his time and selected with care. Every man in the crew had been chosen for a purpose, and while his judgment was hardly flawless, there was no deadwood among them. The past six weeks had proved a stern test, one that would have scattered lesser men by the wayside. Yet each of them had stuck, pulling his own weight, and by the sheer dint of hardships endured, they had dispelled any lingering doubt. These were tough men, determined and able, seared by wind and sun and time. They would stick to the last.

Ben Hall was perhaps the choice find of the lot. At the end of the war, he had drifted into ranch work and quite soon shown a remarkable gift for the ways of horses. Though lean, he appeared built of gristle and spring steel, and it was a rare bronc that could unseat him. Better still, he had a head on his shoulders and knew how to use it. He was smarter than he let on, and while he wasn't pushy, Stroud observed that he generally got things his own way. That he outfoxed the others without them knowing it made him a prize catch indeed. Horse sense and brains seldom came in the same package.

Clint Langham and Hank Blalock were two of a kind: not too bright, but long on savvy. They understood hooved creatures better than they did men, and most of their lives had been spent aboard a horse. Their legs

looked warped; they were so bowlegged they tended to wobble when they walked. But when they stepped into a saddle, some change came over them. They sat tall and easy, taking on the grace of men who had found their niche astride a spirited cow pony. Moreover, they were magicians with a rope, and it was for this reason that Stroud had hired them. They could flatten a steer with loops that confounded the eye, and in another flick of the wrist have him hog-tied and begging for mercy. Savvy like theirs wasn't a gift so much as an art. It came only with time and unending practice.

The fourth member of the crew, Turk Jordan, was also a specialist of sorts. Short and chunky, built low to the ground, he had catlike reflexes and the strength of a young bull. There were few men his equal at wrestling steers or earring down a spooky horse. Aside from these more apparent traits, however, Jordan had been selected for yet another reason. Earl Stroud had a sixth sense for spotting men who could handle a gun; he suspected Jordan's quickness and sharp reflexes weren't limited to man-handling livestock. Off in the wilderness, where the odds were passable at best, having another fast gun along was something akin to an ace in the hole.

All in all, Stroud felt like a man who had drawn to an inside straight and caught the right card. Watching them, as the little party moved across the high plains, a surge of confidence came over him. He had four good men, each leading an extra mount loaded with supplies, and they were headed into a country where mustangs were thick as blueberries. Suddenly he wanted to laugh, jump up in the air, click his heels. For a man with a price on his head, he had the world on a downhill slide.

A fortnight later, the trap was ready. Stroud and his crew waited in a broad canyon, hidden against the sheer walls along both sides. Ben Hall was closest to the mouth of the canyon, the crucial position. The others were split into pairs and spaced at half-mile intervals across from one another farther down. All of the men had taken great care in concealing themselves behind rocks and in scrub-choked gullies, and now they stood fretful and anxious beside their fastest horses. This was the day, and if they had calculated right, all hell was about to break loose.

Their first herd of mustangs was due any minute now.

This was the hardest part—the waiting. Finding the canyon had been fairly simple, for the grassy floor and the tree-studded creek was alive with hoofprints. After that it was a matter of Ben Hall bird-dogging the herd and determining from their movements the best place to construct a trap.

Less than a week was needed to sniff out the mustangs' grazing habits. Tagging along behind them, he found that this herd was much like all

bands of wild horses. They browsed over a wide expanse of the high plains, always drifting into the wind, and covered about twenty miles in four days. What made it interesting was that it was always the same twenty miles. The herd moved in a set pattern, roughly an elongated circle, which ultimately brought them back to their starting point. They stopped once a day to water, mostly at remote, pan-shaped basins on the plateau. But every fourth day, a couple of hours before sundown, they watered in the canyon. Warily, they then returned to the plains along about dusk and spent the night in the safety of open spaces.

Hall trailed them for six nights and five days before he was certain of the pattern. Then he rode back to camp with the news. Their grazing habits were regular as clockwork, and just as predictable. With any luck at all, they could be trapped in the canyon like a herd of sheep.

Stroud listened, asked an endless stream of questions, and followed Hall's advice to the letter. The men worked three days out of four, avoiding the canyon completely on the day the herd came there to water. This was part of the plan laid out by Hall, and it was based in no small part on the cunning of the dun stallion that ruled the herd.

Sleek and barrel-chested, the stallion was heavily scarred from a lifetime of fighting wolves and doing battle with young studs who tried to steal his harem. It was a full-time job, for the herd contained close to thirty mares, half again as many colts, and several yearlings. But the stallion was equal to the task. His strength and ferocity in a fight were balanced by the wisdom of age and constant vigilance. He suspected anything that moved, and at the first sign of danger sent the herd flying with iron-jawed nips and whistling squeals of outrage. If the herd was to be captured, it was the stallion who must be outwitted. Under Ben Hall's directions, Stroud and his crew set about accomplishing that very thing.

The trap itself was a simple affair, constructed along the lines of a funnel, but it was hellishly difficult to disguise. Since this was not a box canyon—the stallion would never water in a place that lacked an alternate means of escape—it was necessary to build two corrals where the sheer walls squeezed down to a narrow gorge. Built back to back, with a gate in between, the first was a catch corral, and the second was a larger holding pen to contain horses already caught. The next step was by far the hardest. After cutting posts, the men constructed a half-mile-long fence on either side of the canyon. The fence fanned out from the corral entrance in a V shape, with the broad mouth facing the upper end of the canyon floor. If it worked, the herd would be tricked into the open throat of the funnel, then hazed down the narrowing fence and driven into the corral.

With everything completed, the men came to the canyon before dawn on

the eighth day and worked like demons cutting green junipers. These were used to hide the fences and corral, giving the trap a natural appearance. Once it was done, the men brushed their tracks from the canyon floor, erasing all human signs, and concealed themselves in the positions designated earlier by Ben Hall.

And now they waited. Deep shadows had already fallen over the canyon's westerly wall and sundown was but an hour away. The men began to sweat, despite a cool breeze, and their apprehension mounted as the fleeting sun dropped lower in the sky. Never before had the mustangs been this late. Unless they came to water soon it meant they weren't coming at all. Not tonight. Perhaps never again.

Then, quite suddenly, the herd appeared. One moment the mouth of the canyon stood empty and in the next, like some ghostly apparition, the mustangs simply materialized. A barren old mare, the herd sentinel, was in the lead. She came on at a stiff-legged walk, ears cocked warily, eyeing the canyon for anything out of the ordinary. At last, satisfied, she broke into a trot and led the herd toward the creek.

These wild horses were a sturdy breed, high in the withers and long in the shoulders, with a wide forehead, small ears, and a tapered muzzle. They had the spirit of their noble ancestors, the Barbs, and from generations of battling both the elements and predators, they possessed an almost supernatural endurance. Honed by adversity to a single purpose—survival—they were the freest of all the earth's creatures. In motion, swallowing the wind, they could gallop to the edge of eternity and back again.

Behind the herd, the dun stallion came on at a prancing walk. Larger than the others, heavily muscled, he moved with the pride of power and lordship. Yet he was skittish as ever, nervously testing the wind, scanning the canyon floor with a fierce eye that missed not a rock or a blade of grass. He would water only at the very last, when the herd had taken its fill. Until then, protector as much as ruler, he would remain watchful and on guard, alert to any sign of danger.

Halfway between the canyon entrance and the creek, the stallion suddenly stiffened and whirled back. A vagrant breeze had shifted and with it came the most dreaded scent of all. The man scent. Pawing at the earth, nostrils flared wide, he arched his neck to sound the whistling snort of alarm.

Ben Hall shot him at that exact instant.

As the stallion went down, fighting death as he had fought life, Hall charged the herd. Instinctively, they wheeled away from the creek, prepared for flight. But their leader was down, legs jerking in death, and this strange new creature barreled toward them. It uttered the blood-curdling

scream of a cougar, and in its hand was an object that flashed fire and roared like thunder. Without their leader to command them, crazed with fright, the herd broke before Hall's charge and bolted down the canyon in a clattering lope.

The mustangs had gone only a short distance when other strange creatures came at them from either flank, screaming and firing guns. Their pace quickened, and tails streaming in the wind, the herd took off in headlong flight. Then, out of nowhere, two more riders appeared, forcing the herd straight down the middle of the canyon. Terrified, racing blindly in a thunderous wedge, the mustangs entered the juniper-lined funnel without breaking stride. The men on horseback stuck tightly to their flanks, hazing them onward with shouts and gunshots. Suddenly the funnel squeezed down to nothing, the only escape a narrow opening dead ahead.

Never faltering, the herd blasted through the corral entrance at a full gallop. The barren old mare and a yearling hit the far wall with a shuddering impact and toppled over backward, their necks broken. The rest of the herd slid to a dust-smothered halt, confused, then turned and started to retreat the way they had come. But the men were there, sliding long poles across the opening, and suddenly there was no escape. The mustangs milled about, wild-eyed and squealing, slamming against the corral at several spots. They tested the fence cautiously, though, with respect. For they had seen what happened to the old mare, and it was lesson enough. Slowly their panic faded and they huddled together in the center of the corral, trembling and frightened, staring watchfully at the creatures who had captured them.

The men were shouting and laughing and slapping one another across the back. Langham and Jordan even linked arms and danced a mad jig. But like the mustangs, their excitement slowly drained away. Instead, the hoots and laughter became a stilled amazement. Gathered before the corral gate, they just stood there, staring back at the horses. Somehow it wasn't yet believable, but what they saw was no mirage. They had actually done it: trapped themselves a herd of woolly-booger mustangs.

Ben Hall was flashing a wide grin, proud as a peacock, and he finally got around to shaking hands with the boss. "Lordy me, but ain't they a sight? Nothin' Gawd ever made that's prettier'n a wild horse."

"I guess not." Stroud smiled, but his eyes were thoughtful, somehow distant. "Sorry you had to kill that stallion. I was hopin' to get a good stud horse for breedin'."

"Weren't no other way." Hall met his gaze and held it. "The devil caught my scent, and he was fixin' to take 'em outta here lickety-split."

"You did what you had to. I know that, Ben. Guess I was just wishin' out loud."

"Well, bossman, you done got your wish." Hall dazzled him with a mouthful of brown teeth and gestured toward the corral. "Case you ain't had a gander, there's a couple of studs in there pushin' two years. And if I'm any judge, they got their daddy's blood in 'em."

Stroud studied the milling herd for a long while, sorting them in his mind. The studs were there right enough, a matched pair. In another year a man would be hard put to tell them from their sire. Of more immediate consequence, there were better than twenty head that could be sold off this year. His inspection finished, Stroud turned back and the corners of his mustache lifted in a wry smile.

"Ben, how long you reckon it'll take us to catch the next herd?"

A tangle of arms and legs, breathing hard, they slowly came apart. Laura sat up, straightening her skirts, and patted a stray lock back in place. Then she came into his arms again, suddenly reluctant to have it end so quickly. They didn't say anything for a while, just sat there underneath the oak hugging and kissing, listening to the katydids serenade the night. But the stillness gradually fanned her curiosity, and when she could bear it no longer, she pushed him away.

"Now that's enough! You promised to tell me and so far you haven't done anything but muss me up something awful."

"I don't recollect you puttin' up much of a fight."

"Honestly, Sam—you're incorrigible! That's what you are. A wicked, naughty boy. Now, are you going to tell me or not?"

He smiled. "Well, first off, you've got the right fella but the wrong name. Figured if I was gonna have a new life I might as well have a new handle. Picked one out of a hat and came up with Earl Stroud."

"*Earl Stroud?*" Laura blurted the name, astonished and not a little mystified. Then she paused, repeating it several times to herself. At last, her cheeks dimpled in a smile and she gave his hand a big squeeze. "Oh, I like it! It's so dignified and—well, I don't know, almost like a banker's name."

"That's where I got it!" He let go a burst of laughter. "Off a bank window in Fort Worth."

"You didn't rob the bank!"

"Course not. I just borrowed the name."

"But I don't understand, Sam. Why did—"

"Just for openers, you better get used to callin' me Earl."

"Oh, fiddlesticks. Stop playing silly games and tell me where you've been for the last three months."

"I'm not playin' silly games. That's my name now. And where I've been is catchin' a bunch of wild horses."

She stared at him, thunderstruck, and repeated it in a tiny voice. "Wild horses. You mean real honest-to-goodness wild horses?"

"Yep. Hired myself a crew of men and went pretty near to the headwaters of the Brazos before I found the spot I was lookin' for." He hesitated and gave her an earnest look. "Built a humdinger of a cabin. Got a parlor with a fireplace, and a bedroom and a kitchen. Real fancy." Then before she had time to interrupt, he went on. "Anyway, me and the boys took a little sashay out to the Staked Plains and when we come back we had ourselves close to two hundred head of mustangs. You're lookin' at a man of means, case you didn't know it. All honest and aboveboard, too."

"But I still don't understand." Her face crinkled in an exasperated little frown. "What earthly good are wild horses?"

"Money, woman. Money!" He cupped her face between his hands. "We're gonna break them horses and teach 'em some manners, and come fall, I figure to make myself about four thousand dollars."

Laura was visibly startled. That was almost as much as her father made in a year. And his was the most successful store in Denton.

"That's wonderful, Sam. But how long can you go on catching wild horses? I mean, it's dangerous work, and surely it couldn't be too steady."

"The name's Earl. And don't you worry your head about wild horses. I don't plan on being a mustanger much longer. Just till we can get a herd of brood mares built up and start ourselves a real ranch."

"You mean it? You're going to be a rancher?"

"God A'mighty, haven't you been listenin' to a word I said? Why do you think I went to the trouble of buildin' a cabin and a bunkhouse and a corral? And near busted my back catchin' all them horses?"

Suddenly Laura was listening, very intently, and she understood at last. She fluttered her eyelashes and prompted him with a coy smile. "Tell me—Mr. Stroud—why did you do all those things?"

"'Cause I figured it was time I made an honest woman of you." He cocked one eyebrow in a mock scowl. "Unless you couldn't abide folks callin' you Mrs. Stroud."

She laughed and clapped her hands like an exuberant child. "Oh, I could! Honestly, I could. I just don't care anymore, Sam. Just so long as we're together."

"*Earl*, dammit! Honey, you gotta get used to that. The name's Earl."

"I'll remember, I promise." She threw her arms around his neck and embraced him fiercely. "I wouldn't care if your name was Judas Iscariot. Just so we can get married."

Oscar Belden hardly shared his daughter's sentiments. In fact, he was livid with rage. He had hoped that, with time, she would outgrow her infatuation. Failing that, he had every confidence the boy would get himself killed before too long. Either way, the Belden family would be shed of their own personal albatross and his daughter would again return to her senses.

When the youngsters swept into the parlor with the news that they were to be married that very night, he was at first speechless. Then he went red as ox blood and began shouting. They stood there smiling at one another, arm in arm, as if he were some spoiled brat throwing a temper tantrum. Only by imposing an iron will was he able to calm himself. If anger wouldn't work, perhaps reason would. Facing them now, he took a grip on his rage and reversed tactics.

"Think for a minute, both of you. What kind of a life could you have together? Always running and hiding, never knowing when the law will kick down your door in the dead of night. That's not what you want for Laura, now is it, Sam?"

Laura countered with a fetching smile. "Mercy sakes alive, Daddy! You're just working yourself up for nothing. It's already settled. We have a ranch and a herd of horses and there won't be any more trouble with the law."

"But you can't know that for sure." The storekeeper was sweating freely now. "Why couldn't you wait a while? A year, even six months. Give yourselves a little time. If you really love each other, a few more months won't make any difference. Now will it?"

That was his best shot, the irrefutable logic used by fathers since Biblical times. But when he saw the look on their faces, Oscar Belden knew he was licked. His last-ditch effort had just shattered to smithereens against a stone wall.

"Daddy," Laura said sweetly, "will you call the preacher over, or do you want us to run off and live in sin?"

Reverend Virgil Pryor opened the good book and blinked sleep from his eyes. This whole affair seemed a trifle unorthodox and he had a strong hunch the Belden girl was in a family way. If not, then he was going to be strongly indignant with Oscar Belden for rousing him at this ungodly hour. Barring a shotgun wedding or sudden illness, there was very little that couldn't await the light of day. The Lord hadn't said it just exactly that way, but Virgil Pryor felt sure He would agree.

Still, the youngsters did make a handsome couple. And from the looks of her folks, it was entirely possible the girl was in a family way. Oscar Belden

looked mad enough to chew nails, and his wife had reduced her handkerchief to a sodden ball. The preacher sighed wearily and in a resigned monotone began the service.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together to join this man and this woman in holy wedlock—”

Langham and Blalock roped the horses selected by Ben Hall and dragged them fighting and kicking out of the corral. These were the mustangs the professor had picked to work on that particular day. Half of them were raw and untried, yet to feel a saddle or the weight of a man on their backs. The others were about half-broke, having been ridden and accustomed to a bridle, but they were still in school. As Hall had commented, they had a ways to go before earning a diploma from his bronc-bustin’ academy.

The day’s pupils were hauled down near the river and tethered to trees. Then the rest of the herd was driven from the corral and hazed through the ford to a lush grassland on the north side of the stream. There they could graze and water throughout the day, and toward sundown they would be driven back to the corral. Hank Blalock was left to keep an eye on them, just in case some hammerhead took a notion to quit the bunch and head back to the wide-open spaces.

There was only a slim chance of this happening, though. The mustangs had learned that a bunch quitter quickly came upon hard times. Shortly after being captured on the Staked Plains, each of the horses had been roped and thrown to the ground. When released, the horse discovered that one of its front feet had been tied to its tail with a piece of rope. It was a practical device that kept the mustangs from running, and after they had dumped themselves a couple of times, they simply gave up trying. The men drove them out of the canyon and trailed them for two days in this manner. Afterward, with the ropes removed, the mustangs behaved themselves. They could be herded any way the men wanted them to move, and few of them needed a second dose. Another day roped foot-to-tail convinced even the most stubborn of the lot that it was better to stick with the bunch.

With the herd grazing peacefully now, the work day began. Clint Langham brought one of the tethered horses back from the river and released it in the corral. This was a raw bronc, a big rangy buckskin, and it looked to be a lively session. Langham hitched his own horse outside the corral and stepped down with a lariat in his hand. Stroud, along with Hall and Jordan, awaited him at the gate, and they all four entered the corral at once. This was a job they had been at steadily for the past three weeks and

there was little lost motion in their actions. Like a freshly oiled machine, with all the parts functioning properly, they worked well together.

The buckskin started racing around the far side of the corral as they fanned out and walked forward. Suddenly Langham's arm moved and the lariat snaked out, catching the mustang's front legs in a loop just as its hooves left the ground. Langham hauled back, setting his weight into the rope, and the horse went down with a jarring thud. Working smoothly, every man to his own job, the other three swarmed over the buckskin in a cloud of dust and flailing arms.

Jordan wrapped himself around the horse's neck, grabbing an ear in each hand, and jerked it back to earth just as it started to rise. Almost at the same instant, Stroud darted in with a length of braided rawhide and lashed the animal's back legs tight. While Jordan kept the horse eared down, Hall slipped a hackamore over its head and Stroud clamped hobbles around its front legs. Pushing and tugging, sometimes rolling the horse up on its withers, Hall and Stroud then managed to cinch a center-fire saddle in place. As Hall jerked the latigo taut, Stroud eased forward and tied a blindfold around the mustang's eyes.

The entire operation had taken less than a minute.

Quickly, the ropes were removed from the buckskin's legs and it was allowed to regain its feet. Blinded and dazed, still winded from the fall, the horse stood absolutely motionless. The hobbles around its front legs kept it from rearing or jumping away, and the blindfold calmed it into a numbed stupor. However unwilling, the bronc was ready for its first lesson.

Langham and Stroud backed off and scrambled over the fence just as Laura walked down from the house. She couldn't bear to watch as the mustangs were thrown and tied—although she readily admitted that it was the most practical means of strapping a saddle on a wild horse—but she loved to watch the bucking. Langham touched his hat, grinning like a possum, and Laura gave him a winsome smile.

The sight of her was a constant source of agony to the men, for until Stroud showed up with his new bride, they hadn't seen a woman in close to four months. The dresses she wore were simple gingham affairs, not meant to be suggestive, but they fit snugly across her tightly rounded buttocks and her fruity breasts. There was considerable moaning in the bunkhouse late at night, but the men treated her like a fairy princess come to life. Though unspoken, there was general accord that it was better to look and not touch than to have nothing at all to look at. They suffered in quiet agony.

Standing between her husband and Langham, Laura felt her pulse quicken. Jordan had just handed the reins to Ben Hall and retreated back

to the fence. Hall tugged his hat down tight and scrambled aboard the mustang. Whenever he mounted, no matter how many times Laura watched, she was always reminded of a monkey leaping nimbly to the back of a circus pony. One moment Hall was just standing there, and in the blink of an eye, as if springs had uncoiled in his legs, he was seated firmly in the saddle.

Leaning forward, Hall jerked the blindfold loose and let it fall to the ground. For perhaps ten seconds the buckskin remained perfectly still. The broncbuster sat loose and easy, just waiting, his lips skinned back in a faint smile. Then he moved his foot, and in the breathless quiet of the corral, the jingle-bobs on his spurs gave off the thunderous chime of cathedral bells.

The buckskin exploded at both ends, like a firecracker bursting within itself. All four feet left the ground as the horse bowed its back and in the next instant came unglued in a bone-jarring snap. Then it swapped ends in midair and sunfished across the corral in a series of bounding, catlike leaps. Hall was all over the horse, bouncing from one side to the other, never twice in the same spot. Veering away from the fence, the bronc whirled and kicked, slamming the man front to rear in the saddle, and sent his hat spinning skyward in a lazy arc.

Hall gave a whooping shout, and in the middle of a jump, decided it was time they got down to serious business. Lifting his boots high, he raked hard across the shoulders with his spurs, and the spiked rowels whirred like a buzz saw. The buckskin roared a great squeal of outrage, and this time went off like a ton of dynamite with a short fuse.

Leaping straight up in the air, the bronc swallowed its head and humped its back, popping Hall's neck with the searing crack of a bullwhip. A moment later it hit on all four feet with a jolt that shook the earth. Then the horse went berserk. As if willing to commit suicide in order to kill the man, it erupted in a pounding beeline toward the corral fence. Hall saw it coming and effortlessly swung out of the saddle at the exact instant the mustang collided with the springy cross timbers. Staggered, the horse buckled at the knees and fell back on its rump. Like a drunk man, it just sat there for several moments, shaking its head and making pitiful little grunts.

Hall casually stepped back into the saddle as the mustang regained its feet, then he rammed his spurs clean up to the haft. This time there was less rage and less fight, ending in a series of stiff-legged crowhops that lacked punch. Hall hauled back on the hackamore for the first time, shutting off the horse's wind, and reined it around the corral in a simple turning maneuver. At last, he eased to a halt and climbed down out of the

saddle. The buckskin stood where he left it, head bowed and sides heaving as it gasped for air.

Hall retrieved his hat and dusted it off. Jamming it on his head, he walked toward the grinning foursome gathered outside the corral.

"That's gonna be a good hoss." He smiled and jerked his thumb back at the spent mustang. "Got plenty of starch."

"He don't look so starchy now," Turk Jordan cackled. "Looks like somebody twisted all the kinks out of his tail."

"Aw, he's jest restin'. Figgerin' what he's gonna do next time. Course, I'd bet a heap he don't run into that fence no more."

Earl Stroud laughed and squeezed Laura around the waist. She had never seen him in such good spirits. Nor had the men. They talked of it often in the bunkhouse. Since the lady had come to stay, and Ben Hall started busting broncs, the grim-eyed youngster was a changed man. Like night and day.

That evening the young couple came to sit on the front step of their cabin. The sweet coolness of night had fallen over the land and they could hear the crickets warming up along the riverbank. There was a serenity about this place, something they both felt, almost as if there had never been another life except the one they shared here on the Brazos. Thinking about it now, Laura felt warm and giddy inside. These were the happiest days she had ever known. And she need look no farther for the reason than the man seated beside her.

"Penny for your thoughts."

His words jarred her reverie. She snuggled closer, burrowing deep into the hollow of his arm, and smiled. "I'm not sure I should tell you."

"Keepin' secrets on me?"

"No, but your head might swell up and bust."

He chuckled and gave her a bearish squeeze. "Try me. Can't hardly be no worse'n it already is."

"I was just thinking how proud you make me. That it was you who built all this. The cabin and the horse herd and everything. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure it's all real."

"Well, I had some help, y'know. It wasn't like I walked in here with an ax and a mouthful of nails and slapped it together all by myself."

"You're a paragon of modesty, Mr. Stroud." Her voice had a teasing lilt. "I wouldn't be surprised but what you're blushing."

"Nope, I clean forgot how. Been too busy buildin' empires."

"See, I told you. It went straight to your head."

"Judas Priest, can't a fella speak the truth in his own house?"

"Oh, you really are vain, Sam Ba—" She clamped a hand over her

mouth and giggled softly. "I mean, Mr. Stroud. But it's still true. You're the vainest man I ever met."

"Caught you, didn't I? Any man that done that has got reason to be proud."

She laughed a deep, throaty laugh. "Maybe you don't catch me enough."

He considered it a moment and she could tell he was smiling. Then he chuckled. "I think you got somethin' there. What d'you say we hit the hay early tonight?"

"Mr. Stroud, I thought you'd never ask."

Since they were of a mind, there seemed no reason for further talk. They stood and he lifted her over the step and set her on the floor inside the cabin. As he swung the massive oak door closed and barred it, she crossed the parlor and blew out the lamp. Then she laughed that laugh again, and he heard the rustle of her skirts as she headed toward the bedroom.

Curiously, he had no trouble finding her in the dark.

* * * * *

Wise men and poets often remark that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Perhaps it's true. A woman's love—even a ranch on the Brazos—sometimes isn't enough. Every man casts a shadow on his own personal road to hell; however far he runs, it's always there, a step behind, waiting for him to falter.

On July 19, 1878, a gang of bank robbers rode into a little town called Round Rock. Texas Rangers were waiting for them, and several men were killed in the ensuing shootout. The young outlaw leader, although mortally wounded, escaped on a fleet mustang gelding. He died two days later, July 21, his twenty-seventh birthday.

His name was Sam Bass.

Fred Grove

The Mystery Dogs

He lay slumped against the rocky wall, sweat runneling his slim brown body, naked to the waist, his heart laboring heavily, his legs and arms strengthless. He ran a hand through his straight black hair, now cropped short, and gazed about him. In the fitful light of the torches, he could see the forms of his young Navajo friends, like him, becoming weaker day by day, some already unable to stand. Soon they would all die in this dark hole where they dug out the shiny metal for the Hairy Ones. Then others would take their places, and others after them.

He dozed. Hardly had he begun to rest, it seemed, when he heard the harsh voice of a Hairy One ordering them up. The voice drew nearer. He heard the snap of a whip and the unwilling stir of bare feet. He saw his friends struggling to rise; some could not. He watched in growing despair.

Of a sudden his smoldering defiance burst through. He did not rise, even when he saw his captor moving upon him. This white-skinned man had hair on the backs of his hands, under his long nose and on his chin and cheeks like the fur of an animal, so thick that his narrowed eyes seemed to glint behind vines, and his mouth was like the den of a beaver overhung with roots. These Hairy Ones also imprisoned their bodies in heavy clothing. There was an odor about them that nauseated a Navajo. Although no stronger than drying hides and other camp odors, the smell was strange and discernible this moment, despite the bad air in the tunnel.

He tensed but kept his face inscrutable as the Hairy One said, "Get up, Roberto."

"My name is Hosteen." His words came awkwardly in the alien tongue he was learning, the tongue he detested.

"On your feet. Remember, you are a slave and a heathen."

Hosteen, not rising, continued to stare at the muscular figure towering over him, the whip dangling like a long black snake.

"I am a Navajo. My name is Hosteen."

"Heathen! Your name is Roberto."

"Hosteen."

It struck him then as he knew it would, quickly and powerfully, as it had before when a slave lagged, the whip slashing his naked legs, now his arms and shoulders. He took each blow without expression, refusing to show pain before an enemy, while inside him he cried out. He heard the voice again:

"If I punish you much more, you cannot work. Say your name is Roberto and get up."

"Hosteen," he breathed. "My name is Hosteen."

Again the rain of pain. Just when he was about to cry out, it ceased. He sank back. The arm-weary Hairy One was turning away to herd the others to their work.

Hosteen swayed up and fell into line, a grim awareness coming over him. Another beating like that and he would not rise to see another day. He must try to think. One must be brave, but not foolish brave.

Trailing back into the dimly lit tunnel, he chose a pick and began digging and filling the stout sacks. His hands bled. Dust filled his nose and throat and filmed his eyes. He coughed. All around him there was coughing. And before him, like a sweet dream, rose the wind-swept red rock country where he was born, far to the north, bright and high and clean. Would he ever see it again? He feared not.

A nearby clattering broke his musing. He turned. A boy lay face down across the handle of his pick. Hosteen knelt and lifted the boy over on his back and touched his slack face, seeing the glazed eyes. He stood, eyes smarting tears, as the boy was hauled away by his heels.

Afterward, with the others, Hosteen strained at the lumpy sacks and fell to dragging and carrying them to the entrance of the tunnel, then down the mountain to the high-wheeled *carretas*. Here, for a few moments before he was shouted and lashed back up to the tunnel, he always rested his fascinated eyes on the "Mystery Dogs" inside the log corral. That name, which the Navajos had given these four-legged creatures because they were burden bearers and carried people on their backs, did not fit them somehow, for they were too beautiful and did not look like dogs.

He had seen them first when many Hairy Ones raided Hosteen's tribe and took only young captives, slaying the elders. On the long walk down the Rio Grande to this stony mountain he had constantly observed the Mystery Dogs, which the Hairy Ones called *caballos*, and which the Navajos were not allowed to go near. Astride their *caballos*, the Hairy Ones had come like gods and left in evil.

"Stay away," Hosteen was warned. "Don't touch the *caballos*. *Caballos* eat heathens."

Terrified, he had obeyed. And yet, he asked himself many times, why did not the beautiful *caballos* also eat the Hairy Ones, since they were like the Navajos except for the paleness of their skins and the furry hair on their bodies? It was strange. It challenged his reasoning.

Hosteen also noticed that his captors handled these mystery creatures with great care on the trail, feeding them corn and staking them at night to eat the sparse grass, and leading them to water several times each day, and brushing their smooth skins, which glistened in the sun, and combing their glossy manes. And when the Hairy Ones wished to ride, they placed a thing of leather pieces sewn together on the creatures' heads and a straight thing in their mouths and controlled them by pulling on long leather reins attached to the straight thing. And on the creatures' backs the Hairy Ones placed a blanket and on top of that a horned thing of leather which made a seat. How lazy his captors were to ride! How puzzling it all was!

His mind whirled. Could it be that these beautiful beings were the Hairy Ones' secret medicine or power, more powerful than the medicine sticks his captors possessed, which made noise and smoke and hurled tiny objects that killed Navajos? Indeed, everything the invaders did was strange and destructive.

Straining, his body streaming sweat, hacking for wind, Hosteen helped lift the last sack into a *carreta* and stepped back, his eyes fixing on the corral, searching for the *caballo* he had seen yesterday for the first time. His throat caught. There it was now, curiously watching among its fellow creatures, its wide nostrils flaring. He caught their pungent smell. He liked it.

He stared in awe, momentarily lost to his surroundings. This *caballo's* skin was as red as the Navajo sun and a broad streak as white as snow ran the length of the proud face. How beautiful! How swift! For he had seen the *caballos* run. His spirits lifted higher. If only he might possess such a wonderful creature, if only he dared touch one and not be eaten alive. Still, why would a being with eyes so intelligent and brave, so warm and gentle, devour a helpless Navajo boy and not the evil Hairy Ones? He yearned to know the truth.

As he stared, a Hairy One ordered the Navajos back to the tunnel. Hosteen lingered a moment longer. Instantly a whip lashed his shoulders. He turned and followed his tribesmen, conscious of an unlooked-for strength. Somehow the whip didn't hurt so much now. Had the red *caballo*, which he decided he would not think of again as an undignified dog of burden, working in its mysterious way, made him braver? Perhaps he could ride the *caballo* to freedom. The moment the bold thought sprang to his mind he shrank from it, stiff with fear.

When he staggered into the sunlight again to start loading, there was a

noisy commotion in the camp of the Hairy Ones, a rushing about. Looking off to the south, he saw a line of bobbing *carretas* and many four-footed creatures bearing packs, the braying ones with long ears that did not approach the beauty of the proud Mystery Dogs. Watching, Hosteen remembered. One moon ago he had seen such an arrival. Tonight, he knew, the Hairy Ones would drink much crazy water and shout and sing and fight among themselves until it was time for Grandfather the Sun to leave his robes and look upon the world.

Twice during the long afternoon Hosteen saw boys drop in their tracks and be dragged away. That evening, as he ate the watery corn gruel which the Hairy Ones fed them like dogs, a somber realization crowded his mind. He could not endure much longer. He must try to escape. He must be brave. Better to die under the open sky, eaten by a beautiful red *caballo*, than here in the darkness of a foul cave.

Presently, two guards entered to tie the slaves for the night, weaving and talking boisterously as they went from boy to boy, binding their wrists behind them and then their feet with leather thongs.

"Why tie them," the first Hairy One asked, "when they are too weak to run away?" His laughter spilled. He gave an enormous belch and reeled against the wall.

"Because," said the other, drawing himself up stiffly, "our illustrious *comandante* so orders. It is our sacred duty to save these heathens from their savage ways."

"Their wrists are as thin as reeds."

"Tie them anyway."

"Save them, it shall be." Attempting to deliver a mocking salute, the first Hairy One lost balance and fell backward. His companion roared with laughter.

When the captor came to him, Hosteen smelled the sourness of crazy water like a further taint on the fetid air.

"Because of your heathen stubbornness today," the guard said, "I will double-tie you tonight."

Hosteen was dismayed. He hadn't expected this.

After the guards left, taking the torches, the tunnel was still save for the coughing and an occasional low moan. Now and then, faintly, Hosteen caught shouts and snatches of song from the camp. Tonight, he thought. If I do not escape tonight when the Hairy Ones are full of crazy water, I will not be alive when the supply carts come again in another moon.

Twisting about, he felt along the wall behind him for a cutting rock. There was none. Struggling to his feet, he felt higher and to each side. There was none. Now he worked at his rawhide bonds, hoping to slip his

wrists free. He could not. Instead, the rough leather seemed to bind him tighter, and in his squirming he knocked over his water gourd.

Next, he scooted forward and with hands and feet searched clumsily for a sharp rock on the tunnel floor. It was deep in rubble and dust. He found nothing. Weakness overcame him. He lay there for a while. Worming back, he groped for his water gourd. It wasn't there. He had lost his bearings in the darkness. When morning came and he wasn't in his place, the guard would whip him again. He sagged against the wall to rest.

Something dug into his back. Something sharp.

He turned with new strength, feeling for the jagged edge of the rock, and began sawing his wrists back and forth.

A long time later his raw arms dropped free. He sank to the floor, spent. But in moments he was untying his ankles and jerking up and freeing the nearest slave.

"Listen to my words," Hosteen said when they were all around him. "There is only the guard between us and freedom. I will take him. Then we will ride away on the *caballos*."

"No—no!" He could feel their fear, their shrinking back. "The Mystery Dogs will eat us. You know what the Hairy Ones say."

"I have not seen this thing happen. Why do they not eat the Hairy Ones if they like human flesh?"

"We are afraid, Hosteen. We will walk."

"And the Hairy Ones will catch you on the *caballos*. Well, come. You will need your water gourds if you are going to walk."

As he slipped toward the mouth of the tunnel and saw the first dull glow of light, the voices from the camp sounded stronger. With the yelling and singing was a rapid, string-like music not unpleasant to his primitive ears.

He stopped. There was no one at the entrance. But he could not believe the Hairy Ones would leave the slaves unguarded. He moved to the opening, then froze at a whistling sound.

The guard lay on his back, snoring steadily, deeply. Crazy water smell was strong. Hosteen stiffened as the guard mumbled and stirred. Another moment and the snoring resumed, rising and falling. Hosteen relaxed.

Stepping back, he led his young tribesmen out and down the trail, past the noisy, torch-lit camp at the foot of the mountain, and onward to the clutter of *carretas* loaded that day. Just beyond rose the corral. From here a valley beckoned toward the north. He paused to draw in the sweet-smelling air.

"The Mystery Dogs will eat you," someone said. "Come with us, Hosteen."

He did not quite understand himself. It was strange and compelling. He said, "I must find out about this thing. Go on."

He watched them hurry away, becoming smaller and smaller in the moonlight until their small figures dissolved. A sense of loneliness stabbed him. Would he live to see them again?

His heart leaped faster as he turned and approached the corral. The warm pungency of the *caballos* sent excitement racing through him. He had covered but a few steps when he heard snorts and a ruffle of hoofs. Although he had made no sound, the four-footed beings had discovered him. Did they fear him, a mere boy? Or were they hungry? He was both puzzled and frightened.

He had seen the low house near the corral where the Hairy Ones kept the leather things that went over the *caballos'* heads, and the ropes and blankets, and the horned leather seats that went on the *caballos'* backs. Entering, he took one of the leather things and examined it closely. The attached straight thing, which he remembered went between the *caballos'* teeth, was as hard as rock.

Now, going outside, he called on all his courage and slipped between the bars of the gate and stood motionless. Would the *caballos* rush upon him with teeth bared?

To his relief they trotted to the far end of the corral and swung about, trampling and snorting. How beautiful under the golden light! For a moment his fear left him. One head stood out. The white-blazed face of the red *caballo*. Hosteen stared, entranced. Did he dare touch this most mysterious and powerful of all creatures? For to touch an enemy was the bravest feat of all.

He did not remember stepping forward, but he was, drifting, as silent as smoke. He was some ten steps away when they milled and trotted off. He froze. And an insight came to him: Was it his smell that made them turn away? Did they fear him? But why, when they were the powerful eaters of human flesh?

He became stone still, for so long that the *caballos* seemed to lose interest in him; some strayed from the bunch. He began a slow drift again toward the blaze-faced *caballo*, pausing at longer intervals. The creature was blowing softly through its wide nostrils, watching him, more curious than afraid.

By now Hosteen was quite close. He extended his hand, though he never remembered lifting it, toward the quivering nose. He took another careful step, fascinated by the beauty he saw so near, the large eyes more luminous and soft by moonlight. One more step and he would touch this fearsome Mystery One. He was trembling. He had no breath.

With a suspicious snort, the red *caballo* bolted away. And suddenly all of them were running around the corral.

Hosteen glanced in alarm toward the camp. Had the Hairy Ones heard? He listened. As the *caballos* quit circling, he picked up the unbroken strains of stringy music and the hum of voices.

Once more he stalked. Once more he stood close. Only this time as he reached out a trembling hand, he murmured softly:

“O *caballo*, you are beautiful and strong. As red as Grandfather the Sun. As swift as the great wind. You are not a dog. Now I tell you this thing: I would rather you ate me here than die in the Hairy Ones’ dark hole. If you must do this bad thing which the Hairy Ones say, do it now. I am afraid, but I am ready to die brave like a Navajo.”

Little by little, he stretched forth his hand. Would the dreaded moment come when he touched the nose? He felt dwarfed as he sensed the creature’s enormous strength. Its pungency, strange yet warm, flowed over him, making him even weaker.

He felt the tip of his forefinger graze the nose; to his surprise it was sensitive and also warm. Now he touched the nose with his hand, while his mind spun. Why didn’t the creature open its mouth and devour him? Still, he did not draw away, letting the creature breathe his Navajo smell. A shudder ran through him as he felt the lips move.

But nothing happened. He felt no pain.

Emboldened, he stroked the white blaze while murmuring all the while. Breathless, he very gradually brought up the leather thing and held the straight, rocklike thing against the *caballo*’s mouth. It opened and when he glimpsed the great, even rows of teeth, his fear jumped again. But when he slid the straight thing against the teeth, they parted and did not bite and, quickly, he drew the leather thing over the short ears as he had watched the Hairy Ones do.

He was bathed in cold sweat as he stood back, holding the reins. Would the *caballo* follow him out of the corral? Would it eat him when he attempted to ride? Or would it devour him now, when he turned his back? He did so, feeling the tingling up his spine, and pulled on the reins and marveled when the other followed him obediently. I am not fooled, Hosteen reminded himself. The Mystery One acts friendly, but so did the evil Hairy Ones when they came to my people.

When Hosteen let down the wooden bars to go out, it occurred to him that the Hairy Ones could not pursue his friends if the other *caballos* ran away, so he left the bars down.

At last he halted. He no longer heard the camp or hoof sounds. He stood in a lake of moonlight. Now, he thought. It will happen now.

With dread, he drew the reins over the *caballo's* arched neck and moved to its side. Grasping the long mane, he pulled himself to its back and waited, resigned—for the blinding crash to the earth, the thud of hoofs, the ripping of his thin flesh. He closed his eyes. He must be brave to the end.

A moment. More moments.

He opened his eyes, bewildered. It was strange, but he felt nothing. To his astonishment the *caballo* stood quietly. It seemed to wait.

Shifting about, Hosteen happened to touch his heels to the *caballo's* flanks. And instantly he was aware of gliding movement beneath him, of being carried away as if on the wings of an eagle. A rhythmic drumming reached his ears. Faster and faster he was moving. He had the headlong sensation of the moon-drenched night rushing past. Cool wind teased his face. A sudden knowing came and deepened, absolute and true. He had found his power and beauty as well. Above all, he was free again.

Leonard Sanders

A Winter with Mabry

They camped that night below the Cap Rock. The herd was bedded down deep in a box canyon, well protected from the blue norther that had struck in midafternoon. Above them, on the flat tablelands of the Llano Estacado, the sound of the wind staggered the imagination. Heavy freight wagons, it was said, sometimes were toppled by the blasts. But here, in the canyons, the wind whipping off the High Plains created eddies that ruffled the campfire and made the cold seem to creep out of the ground itself. Before dark they had built the fire high and gathered a stack of dried mesquite to feed its comforting roar through the night. Clay had said that they would remain here until the norther blew itself out.

The cattle were restless, but more from the discomfort of the wind and cold than from nervousness. Most were lean scrub steers too trailwise to give unnecessary trouble. The herd had run only once since leaving the Spur west pasture, a half-hearted effort that petered out within a mile. Now the cattle were bothered only by the weather, and they seemed to know they couldn't do anything about that.

After supper, A. J. got his bedroll from the wagon, took off his boots, and stretched out far enough back from the fire to avoid traffic, yet close enough to feel the warmth. He would be awakened for night guard at midnight, and already he was dreading the cold and the darkness.

Mabry came over from the wagon. "Oh, Lord, we went through so many gates today I'm plumb dizzy," he said.

A. J. didn't answer. Sometimes he did not feel inclined to encourage Mabry's talking.

On the other side of the fire, Hokey-Pokey, the cook, had finished cleaning up from supper and was closing up the wagon. Four of the Spur riders squatted by the fire, playing poker. Clay didn't mind the men playing cards, but he had a rule that any man who got in deeper than a month's wages had to quit playing for a month. A. J. leaned back, slid his

legs between the soogans, and arranged the tarp carefully across his chest so moisture, if there was any, would not wet *them*. Looking up at the sky, he could see only blackness. The overcast probably would remain another day or two. He closed his eyes. He liked to look at the stars before he went to sleep; he liked to think about things.

"Times sure has changed," Mabry said, pursuing his topic. A. J. didn't look at him, but he could hear the old stove-up cowboy easing himself down on his bedroll to pull laboriously at his boots. As they came clear, Mabry put them carefully by the head of his bed, where they would be within easy reach.

"Wasn't a thing out here first time I saw it, in 'seventy-two," he went on. "I must of been about your age. We rode from Jacksboro clear to Santa Fe without seeing another human being. Just a few buffalo hunters, but they'd been killing and skinning buffalo about two months without a bath. I wouldn't exactly have called them human."

"How long's it been since you had a bath, Mabry?" Clay asked, coming out of the darkness behind them.

"Took one the last time I went to town," Mabry snapped back. "Guess it couldn't a been more'n a year ago."

Mabry was exaggerating, but not much. The lack of free time had become a sore point with the hands during the last few years. Now Mabry was nettled at the prospect of wintering this bunch of cattle on leased land in New Mexico Territory with no hope of seeing another place to go on a proper spree before spring.

"With your thirst, once a year should be about all the town life you can stand," Clay said. He went to the wagon, returned with his bedroll, and bedded down a few feet from A. J. As trail boss, Clay would not stand night guard, but he had an uncanny instinct for knowing when the cattle might give trouble. Often during the night he would get up silently and go out to ride around the herd. He always kept a horse saddled, girth slack, close to the wagon. He was the one man in camp who could ride up to the wagon and not awaken a soul.

"We'll probably lay over through tomorrow and let this norther blow itself out," Clay said, as if confirming it to himself. "I don't think there'll be snow, but I don't want to chance them turning back on us after we get them up on the Cap Rock."

"Just so we get out of these fences," Mabry said. "Lord, I'd have had nightmares if I'd knowed I was living surrounded by so many fences."

"Well, we got considerable more ahead of us," Clay said. "I wouldn't be surprised if this isn't the last time we trail cattle across the Plains. It's getting to where it's just too much trouble."

“And too slow,” Mabry said. “It’s going to be turning out time before we get these critters through all these here fences.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about putting A. J. behind them,” Clay said. “I bet he’d move them.”

Mabry laughed. “Hell, he’d probably stompede them to the nearest post office.”

A. J. kept his eyes closed, but despite his efforts he grinned. Hurraing him had become a nightly ritual.

“I hear them little Indian squaws down in the Nations can really drive a man crazy,” Mabry said.

“She’s not a squaw!” A. J. said, louder than he’d intended. He raised up on one elbow, still not believing that Mabry had said such a thing.

“I didn’t say she was,” Mabry said easily. “I was just talking about them little Indian girls down in the Nations.”

Clay hooted with laughter. A. J. felt his face burning. “Go to hell,” he said, furious with himself. He couldn’t understand how, after knowing Mabry more than three years, he still let Mabry trap him with the same traps.

Mabry laughed. But he knew when to let something alone.

“That reminds me,” Clay said. “I sent word back that we would pick up mail at NUN headquarters. Wouldn’t surprise me if there’s some waiting.”

A. J. tried to keep from showing how much the news affected him. “How long you think we’ll be getting there?”

Clay didn’t joke about it. A. J. was grateful. “Another week or so, depending on the weather, and what kind of luck we have with water and all.”

A. J. did some figuring. Mabry had helped him write a letter before they left the Spur range. They’d spent a week gathering, and ten days or more branding the unmarked cattle and cutting the herd to those Clay felt would tolerate a winter in the high country. Then they’d been more than a week at moving the herd across the Currycomb, the HHH, and into the 10V to the head of Yellow House Canyon under the Cap Rock. In a month, with any luck, he should have an answer to his letter. He lay awake a long time after the poker game had ended and the fire had died down, thinking about it. He had barely gotten to sleep when Hank shook him awake for night guard.

Six days later they picked up the two trail cutters who would take them across the NUN range. The cold had persisted, but the wind had eased. After climbing the Cap Rock with the herd, they had a dry drive most of the way from the Yellow House Fork to the NUN range.

The trail cutters helped them turn range cattle back so they could water the herd at Bird Mill just north of the old NUN drift fence. While they held the herd there, Clay rode to NUN headquarters and returned with the mail. There was one letter for A. J.

They had made camp by the mill. The two NUN riders, glad to have company, were sitting on their heels by the fire, exchanging range gossip with the Spur outfit. Clay came up to A. J. and handed him the letter without comment.

A. J. did not know what to do with it. He wanted to ask Clay to read it for him, but Clay was the boss and A. J. did not want him to know that much about his affairs. Mabry had been through the fifth grade, and could read well enough, but A. J. always suspected that Mabry stuck in some words of his own now and then just for fun. A. J. usually checked Mabry's version against that of Hank, who'd been through the third grade. Hank was smart enough to read, yet not smart enough to make up anything while engaged in the effort. But Hank was too slow. His reading put A. J. on edge.

A. J. motioned to Mabry, and they moved away from the fire to sit on the edge of the water tank below the windmill. He gave the letter to Mabry, who promptly put it to his nose, as he always did.

"My, my, but it sure smells sweet," he said.

"Go on," A. J. said. "Read it."

Mabry carefully opened the letter and spread out three sheets of ruled tablet paper. He studied the first one a moment before starting, then read all of the opening in one breath. "October twelve, eighteen hundred and ninety-four, Nelson, Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory, Dear Kind Friend."

He slowed to get the right inflections on the body of the letter. "I received your most welcome letter yesterday and I was very glad to hear from you. I am glad to know that you are well and enjoying your work."

Mabry threw back his head and laughed.

"Go on," A. J. said.

"We have the frame house ready, all but the floors, and are moving up there this week from the old sod house that you saw, and I know it will be much more pleasant. I and my sisters have much work to do, but we try to do it cheerfully, and in all we are very happy and contented. We have cleared our last revival meeting for this year. We enjoyed them to the last. Now they are over and we must bring ourselves to something else.

"Papa will hold a baptizing up near Antlers at Pine Church next Sunday. There are eight to be baptized, and I wish you could be here to go with us up there. I must close now. If you should return here, and we

should meet, we will talk over the rest of your letter. It is not wise for me to put all my thoughts on paper. Accept my best wishes, and write if you find it convenient. Bessie McFarland."

A. J. sat for a moment, listening to the sound of the windmill, thinking, while Mabry read silently back over the letter, as if to make sure he had not skipped anything.

"What do you think she means there, where she says, 'It is not wise for me to put all my thoughts on paper'?" A. J. asked.

Mabry studied the phrase, frowning. A. J. liked Mabry better when he dropped his joking manner in the face of important things. He seemed to become a different person.

"That sounds good, I think," Mabry said. "First, it means she does have thoughts about you, and that's something. If it's not wise for her to put them down on paper, then they must be serious. I suppose in her way she is answering that stuff about you wanting her for a sweetheart."

"I suppose so."

"Well, I'm satisfied you got one, if you ever get back through that part of the country again."

"I imagine I will," A. J. said.

That night, in the glow of the cook's lantern, A. J. and Mabry composed a reply. Mabry held the tablet on one knee, squatting Indian fashion, and worked tediously over each letter in each word. Yet he ruined two drafts with repeated erasures. The final version had a few smudges, but no place where the eraser wore through the paper.

A. J. suspected, but had no way of knowing, that Mabry's claim to education in many ways exceeded his accomplishments. A. J. sat by helplessly in frustration while Mabry labored. Mabry's writing was good enough that Mabry himself could read it, though, for he had no trouble in reading back the final draft for A. J.'s approval:

"Dear kind friend: It is with great pleasure to me that I received your nice little letter yesterday, and was glad to hear from you. I am glad that you have not forgotten me. Your little letter was sent to me here from the Spur. We are on our way to Mexico with a herd of big yearlings with some lean twos mixed in. I and a friend will hold them on leased grass this winter. It will be a long winter. I will be thinking of you.

"Bessie, I do not know what life holds for me, but I will see you some time if the Lord is willing. I don't know just when. Some time when you ain't thinking about me.

"I would like to see you and talk with you. I can't write much and I guess you think that I can't talk much.

"The herd has not given us trouble this far.

"I will close for this time. Write soon. I will give you a badge I got at the reunion at Honey Grove. Your best friend. A. J. Kirkland to Miss Bessie McFarland."

A. J. entrusted the letter the next day to the NUN trail cutters for mailing, along with a penny for postage.

Although A. J. was grateful to Mabry for his help in the correspondence, A. J. never felt right about it. He knew a man should be able to do his own writing.

He feared that Bessie might feel the same way.

The line shack where A. J. and Mabry were to winter was in bad shape. It was the only man-made object visible in an impressive sweep of country. The land nearby was flat, but to the west the ground rose steadily toward the mountains in the distance.

The crew was worn out from the long, monotonous drive. A. J. had seen a lot of new country he didn't think he'd ever want to see again. From the windmill on the NUN, they had trailed on west through the Scarbauer, Mallet, and Surrat ranges. They had crossed into New Mexico Territory on the DZ. There they had picked up the old Chisum trail and moved northward up through the sand hills to just south of Clayton, where they turned west onto the leased range.

Clay and the crew stayed four days, helping with repairs on the cabin. They put new sod on the roof and chinked the heavy log walls. The wagon was sent into Clayton for supplies, and they built a small sod lean-to behind the shack to hold all the canned goods, dried fruit, beans, flour and trappings they'd need through the winter.

On the fifth morning, the rest of the crew saddled up and gathered around for departure. A. J. and Mabry stood at the shack door, watching them. They swung into their saddles and turned to face the shack. Clay looked down at A. J. and Mabry from his horse.

"Well, you both know what to do as far as the cattle are concerned, so I won't tell you," he said. "If you run low on grub, you can kill a beef, but wait late enough so it won't spoil. You can take turns about going into Clayton every six weeks or so, but try to time it so you don't get caught in a blizzard. If it turns real bad, and they bust through the south fence, let them go. You won't do the ranch no good out there froze in a snowbank. There's a good drift fence about twenty miles south that should hold them. That's part of the Triangle Dot, and they'll help you with the cut if it gets into a mixup. If you have any bad trouble here, get word to Ingersoll on the Triangle Dot. We've helped him out a time or two, and he'll do the same for you. Mabry's in charge unless he finds a bottle. But A. J., if he

starts driving you crazy with his talk, you have my permission to shoot him."

The crew laughed.

"We'll get along," A. J. said.

Clay grinned. "You'll damned well have to, unless one of you'd rather sleep out on the prairie." He leaned down from the saddle and shook hands. "You can look for us back in late March or early April," he said.

He turned and rode away. The crew followed, looking back occasionally for a new perspective of the distant mountains, the range, and the little line shack. There probably would be talk, from time to time, at headquarters as they wondered how Mabry and A. J. were doing "out in Mexico." As they topped the last rise, they turned and waved. Mabry and A. J. waved back. Then they were alone.

Mabry stood for a moment, watching the ridge where the crew had disappeared. "Oh, Lord," he said. "How'd we ever let ourselves get talked into this?"

In all his life A. J. had never felt so alone. He turned and studied the western horizon. "I wonder how far away those mountains are," he said.

Mabry sighed. "I don't have any idea. But I bet we're going to find out. You see any wood around here?"

There was some scrub cedar in the canyons to the south, but not much. They'd probably have to go to the slopes of the mountains to find wood in quantity. A. J. pointed. "That one yonder looks the closest."

Mabry nodded. "I guess it can't be more'n forty miles away. You a pretty good hand with an axe?"

"Tolerable," A. J. said.

"Well, we both ought to be rip-snorters within a week. We're going to need a woodpile about the size of one of them mountains if we expect to survive the winter."

Wood remained their major worry through the short days of fall. With an improvised sled, they dragged a dozen loads down from the mountain slopes. The cedar was difficult to cut, but it would burn much slower than mesquite. The pile slowly grew behind the shack until it was almost the same size.

"That ought to be enough," Mabry said one day. "Hell, if it ain't we can just burn the shack. This ain't no work for a cowboy."

They built a solid corral for the remuda below the bluff down on the creek, well protected from the wind. On their first inspection trip over the range, they found the south fence in bad shape. In some places a good Texas wind would have flattened it. They worked for three weeks rebuild-

ing it the best they could, making do with what wire they had and dragging posts down from the mountains with the sled. Arrangements had been made with the Bell Ranch to the northwest for feed, and in mid-November a crew of teamsters hauled in enough bundled maize to make a huge stack on the ridge behind the shack. The feed had to be fenced away from the cattle.

"Line shack, hell," Mabry said one day. "We've got a two-man ranch a-going."

As soon as they felt better prepared for winter, they spent more time in the saddle, getting acquainted with all parts of the range. The leased pasture went about five miles east of the shack, six miles west, two south and three north. By late November, they had fallen into the routine that would see them through the winter. Each morning, shortly after dawn, they rode in opposite directions until they reached the limits of the pasture, then returned to the shack in a loop to the north. This took most of the day, and by the time they had taken care of the horses and fixed supper, it was dark.

"If this ain't a miserable damned way to live," Mabry complained one night. "Hell, I used to feel sorry for ol' Jed Pearce. He was before your time. Horse fell on him and busted him all up. Ol' Jed spent the rest of his days sweeping out a saloon. But at least he wasn't stuck out in the middle of nowhere with a bunch of cattle to tend to."

A week before Christmas, Mabry got the blues.

"I've been doing this shit all my life," he said. "Ever since I was seventeen. I'm forty-seven now. That's thirty years. And look what I got to show for it. Nothing. No family, and no prospects. All I know is cattle. Take me off a horse and I don't know nothing. I probably don't have enough sense to sweep out a saloon."

A. J. left him alone. Mabry stayed moody for two or three days. Then one night he asked, "You planning on going into town Christmas?"

"I've got no call," A. J. said.

"I don't neither," Mabry said. "But I'm going."

He said he would be gone two days. He was gone six. When he returned, his mood was not much better. "I spent three months' pay," he said. "In six days, I spent three months' pay."

He brought a letter for A. J. and read it to him by lantern light. There was not much difference in it. Bessie still had the same reluctance to put her feelings into words. But she said she'd be proud to wear A. J.'s badge.

"What the hell is that thing, anyway?" Mabry asked.

"Just a badge," A. J. said. "I won it in a potato sack race."

"Well, they must give out valuable prizes for that," Mabry said. He read

the letter over again carefully. "That sure is a smart girl," he said. "If you got any sense at all, you'll head back to the Nations next spring and marry her."

A. J. shook his head. "I'd never make a go of it on range wages."

"Shit. You'll never do *anything* on range wages," Mabry said. "It's about time you got that through your head. You'll just wind up like me, facing old age with nothing but a few broken bones. Or like Ol' Jed, limping around in a saloon, sweeping out and wiping pee off other people's boots."

"I've always thought I might start me a little ranch." A. J. had never admitted this to anyone.

"Every cowboy I've ever knowed has had the same thought. But look how many of them do it. And the time's past. Once I could have done it. Most every spread in the old days used to let you run some of your own cattle, if you were of a mind. That's the way some got a start. But they're breaking up all the old spreads. The syndicates are taking over, and a cowboy is no more human to them than a gatepost. You watch. In another few years there won't be no little ranches."

"I don't know anything else," A. J. said. "Nothing except farming, and I sure don't want to do that."

"You're young enough to learn. And don't knock the nesters. There's still plenty of good homesteads just for the taking."

"I don't see any difference, following a cow or following a plow. I prefer the cow."

"Shows how much sense you got. On a homestead, you'd be working for yourself, building something."

"I've seen them trying it," A. J. said. "And I've seen the wagons going back."

Mabry snorted. "If money grew like grass, there'd be some that couldn't gather a living with both hands."

"I wouldn't exactly call a sod shanty a living," A. J. argued. "Who'd want to live that way?"

"That's only the start," Mabry said. "Arkansas and Louisiana are full of fine mansions. There are fine homes all over the South. How in hell you think them people started? They got their own little place and built, that's how. They damned sure didn't do it working for somebody else."

A. J. spent many hours thinking over what Mabry said. He realized, perhaps for the first time, that as a cowboy he was limited far beyond what he wanted from life. Few cowboys made more than thirty dollars a month. He knew none that made more than fifty. A foreman might get seventy-five and a two- or three-room house tucked away among the ranch buildings.

But few cowboys wanted to be foreman. The job entailed more problems than it was worth.

Through the winter months A. J. had many hours alone to give thought to his future. He knew that with no schooling he was tied to what he could do with his hands. The more he thought, the more sense he found in Mabry's argument.

The courtship by mail continued. Mabry rode into Clayton at least once every two or three weeks. He invariably got drunk, but he never returned with a bottle. A. J. spent more and more time thinking about Bessie. There were nights when he couldn't remember her face. The failure scared him. He had seen her only three times, no more than four hours all told. But if he relived in his mind the way he met her, the memory of how she looked would return.

He had gone back to the Nations in an effort to find his father. Now that he was eighteen, lean, tall, and tough as rawhide, he no longer was afraid to face his father.

The memory of that reunion he would rather forget. But while he was at Honey Grove in the Choctaw Nation, he went to a brush arbor revival meeting one Sunday afternoon. He had no religion. It was just something to do. There he was introduced to the preacher's daughters. The youngest was the smallest, the shyest, and the prettiest. A. J. was no hand with the ladies. But he sensed in the way those soft blue eyes looked at him that his attentions would not be rebuffed. He managed to talk with her some that afternoon. Afterward, he took her to church once, and to a Fourth of July picnic. He had promised he would write, not letting on he couldn't make out his own name if he saw it in the plainest print.

So Mabry had helped him.

They spent hours over each letter, making certain they achieved the exact tone intended. A. J. knew that Mabry's interest in the correspondence had grown all out of proper proportions, but he was helpless to do anything about it. He often wondered if Mabry were inserting words and phrases of his own. A. J. had no way of knowing. He tried to follow the words as Mabry read them aloud, but his eyes couldn't keep pace. Each session left A. J. weak with frustration. He knew that in some way or other he would have to learn to write what was in his heart. No man could express his deepest thoughts through someone else.

He began making plans.

The first heavy snow came in the second week of January. Earlier light flurries had led them to believe this winter might be mild. But a blizzard swept in on a Sunday night, and by daylight Monday their whole world

was white. Drifts covered some of the six-foot posts around the corral, and they knew that if the storm continued they would lose cattle.

Mabry stared out the window while A. J. built up the fire and started breakfast. "Ain't that a piss-cutter?" he asked. "I'll bet we got a bunch of cattle half way to Old Mexico."

A. J. had heard the roar of the wind during the night. Snow was still falling heavily and the wind remained fierce. There was no way of knowing how much was fresh snow and how much was blowing along the ground. They had no thermometer, but the water bucket close to the door had slivers of ice despite the fire burning in the stove all night.

Mabry fidgeted for a while by the window. "I guess Clay's right, though. We wouldn't do no good out there froze into a snowbank. If we did find the cattle, we'd probably ride right over them and never see them in that stuff."

They waited two days for the storm to let up. On the second night the wind died and the snow stopped. With daylight, they saddled and rode to the south fence. They took four extra horses, bedrolls, and enough provisions to stay out overnight. Along a draw two miles from the southwest corner of the pasture, they found where a bunch had gone through. The fence was flat over a thirty- or forty-foot stretch. There was no way of knowing how many cattle had left the range, for the drifting snow had wiped out all sign.

"Well, that's just great," Mabry said. "I knowed that puny little thang wasn't going to hold them. They can hurrah us Texans all they want, but by damn we know how to build fence."

They now had a problem. What cattle remained on the range needed to be driven in and fed from the stacked feed. And they had to go after the cattle that had gone through the fence. Mabry made the decision.

"Hell, maybe they're all gone. They tend to bunch up more in bad weather. I'm guessing that most of those we drove down here last week are drifting. I reckon we better go after them first. They can't be more'n a hundred miles south of here. Probably won't more'n half the herd die before we get back."

They rode straight south, knowing that during the storm the cattle drifted with their tails to the wind. The snow often was belly deep to their horses, and before they'd gone five miles they had to shift saddles to fresh mounts.

Just before dark they came to the drift fence, a solid four-wire barrier.

"There must be a Texas cowboy somewhere on this range," Mabry said admiringly. "*That's* the way to build a fence."

But they could find no sign of the cattle. They rode to the west along the fence, searching. Darkness came without twilight. There was nothing they

could do but camp in a dry wash. They managed to gather some wood, but the fire didn't help much against the numbing cold. After a hurried supper, they scooped out places for their bedrolls in the snow and turned in. A. J. was cold, hungry and wet. He had never known such a miserable night.

The next morning they rode on west and found no cattle, so they retraced their trail and ranged on to the east.

"They probably headed for Texas. Shows they got more sense than we've got," Mabry said.

At noon they found more than six hundred head of cattle huddled against the drift fence, bawling. About two hundred were Triangle Dot. They were well mixed.

"Lord, it'd take six topnotch cowboys a week to get them separated in this mess," Mabry said. "And you know something, it may take you and me four or five hours of damned hard work."

They wore out all six horses that afternoon. By sundown A. J. was weak with hunger and fatigue. But they had the cattle separated. They drove the Triangle Dot bunch a mile or more east toward the ranch headquarters, then went back to their own cattle. Darkness was near, and they had no more food. They'd finished the last dab of cold cornbread and beans at noon, and there was only the oats they'd brought for the horses.

"Let's move them west to that big draw," Mabry said. "I'm not sleeping in no damned snowbank tonight."

With ropes, and the groundcloths from their bedrolls, Mabry made a lean-to against a creekbank. A. J. gathered wood and started the fire.

"Are you as hungry as I am?" Mabry asked.

A. J. nodded. He was beyond talk.

Mabry got his rifle. "It seems to me it's about time we took Clay up on that beef. Any of them steers you don't especially like?"

Despite his fatigue, A. J. laughed. "You don't have that many bullets."

Mabry cut one of the smallest steers out of the herd and shot it in the head. They butchered it on the ground and put the quarters into the snow to freeze. Mabry weighted the hide with rocks and left it, brand up, beside the entrails.

They stretched out under the lean-to, between the fire and the creekbank. Mabry turned the shortribs on a spit while A. J. melted snow and made coffee. For the first time in two days, A. J. grew warm enough to relax.

Leisurely, they ate until A. J. thought his own ribs would split. He'd never eaten anything as delicious as those sizzling beef ribs straight from the fire.

They filled their coffee cups and lay back against the bank.

"By God, that was worth thirty years of cowboying," Mabry said.

A. J. laughed. He knew that this night would become one of Mabry's stories. He could imagine how it would go: "So then, by God, I killed a beef, and me an Ol' A. J. ate everything but horn, hoof and beller."

A. J. laughed again.

Mabry looked at him. "Somebody must of kicked over your funny box."
"Just feeling good."

Mabry grinned. "Well, there's lots of pore hungry critters on this range tonight. But we're not two of them."

When they got all the cattle in and fed from the big stack of maize, they found they'd lost only twelve head.

"Well, that ain't too bad," Mabry said. "A dozen ordinary cowboys could have done worse."

Late in February, after much thought, A. J. put his plan into action and made his first trip into Clayton.

Shortly after daylight one Saturday morning, he saddled his favorite horse, Blackie, and rode the forty miles into town through gently falling snow. When he arrived, a thermometer outside a store read five above zero. He hung around the store until he thawed out some, then waited until the store owner was alone.

"You have any idea where I might find the school teacher hereabouts?" he asked.

"Frank Wheeler is the schoolmaster," the store owner told him. "First house acrost the draw west of town."

A. J. found Wheeler chopping wood behind his four-room adobe. He was a big, beefy man with a slow, thoughtful way about him. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'd be obliged if you would show me how to read," A. J. said. "I'd expect to pay you for your time."

"Why don't you enroll in school?"

"I can't spare the time," A. J. explained. "I'm riding for the Spur on a lease forty miles southwest of here."

"That is a problem," Wheeler admitted.

"I can stay through tomorrow, and I'm willing to work hard at it," A. J. told him.

Wheeler leaned the axe against his leg and looked up at A. J. "You mean you want to learn to read today and tomorrow?"

A. J. nodded.

"Well, there may be a bit more to it than that. Have you had any schooling at all?"

"Nary a day. I've been cowboying since I was thirteen."

Wheeler was silent for a moment. "Do you know the letters of the alphabet?"

"Just what I've learnt from brands."

"Can you sign your name?"

"I can draw it, if somebody traces it out for me. But I can't sign it proper."

Wheeler sighed, then fixed the axe in a log. "Let's put your horse up and go inside. Maybe we can make your trip worthwhile."

As they went into the lean-to kitchen, Wheeler called to his wife. "Laura, put on a pot of coffee. We got work to do. Here's a scholar who has ridden forty miles through a snowstorm, and he wants to learn to read and write by tomorrow night. We've got to get cracking."

Wheeler's wife was a small, pretty woman with long dark hair. She was quiet, but smiled often. She helped Wheeler clear off some books and papers on the dining table.

"There's no way to force-feed book learning," Wheeler said. "It usually takes a winter or two before anyone can learn to read and write even tolerably well. But maybe we can teach you the alphabet, and to sign your name. Then I'll give you a couple of books to study until you can come in again."

"I just never had a chance to learn before," A. J. explained. "I'm not dumb."

"I'm sure you're not," Wheeler said. "But reading and writing are a lot like learning to handle a rope. A fellow just needs plenty of practice before he gets good at it."

They worked steadily through the afternoon, Wheeler drilling him in the ABC's. By dark they were forming words, and A. J. felt he about had it licked. He was not aware of how quickly the time had passed, and was surprised when Mrs. Wheeler came in to start setting the table for supper. A. J. insisted he could go to the hotel, that he had not intended to be a burden.

"We wouldn't think of it," Wheeler said. "And if you don't mind a pallet on the floor, we'll expect you to stay the night."

So he slept in front of the big stone hearth. The next morning, after breakfast, they went to hear two hours of preaching.

A. J.'s lessons resumed after Sunday dinner. By nightfall, he could sign his name, recite the alphabet, and form a dozen three- and four-letter words. When they quit work for the night, Wheeler gave him two books. "You have a good mind, Andrew," Wheeler said. "Don't let it go to waste."

He spent the night with the Wheelers, but got up well before daylight. He left three dollars on the mantle and rode back to the line shack in the bone-chilling cold.

The next month was a trial. First, the well in the canyon to the west quit working and they had to pull the sucker rod to change the leathers. It was a cold, wet job. Then a late snow put them to hauling feed. Some of the older heifers started calving, and soon they were midwives to an unseasonal and unexpected calf drop. A. J. managed to see the Wheelers only one more time. He kept his books hidden from Mabry, and he had little time to study.

In late March, Clay arrived with four hands to help move some of the cattle to the railroad for shipment. Clay seemed pleased with the way the winter had gone. He called A. J. to one side. They walked down to the corner of the corral, out of earshot from the rest, and leaned against the rails.

"Y'all have done good work," Clay said. "I know the winter was a caution. We lost quite a few on the ranch. I know it was worse here. I appreciate the way you've made a hand. What I've got in mind, would you like to be our outside man down in the Haystack country this spring?"

A. J. attempted to hide his surprise. Only top hands, older cowboys with years of experience, were sent out as representatives on roundups. He'd never heard of anyone repping at the age of eighteen. He nodded.

Clay squatted on the ground, picked up a stick, and drew a map in the dirt. "Both Texas and the Union lay claim to all this land here between the North Fork and the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red. The courts are arguing about it now. Either way it goes, most likely they'll throw it wide open for settlement."

A. J. had not been through that country. But he knew that the Spur and other Texas ranches had pastured cattle there in the past, both on open and leased land. Texas had organized the area as a county.

"They've tried to drive the nesters out, but there's more coming in all the time," Clay said. "Open range may not last more'n another year or two. I'm satisfied there's still a lot of Texas cattle in there. Boyd Hawkins on the Cross Links, here on the North Fork, is going to work through the Haystack Country this spring, and you'll be the rep for several Texas outfits. I'll give you a list of brands. You ought to be able to pick up two or three hundred head. If you find more, you're authorized to hire a man or two to help you. Take them back to the Spur and turn them in the East Pasture. I'll see you there in late June or early July."

A. J. spent his last night in New Mexico working with Mabry on a letter

to Bessie, explaining his move. Mabry promised to mail the letter, and to forward any that came for him there. The next morning, with A. J. saddled up and ready to go, Mabry followed him away from the corral, leading A. J.'s string of six horses.

"Don't you forget all the things we talked about," Mabry said. "Reppin' ain't such big punkins. You don't want to be a cowboy all your life. You go see that little girl of yours."

"I most likely will," A. J. said.

Mabry stood by the shack and watched as A. J. rode away.

Nas'Naga

Two Paths to Eternity

for "Ceaser"

The light was failing fast and an early autumn wind had chilled the air to the point of discomfort. The long shadows of evening walked in great strides across the flat plateau, broken only by an occasional mesquite or prairie bush. The large army mule snorted its displeasure and the tired trooper on its back kicked him hard in the sides just to keep him moving.

"Gawd damn ya! Ah'm as tired as you are! Now you just keep on gittin' a while longer. Ya hear!"

The mule heard but couldn't have cared less as it tried to stop again. Snorting and grunting, it got another kick in its sides. Muttering to himself, the man on its back was thinking hard about stopping too. Between trying to keep the mule moving and his own desire to rest, his usually sharp senses failed to notice the unnatural movement in the head-high brush fifteen yards in front of him.

The chill wind was suddenly broken by the blood-curdling war cry of an Indian bursting full-on toward man and mule. For the instant, time took on an unreal dimension for both men. What was happening in seconds slowed to almost stop-action movement. Each reacted by instinct and training, with little actual conscious thought. Survival became the ruler and the spirit the warrior.

The trooper reached for his rifle in the scabbard attached to the mule's saddle while trying to control the startled animal with one hand. The mule jerked wildly and the man lost his grip on the beat-up piece of metal, and it went spinning off into uselessness like the blade of a broken windmill. His rifle gone, he grabbed for the pistol in his belt, his eyes riveted on the charging Indian and pony.

The Indian had raised his lance as he began his charge, while the leather

thong tied to his pony's lower jaw flew free, leaving him to be guided only by pressure from the warrior's legs. His left arm held his medicine shield and, at full gallop, the lance was on target, with the shield in position across his chest. Another short cry burst from his dry lips.

The mule was still jerking, but the trooper managed to pull his pistol up and fired as the barrel came even with the enemy's chest, but the only sound was a dull thud as the hammer came down on a bad cap. The gap closed with the Indian's final war cry mixed with the frightened mule's bawling.

The trooper fired again, his aim ruined by his unruly mount. The ball struck the warrior in the shoulder, causing his lance point to drop from its intended goal, but it didn't stop his charge or cause him to lose his weapon.

Men and animals came together with the roar of the second pistol shot, which struck the Indian full in the right breast. The trooper screamed as the Indian's lance sliced its way through his upper thigh and passed on into his mount, pinning the two together.

Eyes wild and ears back, the Indian's small pony sped on as his rider flipped backward to the earth, slammed hard by the force of the pistol shot, so close as to cause black powder burns on his brown chest. He landed on his back, and the force of the fall broke his bow and all the arrows hanging in the quiver across his shoulders.

The trooper and mule, now stuck together like two pieces of skewered meat by the Indian's lance, fell together. Unable to control his mount and blinded by the pain of the shaft through his thigh, the man could only sense the fall of the large mule. Its back legs slipping, the animal fell away from the force of the lance thrust, landing heavily on its left side, crushing the rider's other leg as it came down with its full weight on the hard ground.

Within seconds of the warrior's first war cry to the mule's last bawl, the plains returned to silence. The soft hoofbeats of the unshod Indian pony could be heard briefly in the distance, but now there was no one to hear them.

Night came on swiftly, bringing a sparse dew to the brown prairie and causing the light of a near full moon to glisten on the skins of the two men lying unconscious in trampled buffalo grass. The big mule, now nearly dead, had ceased any effort of movement and breathed in a weak, uneven bubbling of blood and foam draining from his broad nostrils. By first light, even that had ceased forever.

Corporal Ely Parker Brown stirred slightly. Pain exploded throughout his strong black body and a muffled cry passed his dry, cracked lips.

The sun, now standing near its zenith, blinded him, and he tried to wet his full lips with a dry tongue. He opened his eyes slightly to see dull, dark forms floating with effortless ease on the hot prairie winds aloft. His mind registered *vultures*, and he lost consciousness again.

For the Indian, first wakefulness did not come as soon. The sun sat on the midpoint between noon and dark as Cat-In-Water regained his senses. Out of instinct, the warrior did not move. He was so weak from loss of blood he wasn't sure he could anyway. Nor did he open his eyes. He lay very still, listening. The pain in his shoulder and chest caused tears to run down from his closed eyes into his fur-wrapped braids. With all his effort he tried to slow his breathing so he could hear better. His ears told him he was not alone. Another man was breathing heavily near him at about ten feet. Moments of listening told him the man was not moving either and was himself on the ground. Slowly the Indian opened his eyes and rolled his head in the direction of the sound. He saw the hawk feathers fluttering from the end of his lance. The shaft stood at a crazy angle. Though he knew it went through the leg of the man, he could not see where it entered, but the point protruded from the belly of the dead mule. Cat-In-Water was covered with a wave of disgust and shame. He had failed. The man lived, but he himself was near death. He knew this, but rather than being frightened he only wished death would hurry. Death, he would find, would take its time in coming for him, if at all.

He knew by the angle of his left arm that it was broken, though he still gripped his medicine shield. Little good it would do him now, and so much time had been put into making it. Through waves of pain he could only guess he had done something wrong to weaken its power. The broken quiver of arrows and bow behind his shoulders added to his discomfort, but he was too weak to correct this position, or anything else.

Hours passed while the young warrior prayed to die and asked that his disgrace not be placed upon his family. No sound passed his lips, for he accepted the pain as just punishment for failure. A change in the other man's breathing stopped Cat-In-Water in his thoughts, and once again he listened intently.

Sounds of movement came to his ears and a word or two that he did not understand. The leg pinned to the dead mule moved. More words. Still none he had heard before, nor could understand. He remembered that the man he had charged was a Buffalo Soldier. Strangely, though, he could not remember his face, only the ebony color of it. Now all he could see was the man's boot. He could kill him with the knife still in his war belt, but he was too weak even to reach for it. For that matter, he was too weak to use it on himself—not that he would allow himself that luxury.

More muffled sounds Cat-In-Water did not know. The trooper apparently thought he was alone.

"Gawd! Lord a-mighty! Mule, you never was any damn good. Now ah think you done kilt me!" The slightest movement sent pain through Ely's body. His throat was like sandpaper, and he remembered the canteen attached to the dead animal's saddle. He raised his head and could see it still dangling there, but he wasn't sure he could reach it with both legs pinned in place.

"Well, ya sure as hell ain't gonna git no help out here, Brown, so ya best give it a try. Either thet or just lay here till your damn tongue blows up. Well, mule, here goes the whole thing."

Before trying to raise himself, Ely rolled his head from side to side. The pistol and rifle had disappeared into the buffalo grass. Little matter. He wasn't in any mood to use them anyway, and besides, who would he use them on? Himself? The thought passed through his mind at the same time another wave of pain surged through his body.

"Git on it, Brown, afore ya pass out again. Damn it!"

Slowly, trying not to move either leg, the black man raised himself up on his elbows. It gave him just enough height to see part of the Indian's body lying in the grass on the other side of his dead mount.

"Son-of-a. . . ." He froze and watched the form. He could make out very slow controlled breathing. "Hey you. Injun. Ya talk English?" Ely waited, but Cat-In-Water lay still, eyes closed.

The trooper's experience of four and a half years on the frontier told him that the Indian was a young Kiowa.

"Well, Brown, he's still alive and looks to be in better shape than you. Law! He ain't more than seventeen. Musta been trying for his first coup. Looks like he could make it yet, Brown. And you is it!" Again he looked for either weapon, but they were lost for good. Easily he pulled the skinning knife from its scabbard at his side. He'd traded two bottles of rot-gut for it only the week before because the Army wouldn't issue him a decent one. "Okay, Injun, if ya is comin', we'll have us a little tussle." Ely watched the Indian's still form. Cat-In-Water understood bits of the trooper's words, but not enough to put them together. Either way, a quick death was better than just lying here dying. He turned again to face the man, and in a hoarse voice used every dirty English word he knew. Strung together, though, they didn't make much sense.

Brown started to laugh, but it hurt too much. He flashed a smile at the boy.

"Ya hurt pretty bad, too, huh, boy? Second thought, guess ya ain't no boy anymore. Look at what ya did to me!" He grinned again. Cat-In-Water

was sure the man was crazy. These black-whites never made any sense to him. The whites treated them as badly as they treated Indians, yet they fought for them.

"Ah. Hell, gotta git that water 'fore it's too late. Our little war's gonna have to wait a while, Injun."

Every move sent a new wave of pain through Ely's body. He did his best not to move either leg while trying to reach the canteen hanging loosely from the back of the saddle. His knife lay beside him as his fingers slowly worked at getting the canteen unfastened. Just as it came loose in his weak grip, he passed out. His pleasure at seeing his enemy collapse was short-lived.

As the sun broke through the last thin veil of night, Ely heard the rustle of a prairie hen. The leather strap of the canteen was still wrapped in his cold fingers. His leg under the dead mule didn't seem to hurt so much any more, but the right leg with the lance through it felt like it was on fire.

"Holy Jesus," his voice rasped across his dry throat, "that spear sure as hell hurts, Injun!" Slowly pulling the water toward him, he continued to talk. "Hope ya hurt as bad as I do. This was your idea, ya know." His numb fingers worked at the corked, cloth-covered cavalry canteen. Finally working the cork loose, Ely took long swallows. "Oh man, that sure does this chile good." He took another pull, then replaced the cork.

"Ya still there, Injun?" He heard nothing, so decided to take a look. Gritting his teeth at the pain, he slowly raised himself up on his elbows again. The young Kiowa hadn't moved and his eyes were closed.

"Ya dead, there, Kiowa?"

Silence.

"Hey! Wake up! Its gonna be a purty day—ah think—considerin' where we is." He saw the young warrior's slow breathing, so he knew he was still alive. "Come on, ya young buck, if'n ah gotta be awake for this you ain't gonna sleep through it."

Cat-In-Water slowly rolled his head toward his enemy. "You die, Buffalo Soldier?"

Ely grinned. "Now this is just a guess, chief, but ah think we both got a good chance of that. Ya sure messed this one up." A look of compassion crossed Ely's eyes. "Knowin' you folks, guess ya'd rather die, uh?"

"Kiowa die soon, Buffalo Soldier."

"Yeah, big warrior, yer probably right." Ely grinned. "Both of us die soon." Ely looked up at the vultures already circling above them. "They know it too."

"Kiowa die soon," Cat-In-Water said again.

"Ya made yer point, boy. For myself, I'd just as leave wait awhile. Hell, boy. You sure picked a bad day for me. Another day or so I'd been on my way. Had enough of that 'U.S. of A.' Army life. Fought the Rebs, then they sent me out here to fight you all. Hell, man. I'm tired of fightin'. Never knew nothin' but."

"Fight good."

"Not now, we is both a little off our feed for thet."

"Fight now!" Cat-In-Water's eyes burned.

"Yeah, at your age I felt the same way, Injun. But that was some ways back. Seen a lot of dead men sence. They all looks alike . . . dead."

"You die."

"Boy, you're repeatin' yourself. Think I'll lay back here, and if'n you want to talk we'll have to do it over this worthless Army mule. Damn thing always was in the way."

Ely eased himself back. He thought of offering the young Indian some water because he was sure he needed it, but he was also sure, at this point, that if he gave up his canteen there was no way he would get it back.

The young warrior wouldn't let it set. He'd win his battle without moving. Unless the Indian resolved his position, Ely couldn't chance it. "Damn this white man's killin'," he said under his breath as his pain-racked body found its place on the dry buffalo grass. "Kill Rebs—kill Injuns—kill—kill—kill—just kill anything. Now they kilt me!"

For long quiet moments, both men watched the large ugly birds floating in circles on the hot air currents above them. For Cat-In-Water it was as though he had been caught in a bad dream and couldn't wake up. The pain of his wounds dazed him. Not really pain anymore. Since he could feel his legs but couldn't move them, he guessed he had a broken back too. But then, being so weak, it was only a guess. Again, as he often had since he had awakened the first time, he felt shame.

For Ely the shame was that he had finally decided to dodge out on the Army and now he lay pinned to one of them damn 10th Cavalry mules. Lying on his back, he called to the young Kiowa.

"Ya know, Injun, might be ya got folks out looking for ya. Now thet would solve the problem. Ah, man! Why'd ya have to go 'n pickin' on a tired ol' nigger to fight with? Why didn't ya find one of them nice clean white 'long knives' to tussle with? Ah know y'all hate them more'n you do us. Hell, we just here cause we got no place else to go." Ely thought back over his nine-year Army career—years during the War between the States, spent mostly cleaning out stables or holding off Reb units with little more than pitchforks and knives. Then Freedom! Yeah, the freedom he had found in the U.S. Army 10th Cavalry. Under-equipped, mounted on cast-

off horses and mules, and sent to plug up holes left by whites deserting the Indian War front. He'd fought Comanches, Kiowas, Apaches and Cheyennes. Now, just as he himself had deserted to find some place in the North to settle down, a young boy had stopped him cold.

Ely never could find any way to hate Indians, though he'd fought enough of them. It was finally his hatred for whites that sent him off on his own. His momma was dead, and having to watch his father sold on the block when he was five had never left him. Brothers and sisters? He thought he had seven, but he never saw them after he himself had been sold to a new master when he was fifteen. Hate? Yeah, but even now, when he was sure his life could be measured in hours because of the young Kiowa, he couldn't find any reason to hate Indians. To him they had the same problems he had, in a way.

Throughout the long day his mind wandered over these things, though a couple of times he drifted off into darkness from pain. And for the first time since he was fifteen, he prayed like his momma had taught him. He thought he'd forgotten how.

Cat-In-Water had lain in one position all day. He could move his head and got some movement out of his right arm. He couldn't lift it, though it did better as the day wore on. The pistol ball had gone clear through his shoulder, not touching the bone. He wasn't sure about the one in his chest, but as best he could tell the bleeding had stopped in both wounds. The smell of the water in the Buffalo Soldier's canteen had caught in his nostrils, but it might as well be back in his father's teepee. The thought of his father made the feeling of shame overwhelm him again. He had been trained well, but in only a few seconds it had all been wasted. Why had he picked on a Buffalo Soldier? He knew as well as the rest of his people they fought better than the white long knives. He hated himself for trying to be more than he was. Now, from his point of view he was dead, but not dead enough.

The shrill cry of a night hawk drifted across the dark forms of the prairie. The sun, which had beat down on the men throughout the long day, had died in a burst of plains color, leaving the two wounded warriors to the mercy of the wind and cold. Nature's other face now turned on them, and each in his own way would come to grips with it or die before the sun returned.

The young Kiowa could feel the cold in his legs, but he couldn't move them. For all he knew, his back was really broken in the fall. There was no pain now like the other wounds. For him, darkness at least meant the slight bit of dampness from the dew—hardly enough to keep him alive,

and it made his cracked lips burn, but it did ease the pain of his parched throat.

"Buffalo Soldier, you die now?" Cat-In-Water's weakened voice carried easily through the quiet night air to the black trooper.

"Not yet, Injun. Takin' longer than we thought—huh?"

"Buffalo Soldier, you know Kiowa?"

"Yeah, boy, I know your folks."

"You hurt bad, Buffalo Soldier?"

"Well, son, ain't neither of us gonna up and run outa here." A short period of quiet left each man to his own discomforts.

"Hey, kid, you talk trader's English purty good?"

"Talk many white man in camp."

"Yeah, 'spect ya did, boy."

"Kiowa come soon." Cat-In-Water knew no one would come looking for him.

"Been thinkin' on thet, kid. Sure would fix my wagon."

"Not kid. Cat-In-Water. Cat-In-Water. Warrior."

"Ya damn sure are. But I wish you'd picked someone else to prove it on."

"You fight good, Buffalo Soldier."

"Not good enough, it seems. Gettin' old." Ely gritted his teeth as fire shot up the leg the lance went through. "Ya move at all, Injun?"

Cat-In-Water thought a moment, but knowing the trooper was pinned, decided it didn't matter.

"Only hand little way. You move, Buffalo Soldier?"

"Not enough to matter, son. Sorry you had such a short war trail."

"War trail short Kiowa much times."

"Yeah. . . ." There was a touch of sadness in Ely's voice. He'd seen some younger than this one die. "My folks, too."

"Gawd!" Ely's voice was filled with pain. "Ah just wish ya been a bit neater, son." There was no reply. "Hey, Cat-In-Water, ya still with me?"

"Cat-In-Water still here." The voice was weaker.

"Hang on, son, maybe you got your folks comin' after all."

Cat-In-Water grinned as best he could with split lips. "Kiowa come, kill Black-White."

"Ha!" said Ely. "Thet ain't gonna be no big chore after what ya done to me."

"Kiowa die too, Buffalo Soldier."

"Sorry, son. Ah thought ah was done with thet." Ely put killing out of his mind. He was forty years old and tired of watching young men die. "Whew! This damn mule stinks. Damn thing never was any good alive, either."

Fortunately for the Indian, he was upwind of the dead animal.

"Kiowa have good pony."

"You *had* a good pony, son. He's gone now. Want my mule?"

"Buffalo Soldier make joke."

"No joke, son, ya can have 'im."

"Cat-In-Water die like mule soon."

"Maybe, son, maybe."

The rest of the night passed with only with a few words. Man and boy faced their pain alone. Each knew that the chance of seeing another night was less as the heat of the day began to build. Cat-In-Water's tongue began to swell, and he gave up trying to speak at all. Ely still had about half a canteen left. He also noticed the condition of his legs. With as much care as possible, he raised himself up to where he could reach the shaft of the lance and ripped his trouser leg open. Even if someone did find him he would probably lose both legs. He lay back on the ground to watch the vultures get closer as the dead mule's odor began to call them in.

Ely uncorked his canteen and took a long pull. He wouldn't want to live with no legs. Saw too much of that in the war. He jammed the cork back in hard.

"Hey ya, Injun!"

"Uh." It was all the young warrior could get from his cracked lips.

"Ya move that arm any?"

"Uh."

Again Ely raised himself up, this time ignoring the pain to get more height. He spent a few moments studying the distance.

Cat-In-Water looked at the black face staring at him over the dead mule.

"Tell you what, young warrior, ain't no way we both gonna get outa this, and this leg of mine is gonna kill me in a while either way. Ah think its stupid if'n you still got a chance. Here. Try to catch this." With that Ely threw the canteen toward the young Indian's good arm. Then he fell back hard on the grass, passing into darkness again not even knowing if he had hit his mark.

Cat-In-Water did not understand at first but forgot to worry about reason and within fifteen minutes' struggle tasted water for the first time in three days. He didn't get down much as he passed out again from the renewed pain in his wounds. But it was enough. . . .

When Cat-In-Water awoke, he lay on a soft buffalo robe. His wounds were dressed and oils covered the burns from the sun on his exposed skin. His mother knelt over a skin she was working on just inside the teepee door. He looked past her. Hanging from his own lance was a fresh Buffalo Soldier's scalp. Cat-In-Water wanted to throw up.

Three months later the young Kiowa was on his feet again. His father had given him a new pony. He took his lance with the scalp still hanging on it and rode slowly out of camp, with one new eagle feather standing upright in his hair.

The scene of the fight had changed little. Winter's approach had caused the scavengers to scatter the bones in many directions.

By nightfall Cat-In-Water had gathered all the bones he could find and identify as human. He scraped out a shallow hole and laid them in it. Then he broke his lance with the black soldier's scalp still on it and placed two pieces in the hole along with the rusty rifle, knife and pistol he had found. He covered it all with dirt and piled stones on top to keep wolves out.

When he had finished, he mounted his pony and stopped by the new grave. In his own tongue, his arms raised, he spoke to the sky.

"Here, Great Spirit, lies a fine warrior. Because of him I am alive. Let him be happy on his new trail. I don't think he ever was, here."

The young Kiowa looked down at the pile of stones for a moment. Then he reined his pony around and raced darkness back to the Kiowa village. He would not come back to this place again.

Onen

John R. Milton

Two Wests

Some years ago I read five “westerns” a week until I reached the grand total of 400. If someone imposed that task upon me today, I would consider it cruel and inhuman treatment. At that time, however, like most other readers of these novels, I was avoiding the realities of my daily schedule by escaping into a world quite different from my own. I leaped out, as it were, from a crowded city to open plains and silent mountains, from the dark and musty stacks of a large university library to the clean sands of the desert and the fresh air of a wilderness almost unspoiled by people. What people there were in these “westerns” behaved in perfectly predictable ways and never kept me guessing. Good and evil were clearly distinguished, and a good man could always surmount any difficulties, triumph over the bad man, and get a beautiful woman as a reward.

A nice world. But two things happened to me. First, I found that it was possible to tire of the escape, especially when the stories I was reading were essentially the same story. Second, and somewhat in contradiction, I discovered in some of the novels a redeeming grace of one sort or another—a psychological insight, a fresh look at the landscape, or a character who stood on his own feet, quite apart from his stereotyped context. In fact, I soon discovered an entire area of American literature which was being ignored in academic circles and which confused some of the critics and professors who condescended to take a look at it. The broad area can be called, simply, Western American fiction.

From here on it is not quite that simple. Consider, for example, two opening sentences from pre-1940 “westerns”:

“Silvertip” was what men called him, since the other names he chose to wear were as shifting as the sands of the desert; but he was more like a great stag than a grizzly.

A sharp clip-clop of iron-shod hoofs deadened and died away, and clouds of yellow dust drifted from under the cottonwoods out over the sage.

And then two concluding sentences:

He set his teeth firmly and aimed his course toward the blue and crystal-white of distant mountains.

Mary lifted a rapt young face to his kiss.

It is easy to identify ingredients: the strong and mysterious man, the horse, dust, cottonwoods, true grit, the journey westward toward the shining mountains or the new Garden of Eden, and the woman whose kiss the cowboy preferred to that of his horse. These and similar ingredients appear over and over in the thousands of novels known as the "western," that ubiquitous story which misshaped the West and left eastern readers with more misconceptions than could be corrected in half a century.

In contrast, the first and last lines of a novel which has been called a "western" but which is a major novel, an American classic, and must be considered in quite different terms:

Arthur was the first in the Bridges' ranch house to hear the far-away crying, like muted horns a little out of tune.

Once in a while it showed clearly, so he could see even the smoke lining out from the chimney of the house, but more often it grew faint or even disappeared behind the running snow.

As unfair as it may be to take opening and closing sentences and base an argument on them without considering the main texts, it should be obvious from these isolated examples that we are involved in two quite different kinds of writing. And so it is equally unfair to lazily bestow the label of "western" upon both kinds.

What has happened in the fiction of the American West, of course, is not entirely different from what has happened elsewhere in the United States: there are good novels, mediocre novels, and bad novels. What clouds the issue is the unique influence of the frontier in American history, that invisible line which gradually moved from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries, with civilization behind it and the wilderness ahead of it. From the nation's move westward, heroes erupted: Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, Davy Crockett, Jed Smith, Jim Bridger, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickock, Buffalo Bill Cody, and many others, some of them legitimate heroes, and some of them tainted in

real life but raised to legendary status by enterprising writers. Because of the great distances between the civilized East and the barbaric West, fact could be replaced by fiction until the West was like a foreign land, exotic, dangerous, adventurous, a place to escape to in the imagination, a myth.

In a cultural phenomenon of this kind it is impossible to say that the myth began with a specific writer. For some, James Fenimore Cooper will do, and he certainly is valuable in establishing the directions of two kinds of writers in a later time. On the one hand, Cooper recognized the great dilemma of the growing nation, the need to destroy the wilderness in order to further the march of enlightened progress, and the equally strong need to preserve the wilderness and those values which arise from the natural world. On the other hand, Cooper encased his important theme in a romantic landscape which he had never seen in reality, in a cast of stock characters, and in platitudes rather than plot.

Bret Harte will also do, with his sentimentality, his exotic landscapes, his lifeless characters whose hearts are made of gold, and his pandering to the wishes of a reading public which wanted to hear exactly what Harte was feeding them. Or, Owen Wister, whose novel *The Virginian* was hesitantly praised by his friend, Henry James, and who is generally blamed for establishing the formula for the "western" which includes the battle between good and evil, the shoot-out on a dusty street, the gallantry of the cowboy, and the essential manliness of the West. It doesn't seem to matter that this cowboy novel has no cows, that when the Virginian confronts Trampas with "When you call me that, *smile!*" he has already drawn his gun and has an unfair advantage, or that there is more talking than fighting.

What is perhaps more important than individual writers is the insatiable thirst of readers in the late 19th century and early 20th for the romance and glamour and heroics that were associated with the Old West. Furthermore, a nation on the move needed its symbols and myths to support its motivations in taking over a vast territory and rooting out the Indians. These needs were satisfied by the hundreds of dime novels which called out the exploits of Wild Bill, Deadwood Dick, Buffalo Bill, and Calamity Jane. Then, as the frontier ended, and the nation moved uneasily toward World War I, escape literature again became important and the West provided more material. By this time the market was so good that the "western" became a staple for writers like Zane Grey who abandoned dentistry to embark on a new and highly successful career. If Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* is, as many students of the "western" insist, the most famous "western" of them all, it is interesting to note that its year of publication, 1912, also marked the appearance of the first book in the Tarzan series. It is

possible that Edgar Rice Burroughs, who began writing cowboy stories, took to the African jungle in order to avoid such competition as Zane Grey while retaining a foothold in the market of escapist literature.

In any case, the big period of the "western" was from 1910 to 1940, approximately, even though Zane Grey is still selling steadily and a "newcomer," Louis L'Amour, is fast becoming the best-selling writer in the world. 1940 is notable because of Walter Van Tilburg Clark's "anti-western," *The Ox-Bow Incident*, which literarily destroyed the accumulated stereotypes of several decades of the cowboy novel. And this brings us to some necessary distinctions.

What I have been calling the "western" is the formula novel which varies in literary quality from one writer to another but which is characterized by its relative sameness in plot and treatment and by a promulgation of the elements of the mythical Old West. The term can also be applied to the hundreds of motion pictures and television programs which have flourished from the 1930s to the present, only recently giving way somewhat to the detective story. The term is also spelled without quotation marks (western) and with capitalization (Western). Sometimes this novel is called the cowboy novel, even though different subjects and themes are employed. Frank Gruber, one of its able practitioners, has twice said that there are only seven plots for western stories, although his lists differed slightly on the two occasions and I shall combine them, making nine plots: the rustler story, the range war or empire story, the "good but not worthy" story, the marshal or dedicated lawman story, the revenge story, the outlaw story, the cavalry and Indians story, the ranch story, and the Union Pacific story. Several of these categories could, of course, be subsumed under "the western historical novel," with, again, varying degrees of attention to history. L'Amour, who researches painstakingly for his novels, has said that "if you write a book about a bygone period that lies east of the Mississippi River, then it's a historical novel. If it's west of the Mississippi, it's a western, a different category. There's no sense to it."

The problem lies in the image of the "western" and the frequent inability to distinguish it and its formula from other fiction which is written in and about the West but which is original and artistic fiction, ranking with the best anywhere. Presumably there is a writer of "westerns" who epitomizes all that is commercial, thoughtless, and dreary in the formula; and presumably there is a western writer who is the equal of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, et al, in his ability, his seriousness, and his artistic worth; and presumably all the others who deal with western themes and places can be scaled in between. Although I have made such lists in private, I hesitate to make them public. Nevertheless, names

must be mentioned if only for the sake of information. Let us put at the bottom of the scale Frederick Faust, who wrote as Max Brand, Evan Evans, Peter Dawson, and other pseudonymous people. In the middle group, with no attempt at further comparisons, we might find Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Frederick Glidden (Luke Short), Henry Allen (also writing as Clay Fisher and Will Henry), Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Ernest Haycox, Frank Gruber, Frank Bonham, Louis L'Amour, Steve Frazee, Robert McLeod, Wayne Overholser (who is also Joseph Wayne, Lee Leighton, and a couple of other people), and Frank O'Rourke. This is by no means a complete listing.

At the top we depart from the term "western" as applied to fiction. After all, it has never been said that Faulkner wrote "southerns." Nor has it been said of any other southern writer. It has never been said that Philip Roth writes "easterns." Sinclair Lewis did not write "northerns," or "mid-westerns." The terminology is considered ridiculous—until it hits the West. Laboring under this disadvantage, their work often called, unfairly, "westerns," or Westerns, a significant group of writers living in the West, taking their region with the utmost seriousness, writing with great skill and craft, has turned out a notable body of fiction since the 1920s. I do not mean to belittle popular culture, popular literature, or the divisions called the Western, the Detective Story, and Science Fiction. But Arthur Clarke, Ray Bradbury, and Ross Macdonald (to name three) are more than popular writers. Their appeal on the mass market does not demean the quality of their work; it means only that they are writing in established genres which continue to appeal to the public. With the serious western writer it is different because he has broken away from the popular "western," something which the general reader does not want him to do. In a sense he has committed heresy by daring to suggest that the West is like any other part of the nation in that it has its own themes and forms, its own serious art.

Let us, then, put in opposition to the "western" what we might call (if it must have a label) the Western regional novel. It is set in the West; its fictional time is both past and present; its creators are serious artists who live in the West, or have spent enough time there to know the landscape and the people intimately. The concerns and abilities of the true western writers vary, of course, and I cannot include all of the names: Harvey Fergusson, Vardis Fisher, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Frank Waters, A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Frederick Manfred, William Eastlake, Edwin Corle, Max Evans, Jack Schaefer, Wallace Stegner, Paul Horgan, Oliver La Farge, Archie Binns, and Forrester Blake are some of the novelists who have explored the ways of the mountain men, the mysteries of nature, the

psychology of space, the culture of the Indians, and the ties between past and present in ways that make the West both real and significant. The work of these writers stands partly in the tradition of the travel narrative of the 19th century West, a line different from that of Cooper, Harte, and Wister; but it also takes its place within the American modes of realism and naturalism, and it also takes its place within the American modes of realism and naturalism, and it has occasional affinities to mysticism and symbolism.

It would be difficult to omit Fergusson's *The Conquest of Don Pedro*, Fisher's *Dark Bridwell*, Clark's *The Track of the Cat*, Waters' *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, and Stegner's *Big Rock Candy Mountain* from any list of American classics; yet, it is the "western" that appeals on a popular level because it calls to mind a West that most people wanted to exist even though it did not, strictly speaking. Its heroes and villains, taken collectively, have become a part of our folklore, our legends, our national myth. The "western," even though clumsily written as often as not, is our revival of the King Arthur legends and of the medieval morality plays. As such, it deserves a certain amount of respect, but not at the expense of the more mature novel of the West.

Detective Fiction

Edited With

Gloria Amoury



Raymond Chandler

Introduction

TWELVE NOTES ON THE MYSTERY STORY

1. It must be credibly motivated, both as to the original situation and the denouement; it must consist of the plausible actions of plausible people in plausible circumstances, it being remembered that plausibility is largely a matter of style. This requirement rules out most trick endings and a great many "closed circle" stories in which the least likely character is forcibly made over into the criminal, without convincing anybody. It also rules out such elaborate *mises-en-scène* as Christie's *Murder in a Calais Coach*, where the whole setup for the crime requires such a fluky set of happenings that it could never seem real.

2. It must be technically sound as to the methods of murder and detection. No fantastic poisons or improper effects from poison such as death from nonfatal doses, etc. No use of silencers on revolvers (they won't work) or snakes climbing bellropes ("The Speckled Band"). Such things at once destroy the foundation of the story. If the detective is a trained policeman, he must act like one, and have the mental and physical equipment that go with the job. If he is a private investigator or amateur, he must at least know enough about police methods not to make an ass of himself. When a policeman is made out to be a fool, as he always was in the Sherlock Holmes stories, this not only deprecates the accomplishment of the detective but it makes the reader doubt the author's knowledge of his own field. Conan Doyle and Poe were primitives in this art and stand in relation to the best modern writers as Giotto does to da Vinci. They did things which are no longer permissible and exposed ignorances that are no longer tolerated. Also, police art, itself, was rudimentary in their time. "The Purloined Letter" would not fool a modern cop for four minutes. Conan Doyle showed no knowledge whatever of the organization of

Scotland Yard's men. Christie commits the same stupidities in our time, but that doesn't make them right. Contrast Austin Freeman, who wrote a story about a forged fingerprint ten years before police method realized such things could be done.

3. It must be honest with the reader. This is always said, but the implications are not realized. Important facts not only must not be concealed, they must not be distorted by false emphasis. Unimportant facts must not be projected in such a way as to make them portentous. (This creation of red herrings and false menace out of trick camera work and mood shots is the typical Hollywood mystery picture cheat.) Inferences from the facts are the detective's stock in trade; but he should disclose enough to keep the reader's mind working. It is arguable, although not certain, that inferences arising from special knowledge (e.g., Dr. Thorn-dyke) are a bit of a cheat, because the basic theory of all good mystery writing is that at some stage not too late in the story the reader did have the materials to solve the problem. If special scientific knowledge was necessary to interpret the facts, the reader did not have the solution unless he had the special knowledge. It may have been Austin Freeman's feeling about this that led him to the invention of the inverted detective story, in which the reader knows the solution from the beginning and takes his pleasure from watching the detective trace it out a step at a time.

4. It must be realistic as to character, setting, and atmosphere. It must be about real people in a real world. Very few mystery writers have any talent for character work, but that doesn't mean it is not necessary. It makes the difference between the story you reread and remember and the one you skim through and almost instantly forget. Those like Valentine Williams who say the problem overrides everything are merely trying to cover up their own inability to create character.

5. It must have a sound story value apart from the mystery element; i.e., the investigation itself must be an adventure worth reading.

6. To achieve this it must have some form of suspense, even if only intellectual. This does not mean menace and especially it does not mean that the detective must be menaced by grave personal danger. This last is a trend and like all trends will exhaust itself by overimitation. Nor need the reader be kept hanging onto the edge of his chair. The overplotted story can be dull too; too much shock may result in numbness to shock. But there must be conflict, physical, ethical or emotional, and there must be some element of danger in the broadest sense of the word.

7. It must have color, lift, and a reasonable amount of dash. It takes an awful lot of technical adroitness to compensate for a dull style, although it has been done, especially in England.

8. It must have enough essential simplicity to be explained easily when the time comes. (This is possibly the most often violated of all the rules). The ideal denouement is one in which everything is revealed in a flash of action. This is rare because ideas that good are always rare. The explanation need not be very short (except on the screen), and often it cannot be short; but it must be interesting in itself, it must be something the reader is anxious to hear, and not a new story with a new set of characters, dragged in to justify an overcomplicated plot. Above all the explanation must not be merely a long-winded assembling of minute circumstances which no ordinary reader could possibly be expected to remember. To make the solution dependent on this is a kind of unfairness, since here again the reader did not have the solution within his grasp, in any practical sense. To expect him to remember a thousand trivialities and from them to select the three that are decisive is as unfair as to expect him to have a profound knowledge of chemistry, metallurgy, or the mating habits of the Patagonian anteater.

9. It must baffle a reasonably intelligent reader. This opens up a very difficult question. Some of the best detective stories ever written (those of Austin Freeman, for example) seldom baffle an intelligent reader to the end. But the reader does not guess the *complete solution* and could not himself have made a logical demonstration of it. Since readers are of many minds, some will guess a cleverly hidden murder and some will be fooled by the most transparent plot. (Could "The Red-Headed League" ever really fool a modern reader?) It is not necessary or even possible to fool to the hilt the real aficionado of mystery fiction. A mystery story that consistently did that and was honest would be unintelligible to the average fan; he simply would not know what the story was all about. But there must be some important elements of the story that elude the most penetrating reader.

10. The solution must seem inevitable once revealed. This is the least often emphasized element of a good mystery, but it is one of the important elements of all fiction. It is not enough merely to fool or elude or sidestep the reader; you must make him feel that he ought not to have been fooled and that the fooling was honorable.

11. It must not try to do everything at once. If it is a puzzle story operating in a rather cool, reasonable atmosphere, it cannot also be a violent adventure or a passionate romance. An atmosphere of terror destroys logical thinking; if the story is about the intricate psychological pressures that lead apparently ordinary people to commit murder, it cannot then switch to the cool analysis of the police investigator. The detective cannot be hero and menace at the same time; the murderer cannot be a tormented victim of circumstance and also a heavy.

12. It must punish the criminal in one way or another, not necessarily by operation of the law. Contrary to popular (and Johnston Office) belief, this requirement has nothing much to do with morality. It is a part of the logic of detection. If the detective fails to resolve the consequences of the crime, the story is an unresolved chord and leaves irritation behind it.

ADDENDA

1. The perfect detective story cannot be written. The type of mind which can evolve the perfect problem is not the type of mind that can produce the artistic job of writing. It would be nice to have Dashiell Hammett and Austin Freeman in the same book, but it just isn't possible. Hammett couldn't have the plodding patience and Freeman couldn't have the verve for narrative. They don't go together. Even a fair compromise such as Dorothy Sayers is less satisfying than the two types taken separately.

2. The most effective way to conceal a simple mystery is behind another mystery. This is literary legerdemain. You do not fool the reader by hiding clues or faking character à la Christie but by making him solve the wrong problem.

3. It has been said that "nobody cares about the corpse." This is bunk. It is throwing away a valuable element. It is like saying the murder of your aunt means no more to you than the murder of an unknown man in an unknown part of a city you never visited.

4. Flip dialogue is not wit.

5. A mystery serial does not make a good mystery novel. The "curtains" depend for their effect on your not having the next chapter to read at once. In book form these curtains give the effect of a false suspense and tend to be merely irritating. The magazines have begun to find that out.

6. Love interest nearly always weakens a mystery story because it creates a type of suspense that is antagonistic and not complementary to the detective's struggle to solve the problem. The kind of love interest that works is the one that complicates the problem by adding to the detective's troubles but which at the same time you instinctively feel will not survive the story. A really good detective never gets married. He would lose his detachment, and this detachment is part of his charm.

7. The fact that love interest is played up in the big magazines and on the screen doesn't make it artistic. Women are supposed to be the targets of magazine fiction and movies. The magazines are not interested in mystery writing as an art. They are not interested in any kind of writing as an art.

8. The hero of the mystery story is the detective. Everything hangs on his

personality. If he hasn't one, you have very little. And you have *very few* really good mystery stories. Naturally.

9. The criminal cannot be the detective. This is an old rule and has once in a while been violated successfully, but it is sound as it ever was. For this reason: the detective by tradition and definition is the seeker after truth. He can't be that if he already knows the truth. There is an implied guarantee to the reader that the detective is on the level.

10. The same remark applies to the story where the first-person narrator is the criminal. I should personally have to qualify this by saying that for me the first-person narration can always be accused of subtle dishonesty because of its appearance of candor and its ability to suppress the detective's ratiocination while giving a clear account of his words and acts. Which opens up the much larger question of what honesty really is in this context; is it not a matter of degree rather than an absolute? I think it is and always will be. Regardless of the candor of the first-person narrative there comes a time when the detective has made up his mind and yet does not communicate this to the reader. He holds some of his thinking out for the denouement or explanation. He tells the facts but not the reaction in his mind to those facts. Is this a permissible convention of deceit? It must be; otherwise the detective telling his own story could not have solved the problem in advance of the technical denouement. Once in a lifetime a story such as *The Big Sleep* holds almost nothing back; the denouement is an action which the reader meets as soon as the detective. The theorizing from that action follows immediately. There is only a momentary concealment of the fact that Marlowe loaded the gun with blanks when he gave it to Carmen down by the oil sump. But even this is tipped off to the reader when he says, "If she missed the can, which she was certain to do, she would probably hit the wheel. That would stop a small slug completely. However she wasn't going to hit even that." He doesn't say why, but the action follows so quickly that you don't feel any real concealment.

11. The murderer must not be a loony. The murderer is not a murderer unless he commits murder in the legal sense.

12. There is, as has been said, no real possibility of absolute perfection [in writing a mystery story]. Why? For two main reasons, one of which has been stated above in Addenda Note 1. The second is the attitude of the reader himself. Readers are of too many kinds and too many levels of culture. The puzzle addict, for instance, regards the story as a contest of wits between himself and the writer; if he guesses the solution, he has won, even though he could not document his guess or justify it by solid reasoning. There is something of this competitive spirit in all readers, but the reader in whom it predominates sees no value beyond the game of guessing the solution. There is the reader, again, whose whole interest is in

sensation, sadism, cruelty, blood, and the element of death. Again there is some in all of us, but the reader in whom it predominates will care nothing for the so-called deductive story, however meticulous. A third class of reader is the worrier-about-the-characters; this reader doesn't care so much about the solution; what really gets her upset is the chance that the silly little heroine will get her neck twisted on the spiral staircase. Fourth, and most important, there is the intellectual literate reader who reads mysteries because they are almost the only kind of fiction that does not get too big for its boots. This reader savors style, characterization, plot twists, all the virtuosités of the writing much more than he bothers about the solution. You cannot satisfy all these readers completely. To do so involves contradictory elements. I, in the role of reader, almost never try to guess the solution to a mystery. I simply don't regard the contest between the writer and myself as important. To be frank I regard it as the amusement of an inferior type of mind.

13. As has been suggested above, all fiction depends on some form of suspense. But the study of the mechanics of that extreme type called menace reveals the curious psychological duality of the mind of a reader or audience which makes it possible on the one hand to be terrified about what is hiding behind the door and at the same time to know that the heroine or leading lady is not going to be murdered once she is established as the heroine or leading lady. If the character played by Claudette Colbert is in awful danger, we also know absolutely that Miss Colbert is not going to be hurt for the simple reason that she is Miss Colbert. How does the audience's mind get upset by menace in view of this clear knowledge? Of the many possible reasons I suggest two. The intelligence and the emotions function on different levels. The emotional reaction to visual images and sounds, or their evocation in descriptive writing, is independent of reasonableness. The primitive element of fear is never far from the surface of our thoughts; anything that calls to it can defeat reason for the time being. Hence menace makes its appeal to a very ancient and very irrational emotion. Few men are beyond its influence. The other reason I suggest is that in any intense kind of literary or other projection the part is greater than the whole. The scene before the eyes dominates the thought of the audience; the normal individual makes no attempt to reconcile it with the pattern of the story. He is swayed by what is in the actual scene. When you have finished the book, it may, not necessarily will, fall into focus as a whole and be remembered by its merit so considered; but for the time of reading, the chapter is the dominating factor. The vision of the emotional imagination is very short but also very intense.

James Holding

Dumb Dude

When I got the hot tip on Alacrity and added up all my liquid assets, I knew there was only one thing to do: consult Harry Carmichael.

I found him in Clancy's Bar, sitting on his usual stool, drinking his usual poison, a Negroni. I've been told that a Negroni is warm and comforting but carries quite a kick. I can't even drink one martini on the rocks without flying like a bird, so I stick to beer and leave Negronis strictly alone.

Ordinarily I leave Harry Carmichael alone, too, because he's not what you'd call a reliable, predictable person. His heart is just as full of larceny as mine is, I know that, but his methods are so crazy and his morals so mixed up that it's hard to know where you are with him. All the same, there are times when a dumb dude like me needs the benefit of Harry's Ivy League brains. And this was one of them.

I put a hip down on the bar stool next to Harry's and said, "Hi, Harry. You're just the man I've been looking for."

Harry turned his mild blue eyes my way. "Well, Charles, you have found me, it seems." Everybody else calls me Chuck, of course. The fluorescent tube above the back bar mirror threw a shiny highlight onto Harry's bald dome.

I said, "Harry, I need your advice. I need it worse'n I ever needed it before."

He nodded and took his Negroni firmly in his right hand and said, "Come to a booth, Charles, where we can be more private."

I ordered a beer from Clancy's son-in-law, who tends bar for him, and then followed Harry to the back booth. "Now," I announced, sitting down across from Harry, "I suddenly have the opportunity of a long lifetime, Harry. A chance to make a real score. And here I am, without ten bucks to my name!"

Harry grinned at me. "I thought you had your poverty-stricken look on tonight," he said. "Unfortunately, my own wallet, too, at this moment is regrettably null and void. With the accent on the *void*. So if the purpose of your visit is to negotiate a small loan from me, I fear you will be disappointed. Insolvency, Charles, as I have frequently observed, tends to become perennial. . . ."

I interrupted him. "Wait," I said, "you're broke and so am I, Harry. Okay. But that doesn't mean we have to *stay* broke. Not with the red-hot inside information I just got from my cousin Lewis out at Delaware Park."

"Your cousin Lewis?" He raised his eyebrows. "I don't believe you've mentioned him before, Charles."

"Maybe not. Anyway, he's an exercise boy at the track. And he just told me about a horse that's a dead sure thing to win the seventh race tomorrow."

Harry's eyes showed interest. He loves a good wager, Harry does, especially on horses. "What is this wonder horse's name? And how does your cousin Lewis know so surely that he will win the seventh race tomorrow?" Harry goes right to the heart of things, you see, when his brain starts clicking.

I said, "The horse's name is Alacrity. And the reason he's going to win tomorrow, Lewis says, is because at a secret workout this morning, Alacrity broke the track record for six furlongs by a full second!"

Harry didn't get excited right away at this news. He said, "It is surprising we haven't heard of this horse before if he can run like that."

"Lewis says he's had some sort of muscle trouble for two years. He's shown great early foot in every race he's run. Then these cramps get to him, and he quits."

"And he won't quit tomorrow?"

"Lewis says not."

"Why not?"

"Because the cramps are over with. A vet in Chicago has cured him. Alacrity is ready at last to show what he can do. And Lewis says he can do plenty."

"Ah, yes," said Harry thoughtfully. "Lewis is your cousin, you say?"

"Yes."

"And you therefore take as gospel truth what he tells you about this horse?"

"Why shouldn't I? He's more like a brother, Harry. My mom raised him along with us six of her own."

"I see. All in the family, eh?" Harry looked at me shrewdly over the edge of his Negroni glass, almost empty now. "I'm inclined to believe you, Charles. And your cousin Lewis as well. Did he drop any hints about what the morning line might show on Alacrity?"

I said with guarded enthusiasm, "At least twenty to one. Maybe thirty to one."

"M-m-m good!" Harry said with relish. Then, as though he'd just thought of it, "What we need, Charles, is money, is it not? Quite a bit of money. Enough to make your inside information yield a respectable return."

"Right," I said. "That's why I came to you, Harry. If anybody can figure out how to get up a quick bundle, you can."

Harry bowed solemnly across the table. "Thank you, Charles. I shall try to justify your confidence in me."

"Got any ideas?" I asked eagerly.

"Not yet. I intend, however, to give the matter my earnest and early consideration. Will you call around at my apartment tomorrow around nine o'clock?" Harry's "apartment" is a beat-up, book-lined back bedroom in a crumby rooming house.

But I said immediately, "I'll be there, Harry. And I just know you'll think of something."

The funny thing was, I was absolutely sure he would.

He did.

He greeted me with a broad smile next morning when I knocked on his door. I said, "Harry, you've got it!"

He nodded modestly. "Yes," he said, "come in, Charles." He closed the door after me and invited me to sit down. "Quite a satisfactory solution to our problem occurred to me at dawn this morning, Charles. In consequence, I intend to take the bus out to the race course."

"One of the specials for track fans they run out to Delaware Park?"

"Exactly."

"And how will that help us?" I had perfect faith in Harry, understand, yet I'll admit I was slightly disappointed in him so far.

Harry came out with it then. "I intend to rob the other passengers on that bus."

"Rob them!"

"It's really a splendid idea, Charles. They will be going to the race track, too, you see . . . and should have adequate cash among them for our purpose."

"I hope!"

"And with our superior knowledge," Harry continued, "we can lay their money for them far more profitably than they could." Harry laughed, tickled with the thought. "The vast majority of horse-bettors invariably lose money on any given day at the track, anyway, Charles. So they'll be expecting it, in a way."

I said doubtfully, "Harry, how can you rob a busload of horse-players on the way to the track, and then calmly walk in and put the stolen money down on Alacrity in the seventh? Everybody in Baltimore will be after you. The bus passengers, the bus company, the police, the track security guards. . . ."

Harry waved a negligent hand. "Not to worry, Charles. I shall divert the bus to another route, of course. And furthermore, I shall wear my Ivy League jacket and my Brooks Brothers shirt and tie, Charles. I shall look more respectable than a city councilman." He paused. "Perhaps that is an unfortunate simile. But you see what I mean. Added to this ultra-respectable outfit, I plan to wear my brown contact lenses, changing the color of my eyes; my elevator shoes, changing my height; my false mustache, changing my face; and my long-haired hippy wig to conceal my baldness. In a word, Charles, disguise. I can guarantee I shall be transformed to a degree that will certainly obviate future identification by any of my victims."

"Great, Harry. But what'll I wear for a disguise? I don't want to land in the soup either, you know."

"You will need no disguise, Charles. You are not going to accompany me on the bus."

I gave him a startled look. "I'm not?"

"By no means. Your role is very important to our success, however. You must steal a motor car of some sort, drive it to Halethorpe, and meet me there. Are you familiar with Halethorpe, Charles?"

I nodded. "A little suburban dump ten miles south of here on the Beltway?"

"Exactly. Its virtue for us is that the Baltimore Beltway Interchange for Route 95 happens to be at Halethorpe." He got out a big scale city map and showed me the spot. "I shall leave the bus at Halethorpe, join you in your car, and proceed with you to Delaware Park, leaving the bus stranded on the Beltway until at least the next exit. And you and I shall arrive at the track in good time, I hope, to wager our takings on Alacrity in the seventh race. What do you think?"

"Beautiful," I said. "How do you figure to handle a whole busload of people by yourself, though?"

"I shall blame my desperate resort to crime on gambling," Harry said

with dignity. "And being gamblers themselves, I have no doubt the bus passengers will understand and cooperate with me, albeit rather unwillingly."

"You're not going to tell them about Alacrity?" I asked in horror.

"Do you take me for an idiot? Of course not."

"Well, how are you going to control them while you're explaining things to them?"

He gave me a kewpie-doll smile. "With this," he said, and pulled the biggest, blackest forty-five automatic I have ever seen out of a shoulder holster under his coat.

All I could say to that was "Oh." His idea for crowd control seemed quite convincing to me.

Shoving his gun back in its holster, Harry then gave me a detailed briefing. "I shall take the special race track bus at the Civic Center downtown at eleven o'clock. I have calculated that one hour and ten minutes should suffice for me to complete my business on the bus. So you will meet me at the Halethorpe Interchange, please, no later than noon. Indeed, I suggest you be there a few minutes early for safety."

"You're going to force the bus driver to circle the city on the Beltway while you rob his passengers, is that it?"

"I thought I had made that clear some time ago," Harry said chidingly. "You must pay attention, Charles."

"I'm paying attention," I said, "and I'll meet you in Halethorpe when you say. I'll be parked right here," I said, pointing to his map, "heading west. You won't know what kind of car I'll have, so watch for me. I'll be standing outside the car, leaning against its left front fender."

"Very clever of you, Charles. I'll find you, never fear." He smiled and nodded and stood up and waved me out of his room.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you at Halethorpe. Good luck, Harry."

"Thank you, Charles." As I was going out his door, he suddenly called, "Look, Charles!"

I stopped and looked back at him. For a moment, I thought I was looking at a total stranger. Then I realized he'd clapped his long-haired wig on his bald head. He was right. I wouldn't have known him in a thousand years, even without those other goodies still to come, the brown contacts, the elevator shoes, the mustache, and the Ivy League jacket and Brooks Brothers shirt and tie.

And the morning line *had* shown Alacrity at thirty to one.

Like I said at the beginning, I'm a dumb dude compared to Harry, but that doesn't mean I'm not pretty slick when it comes to stealing cars. At

one time, when I was younger, and the South American market was better, stealing cars was my specialty, you might say. So picking up a nice little gray Vega with a half-full gas tank was no sweat for me, even in broad daylight. I borrowed it from a parking lot outside a factory where its owner wouldn't miss it until he knocked off work at five o'clock.

Then I drove south by back roads till I was near Halethorpe, found a deserted lane through a strip of woods, and loafed there until fifteen minutes before noon. By five minutes to twelve, I was in position at the Beltway Interchange, standing outside the parked Vega, leaning against the left front fender. I was early, like Harry told me.

There wasn't any action, though, until ten after twelve. Then I saw this long-haired character in an Ivy League jacket come walking leisurely down the Interchange ramp from the Beltway, swinging a brown paper bag in one hand. It was Harry. He saw me right away and hurried over, smiling and making the OK sign with his other hand.

It *was* okay, I can tell you! While I drove out of Halethorpe headed for Delaware Park, Harry opened his sack and counted onto the car seat between us two thousand, five hundred and thirty-eight dollars in beautiful green bills.

"Wow!" I said, when he finished counting. "We're rich, Harry!"

"And if we're not," Harry said complacently, "it's because your cousin Lewis is a very poor judge of horseflesh."

"Any trouble?" I asked.

"None at all, I'm happy to say. I'll tell you about it later, Charles. First, let me un-disguise myself." He stuffed his fright wig, his contact lenses, his fake mustache and his Ivy League jacket into the paper bag. Then he leaned back against the cushions of the Vega and said gently, "People are really very understanding, Charles, if you explain things to them. I extracted that money from the bus passengers . . . there were forty-four of them, by the way . . . without having to resort to violence at all."

"Great," I said. I was relieved. "How?"

"Well, I sort of had to hold my gun on the driver and threaten to shoot him while the bus was traveling at fifty-five miles per hour to make my point. But I *did* make it. And once they grasped the situation, every passenger voluntarily contributed his mite to our war chest. Except the driver, of course. I didn't think it fair to collect from him, since my gun was making him quite miserable and jumpy at the time."

I wagged my head. "You're really something, Harry," I said in admiration. "Twenty-five hundred and thirty-eight bucks and you're not even breathing hard! How much will that come to at thirty to one?"

"Let us leave out the odd thirty-eight dollars," Harry said, "which we

may fairly apply against expenses, I think. At thirty to one, we should have a nest egg in the neighborhood of seventy-five thousand dollars, Charles."

"We're rich!" I cried, guiding the Vega over a rough road that seemed as smooth as glass to me. "But I said that before, didn't I?"

"You did," Harry said, "and we are. Unless Alacrity lets us down."

Alacrity didn't let us down. He finished eight lengths ahead of the field to establish a new track record.

The odds, however, were a disappointment. As race time approached, it seemed evident that my cousin Lewis must have told other relatives and friends about Alacrity's prospects. For by the time Harry and I had ditched our stolen car near Delaware Park, walked to the track, paid our way in, and got our bets down, the odds on Alacrity had fallen to twenty to one, and the horse actually went off at fifteen to one. Still, Harry and I went home with thirty-seven thousand dollars between us. The other five hundred we won on Alacrity, we bet like damn fools on a dog in the eighth race that was still making the turn into the stretch when the winner was crossing the finish line.

Out of respect for the money in Harry's paper bag, and with the comforting protection of the forty-five still tucked away under Harry's arm, we took a cab direct from the track to Harry's apartment. Harry was anxious to get the split out of the way before dinner, he said. He didn't say why, but I could give a guess. After three or four of his Negronis, Harry couldn't count straight.

Once back in his room with the door locked, he dumped our winnings out of his paper bag along with the crumpled elements of his disguise. "Now then," he said comfortably, "let me just figure this out, Charles."

"What's to figure?" I said happily. "Fifty-fifty, Harry."

"Of course. Now let me see." Harry got out a pencil, flattened the paper bag on the table top, and began to figure on it.

"Total capital," Harry said, "two thousand, five hundred thirty-eight dollars . . ." he went on muttering to himself and figuring on the brown bag for five minutes as though he were a tax accountant. Finally, his figuring done, he divided up the money, moving his lips silently as he counted.

When he was finished, he pushed a pile of bills toward me. I'm sorry to say I couldn't help noticing it was a smaller pile than the one he kept for himself.

"Hold it, Harry," I said, "haven't you made a mistake?"

He looked as innocent as a newborn baby. "Mistake?" he echoed.

"Yeah, Harry. I don't think you gave me my full share here."

"Count it, Charles," he directed me.

I counted it slowly and carefully. It came to sixteen thousand, one hundred and ninety dollars. I began to do a slow burn. I said, "First time I knew that sixteen, one-ninety was half of thirty-seven grand, Harry."

"Oh, it isn't, it isn't," Harry said. "But that's your fair share, all the same, Charles."

I remembered the gun under his arm but I said it anyway: "How in God's name do you figure that?"

"Calm down, Charles, I beg of you." He sounded like a nurse arguing with a nut. "I believe you will agree that our expenses came out to about the extra thirty-eight dollars we allowed for them? For admission to the track, for two hot dogs, two beers, cab fare, and the generous tip we gave the cab driver?"

"Sure," I said, "but . . ."

"And you'll remember, no doubt, that we lost five hundred on that snail in the eighth race?"

"Sure, but that still leaves us with thirty-seven thousand to split fifty-fifty!"

Harry shook his head. "I haven't finished with the expenses yet," he said. "Look here. This is an expense item also, Charles." He indicated a figure on his paper bag. "Five thousand and seventy-six dollars."

I stared at him. "For what?" I yelped. "Expenses for what?"

"Call it return of principal with accrued interest if you prefer," Harry said solemnly and waited for my reaction.

My reaction was a sick choking sound. Harry laughed at that until the tears ran down his cheeks. "I saved that item for a little surprise, Charles," he said when he could control his mirth. "You will note that five thousand seventy-six dollars is exactly double the twenty-five hundred and thirty-eight dollars I borrowed from the bus passengers?"

I nodded.

"Two to one, Charles, do you see?"

"I only see you better explain damn quick if you want to keep your health, Harry!"

He went into another fit of laughing. "It is quite simple, Charles. I cajoled the people on the bus into giving me their money by offering them two to one on their contributions . . . *if* my gamble paid off."

"Your gamble! You told me you didn't mention Alacrity!"

"I didn't. I fear I gave the bus passengers the erroneous impression that I was going to Vegas for a last desperate fling at the crap tables. As I say, they were gamblers themselves, all those horseplayers on the bus, so they figured a chance of a two-to-one payoff was better than nothing at all, or a bullet in the leg. So they anted up handsomely. Do you see it now? A

simple double-your-money-back offer. The advertising people use it all the time.”

I calmed down a little. “So you’re keeping that five thousand and seventy-six bucks to return to the bus passengers, is that it?”

“Exactly,” Harry said, beaming.

“You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you, Harry?” I asked in deep disgust. “Why, you don’t even know their names or how much money you stole from each one!”

“Oh, but I do!” Harry reached for his crumpled Ivy League jacket and took a small notebook from its inside pocket. “I have all their names and addresses right here, Charles, together with a notation of the amount each contributed to our wager.”

I choked again. Harry was full of surprises, all right. “How the hell did you get that information when you were *robbing* the people?” I asked.

“Merely passed my notebook around and asked them to enter their names, addresses and contributions, so I could send them their winnings, if any.”

To tell you the truth, I didn’t know whether he was leveling with me or conning me out of twenty-five hundred and thirty-eight dollars. He could have had that phony list of names all ready before he ever got on the bus. But how about the amounts? I said, “Harry, if you don’t mind, I’d like to examine your little notebook.”

“By all means, Charles. Please do, if you doubt me. And I can see you do.”

The names and addresses were there, all right. And an amount entered opposite each name. I added up all the figures and, believe it or not, the total came to exactly twenty-five hundred and thirty-eight dollars. He couldn’t have had *those* prepared before he hijacked the bus, I told myself. And he certainly hadn’t had time to put them down since. So he *could* be telling me the truth.

Then another thought struck me. Even if the bus robbery had happened the way he said it did, how did I know he’d ever *make* his payoff to the bus passengers?

Well, like I said at the beginning, Harry’s an unpredictable person. So maybe, just maybe, he might actually send those passengers double their money back. I doubted it, but it was possible.

After thinking it over for a minute while he watched me with a smile, I decided I’d let him get away with cheating me, if that’s what he was doing, because without Harry, I wouldn’t have made one red cent off Alacrity’s flying heels. So he was entitled to a little bonus.

Just for my own satisfaction, though, I took Harry’s pencil and did a

little figuring of my own on his brown paper bag. After that, I counted my money again. Then I looked at Harry and said, "Damn it, Harry, even if you *do* have to pay off your bus people like you say, I'm still twenty-two bucks short!"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Charles, that's right," he said. "That's another expense item. A very minor one, however."

"Minor or not," I snarled, "what the hell are you holding back that twenty-two bucks for?"

"Bus fare," Harry said. "There were forty-four passengers on the bus, Charles. And you must admit I caused them to waste their bus fares. So I intend to add an extra dollar to each one's payoff."

That was enough for me. I couldn't help laughing. "Harry," I said, "I know I'm repeating myself, but you really are something else! Refunding their *bus* fare, for God's sake!"

"Certainly," said Harry with a virtuous air, "one tries to be as scrupulous as possible about such things, Charles."

"Absolutely, Harry," I agreed, although I had the feeling I had just made Harry a gift of forty-four Negronis. For even a dumb dude like me knows that a Negroni at Clancy's Bar costs a dollar even, and the bus fare from Civic Center to the race track is only fifty cents.

Frank Sisk

In Limbo

Sunlight flickers through the blossoming cherry tree. The patio is warm and delicately scented. Somewhere in the garden a meadowlark whistles two slurred notes over and over. Sitting slack in the wheelchair, Margaret Kemper listens to the bird until human voices begin to drift through the open French windows nearby.

“. . . early stages of convalescence,” says Dr. Jostyn’s soft tenor.

“We realize that,” a deeper voice says. “Still . . .”

“I assure you, gentlemen—” Jostyn’s voice, though soft, is insistent—“she is totally incapable at this time of shedding a scintilla of light on your investigation.”

“When we talked earlier on the phone to Mister Zane here, he gave us permission to . . .”

“Mister Zane has had second thoughts on the subject.”

“I’m afraid that’s so, Lieutenant.” This is Edmund’s unctuous voice. “Doctor Jostyn has convinced me that my aunt is not physically up to being interviewed. After all, this is only her second day home from the hospital. I’m sorry if I’ve . . .”

“Doctor,” the deep voice interrupts.

“Yes?”

“Can we see her just for the record, just so we can report to our superiors that she’s still unable to, uh, communicate?”

“I must say no, Lieutenant.”

“When can we come back?”

“Phone my office a week from today. Then we’ll see.”

A pink petal floats down from the cherry tree and settles on the back of Margaret Kemper’s left hand. The hand lies limp in her lap. She wills it to dislodge the petal but it fails to respond.

She wakes from a brown study as the nurse, Grace Horne, appears on the patio. It must be noon. Miss Horne, plump face aglow with a smile, deposits a round tray on the marble top of a wrought-iron table. Orange

juice, some sort of grayish porridge, cambric tea, silverware, a linen napkin.

"It may not be caviar and champagne, dear," Miss Horne says in her surprisingly high voice. "But it sure beats getting your calories through a needle. Here we go." She shakes open the napkin and leans forward beamingly to tuck a corner of it inside the yoke of Margaret Kemper's dressing gown. "Let's start with the orange juice, shall we? Do you want to try it through a straw today?"

Staring straight ahead, Margaret Kemper gives no sign that she hears a word that Miss Horne is saying.

"Well, we'll make an effort anyway," Miss Horne says, stripping paper from a plastic straw. "Two inches forward, one inch back. Two inches forward, one inch back. That's what Doctor Jostyn calls progress."

The straw is not a success. She could have predicted as much. The nerveless left side of her face refuses to cooperate. Juice dribbles from the sagging edge of her lips and runs down her unfeeling chin. She sees a pinkish stain growing on the napkin.

"All right, dear," Miss Horne says. "We'll return to the spoon. Rome wasn't built in a day."

While she is being spoon-fed, Edmund Zane drifts out onto the patio. He wears a white turtleneck sweater under a blue blazer. His youthful face is deeply tanned. It might be considered rather attractive except for an almost perpetual simper. Edmund devotes much of his day to golf, tennis or swimming. From his mother he has inherited an ingrained habit of leisure and a small fortune with which to support it, but the fortune is now exhausted.

"Well, how is our pretty vegetable doing today?" he asks Miss Horne.

The nurse regards him stonily. "Please don't use that word."

Smirking, Edmund takes a cigarette from a silver case and lights it with a silver lighter. "Do you find the word offensive, Miss Horne?"

"I find it senseless."

"I should think under the circumstances it aptly describes Aunt Margaret's mental and physical condition. Or am I wrong?"

"You're probably dead wrong."

Edmund exhales a cloud of smoke and peers through it narrowly at Margaret Kemper. "Do you mean to say she is beginning to comprehend things, recognize people?"

"I think so," Miss Horne says.

"Incredible. To me, frankly, she appears to be completely out of touch with reality. Why, I'd bet odds she's no more aware of her surroundings than, well, let's say that cherry tree."

"Don't you have something else to do?"

“Just look at her. A withered vine if I ever saw one.”

A blaze of anger invests Miss Horne's normally mild brown eyes. “I think you'd, I think you'd better leave. I have strict orders, the strictest, from Doctor Jostyn that Margaret, Missis Kemper, is to be protected from any unnecessary disturbances.”

Edmund widens his little simper into a simpering smile. He flicks ash from the cigarette. He saunters back inside the house, his manner contemptuous and proprietary.

Why is Edmund Zane living in this house now?

Margaret Kemper asks herself this question much later in the privacy of her bedroom.

She remembers he has been *persona non grata* here ever since the clumsy attempt to blackmail Paul. How long ago is that? She isn't sure. The red edge of a ravine separates the exact past from the exact present. That is how her stroke is symbolized in her painful memory of it—a red-edged ravine opening suddenly underfoot, with a faint roar.

Imagine anyone in his right mind trying to blackmail Paul Kemper. Edmund had badly misjudged his uncle. Even as a young man Paul was always intractably proud and reckless, a gambler for high stakes, a player not easy to bluff, and these characteristics hardened with maturity. Edmund was lucky not to have landed in jail. Consanguinity—his late mother was Paul's only sister—was what had saved him from that. But it hadn't saved him from banishment.

“I never want to see that simpering fool in our house again,” Paul told Margaret. “I expect you to abide by my decision.”

On those frequent occasions, however, when Paul was away on business and Edmund, always the brassy sponger, dropped by with friends to use the pool or the tennis court, Margaret looked the other way.

Why?

Was it because she felt she indirectly owed the young ass a debt for opening her eyes after seventeen years of marriage to the intolerable truth about her husband? Yes, perhaps that was it.

But how is it, she wonders now in the privacy of her bedroom, that Edmund seems to have taken up full-time residency here? Why does Paul permit it?

Then she again remembers a fact that is continually slipping from her mind:

Paul is dead.

A soft June rain whispers among the roses outside the screened windows of the sun porch. Margaret Kemper sits half-reclining on a long chaise. A colorful afghan covers her from the waist down.

Mattie Morgan, a pleasantly plain girl whom Mrs. Stovral, the housekeeper, has enlisted as a general maid, ventures into the room with a red bowl full of pale yellow grapes. She approaches the chaise apprehensively.

"Good mornin', ma'am." Her voice has the same girlish timbre as Miss Horne's. "You're lookin' good this mornin' and here's some nice grapes if you'd like." She sets the bowl on a coffee table alongside the chaise. "They's seedless, ma'am, and been chilled a little. Miz Stovral says you always liked seedless grapes that way—chilled a little."

Margaret Kemper stares straight ahead, seeing and not seeing.

"Would you like me to put one in your—" Mattie can't finish the question because, obviously, the idea of feeding Mrs. Kemper a grape frightens her. She finally inches the bowl to the edge of the table closest to the chaise and, with an uncertain smile, departs.

Alone, Margaret Kemper carefully lifts her viable right hand from the soft afghan. It's a thinner hand than it used to be, almost transparently thin, and intricately veined and ringless. She sends it fluttering uncertainly above the red bowl. Long white fingers dip down, seize a fat frosty grape, transport it with delicate precision to her pale-lipped lopsided mouth. Eager teeth crush the grape's chilly skin, releasing a rich spurt of juice against the parched palate. She closes her eyes, the good one and the heavy-lidded, in a spasm of ecstasy and thinks:

Up out of limbo. Yes, yes, yes. I'm going to start coming up out of limbo at last. . . .

A part of the patio is covered with a velvety carpet of cherry blossoms. In the wheelchair Margaret Kemper enjoys the exquisite warmth of the morning sun. A few feet away, his freckled baldness gleaming, Dr. Jostyn talks softly and seriously to Miss Horne.

". . . the impact of the bullet—and that's what an arterial clot actually is, Miss Horne, a bullet in the chamber—to survive its impact for a few days is more than half the battle. That's why I'm so optimistic about Margaret. She's coming along fine. Pretty soon I'll get a rehabilitation therapist in here. In the meantime we can try a bit of simple therapy ourselves."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"All the routine tests indicate a possible impairment of the auditory faculty—temporary, in my belief—but the ocular faculty appears to be unaffected. The droop of the left eyelid is only a sign of the nervous system's malfunction on that side of the body. Her eyesight is probably as good as ever. Haven't you noticed how she watches any extraordinary movement?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Miss Horne says uncertainly.

"Of course the ability to see doesn't guarantee the process of assimilating

what is seen. She may be disoriented deeply or superficially. That's what we'll try to find out."

"Yes, Doctor."

"We know her left side is paralyzed." Dr. Jostyn begins to rummage in the squat black bag on the marble tabletop. "We know that presently she can't speak. We suspect that she may be totally or partially deaf. All negatives. But on the positive side—" from the bag he produces a thick yellow pencil and a pad of white paper—"there's the fact that she can see and can use her right hand."

"Is she naturally right-handed, Doctor?"

"Yes. So what we're going to do, Miss Horne, is to put the positive side of her condition in working order."

"Yes."

"Take these." Dr. Jostyn hands Miss Horne the pencil and paper. "Our basic research tools. It's time, isn't it, for her mid-morning orange juice?"

Miss Horne checks her wristwatch and nods.

"All right. Print the word 'juice' in big block letters, with a question mark after it."

Miss Horne complies.

"Now hold the pad in front of Margaret's eyes."

Miss Horne does so.

Margaret Kemper stares at the pad and seemingly right through it. JUICE? She recognizes the word. She understands the stratagem. But for some mysterious reason unknown even to herself she prefers to pretend utter lack of comprehension.

"Offer her the pad and pencil," Dr. Jostyn says.

Margaret Kemper ignores the offer and continues to stare expressionlessly into a special portion of sun-filled space.

"Just a minute." Dr. Jostyn takes the "basic research tools" from Miss Horne, prints under JUICE? the words YES and NO, and draws beside each a small square. "Let's see if she's up to a check-off."

Margaret Kemper again ignores the proffered pad and pencil.

"Well," says Dr. Jostyn, closing the black bag, "that's the practical course to follow for the next few days. Keep to the fundamentals. Food, drink, sleep, the periodic stool. Pretty soon, take my word for it, you'll get a definite response. As you know, Miss Horne, in most of these stroke cases progress is measured minutely at first—two millimeters forward, one millimeter backward. Infinite patience is the prerequisite."

"Yes," Miss Horne says.

"I'll drop by tomorrow afternoon. Meanwhile, keep young Zane out of her hair."

A blood clot chambered in an artery. Margaret Kemper muses for hours over Dr. Jostyn's figure of speech. *It travels in deadly silence to the brain, where it strikes with the impact of a bullet, causing the earth to open a red maw from which issues a dense gaseous oblivion.*

An instant earlier another small projectile—a real bullet—moves with invincible velocity toward Paul Kemper as he stands in the upper hallway at the head of the wide staircase. The hot twist of lead enters warm flesh and starts to melt it. Paul's hard body softens, collapses slowly in on itself, bounces like a rubbery substance halfway down the stairs.

Miss Horne tries her best as time passes.

She prints TEA ICED? HOT?

She prints SOUP CHICKEN? MUSHROOM?

She prints TOILET YES NO.

She prints TV? RADIO? STEREO? NEWSPAPER? BOOK? CARDS? JIGSAW?

All to no avail.

Every so often Edmund enters the periphery of Margaret Kemper's vision. She catches the strangeness of his gaze even while consciously ignoring it. Is she right in imagining that he seems to be waiting for something?

Tall, graying Jeffrey Burroughs arrives. Natty banker in tailored pinstripe, trusted confidante of the late Paul Kemper, executor of Paul's estate whose residuary legatee is the incapacitated widow, Burroughs goes through the motions of making an interim financial accounting but soon concludes the visit is serving no useful purpose. Touching Margaret's right shoulder with beneficence, he sadly departs. The scent of manly cologne lingers in his wake.

Approximating a semicircle, Miss Horne and four men sit vis-à-vis Margaret Kemper in the living room. Detective Lieutenant Jackson occupies an armless chair at the center. Detective Quinn, to his right, is immersed in an overstuffed armchair. Miss Horne perches on the edge of an ottoman beside Quinn. Dr. Jostyn and Edmund sit at either end of a roomy divan to Jackson's left.

Margaret Kemper sits apathetic in the wheelchair.

The Lieutenant has already prefaced the proceedings with a declaration that, while he is inclined to agree with Dr. Jostyn that nothing substantive may evolve from all this, he still needs something for the record, even if it's negative.

"Is the tape recorder ready, Pat?" Jackson asks Quinn.

"It's go," Quinn says.

"Let the record show that on this twenty-ninth day of June, at ten thirty-four in the morning, in the presence of witnesses to be identified later—" Jackson's voice is both flat and declamatory— "I am confronting one Margaret Kemper, the widow of Paul W. Kemper, inside the Kemper residence, the address being eleven Briarwood Terrace.

"Let the record further show that said Margaret Kemper is confined to a wheelchair. She is paralyzed along the left side of her body and unable to talk. Her physician says she may not be able to hear either. How old are you, ma'am?"

Margaret Kemper's absence from the moment is total.

"Let the record show that Missis Kemper neither responds to the question nor gives any visible indication she heard it. Her present condition is the result of a cerebrovascular accident—have I got that right, Doctor?"

Dr. Jostyn smiles mirthlessly and nods.

"This accident, or stroke as it's more commonly known, occurred about six weeks ago—the fifteenth of May, to be exact—on the day Paul Kemper was killed in this house by a bullet fired from a thirty-eight caliber revolver, probably a Smith and Wesson make, model number forty. How long had you and Mister Kemper been married at the time of his death, ma'am?"

Silence.

"Let the record show that the lady continues to remain mute. But for the sake of the record, Margaret Kemper is forty-one years old and had been married to Paul Kemper for seventeen years. . . ."

A long time ago, Margaret Kemper reflects. A different time, a different mood.

She remembers how healthy she was at 24 and how idealistic and naive. Nowadays a girl of 24 seems to have done everything twice, with no regrets; but she was saving herself for Mister Wonderful.

At 26 Paul Kemper qualified. He was handsome, forthright, imaginative, passionate, and a terrific tennis player. After their marriage she learned he was also driven by an insatiable ambition. It was her money, \$15,000 that first year, \$25,000 a year later, which gave Paul that initial impetus that eventually carried him close to the top in the real estate development business. Her own private means shrank to insignificance compared with the fortune Paul accumulated by the time he was 40 and (belated discovery) she was shrinking in his perspective to the same degree.

There were no children. The inherent fault was hers. Moreover, at 28 she began to suffer from a chronic circulatory problem (her father had been

likewise afflicted), with unsightly varicosities forming in her legs. She went from doctor to doctor in search of help. She stopped smoking. She wore support hose. She swallowed all kinds of anticoagulants. One physician even prescribed slightly less than toxic doses of strychnine as a stimulant for her circulatory system. "A damned quack," Dr. Jostyn called him when she first came to his office and, in outlining her case history, mentioned this treatment.

As the years passed, poor circulation finally developed into phlebitis, each successive attack leaving her a little worse off, a little closer to the prospect of surgery.

Looking back now, she finds it hard to believe how blind she was during this period to Paul's other interests. She mistook his flagging interest in her as a preoccupation with the complexities of his business. Her ego must have been monumental in those days.

The truth of the situation was disclosed by Paul himself. Over a second martini one evening, he remarked apropos of nothing, "This afternoon I read off that stupid nephew of mine for good."

"Edmund?"

"Who else? Let me make this clear, Margaret. I never want to see that simpering fool in our house again. I expect you to abide by my decision."

"But, dear, what's it all about?"

"The callow son of a bitch tried to shake me down."

"You mean he asked you for money?"

"Asked me? Hell, he tried blackmail. Imagine the gall of the bastard. Blackmail."

An inner voice warned her against listening further. She turned away as if the sight of her back would end the matter. But Paul was talking to himself as much as to her.

"I suppose I may as well tell you the story," he went on, "before he sneaks around while I'm not here and tells it to you himself. With embellishments. At least you'll be protected against the humiliation of surprise. It concerns Trudy."

"Trudy? Your secretary?" The words came from her mouth witlessly hushed.

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Edmund suggested I give him five thousand dollars not to mention Trudy's name in your presence."

"I don't think I quite understand," she heard her hushed voice saying, but she suddenly understood more than she wished to.

"Do I have to spell it out, Margaret?"

She was unable to reply.

"Don't take it so damned dramatically," he said.

She started to leave the room.

"It shouldn't come to you as such a big shock," he called after her, "considering the way it's gone with us the last few years."

Tears blurred her vision. She hurried up the stairs with one thought expanding inside her like suffocation: *Life is over, life is done with, life is finished. . . .*

For a week she contemplated suicide, considering one method after another—sleeping pills, strychnine, carbon monoxide. She even thought of her father's revolver, finally finding it fully loaded in a trunk in the attic. A Smith & Wesson, just as Lieutenant Jackson has speculated.

The suicide phase ended, oddly enough, with something said by Edmund, who in effect had started it all. Taking advantage of Paul's absence on a business trip, he dropped by one afternoon for a swim in the pool. He was sunning himself on an air mattress when Margaret, highball in hand, joined him.

"You've really got one hell of a nerve, Edmund," she said.

He looked up at her indolently through his dark glasses. "Paul told all, I see."

"He'd break your neck if he found you here."

"But he's in New Orleans, isn't he?"

"So I believe."

"With the trusty Trudy."

Margaret took a long swallow from the highball.

"Patience, dear Auntie—"

"Please spare me that title, Edmund."

"—patience. Trudy's not Paul's first playmate and she won't be his last. They come and go but you go on forever. You're his wife."

Wife. A verisimilitude, really. But it dislodged for good all further thought of suicide. She resolved to erect a facade of wifely dignity and proudly do battle whenever the opportunity presented itself. And she was rather successfully maintaining her poise right up until—

Margaret Kemper grows vaguely aware that Lieutenant Jackson has risen to his feet and taken two steps forward. He places something—a glossy photograph—in her lap. It depicts Paul, dull-eyed, lying on his back, the large body occupying half a dozen stairs, head downward. The breast pocket of his white shirt is stained pink.

"Does this picture strike a chord of memory, ma'am?" Lieutenant Jackson asks. "Respond, if you can, by blinking your right eye—once for yes, twice for no."

Dr. Jostyn comes to the Lieutenant's side. "Is this procedure actually necessary?"

"I think so, Doctor. Kemper was shot on a Thursday afternoon, the day off for the servants. There was nobody else in the house except Missis Kemper. It's possible she witnessed the murder and may even be able to identify the murderer."

"It may be," Dr. Jostyn says, his low-keyed voice laced with sarcasm, "that she herself is the murderer. Isn't that what you've been implying right along, Jackson?"

"The spouse in such cases is always suspect. But that hasn't been so here. First, we know the fatal shot was fired a few minutes before Missis Kemper was found in her room in a deep coma, the result of a stroke. The shot was heard by Mister Zane and two of his friends as they drove into the driveway to go for a swim in the pool. All three of these people rushed into the house through the front door. Mister Zane himself has stated that he ascended the stairs, where he discovered his uncle's body. Then he continued on to the upper floor where he soon found his aunt. She was unconscious. He saw no gun anywhere. Immediately he phoned for an ambulance and the police. We thoroughly searched every inch of the house and grounds without finding a gun. We knew that your patient here was physically incapable of disposing of it if she'd ever used it. As a result, we've worked on the theory that the murderer carried it off with him in his escape—probably going out the back door just as Zane and friends were coming in from the front."

"Well, all right then." Jostyn returns to his seat.

Once more Lieutenant Jackson turns his attention to Margaret Kemper. "Blink your right eye, ma'am, if you saw your husband as he's shown in this picture. One for yes, two for no."

She remains blinkless.

"Did you witness somebody shoot your husband?"

She lowered the right lid so that it was on par with the left and kept it that way.

"Well, so much for the record," Jackson says, repossessing the photograph.

"If you want my educated guess, Lieutenant," Dr. Jostyn says, "I believe Margaret Kemper was stricken before her husband was killed. When I examined her at the hospital thirty minutes later, all the signs were extremely moribund. Touch and go. She'd probably been in coma an hour at least."

Margaret Kemper smiles inwardly at Dr. Jostyn's professional opinion, and from under her hooded eyes she catches a glimpse of Edmund's know-it-all smirk.

Her memory of that afternoon is vivid.

Paul came home for a late lunch and announced he was moving into a downtown hotel. Hardly believing it, she asked him why. His answer was never to be forgotten:

“I find your presence increasingly uncomfortable, Margaret. That’s all.”

While he was packing a bag she went to her room, all thought and feeling frozen, and got her father’s revolver. She waited mindlessly, leaning against the inside of the door, until Paul called out, “I’m leaving now, Margaret. I’ll be back in a few days for some other things.”

“Just a minute,” she said, stepping out into the hallway.

He turned at the head of the stairs and set down the bag. He must have seen something fateful in her eyes, because the lines of his face hardened with intuitive realization just a second before she pulled the trigger.

Twilight.

Near the tall windows of her bedroom Margaret Kemper sits in the wheelchair. She’s gazing contemplatively out on the darkening stretch of lawn. Her expression is peaceful. She will sit thus until Miss Horne, presently eating dinner below with Mrs. Stovral, returns to prepare her for bed.

She is trying to banish the specter of death—Paul’s and her own close call—with a new hope of life, a resurrection, an escape from this tongueless limbo. For today she is definitely convinced that in a matter of time she will free herself from paralysis and regain the full use of her faculties.

“Yes,” she says. She says it aloud. “Yes,” she repeats, delighted. “Yes.”

A minute later the bedroom door opens with a whisper. She refrains from turning to look. The footfalls tell her the visitor isn’t a woman. In a moment Edmund appears in front of her.

“Good evening, dear Maggie,” he says. His speech is somewhat slurred. In one hand he holds a glass of iced liquid—a triple scotch, Margaret Kemper judges from the darkness of it—and in the other hand, a lighted cigarette. “Your performance for the fuzz this morning was a work of art. If I hadn’t been observing you closely, and with a special bit of information nobody else has, I might have been fooled myself.”

Margaret Kemper keeps looking out at the lawn.

“Do you have an ash tray handy?” Edmund is blatantly gauging the length of his cigarette ash. “I guess not.” He flicks the ash on the floor. “Untidy, I fear. But not always the case with me. In fact, my poor dear, I tidied up quite nicely for you the day you shot Paul. When I found you here in this room, the gun was still hot in your hand. I took care of that

though. Oh yes. I wrapped the foul thing in a handkerchief—making sure not to disturb your fingerprints—and tucked it in the trunk of my car while waiting for the fuzz to arrive in answer to my frantic call.

“I couldn’t have them arresting you for murder, could I? A conviction would have prevented you from inheriting a dime of Paul’s money. And since mean old Uncle had already cut me out of the will, I felt that you should not be punished too. I also knew, Maggie, that you would continue to show me your appreciation in substantial cold cash as long as you lived. Am I right or am I right?” His simper is self-congratulatory.

How contemptible, Margaret Kemper thinks.

Then she becomes gradually conscious of something in her lap. Miss Horne’s futile white pad and yellow pencil, left there since the most recent attempt at communication. She reads the firm block letters— □SHER-BET OR □PUDDING—and nearly smiles at their optimistic inanity. Finally she lets her right hand pick up the pencil and slowly craft a simple sentence under Miss Horne’s words:

Let me see the gun.

Edmund reads over her shoulder as she writes. He chortles. “Damn it, Margaret, there’s a lot more to you than meets the eye. You fake it good. But I knew it. Ever since that mouse Mattie told me eat grapes without help. So you want to see the gun, do you? The hard evidence. Well, why not? I got it stashed just a hop-skip away, down the hall in my own private room.” He sets the glass of whiskey on the edge of a table that holds potted geraniums and snubs out the cigarette in the plant’s soil. “All right, madame. Your wish is my command. Sit tight and I’ll go fetch the piece.”

As soon as he leaves, Margaret Kemper uses her good right hand to propel the wheelchair toward her bathroom. There she tears the used page from the pad in her lap and flushes it down the toilet. Next she maneuvers close to a glass shelf that contains a formidable array of bottles, mostly patent medicines, and she selects without hesitation a small brown phial. Back in the bedroom she uncorks it and empties its contents, white crystals, into Edmund’s dark-colored drink. She buries the phial among the geranium roots.

Edmund appears with the weapon. He is carrying it in a transparent bag.

“Here we are,” he says, advancing boozily.

Margaret Kemper fully realizes she is embarking on an irreversible course once again. This time, however, she foresees certain hazards of self-incrimination from which she was guarded in Paul’s death by a physical accident and Edmund’s self-serving connivance.

“The mighty Smith and Wesson,” Edmund gloats, dangling the plastic

bag a few feet from her face. "The piece a certain detective lieutenant would give his eye teeth to have in hand."

As soon as Edmund's dead, Margaret Kemper thinks, even while the convulsive rictus typical of strychnine poisoning is beginning to stiffen that intolerable simper of his, I can take the gun from that bag, crumple the bag up in my bathrobe pocket, wipe the gun clean with facial tissue and place it in his hand.

I can then write with yellow pencil on white paper—the mechanism alone affording Miss Horne great pleasure—a note to this effect:

Drunk and remorseful, Edmund confesses to shooting Paul. Shows me gun to prove it. Then he drops a powdery substance in drink and drinks.

But she senses almost at once that she cannot write this. She cannot write anything. If she writes so much as a single word, she will be endlessly importuned. Lieutenant Jackson will promptly materialize with dozens of devastating questions.

How could Edmund Zane have shot Paul Kemper? When the shot was fired, Edmund Zane was in a car outside the house with two living witnesses who heard the sound. If Edmund Zane didn't shoot Kemper, why would he confess it? Why would he commit suicide? Where did he get strychnine?

To answer a single question is deadly. She must remain in limbo. Emerging now would be hellish.

"I'm drinking to our partnership in crime," Edmund says.

Margaret Kemper sees Edmund lift the glass. She knows she should utter a warning word, but she's not supposed to be able to speak. And she doesn't.

He drains the glass.

Is limbo, she wonders, preferable to hell?

Joyce Harrington

The Thirteenth Victim

Have you ever wondered what becomes of all the small animals that manage to get themselves flattened on the highways? Not a very pleasant subject for speculation, is it? Nothing uplifting about it. You can't even drum up a decent feeling of guilt about those little furry bodies that slide by under your wheels every few miles or so on any well-traveled interstate. Just shudder and drive on. Or blame it on the suicidal squirrels or badgers or jackrabbits mindlessly intent on getting to the other side of the road where the trees and grasses, the hollows and burrows and water holes are identical in kind if not in actual fact to those left behind in the hazardous crossing. Almost human, wouldn't you say, this concept of the grass being literally greener on the other side?

But to get back to the original question, is there a great morgue wagon that patrols the asphalt arteries of the nation late at night? In the small thin-blooded hours, does a rubber-tired vehicle swoop east and west, north and south, mopping up the day's carnage so that we may all start afresh in the morning? I have never seen it, although I have spent many hours on the road. But somehow they disappear, those pitiful remains. Perhaps they are eaten by scavengers or disintegrated by storms. Perhaps they are borne away, hair by hair and cell by cell, on the wheels of subsequent vehicles to be dispersed finally from Seattle to Boston or, indeed, from Saskatchewan to Patagonia.

I once heard of a young woman, an artist, who collected these fragments. Most particular she was (or so I was told) about the condition of her specimens. Very flat, dessicated and totally unrecognizable they must be. The most perfect of her collection she transformed into works of art, affixing them to canvas and applying paint to the result. A kind of embalming, an immortalization of these hapless victims of our motorized society, and a sock in the eye to those sensitive enough to divine the source of her thick impasto style. But even were she prodigiously productive, she

could account for only a slim percentage of the corpses that are daily struck and flattened in the name of getting from Here to There.

I have never seen the work of this artist, although I made inquiries at the time I heard the story and afterwards. No one seemed to know or would admit to knowing anything more about her. Even the person who told the story persisted in a laconic vagueness regarding her name and whereabouts or even where her work might be seen. Perhaps it is just as well. Had I actually seen the paintings, I might have been disappointed and flung the idea from my mind as too disgusting for further contemplation.

But the idea took hold. It began by my trying to visualize how these pieces might appear. Would they be executed in somber earth tones symbolizing the ultimate end of all creatures, human and animal alike? Or would they celebrate rebirth and resurrection in glad spring hues of new grass and shy violet with the lambent light of the life-giving sun permeating all? Or, yet again, would they represent a descent into the charnel house of the mind with these small dead creatures, our failed hopes and aspirations, limned in bloody tints against a bone-white sepulchral ground?

I might mention at this point that I am an artist myself. At the time of which I speak, I was well past my first youthful infatuation with that treacherous maiden, Art. My relation to my work was similar to that of a man married to a hopeless invalid. I could not with honor divorce her. I must bend my every effort to supporting her through an interminable illness. And, most terrifying, I realized that without her I could not live at all. In short, I had reached the stage in my career when gallery owners had ceased to be polite, or, more often than not, sent messages by thin scornful girls that they were not in and did not plan to be in for an indefinite period of time. I lived then in a dilapidated loft near the Bowery and scraped together its exorbitant rent by teaching culture-hungry housewives to paint flowers.

Leaving, then, the futile speculation on the possible appearance of those dead animal paintings, I began to brood upon the methods of the artist herself. How did she go about collecting her raw materials? Did she, in the dead of night, creep forth armed with trowel, spatula or shovel and by moonlight patiently disengage her subjects from the pavement? Was she ever in danger of being flattened herself while absorbed in her task? What preservatives did she use, if any, to prevent the ultimate dissolution of the finished product? And where, oh where, did she hope to find a buyer for these morbid fancies?

You see the way my thoughts were leading.

They probably would have led nowhere had I not been living in my

unappetizing loft on a poorly lit narrow side street just off the Bowery. The art world has discovered the Bowery. Many former fleabag hotels have been converted into spacious working residences requiring only the application of soaring imagination and unlimited money to be featured in *New York* magazine. My own working residence had not benefited from either. Indeed, since I was living there illegally (in collusion with my landlord, who allowed me to continue paying rent provided I forebore with all the building's many violations), I preferred to be as quiet as possible about my tenancy. My loft was on the fourth floor, reached by a cumbersome and temperamental freight elevator. The remainder of the building was unoccupied.

So, while the Bowery itself, a wide and well lit (both by mercury vapor lamps and the fumes of muscatel) thoroughfare, was crowded at almost any hour of the night and day with wheeled and foot traffic, my own little side street might as well have been an alley on the moon, so infrequently did anyone, artist or panhandler, traverse its cobblestones. Oh, yes, it was cobblestoned. One of the last remaining of its kind in New York. It led nowhere and its attractions were meager in the extreme. A few inhospitable doorways boarded up against the depredations of the homeless, the windowless backside of a large warehouse, and my own grimy facade featuring a sturdy green metal door which was kept locked at all times. Not because I had anything worth stealing, but because the landlord insisted on it.

Were it not for the unique juxtaposition of three events on this cobblestoned byway, my life and my art would have withered into oblivion before the year was out. But this was not to be. Fame and its handmaiden, Fortune, were just around the corner. Not even that far away. They were delivered to my doorstep one freezing February night.

One of the amenities my considerate landlord provided was an invigorating climate. I had no need to travel to the Swiss Alps or the further reaches of Lapland in search of winter sports. I could skate, if I wished, on frozen lakes left by burst water pipes. I could schuss down the fire stairs after a heavy snowstorm had deposited sloping fields of white through the broken windows of the stairwell. However, a cozy bonfire or a cup of hot broth is always welcome after a day in the frigid air, and it was in quest of such external and internal warmth that I ventured forth from my polar loft shortly after midnight. It was either that or burn the hundreds of despised canvases that lined the walls, and I was not yet ready to warm my body at the expense of my soul.

I had just emerged from the green metal door and had turned to relock it, when my eye was caught by a hint of movement in the middle of the

deserted street. Motion of any kind was so rare upon these ancient stones that I peered into the darkness to determine who had invaded the privacy of my preserve (for I had developed a kind of jealous proprietorship for the entire street, and I didn't want any visitors). I soon determined from his erratic movements and indistinct mutterings that the intruder was but a stray derelict loosed from his moorings on the main drag. What he sought in my miserable alley, I will never know. He seemed unaffected by the chill wind that whined about his shoulders, but stumbled and staggered along the cobblestones waving his arms and discoursing incoherently with an invisible audience.

He had just reached the area opposite my door, and while I stood watching this unaccustomed spectacle and reflecting with pity (more for myself than for him) that my own state was not far removed from his, a large van careened around the corner, swept down the street on shrieking tires and was gone—without stopping—out the other end.

There you have it. Three untoward events that combined to change my life. My own midnight foray at the exact moment that John Doe or Joe Blow forsook the comforts of mission soup and a thin mattress in an Uncle Sam house in favor of exploration, and the van that came out of nowhere, achieved its devilish purpose and was gone.

He was dead. There was no mistaking those glazed eyes and inert limbs for a wine stupor. His scabious head exhibited a prodigious indentation and his filth-encrusted neck skewed at an awkward angle.

I picked him up (he was small and thin) and carried him to my door. My exact purpose in doing this was not clear to me at the time, but I could not leave him lying there. Perhaps I had thoughts of discovering his identity and arranging a decent burial for this fellow unfortunate with whom I had felt a momentary kinship. At any rate, I lugged him into the elevator and together we lumbered upward to my arctic studio.

I deposited him at the foot of my empty easel and sat down in my single remaining chair. How forlorn he looked. How sad, neglected and despised. His frail body in its tattered scraps of clothing spoke eloquently to me of the condition of mankind upon this planet. The mighty and the meek, the strong and the vulnerable all come to this in the end. I determined then and there that this anonymous casualty of life's battlefield would have his memorial.

I would paint him. I saw upon my easel an enormous canvas filled with slashing symbolism that would awake an indifferent world to the plight, not only of this poor specimen, but of every man, woman and child of us now and at the hour of our death, Amen. I burned with the desire to work. I yearned to set it all down before my passion left me, as I knew it must through hunger and fatigue. Practically speaking, I knew I must work

quickly before my model and inspiration decomposed into his earthly components. The weather was on my side, but it was February and a warm spell was not inconceivable.

Frantically I searched the loft for canvas wide and high enough to accommodate my vision. Feverishly I cobbled together stretchers and braces. At last the blank canvas stood upon the easel and I turned to survey my dwindling store of paint. Not enough. Not enough. I would have to beg and borrow and try to buy on shaky credit. In the meantime, I could at least sketch in the basic elements of this monumental composition. I picked up a stick of charcoal.

But wait.

Before the paint. Before the charcoal. Had I not here the thing itself? A model, did I say? Here lay the composition before my very eyes. I would transfer this poor broken heap of bones and tissues *itself* to the canvas. I saw then the flaw in the puny designs of the young woman who collected dead animals. Her concept was too small, too insignificant. I would carry it to its ultimate conclusion. This would be my masterpiece.

In a renewed frenzy I swiftly considered ways and means. I must reduce my subject to a fraction of himself. Flat, dessicated and unrecognizable. Those became my watchwords. No sooner had the problem presented itself than I knew the answer. I dragged my unprotesting candidate for immortality back into the elevator, and down we went. Down past three floors of echoing emptiness, and yet down.

In the dank basement below the ground I flicked on a feeble light. My silent companion I deposited without ceremony on the basement floor. Then back into the elevator I went, and slowly, carefully I piloted the cabin with its doors ajar a good three feet above the floor. I leaped out and peered hopefully beneath the suspended cage. The light was poor, but what I saw was encouraging. The elevator mechanism was housed in a steel compartment with cables emerging from a rectangular opening in the center. The roof of this housing was almost level with the basement floor, and it was obvious to me that the elevator came to rest with very little room to spare. An ideal situation.

Working in haste, I arranged my composition on top of the housing of the mechanism. Head just so, mouth agape in a silent scream, arms outflung as if to ward off the inevitable visitation of the Angel of Death, legs, well, the legs, no matter how I arranged them, seemed but feeble appendages in danger of imminent collapse. Just as well, I thought. My subject was no hero, but the commonest of common men. What heroism accrued to him would come through my art, through my rendition of his material being on canvas.

A final adjustment here and there, a last consideration of the effect, and I

was ready for the next step. I clambered back into the elevator and rode it thoughtfully up to the top of the shaft. The control handle trembled in my grasp as if it were aware of the act of creation in which it was about to participate. At the top I paused. If I descended, there would be no turning back. I considered the alternatives. I could at this point return to my studio and begin burning my years of work in my cold pot-bellied stove. I could leave the building and never return, taking up my subject's former habits around the corner on the Bowery. I could kill myself and finally achieve the world's notice for a single day on the back pages of *The New York Times* next to the shipping news.

I switched the control handle to the down position and began my descent into the pit.

How slowly it seemed we traveled. I would have it done instantly, Zeus's hammer from on high striking through the core of the building with stunning effect. But the trip seemed eternal. The elevator creaked and shuddered, halted and suddenly jolted itself to life again. A new ice age would envelope the earth before we reached the bottom. Man would be extinct and whatever life form inherited our fallen cities would be the better for not being afflicted with art critics. The elevator stopped.

Was it my imagination, or did the floor tilt slightly? Was there an almost imperceptible settling motion as the elevator pressed down upon the housing beneath? I pumped the control handle several times. The elevator responded by rocking gently to and fro and coming to rest with a final thump. Was that a crunching of bone I heard, or only some protest of the machine? I opened the doors and stepped out into the basement.

All seemed as before. Yet there was a kind of dreadful *knowingness* in the murky air. The stingy brownish light bulb swung naked on its cord. The gaping maw of the unfed furnace grinned at me in vile complicity. The very pipes and ducts that lined the ceiling seemed to hiss and writhe with excitement. From the indistinct corners of that underground cavern came odd metallic sounds as if the building itself had come to life as witness to my deed. A chill more penetrating than February's icy gales spread through my body and I trembled in its grasp. Numbly I staggered to the stairway, and without a backward glance at the elevator I crawled upward. My senses were frozen in panic, my brain congealed with the horror of what I had done and still must do. I could neither feel nor think but only run from the awfulness below. At the top of the stairs, before I closed the door, I was arrested for a moment in my flight. A new sound had been added to those of the watchers in the gloom. It was a steady drip.

I ran from the building. A freezing rain had begun to fall. It stung my face and soaked my thin jacket. It accumulated underfoot in puddles of

slippery slush and coated the soles of my once sturdy shoes. But even this sleety downpour was but a tropic shower compared to the ice storm that raged within my soul. I trudged on through the rain, my face raised to the cleansing bite of its needle drops, until I reached an all-night restaurant. I went inside.

My resources allowed me a bowl of soup and a cup of coffee. I warmed my hands on the curve of the bowl and hung my face in the steam that rose from the thick nourishing liquid. Then, spoon by spoon, I fed myself back to sensibility. With each spoonful, the awful chill receded, until over the sweet black coffee I was able to reflect that it had all been the result of an overcharged imagination combined with the hallucinatory effects of going all day without food. True, the derelict had been struck down outside my building; I had conceived my masterpiece; and I had with the elevator begun the preparation of his remains. So much was fact. But the grinning furnace, the sentient clutching pipes, the gloating watchfulness were all figments of my mind. The chill was real enough. It was colder in the basement than it was outside. And the drip? That steady remorseless drip that had sent me running through the night? It was but the natural and desired effect of the process I had set in motion. All liquids must be eliminated from the subject. Flat, dessicated and unrecognizable he must become. Unpleasant, perhaps, in the achievement, but nothing to cause unreasoning panic. I resolved to return to my unfinished business, but not until the first light of morning had arrived. No need to invite the recurrence of phantoms, I reasoned, and besides I would work better if I were thoroughly warmed and rested before I approached my destiny. I sat on in the tiny restaurant, now drowsing under its bright lights, now waking with a start to breathe deeply of its warm food-scented atmosphere and peer out its steamy windows for the approach of dawn. The burly man who tended the soup kettle and the coffee urn did not object to my presence, nor did he try to engage me in conversation. And so the slow hours passed.

At last, gray morning swam through the deserted street, and the counterman invited me to swallow another cup of coffee from the dregs in the urn. "One for the road," he said. How little did he, or I, know of the road on which I was about to embark. The coffee was black and bitter but this time I did not sweeten it, relishing on my tongue its acrid taste. I drank it off, muttered my thanks, buttoned up my jacket and left.

The rain had stopped some hours before, and a drop in temperature had coated the pavements with a film of ice. It was impossible to move quickly. It was almost impossible to move at all, but I struggled on, slipping and falling, eager now to resume work on my creation. The streets were

deserted except for here and there a white city truck from which men in thick parkas tossed shovelful of rock salt. As I rounded my corner I saw that one of these was parked opposite my door. Perhaps it had broken down, or more than likely its operators were fortifying themselves in an early opening saloon. I could have used a little such fortification myself.

With frozen fingers I inserted my key into the lock. The building was quiet. No clanks, no rattles, above all no rhythmic drip could I hear as I descended the cellar stairs. The dim light still burned, but it was far outshone by the gray efflorescence that crept in through two small windows located high in the outside wall. I went directly to the elevator and stepped inside. From this haven, I glanced round the basement room, ready to slam the doors and ascend if there were any repetition of last night's horrors. But the furnace was devoid of expression, the pipes on the ceiling remained calm and quiet, and no mysterious noises emanated from the far corners of the room. I proceeded to the next step in my project.

Again with the doors ajar, I cranked the elevator three feet above the basement floor. I had some difficulty getting it started. It seemed to be adhering in some way to the roof of the housing. But at last it jolted free, almost knocking me off my feet, and ground its way up the shaft. The sight which greeted me upon my return to the basement floor was almost more than I had hoped for. My composition was entirely successful. The flattening process had yielded form and nuance totally in keeping with my vision. A few spots would require additional attention, particularly around the head and the large joints, but on the whole I was pleased with the overall design.

I could see now the explanation of the unusual reluctance of the elevator to start. With the escaping of the body fluids the subject had become quite soaked; and during the long cold hours while I was warming myself in the little restaurant, the entire mass had frozen firmly both to the top of the housing and the bottom of the elevator. With the abrupt rising of the elevator, there had resulted a partial flaying which added to rather than detracted from the effect I wished to achieve. I glanced upward and saw that, indeed, bits of clothing and particles of skin had adhered to the underside of the elevator.

But this, in turn, raised another problem. If the entire mass was frozen, then there must still be liquids present. Dessication would proceed, but slowly. And I was eager to get to work. Then, too, if we had a sudden thaw, would not decay set in and rob me of my subject? No. I must find a way of speeding up the drying process and rendering the composition safe from deterioration. Back and forth my mind raced among the possibilities. Formaldehyde? But that was for preserving, not for mummifying. And

how to acquire it, short of robbing an undertaking establishment? The application of heat would perhaps bake the juices out, but I had no source of heat except the disused furnace and my pot-bellied stove, and no fuel but my unsold paintings.

All this while I was pacing up and down the basement, under the two high windows that gave out upon the street. At each turn I was aware of the wheels of the truck parked outside at just about the level of my head. It was not until the tenth or eleventh turn that the significance of those wheels penetrated my abstraction. The wheels were attached to the truck and the truck was loaded with salt! Rock salt! Was not rock salt sprinkled on the streets to melt the ice and cause it to run away down the gutters? Would it not, if sprinkled on my composition, melt the frozen liquids, draw them out and cause them to run away down the sides of the housing?

Quickly I ransacked the basement for suitable containers, praying all the while that the men whose duty it was to tend the truck would stay away until I had helped myself to a supply of their precious salt. I found a couple of noisome garbage cans, a few gunny sacks that had escaped the gnawing of rats, and a broken-handled shovel. These I tossed into the suspended elevator and, leaping in after them, I rode up to the ground floor. I amassed my containers just inside the green metal door and, shovel in hand, cautiously opened the door and peered out. The street lay deserted in both directions. The truck stood seemingly abandoned. I filled the two garbage cans first, shoveling desperately from atop the truck to the cans on the sidewalk below. Salt crystals filled my shoes and a gritty foul-tasting dust clung to my lips. When the cans were full, I hauled them into the building. The gunny sacks were another matter. I was forced to carry these into the truck, scoop them full with my bare hands, and climb down with the heavy sacks across my shoulder, all the while anticipating the return of the truck crew.

I had filled two sacks, deposited them inside the green metal door, and was about to return for the third—which I had left unfilled in the truck—when around the corner came four men. They were laughing boisterously among themselves and walked in a cloud of their own mingled white breath. Three of them carried shovels. I stood inside the green metal door and trembled lest they notice the salt scattered upon the sidewalk where I had spilled it in filling the cans. I was sure they would find the gunny sack or notice the depletion of their supply and come rapping at my door.

Instead, the three shovel-carriers vaulted into the back of the truck, the driver shut himself into the cab, and in a moment they were gone amid laughter and grinding gears.

I judged I had about two hundred pounds of rock salt. All that remained

for me to do was to transport it to the basement, sprinkle it upon my composition and await results. I will not dwell upon the actual performance of this part of the process, except to say that I was, for once, grateful for my landlord's neglect of the heating arrangements. A frozen mass of mangled flesh is infinitely less disagreeable to deal with than one not so congealed. I speak from experience.

I checked the process daily. At the end of the first day, brownish-red rivulets ran down the sides of the housing. By the third day, these had shrunk to a pinkish-gray ooze. Occasionally, I added more salt. By the sixth day, there was only an intermittent dribble and after a full week, nothing but a faint dampness around the edges.

During the entire process, I continued with my flower-painting classes. I could not afford to be evicted before the completion of the work. As I watched the ladies deal clumsily with their watercolors, I wondered what they would say if I told them of the true nature of my art. I longed to speak of it to someone, but there was no one, I felt sure, whose wildest imaginings would allow them to see beyond its grisly inception to the final magnificence. I kept silent and waited.

On the tenth day, a day of bright sun and brisk but not freezing temperatures, the process was complete. The flower-painters would have to manage without me. I set to work brushing away the remaining salt and gently disengaging the composition from the roof of the housing. The salt and the cold air had done their work well. My subject was flat, dessicated and unrecognizable. And extremely rigid. I had no difficulty sliding it out onto the basement floor and from there into the elevator.

Once in my studio, I lay the waiting canvas flat on the floor and stood for some time in meditation. There is nothing quite like the approach to a clean white canvas. The sense of embarking on uncharted seas, the boundless hope of new discoveries, the fear of drowning in a whirlpool of paint—all these conflicting emotions were present as they had been with each and every painting I had ever begun. But this time, to an almost unbearable degree. For with this painting, I would decide my future. If I failed, there would be no future.

I had prepared for this day by cajoling from my supplier a quantity of paint and several cans of newly developed glues guaranteed to stick. I chose one of these chemical marvels with the most highly touted adhesive properties and brushed it according to instructions upon the canvas. After waiting the recommended few minutes, I carefully positioned my subject and weighted it down with whatever came to hand: art books, gallon cans of turpentine and the like. For good measure, I hammered in a number of six-penny nails wherever the wooden bracing on the back allowed for this.

I then prepared my palette. On a clean sheet of window glass (taken from a window on the floor below) I laid out my colors. The names of artists' colors have always spelled enchantment to me, and now as I squeezed paint onto the glass I muttered them aloud in a kind of incantation: "Ochres, light and golden, alizarine and cadmium, viridian, cerulean, and black, black, ivory black." I mixed my colors, tested them, and at last stood before the canvas with a laden brush in hand.

The next few days merged into a glorious orgy of work. I must have eaten and slept, but I do not remember what or when. The only thing I was conscious of was the flow of paint from my brush to the canvas and the growing realization of my vision. At last a morning came when the brush faltered in its rush toward the canvas. I stood back and gazed at my work. It was finished. Warily I scrawled my name at the bottom and fell exhausted on my cot. The last thing I was aware of was a brilliant shaft of light piercing the grimy window and bathing my head in a warm glow.

I was awakened by a shrill jangling. For months at a time my doorbell seldom sounded, and I often forgot I had such a summoner. Now it rang and rang again. I ran to the window and flung it open. On the doorstep below stood my friend, the one person who had never deserted me since our days together in art school. He had become a successful illustrator, but never failed to drop in from time to time to see how I was doing and usually to invite me to a family meal in his elegant East Side apartment.

"Hello," I called down to him. "What day is it?"

"The first of March," he replied. "And a lamb among lambs."

I breathed in the warm languid air smelling faintly of the ocean, and shouted, "I'll be right down!"

The elevator slid down the shaft and soon I was embracing my friend and babbling of the completed masterpiece above.

"Come and see it. I want you to see it. You'll tell me if it's any good."

He stepped into my filthy studio (for I had neglected my housekeeping sadly) and, ignoring the mess, walked straight to the easel and faced its contents. For a long time he stood there, his face impassive, his hands clasped behind his back. I waited restlessly for his verdict. He, of all people, would tell me the truth. He would not hold back or distort or utter idle pleasantries. He didn't know it, but my life rested on his words.

At length, he turned away from the painting and walked to the window. Still not a word. I followed him.

"Well, what do you think?" I am ashamed to say my voice quavered.

He faced me then, and I was amazed to see tears in his eyes. "I don't know what to say," he murmured.

My heart sank. Quite literally, I felt a leaden weight plummet from my

chest to the pit of my stomach. I would ease him out, decline the invitation that was sure to come, and then do what was necessary to end my miserable existence. He was still speaking, but his words echoed in my brain without sense or meaning.

"... quite simply the finest thing you've ever done. Magnificent!"

"What?" I shouted, disbelieving. "What did you say?"

"Not only that," he went on. "It ought to put you at the top of the heap. And I know just the man to do it for you. Come with me."

He gave me no time to change my clothes (not that I had anything really presentable), but hustled me out of the building in my stained jeans and into a taxi. During the ride uptown, he explained to me about a man he knew, a wealthy collector, who was always in the market for the unique, the totally unexpected, and who took pride in discovering unknown talent. His excitement gave me the courage to face this sudden interview with a prospective buyer; but I need not have worried, for my friend took complete charge of the proceedings.

From the moment we stepped out of the taxi, my friend giving instructions to the driver to wait, he was my mentor and guide. We were ushered into the sumptuous townhouse by a manservant, and bidden to wait in the library. I had only a few moments to note the paintings on the walls, fabulous works by artists of great renown, when a tall, gaunt man entered the room.

Introductions were perfunctory, and he came right to the point. Addressing my friend, he asked, "What have you brought me?"

"You will have to go to *it*," my friend replied. "The paint isn't even dry yet. You won't regret the trip."

The man stared at me and I returned his gaze without flinching, although I quailed inside my paint-stained clothes. My friend must be insane, I thought, to expect me to join the company on these walls. Still speaking to my friend, although his eyes never left mine, the gaunt man said, "You've never steered me wrong before."

"And you've never seen anything like this before," my friend answered.

"Let's go, then."

We crammed ourselves back into the taxi and the entire trip downtown passed in silence. I sat between my friend and the gaunt man and tried to prepare myself for the inevitable rejection. I dared not hope for anything else.

Once in my studio, the gaunt man walked directly to the canvas and stood before it. I watched him closely. His eyes narrowed and he stepped back a few paces. Then he lunged forward and subjected the surface of the canvas to the closest scrutiny. Would he see through the

layers of paint to the grim foundation of my work? If so, would he send for the police? Or more appropriately, an ambulance from Bellevue? I watched him in an agony of apprehension. My friend amused himself by sketching a cartoon of the great man.

Abruptly, the collector turned his back on the canvas and faced me. Without preamble, without a word of criticism, he murmured a sum in four figures.

I was stunned. I was incapable of speech. I stood gaping at him like an idiot.

He mentioned another figure, astronomical to me. Still I could not speak. He raised his bid once more, adding, "That's as high as I'll go. Take it or leave it."

"Take it," I managed to croak.

He drew a piece of paper and a checkbook from his breast pocket. The paper was a bill of sale and on it he wrote the final price. Then he handed it to me to fill in my name and the title of the painting. I wrote my name in wavering script and without hesitation entitled the painting "Victim." After a moment's reflection, I added a Roman numeral one. He took the paper from my hand in exchange for a check and said, "I'll send a truck."

"I still have to varnish it," I said.

"Call me when it's ready." He moved to the elevator. Before closing the doors he looked me over one last time. "There'll be a reception two weeks from tonight. Get yourself some clothes." And he was gone.

My friend was elated and insisted that we spend the night in celebration. I, myself, was filled with a sense of anticlimax. It had been too easy, a freak occurrence. It proved nothing except that collectors were as mad as artists. I felt impelled to begin work immediately on a new version of the same theme, but in deference to my friend I agreed to make the rounds with him. All that night, we visited old haunts, ate and drank, and my friend boasted to all who would listen of my extraordinary work and spectacular sale. I grew steadily more morose and finally, pleading exhaustion, I left my friend to continue celebrating on my behalf and went home.

In the morning, accompanied by a sick headache, I enriched my depleted bank account and visited the used car lots in Queens. I bought a van.

By the time of the reception, I had begun work on "Victim II." I could not, I realized, expect fate to offer me another subject. This time I had to obtain my own material. It wasn't difficult. Although most people these days remain indoors after dark or only venture forth in the company of others, there are always a few brave or foolhardy souls who walk the empty night alone. In my van I toured the distant boroughs and the exotic shores of New Jersey. I took care to do my hunting far from my cobblestoned

alley. For three nights I prowled without success. On the fourth night, I brought home an angelically beautiful Puerto Rican girl from the streets of Hoboken. For all I knew, she may have been a prostitute, but in my painting she would achieve beatification. I began the process anew.

Everyone who mattered attended the reception, and my name was on everyone's lips. It was an odd sensation. Amid the champagne and hors d'oeuvres, the very gallery owners who a month ago had not been in flung offers at me, doubling and quadrupling the price of *Victim I*. Their scornful girls pressed against me in the throng promising interesting dividends. Museum curators begged me to call upon them in their offices. No one bothered to look at the painting that was displayed in the main salon.

I escaped as soon as I could, returning to my loft and a strict regimen of work. I would have been foolish not to have taken advantage of the tide that had at last swept me to the pinnacle of success. Like a maniac, I worked on two and three paintings at a time. I refined the process, installing a walk-in freezer with a complicated ventilating system that assured a flow of cold dry air at all times. This became necessary as spring advanced into summer. My completed paintings were snapped up at prices that never ceased to astonish me. Even my old rejected canvases were selling like watermelons in July. I began negotiations with my landlord to buy the building. I felt ever more strongly the need to preserve my privacy.

On the morning when transfer of title was finally achieved, I left my lawyer's office feeling in control of my destiny. My former landlord, while claiming to be taking a great loss, was undeniably pleased to be rid of an unprofitable albatross. And I was secure behind my green metal door to pursue the course of my art. As I stood on a corner hoping to flag a cab, my eye was arrested by a headline at a nearby newsstand. "ART THEFT!" the *Daily News* shouted, and this was echoed more sedately by the *Times*. I bought both papers, thinking to read them on the ride downtown. Idly I scanned the front page story while waiting for the next wave of traffic to bring a taxi within hailing distance.

It was with a sense of shock and impending disaster that I saw my own name on that page. The painting that had been stolen was one of mine: "Victim IV," in fact, an old woman curled in the foetal position and floating in a womb-like universe of steely curves. It had been purchased two months before by the Modern Museum and hung in a place of honor among their new acquisitions. I read on. The thief, it seemed, had been particularly audacious in that he had taken the risk of substituting an absolutely blank canvas for the huge painting. How the theft had been accomplished no one knew, and no one could explain the trail

of paint that led from the display room to the locked main entrance of the Museum.

A cab appeared at that moment and I leaped in, directing the driver to take me to the Museum.

The room in which "Victim IV" had hung was roped off. A small crowd of curiosity-seekers had gathered, although there was nothing to see but a blank canvas. The curator was standing just inside the room in conversation with two conservatively dressed men. I guessed they were policemen of some kind. When he saw me, the curator parted the rope and drew me into the room with effusive apologies and expressions of regret. The two policemen asked me to examine the blank canvas to see what I could make of it.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," I told them. But a February chill invaded my soul as I recognized my own handiwork in the lumber behind the canvas, the nails, the very hammer marks of the construction. The blank canvas was the identical one on which I had painted my fourth Victim!

The policemen promised an exhaustive investigation, the curator apologized and regretted unceasingly, and I stalked out of the Museum with what I hoped was a fair show of indignation.

Once back in my refurbished studio, I fell to brooding on this extraordinary development. "Victim XII" had been carted off that very day to the estate of a famous millionaire. I had planned to begin the hunt for the thirteenth in the series as soon as it became dark. That was now out of the question. As I searched fruitlessly for an answer to the uncanny disappearance of "Victim IV," the telephone rang. It was the gaunt collector, the man who had sponsored my phenomenal success. "Victim I" had disappeared, leaving behind a blank canvas. I recommended that he contact both the police and the museum curator.

All afternoon the phone rang. One by one the reports came in. A call from upstate New York revealed that when the truck was unloaded at the mansion of the famous millionaire, there was nothing inside but a blank canvas. "Victim XII" had disappeared en route. After that, I yanked the telephone cord from the wall, and lay down on my bed to try to think.

I must have dozed off in the wearying confusion of my thoughts, for I opened my eyes suddenly to pitch darkness. A sound of some kind had penetrated my sleeping brain, but I could not at first place it. It came again. It was the creak of the elevator cables. I had left the elevator on this floor. No one but me had a key to the green metal door. Who, then, was riding the elevator?

I switched on a light and glanced at the arrow indicator above the elevator door. It was just leaving the ground floor and approaching the

number 2 on the semicircular dial. I listened to the slow rumble of the mechanism, and it seemed to be accompanied by a faint dry rustling and the murmur of many papery thin voices. The arrow approached the number 3 and continued its steady progress.

I did not wait to see what would debark from the elevator when the arrow reached 4. I ran to the fire stairs and stumbled down them in the dark. When I reached the green metal door, the elevator had come to rest on the fourth floor. I had no doubt but that it would soon begin its descent. I opened the door and ran out upon the deserted street. My van was parked at the curb, that same van that had been both instrument and transport to all my Victims but one. Before I entered it, I glanced up at the windows of my studio. Lights were blazing there, and I thought I saw the outline of a dry, flat, leathery face gazing down at me. I drove away as quickly as my fumbling fingers could manage the ignition and gear shift.

Westward I fled, through the lighted serpentine of the Holland Tunnel and out into the industrial desolation of New Jersey. Through the swampland and past the sleeping suburbs I raced in my van, not stopping until I reached the outskirts of Trenton. There I drew in at a motel. I parked the van well away from the anonymous door that marked my cubicle and threw myself onto the bed that was mine for the remainder of the night.

I slept. What dreams inhabited my sleep were not more terrifying than the face I had glimpsed at my studio window and the dry rustling in the elevator. I awoke early, not greatly refreshed and stiff all over from the infirm mattress. I decided to drive into Trenton, find breakfast and take stock of the situation. But when I approached my van, after checking out, I noticed that the blacktop of the parking lot was oddly marked with streaks of bright vermilion. "Victim XII" had been a bearded young man posed in the traditional attitude of crucifixion upon a cross composed of gigantic hypodermic needles. His blood ran vermilion from the points of those needles.

I forgot about breakfast and again headed west across the Delaware River and onto the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I drove all day, stopping only for gas and quick meals from vending machines. It was on the Turnpike that I began to notice them, the small furry bodies arrested in their crossing and left to trail their viscera across my path. I wept, for them and for myself. Oh, if only I had never heard of the madwoman who collected them. If only I had not sought to improve upon her methods. If only the first Victim had not chosen to die upon my doorstep. I would not now be pursued by dry rustlings and furtive smears of paint. My only hope was to elude them, to hide in some out-of-the-way corner where they could not find me. I drove on.

The day passed in a haze of motion. Rolling hills were followed by flat plains. Town after town flew past my windows, each with its encirclement of car lots and trailer parks like streamlined covered wagon trains drawn up for the night. Twilight found me on a flat plain where tall rows of corn marched north and south and the highway met the horizon in a straight line. My legs ached with cramps and my head was thick from the incessant thrum of the engine. I could go no farther.

I pulled off onto a side road and followed it until I came to a graveled lay-by surrounded on three sides by stiff green cornstalks. There I prepared to spend the night. I climbed into the back of the van and stretched out amid the clutter of my profession, first making sure that all the windows were closed and the doors locked.

But I was not to sleep that night. The dry rustling began almost at once, at first faint and far away, then closer and closer until it became a gentle persistent brushing against the sides of the van. I tried to persuade myself that it was nothing but the wind in the cornfields, and had almost succeeded when the voices began. Papery thin and juiceless, they called my name in a dozen different tones and inflections. I lay huddled in the van, my head wrapped in a blanket, not daring to move, too weary to even think about driving on.

At last morning came, and with it the voices ceased and the rustling noises faded away. I slept then and woke at noon, hungry, unshaven, and stale in mind and body. I resolved to travel by night and sleep by day until I found a haven where the rustling and the voices could not penetrate. As I stepped from the van to stretch my legs before continuing my flight, I noticed that the green corn fronds closest to the van were flecked with white and the gravel underfoot bore traces of sharp viridian.

I cannot recount how many roads I traveled, how many rivers I crossed, how many towns and cities witnessed my passage. The steering wheel became an extension of my arms and the van my only shelter. I drove by night, but always over the sound of the motor and the thrust of the tires against the road, I could hear the rustling above, beside and behind me, and the thin voices calling.

I don't remember how I came to this high plateau or how I found this deserted adobe hut. I can go no farther. They are with me. They watch over me. My only escape now is in death, and they will not let me die. They range themselves against the walls, watching. Smearred trails of paint follow my every move. They bring me food so that I will not starve myself. They shelter me from exposure to the cold dry air of the nights on the plateau. They protect me from mountain lions and deadly snakes, and they will not allow me to handle a knife. For some unfathomable reason, they want me to live.

But I have a plan to escape them. I have indicated to them that I wish to paint. This seems to amuse them, and they have allowed me to bring my painting materials from my van into the hut. Their dry laughter cracked the desert silence as I carried in brushes and canvas, tubes of paint and cans of turpentine. However, they take no interest in this notebook I am scribbling in. When I am finished setting down my story, I will place the notebook on the front seat of the van where it will surely be found some day. Then I will come back inside the hut and begin to paint. When they are ranged against the wall and lulled by my absorption in my work, I will quickly drench myself in turpentine and strike a match.

If this notebook is ever seen by eyes other than my own, the world will know that I am the thirteenth victim.

John D. MacDonald
Wedding Present

On a Saturday afternoon the grey rain falls sweetly sadly upon Seattle, and her bedroom is filled with a soft grey reflection of the day. From where I am, elbow braced, I can look across a shine of wet roofs and hear the wet sounds of traffic, far away. A handspan northeast of her patella are three tiny moles, almost but not perfectly aligned. I trace the imperfect line with a nostalgic fingertip and she gives a compliant residual shiver, an *ex post facto* testimonial.

It is an endearing time of day, and I am awash in a wistful sentimentality, my heart swollen and soggy with affection. She is a big big girl. She is all a pale sheen in the room, luminous, as though she is the source of all the rainy afternoon daylight. She lies supine, arms thrown back over her head, face profiled to me, the further knee cocked up, foot braced, her breathing slow and deep, from the diaphragm, her breath delicious.

"Going to miss you so," she murmurs. "Going to miss you so damn bad, Mulloy."

"Just be happy, Christine. All I ask."

She turns her head slowly toward me, fine eyes opening, mouth with lips kissed to pallor, smiling small. "You are one very complex bastard, darling," she says lovingly.

"Crazylegs, they call me at the store."

It is sad to know you are going to lose touch with so dear a companion, so reliable a friend.

"A month from now" she sighed, "six weeks from now, I'll think of you and know you've come back to town. Damn, damn. I'll hate it. Darling, don't go until I'm asleep. Okay? Then just skulk away. I'll cry later."

"And so will I."

She gives a leonine yawn, reaches, claps a hand on the back of my neck and pulls my mouth to hers. She is a big big girl, and strong. "One for the long long road," she mumbles, shifting and settling herself, and me, hands busy. "Then I'll be sure to sleep."

She guarantees herself a nice nap indeed, because previous games, gambols and inventions had given the coupled weary flesh a resistance that only considerable time, determination and dogged energetic rhythms could overwhelm. But overwhelm she does, and to heavy sleep she goes, leaving Mulloy to the monstrous task of arising and clothing a body ruptured in every joint and crevice, with a back broken in three identifiable places, a sprung rib cage, and a soft, bemused, rubbery smile.

In my clothed frailty, ready to leave her for the very last time in our mortal lives, I snap and float the soft green blanket over all that luminous bounty, totter over and with herculean effort lift the ubiquitous attaché case to the corner table, open it, then open the top drawer of the table and tenderly lift out the three dense skeins of black ribbon, glossy, like a kind of funeral confetti, packing them into the attaché case with care, so that they will not become entangled in transit.

Each black ribbon is twelve hundred feet long, a quarter-inch wide, and made of mylar. They are carbon ribbons that have been run through Christine's electric typewriter, by Christine. It has a typeface called Forum. Christine is private secretary to Mr. Anton Pokaric, the Administrative Chief of Research and Development for Metalmaster Associates, Inc.

The agreed rate for the past two years has been X dollars per ribbon. I count the money out, precisely 3X, and then add a terminal bonus, put it into the drawer, and softly push the drawer shut.

I go and give a final farewell kiss to sleeping lips. Gently. A precaution quite unnecessary, because not even a cattle prod would stir her out of dreams which her half-smile mouth says are sweet.

I hobble down an infinity of stairs. The light rain does not somehow smash me to the pavement. I drift two blocks to my sedate, conformist rental sedan, and look at my watch. Two hours to check out of my hotel, drive to the airport, turn the car in and catch my flight.

By the time I reach the airport, I am recovering beautifully. Mulloy is resilient. I find that I can strike out at the same brisk pace as any ninety-four-year-old fellow who gave up his crutches yesterday.

On Monday evening I take the three reels of black confetti to the little tract house of a girl who works in the steno pool at International Metals, our mutual monolithic employer. She is a shy, sweet, earnest little thing. Ruthie. She supports her wheelchair mother and so desperately needs the supplementary income, I can afford to trust her. She will carefully rewind the ribbons onto metal spools. Then she will fix the spools, one at a time, in a Rube Goldberg device I created for her, one that will track the ribbon across her line of vision, controlled by a foot pedal. It is an eye

strain, and a mental strain also. I pay her well. The typewriter has a ribbon-saving device whereby the space bar does not move the ribbon along. So Ruthie must contend with such materials as: Suggested that we now pick up the leases on the north west sector of the Newbold properties to take advantage of latest geological report received from Timmins yesterday.

Working overtime, with intense concentration, Ruthie will make a single copy of every letter, memo and report which came out of Pokaric's office during the previous six weeks. She will paragraph them in what seems to her the most logical way. She will type them on a shade of orange paper never used at IM, to lessen the chance of their ever falling into the wrong hands.

On Wednesday night I go to her house again to pick up the first sheaf of orange sheets. She works in a corner of the small living room. It is late. Her mother is asleep. I tell her to keep right on working. I sit under a lamp and read what she has done. I go through them, discarding the routine things, treasuring the others, finding a few which make my feral heart go bump.

I go over and stand behind her to see what the next one is going to be. It is a metallurgical analysis, heavy going for the little girl. She gives me a nervous smile and turns back to her work. I am no longer looking at the typing. I am looking at the frail nape of her neck, at the wisps of mousy hair that lie against it. I feel tender and protective. It makes me think of doves and kittens. I am tempted to kiss it, but know it would take the relationship into an area I cannot afford. She is too useful, and, in all her shyness, too vulnerable. The canny young executive does not mess with the home office girls. The fox learns the metallic smell of the trap. Should any compulsion become so great as to interfere with his personal efficiency, the thoughtful young executive gets the lass fired, arranges her reemployment elsewhere, and thus has whatever head start her gratitude will create. Ruthie is not likely to fire up any such compulsion.

"Gee, I wish I could go faster, Mr. Mulloy," she says.

"You are doing wonderfully, my dear," I tell her. "Keep up the good work."

On the following Monday night I cart a fat sheaf of orange paper to the home of Thomas Warren Murling, co-executive, co-conspirator. His lithesome Polly keeps us in coffee while we drudge the hours away, analyzing, making notes, arguing. At the end of the session, long after midnight, he locks the sheets away with all the previous ones in the safe file in his den.

We will not, of course, turn all this material over to the top brass of IM. That would be overly enthusiastic and curiously stupid. IM has a secretive

section called Competitive Analysis, headed up by a fat old espionage type, expert in such vulgarities as wire tap work and parabolic microphones. The Pokaric material will be used to the advantage of IM, but at the same time to the special advantage of Mulloy and Murling. Any young man who can guess the moves of the competition adds class to the operation.

"Nice stuff," Tom says. He looks at me with a speculative squint. "You wouldn't hold out any of it, would you, Mulloy?"

"Dear boy," I tell him, "you disappoint me. Your instincts are sound, but your reasoning is shabby. In the golden years ahead, when you and I are running the store, then you can beware of the machinations of Mulloy. But not yet. During these junior grade years I give, and expect to get, total disclosure."

"You get it."

"He travels fastest who travels with a sneaky friend."

"Until we get to stock option country."

"Then you'll be on your own, boy. And look out for Mulloy."

"That I will." With no more need for coffee, he builds us a sturdy nightcap. He sips his and says, "Too bad this is the end of the Pokaric pipeline."

"That is dreary nomenclature for such a large delicious girl. But it is, in a sense, a fine dramatic irony, Thomas."

"Do you care to tell me what has ended it?"

"Now that it is over, with a heavy heart, I shall tell you. After two amiable years, I shall tell you."

"Would violins help?"

"We can imagine them. Two years ago it took a man of my keen perception to see the joyous possibilities of Christine. She selected clothing suitable for a fifty-year-old woman. She spoke in a high nasal whine through an oversized nose. Her hair was the color of clay and she wore it in a spinster knot. When she walked, it was as though she were guiding an invisible plow across an uneven pasture."

"Pretty exotic stuff."

"The poor darling was twenty-four at that time, Thomas. She had decided love would forever look the other way. An accurate conclusion, perhaps, if Mulloy had not come along. But I saw the glorious texture of the skin of her wrists and her throat. I noted the subliminal mischief in the depths of her stern and innocent eyes. And neither her lumbering gait nor her sorry garments could totally conceal the promise of a wondrous geography hidden from an unappreciative world. Any man who makes passes must, in time, experience a wide range of reactions—from indignation to fright to anger to various forms of delight. But here, for the first

time, I met up with sheer incredulity, which soon became transformed to an entirely unjustified gratitude. Unjustified, I say, because from the first segment of the first moment, I had as much cause to be thankful as did she."

"Mulloy," he tells me, "did you write all this down and memorize it?"

"My degree of emotional involvement renders me particularly articulate. It's the poetry of the organization man. To continue, there is nothing like an affair to give a neglected woman confidence. Once she has that confidence, an understanding fellow can, without damage to her pride, come on with all those little hints, nudges and suggestions that will bring her into full flower. Her clumsy shamble and her low heels and her elderly wardrobe were all foolish attempts to look inconspicuous. She thought herself too big and too bulgy. She is big, gloriously so, and the bulges are where any fool would want them. I learned her shoe size and brought her tall-heeled shoes, wickedly red. When she wore them she stood eye to eye with me, and laughed. I made her walk for me, with a book on her head, tall, grave, worried, lovely, biting her sweet lip as she learned a tall girl's grace. But it was some time before she found the courage to wear such shoes to work. By then she was filching the carbon ribbons, gladly. It gave her extra money, and she spent it wisely, on herself, with small hints from me. The wardrobe changed. The hair changed from clay to a fine-spun silver beige. She went to evening classes in voice and charm, and brought her voice down to a happily sultry level while learning makeup and such esoteric niceties as how to get into and out of a chair. Last summer, instead of buying herself a vacation, she bought herself a nose job. Thomas, dear fellow, I experienced all the joy of creation. I had taken a drab, repressed, frightened creature and turned it into a Viking princess, and thereby, unwittingly, put her at last beyond my reach."

"But how?" he asks.

I give it a long pause, a sigh, building the suspense. "Two weeks from tomorrow, she is marrying Pokaric."

He boggles and then he whinnies, and then he laughs until tears roll down his cheeks. I join him with my sad, half-hearted laughter.

When he has settled down I say, "Pokaric does not want a working wife. And she will be a staunch and reliable wife, with no desire to cheat on Pokaric. So, when I got these last three ribbons, I said my wistful farewells."

"You are right, Mulloy. It is irony."

"She is a valuable woman. She is not small-minded. She accepts the exigencies of a competitive economy."

"And you accept the loss?"

I shrug. "She is making a touching attempt to soften the blow, Tom. She is giving me a little reverse wedding present. I go up there next month to pick it up."

"After the wedding?"

"And after the honeymoon. From now until the wedding she will be busy breaking in a merry little redhead to take over her secretarial post."

He stares at me. "Did I lose track somewhere?"

I finish my drink and stand up. "Apparently, old boy."

"But what is she giving you?"

I shrug in a somewhat humble way. I smile, self-effacingly. I imply that I endure many things for the sake of our mutual advantage, our careers in International Metals. And I tell him what she is giving me: "The redhead."

Edward D. Hoch

Money on the Skull

“We hear you’re a good detective, Darlan,” Arnold Bantor said, shaking my hand. “And that’s what we need on the Hopewell campus.”

It was something new for me. I’d never heard of a college hiring a private eye for anything but guarding dormitories, and that was a bit out of my line. I’d never even attended college in my younger days. So the appointment with Arnold Bantor, the school’s athletic director, was a revelation to us both.

Bantor was a big man, tall and muscular, with football shoulders and a graying brush cut that dated him about twenty years. His office was a dingy room under the football stadium, right next to the showers. I’d passed a couple of casually naked youths on my way in, and settled onto a straight-backed chair that sported a layer of dust. Bantor evidently didn’t get many sit-down visitors. Still, I suppose it wasn’t much worse than the office of *Al Darlan Investigations*.

“Frankly,” Bantor continued, “I’d expected a younger man.”

“I didn’t know I’d have to pass a physical.”

“There may be some rough stuff involved. Could you handle it?”

“Suppose you explain the problem and I’ll let you know.”

Bantor leaned back in his chair. “We have the usual campus problems—drugs and prowlers and all the rest. But I’ve brought you in for something else. Maybe you know about Hopewell’s sports program. We’re a small coeducational college—about 600 students and 40 faculty members—but we’ve always been active in athletics. In basketball and football we’re just passable, but we excel in rowing—skulls.”

“Skulls?”

“S-c-u-l-l-s, Mr. Darlan. We were state champions last year, and expect to repeat this year. Only we’re having trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“One night last week someone drilled holes in the bottom of our boats.

And last Saturday while the crew was practicing on the river, a speedboat with two men in it deliberately rammed them. One boy got a broken wrist and nearly drowned."

"Sounds serious," I admitted. "Have the police been notified?"

"Of course, but they refuse to see any pattern to the thing. They call Saturday's incident just a careless accident, even though the speedboat kept going after the crash. I'm afraid for the safety of the boys, and if the police won't furnish a guard, the college will."

"You must have some reason for suspecting a plot—something more than two unconnected incidents that might be nothing more than fraternity pranks."

"They're not fraternity pranks."

"Do you have many radical students at Hopewell? Perhaps they resent the emphasis on what they consider frivolous athletic events."

Arnold Bantor shook his head. "Nothing like that. Sure, we have a few radicals, but mainly Hopewell is a peaceful place. The kids come here to learn."

"You mentioned drugs before."

"Every campus has them. It's no more serious here than elsewhere."

"Nobody among the students who's a special problem?"

He studied his hands for a moment. "The closest we come to that, I suppose, is our campus witch." He forced a little laugh. "Of course, no one takes her seriously."

"A witch?"

"Her name is Gretel Mackenzie, and she's a junior this semester. The other girls say she practices witchcraft in the dorm, and that she put some sort of curse on the rowing team because the coach jilted her for someone else."

"I don't think you need a private detective, Mr. Bantor. Maybe a psychiatrist or a good exorcist!"

"We don't believe it for a minute! I only mentioned it because you asked about our campus radicals. I thought a would-be witch might qualify." He seemed to regret mentioning it.

I nodded agreement. "She does indeed, even though I suppose some philosophers might argue that witchcraft is more a reactionary than a radical doctrine."

Bantor eyed me uncertainly. "You don't talk much like a private detective."

"That's because you watch too much television," I told him with a smile. "What other possibilities are there? Gamblers?"

He nodded. "Our crew is usually favored, and of course there's always betting on the race. The semifinals against Chackworth are this Saturday, and if they win that they go to the Regatta the first week in June."

I thought about it, and finally I told him, "All right. I'll do it. I'll take the case, even though it's a bit out of my line. You understand about my fee and expenses?"

"We understand. I'll give you a purchase order for services, and you can bill the college direct. Triplicate invoices, please."

"Sure." There was nothing like red tape.

"When do you start?"

"I already have. Suppose you introduce me to your coach."

The sculling coach was a young man in his early twenties who must have been just out of college himself. His name was Frank Evans, and when I met him he was helping eight long-haired college boys lift the racing shell out of the water. He seemed like one of them, joking in the offhand, slightly obscene manner of college youths everywhere.

His firm hand was still damp with water as I shook it. "Glad to have your help, Mr. Darlan. Never knew a real private eye before."

"You're the rowing coach?"

He nodded. "We have an eight-man crew, plus a coxswain who steers the shell and directs the crew. Sometimes during training I act as coxswain myself."

"Were you in the shell when it was rammed Saturday?"

"I was." His voice turned suddenly grim.

"Could it have been an accident?"

"Not a chance. They circled us once and then came right in at full speed. Damn near killed us all. Broke one boy's wrist."

"What did they look like?"

"Two tough-looking guys in a speedboat. The bow was reinforced with sheet metal. They knew what they were doing, all right."

"I'd like to go out on the river, see where it happened."

Evans nodded. He turned to the boys and told them, "Same time tomorrow, fellas. Do your exercises." Then he led the way to a small, brightly painted runabout that drifted lazily against the far side of the dock. "You coming, Arnie?"

Bantor waved his hand. "You two go ahead. I have a meeting."

I settled myself somewhat gingerly into the runabout, while Frank Evans hopped behind the wheel as if he'd been doing it all his life. In a moment we were cutting through the gentle currents of the river, heading upstream. "Beautiful country around here," I observed, holding tight.

"Sure is!" After a moment he cut the motor and we drifted gently with the current. "We were right about here when the speedboat hit us. It came from that little inlet, sheltered by the trees."

"Bantor thinks gamblers might be responsible."

Evans squinted at the cloudless sky. "Could be. Rowing in America was tied to gambling from the very beginning. It got started in New York harbor, among the oarsmen who rowed salesmen out to meet the ships coming from Europe. The salesman who reached the ship first had a distinct advantage over his rivals, so there was great competition among the oarsmen. In 1811 they started holding match races for purses and side bets."

"I always thought rowing was connected with England somehow, with the Henley Regatta, and all that stuff."

"The Henley only dates from 1829, though there were races between rivermen on the Thames a hundred years earlier. I suppose it was the Henley that inspired the first Yale-Harvard race in 1852. But the one we're aiming at is the Intercollegiate Rowing Association Regatta. It used to be held on the Hudson River, but since 1952 it's been on Onondaga Lake in Syracuse."

"How long have you been coaching here?" I asked.

"This is my first year. I rowed myself last year, before graduation. I came back for some post-grad work and Arnold Bantor offered me the coaching job."

For a moment I studied his face, tanned and youthful, framed by sandy hair worn fashionably long. "Tell me about Gretel Mackenzie."

His eyes hardened almost at once. "Did Bantor feed you that line of crap?"

"He said some people thought she'd hexed the rowing team because you threw her over for someone else."

"I went with her all through my senior year. Now I'm back, and a member of the faculty, so I'm thrown in with different people, that's all. It wouldn't look good for me to keep dating students."

"Is she a witch?"

He relaxed into a grin. "Hell, all women are witches, aren't they?"

"I'd like to meet her all the same, if she made a threat against the rowing team."

Evans blinked and stared toward the shoreline. "You might get that wish sooner than you expect. I think she's standing there behind those bushes, watching us."

I followed his gaze and saw a tall, handsome girl standing just to the left of a clump of bushes. She was barefoot, and wore torn dungarees held up

by a rope belt. Her hair was long and black, as befitted a witch, and she wore a blue sweatshirt with the college seal on its front. She was holding something white in her hand, but I couldn't make out what it was. "Let's go in to shore," I suggested.

"You really want to?"

"It's my job, isn't it?"

I thought she might run when she saw us coming, but she held her ground nicely. Evans held the boat steady to the shore as I hopped out and tied it to a tree. Then we walked over together. "Hello, Gretel. How've you been?"

She smiled, eyes boring holes through us, and held up the white thing in her hand. I saw now that it was a bone—a polished white bone about eight inches long. "I've been fine, Frank," she answered, pointing the bone at his chest.

He pushed it away with a flare of anger. "My God, Gretel, when are you going to cut out this insanity? Nobody really believes in this witchcraft thing, you know!"

Her smile was strange and sad. "They will, Frank. They will." She turned suddenly on me, her eyes searching, inquisitive. "Who might this be?"

"A private detective investigating the troubles we've been having. Al Darlan, this is Gretel Mackenzie."

"My first real witch," I said with a smile, giving her a little bow.

"It's nothing to joke about. If I were to point this bone at you and say a few words, you could be crippled for life."

She was the most unlikely witch I'd ever imagined, and I had the feeling that a good spanking might do her a world of good, but just then I decided to go along with it. "They tell me you've placed a curse on the rowing team because of Frank here."

"He's acquired a taste for faculty wives since his graduation. Haven't you, Frank?"

Evans blushed a bit and took a step backward. "If you mean Gilda Harcourt, we're just good friends."

"Sure, you are!" She turned away suddenly, signaling an end to the conversation—then, as an afterthought, turned back to add, "Watch out for Saturday, Frank. Your team will be rowing from the bottom of the river."

We watched her go, and then climbed back into the boat. "See what I mean, Darlan? No more of a witch than any woman."

I smiled at that. "I don't ever remember my ex-wife pointing a bone at me."

"Oh, hell, you know how college girls are these days. Astrology, mysticism, witchcraft—anything for kicks."

"What about Gilda Harcourt?"

He flushed again. "She's Professor Harcourt's wife. You'll see them both at the faculty meeting this afternoon."

I hadn't been prepared for anything like a faculty meeting, but apparently Bantor thought it a good idea for everyone to meet me before I began snooping around in earnest. There were about forty of them, as Bantor had said, and only a handful were women. Gilda Harcourt was a striking girl with short brown hair and a ready smile. She stuck close to the side of a leering gray-haired man who must have had twenty years on her. This, I learned, was her husband—Professor Devon Harcourt of the English Department. If she was playing around with the handsome rowing coach, I could well understand it. Harcourt was just a dirty old man.

"Do you teach also?" I asked her when I had a chance. It seemed likely, since she was attending the faculty meeting.

The ready smile turned my way. "Creative writing, but this is my last term. It's not wise to work in your husband's department. I'll retire to being a housewife."

Professor Harcourt blustered at her side. "You might as well know, Mr. Darlan, that I don't approve of using college funds to hire a guard the local police should supply."

"I agree," I told him. "But I didn't hire me."

When he'd drifted away, I told his wife, "I always wanted to be a writer. Is it easy to learn?"

She ignored my question and said instead, "Brush-cut Bantor says he told you about Gretel Mackenzie. What do you think?"

I shrugged. "Girl witches might be able to summon up imps and demons, but I doubt if they have much connection with two tough-looking guys in a speedboat. Besides, I'm surprised her fury isn't directed against you."

"Oh, you've heard the stories?"

"More important, has your husband heard them?"

"Devon never listens to gossip. Frank Evans is a good friend—that's all."

Her husband interrupted to drag her away to the Dean at that moment, and I was left alone. The meeting itself had been a short affair, with the socializing apparent as the reason for it all. I was already bored with the thing. Whatever I was supposed to find at Hopewell College, I wouldn't be finding it here.

"I'm Sam Turk," a youngish man said, introducing himself and interrupting my daydreams. "I teach Comparative Government."

"Pleased to meet you."

"What's Bantor want you for? The trouble on the river?"

"Is there any other trouble around?"

His chiseled features were a bit sharp to be really handsome, but I was still willing to bet he was a hit with the ladies. High forehead, bushy sideburns, sporty glasses. His whole face seemed a compromise between college and community. "Bantor lives too much in the past," he said. "Today's youth don't care any more who wins the big game on Saturday afternoon. Did you notice the hair on him? The only brush cut on campus!"

"What's that got to do with what happened on the river?"

"Just that I think the kids are somehow responsible. The radicals."

"Bantor says there are few radicals at Hopewell."

Sam Turk shrugged his narrow shoulders. "That just proves how out of it he really is."

"He told me about the witch—Gretel Mackenzie."

A smile now—slight, but playing about his lips. "Bantor worries about the obvious." But he said no more, because Bantor himself appeared at that moment, flustered and impatient.

"Darlan, can you come with me for a moment?"

After all, I was his employee, so I followed him out of the big faculty room and onto the tree-shaded quadrangle where long-haired boys strolled with blue-jeaned girls. From the looks of the student body, I was ready to suspect that they might be a bit more radical than Bantor was ready to admit.

"What's the trouble?" I asked him.

"Another attack on the boats. I'll show you." He was grim-faced and obviously disturbed, and I followed him down to the river in silence. The racing shells sat on their sawhorses on the dock, drying in the sun. I saw at once the gaping holes in the sides of both boats. These hadn't just been drilled—they'd been smashed with axes or something similar. "In broad daylight!" Bantor stormed. "And your first afternoon on the job!"

"Somebody knew there was a faculty meeting today, and that you'd all be at it."

"Everyone knew that. All the students. That damned witch with her bones!"

"Do you have any other boats?"

Bantor shook his head. "We patched up the drill holes, but one shell was

ruined in the crash Saturday. These are the other two. They're beyond immediate repair, which means we'll have to borrow one for this week's race. The crew will be in an unfamiliar boat."

"All right," I said. I was noticing a line of damp shoeprints running across the dock to the damaged boats. They came from the water, and they were too recent to have been made by the crew earlier. The vandals had come by the sea, just as they had in ancient times, and that meant they probably weren't students. "I'll have a report for you in the morning."

"You going to talk to Gretel Mackenzie?"

"Not right now," I told him. "I'm going into town and see if I can place a bet on Saturday's race."

One of the advantages of being a private detective is that you get to meet a lot of people at all levels of society. During the fifteen years that I'd run the little one-man office in an aging downtown building, I'd had plenty of opportunity to meet men like Roscoe Spice.

Roscoe was a gambler—a big, balding man a few years older than myself, crowding fifty and looking every day of it. His father had been a gambler before him, running a chain of little cigar-store horse-rooms near the big factories in town. Roscoe inherited the business and did his old man one better: he branched out into sports betting of all kinds, with occasional poker games for his good customers. The local police arrested him on gambling charges every year or so—usually just before elections—but Roscoe Spice prided himself on never having spent a night in jail.

He looked up when I entered his plush office on the east side of town and seemed surprised. "Al Darlan! It's been a long time since I've seen you in my place!"

"Hello, Roscoe. How're they running?"

"Want a good tip?"

I settled into one of his overstuffed leather chairs. "What odds you giving on the Hopewell-Chackworth race Saturday?"

Spice carefully angled a paperweight on his desk. "We don't do too much with college events, Al."

"I think you're doing something with this, Roscoe."

A frown, the beginning of uncertainty. "How do you mean?"

"You own a speedboat. It's usually docked at the yacht club, but it's been missing since last weekend."

"Yeah. Somebody stole it."

"But you didn't report it to the police."

"Hell, what is this, Al?"

"I'm working for Hopewell. A kid was almost drowned when your goons rammed that shell last Saturday."

"I don't know a thing about it," he said, but he averted his eyes.

"Don't screw around with me, Roscoe. I know you're trying to make a killing on that race. I only had to make three phone calls to find it out. You're trying to make Hopewell lose, or forfeit the race."

He sighed and opened his hands in a gesture of pleading. "I'm in a box, Al. Ever since New York State legalized off-track betting, all the big money goes to the betting parlors. They're all over Manhattan, and there are a few upstate too. It's killing guys like me. So far, they can't accept bets on other sporting events, and that's my only hope. A year ago I wouldn't have looked twice at something like a college boat race, but today it's different." He dropped his voice a notch. "I got fifty-five grand riding Saturday, Al. The way things are, it could wipe me out to lose it."

"Is that any reason to send your goons out and—"

"They weren't supposed to ram it, just scare the kids a little, make them nervous."

"And today, with the axes?"

"More of the same," Spice answered with a shrug. "If they have to use a strange boat, maybe they'll be more likely to lose."

"That's what I figured." I stood up. "You may have the cops in this town buffaloed, Roscoe, but you don't own me yet. Call off your goons or they'll end up in the river along with those boats."

"I could put five grand on Chackworth for you, Al."

"Don't bother. Just keep your guys away." I turned and walked out of the office. There was nothing more to be said.

It had been a long day for me, but I still wanted to get back to Hopewell and report to Bantor. Though he wasn't expecting me till morning, I thought he'd sleep easier knowing the worst was over. I drove out the River Road in the gathering twilight, enjoying the scent of May flowers in the air, happy that the case had been so easy to crack.

By the time I'd parked my car it was almost dark, and my eyes caught a red-orange glow in the eastern sky. It was the wrong direction for a sunset, and besides, it was growing and flickering as I watched. Then I realized what it was—the boathouse by the river was on fire! I started running, cursing Roscoe Spice and his goons with every breath.

A crowd was beginning to gather by the time I reached the flaming structure, and a few students were even filling buckets of water from the river to douse the blaze. I could hear fire engines in the distance, but I didn't wait for them. There was someone inside—a man stretched in the doorway with fire all around him.

Frank Evans was there suddenly, wearing sweat pants beneath a bare chest. He grabbed my arm as I started forward. "It's too late to save him now," he shouted, but I broke free and plunged into the midst of the flames. It wasn't quite as dangerous as it looked, and I figured I had to do something to earn my money.

The man on the floor was dead weight, and I couldn't lift him. Finally I grabbed both legs and dragged him out, beating at the flames that tried to catch his clothes and hair. Then, when we were clear of the fire, Evans and the others ran to help.

I sat on the dock, trying to clear my lungs of the superheated smoke. After a moment, Frank Evans came over. "It was a great try, but you were too late. He's dead."

"Who is it?"

"Professor Harcourt."

I couldn't take my eyes from his face. "Gilda's husband. I guess that's convenient for you."

"Don't say that!"

I got to my feet and pushed through the crowd to the body of the man I'd tried to rescue. It was Devon Harcourt, all right, but he hadn't died in the fire. He'd been shot once through the heart.

By the time the blaze was finally under control, most of the old wooden boathouse had been destroyed. I stood in the glare of the firemen's spotlights, staring at the water-soaked ashes and listening to Arnold Bantor's complaints. "This is exactly the sort of thing we hired you to prevent, Darlan! Where in hell were you, anyway? Now we've got murder and arson on our hands!"

"Keep cool," I told him. "I haven't sent you a bill yet. Things might not be the way they seem."

"Professor Harcourt is dead—there's no doubt about that!"

"Let me look around," I said. "I'll get back to you." My eyes had been scanning the crowd, and it seemed as if most of Hopewell's 600 students and faculty were on the scene. Still, I could not pick out Gretel the Witch in the crowd, and this bothered me. Maybe she was hiding in the bushes somewhere, pointing her bone.

I headed back along the curving sidewalk toward the dorms, walking fast because there was no one else on the path ahead. When I was near the women's dorm, I saw a sudden movement in the bushes, and somehow I knew it was her.

"Hold it," I barked. "I've got a gun!"

She came out then, still dressed in dungarees and sweatshirt, holding

that damned white bone in front of her, pointed at me. I hadn't bothered to draw my gun, and I simply took a step forward, knocking the bone from her hand with a sudden swat. "We've had enough of this foolishness," I told her. "A man is dead."

Her lips curled in a sort of snarl, and she started toward me. I slapped her twice across the face and managed to get her flailing arms pinned to her side. "I know he's dead," she hissed. "I saw it happen."

"You saw it?"

She stopped struggling and relaxed under my grip. "I saw him going down to the boathouse, and I followed. I thought he might be on his way to catch his wife with Frank. But he was meeting somebody there."

"Who?"

"It was getting dark. I couldn't recognize him. But I think it might have been a student. He shot Harcourt and ran off toward the campus. A few seconds later the fire started. He must have had it all ready, and just dropped a match as he left." I could see she was frightened. Perhaps she was done playing the witch game—or perhaps she really thought she'd brought it all on herself.

"Get back to your room and stay there."

"I didn't kill him. I would have killed his wife, not him."

I left her standing on the path and retraced my steps toward the boathouse. The crowd was beginning to drift back, walking quietly in small groups, aware of the presence of death. I walked past a few, but my eyes weren't really on them. I was scanning the bushes and grass for anything the killer might have dropped in his flight. There was nothing until I came to the big yellow trash barrel at the intersection of two walks. There, feeling among the discarded newspapers and cigarette packs and beer cans, I came upon something hard and hairy. It was a .38 Colt revolver, recently fired, wrapped in a shaggy black wig.

I put the whole thing in my pocket, careful not to touch the gun, and went off toward my car. The police were arriving in force, and I didn't have time just then to be answering questions about concealing evidence.

The first thing I had to do was check on Roscoe Spice's movements that night—but there was a surprise waiting for me back at his east side office. I'd brushed past the hood at the door and walked right in, but he wasn't alone. Sam Turk, the sharp-faced faculty member I'd met that afternoon, was seated across the desk from him. Turk paled noticeably at the sight of me, and Roscoe was on his feet in an instant.

"It's after office hours, Darlan," he barked. "Even for you!"

The guy from outside had followed me in, and he made a grab for my

arm. "Call him off, Roscoe," I warned. "There's been a murder, and you're set up to take the rap for it."

That was enough to hook Roscoe Spice. He waved the hood away and asked, "Who got killed?"

"Professor Harcourt, out at the college."

"Harcourt!" It was a gasp from Turk.

Roscoe Spice snorted. "I don't even know the guy!"

"He was killed down by the dock and the boathouse was set on fire, either to cover the crime or make it look like some more of your work."

Spice thought about that. "Hell, I called my boys off after they broke up those shells this afternoon. They're clean."

Sam Turk cleared his throat. "The police should talk to Evans, the rowing coach. Everyone on campus knows he was sleeping with Harcourt's wife."

It was time for me to acknowledge his presence in the room. "Just what brings you here, Mr. Turk? Research in comparative government?"

"I—"

"It's a business deal," Spice interrupted quickly. "None of your affair."

"Can I assume he's been here for the last hour?" I asked.

"You can't think I had anything to do with this business!"

"The only deal you'd have with Roscoe here would be gambling, and when gamblers lose, they do crazy things sometimes."

Sam Turk got to his feet. "I'll talk to you outside, Darlan. My business with Mr. Spice was finished, anyway."

"Mine isn't," I told him. "Wait for me outside." When we were alone, I turned back to Roscoe Spice. "I think you're clean in this, but I'm not absolutely convinced. Take my advice and lay off all the bets of Saturday's race with other bookies. That way you'll be in the clear."

"I got too much money tied up in it, Al. I told you!"

"How many more faculty members have you got your claws into?"

"Hell, their money's as good as anyone else's. A little gambling isn't going to hurt Hopewell. It's one hell of a lot better than all the pot pushing and pill popping."

"Sure. Just a good old American tradition—the corner bookie."

"Look, Al, you were hired to guard the place—right? And now you've got a murder and arson on your hands—right? Seems to me a little gambling is the least of your worries right now."

He was right in a way, of course, and I left him there in his plush office, hoping I could do better with Sam Turk. He was still waiting outside, and that was a good sign, at least.

"Let me tell you how it was, Darlan," he said as we walked to our cars.

"I'm all ears."

"Some of us on campus used to make an occasional bet on the races, just like everyone else. We dealt through Spice's people because they were handy and always cooperative. When the legalized off-track betting came in, Spice started switching us to betting on other sports—baseball, football, boxing, finally even boat racing. Some of us got in deeper than we planned."

"Who else besides you?"

Sam Turk was silent for a moment and then finally he said, "Harcourt. That poor bastard really had his troubles. A pile of gambling debts and his wife playing around with handsome Frank Evans. He's almost better off dead."

"Nobody's better off dead. At least not the way he died."

Turk looked at me. "What are you going to do?"

"Find out who killed him, if I want to collect my fee."

Hopewell College held its breath for the next three days, getting through the funeral of Devon Harcourt without incident. The police were prowling the campus, of course, and I spent most of my time staying out of their way. The rest of it was spent listening to Arnold Bantor's laments about Saturday's race.

"The Board of Trustees suggested we call it off," he told me Friday night, "but that would be admitting defeat. There's been no more trouble since the killing, and Frank thinks the boys are coming along fine in the shell we borrowed. After all, there's a lot of prestige riding on this race."

I nodded. "A lot of money too."

I went up to the Harcourt home to pay my respects to the widow, and ask her a few questions—something I'd refrained from doing in the days before the funeral. She was still dressed in black, with no makeup, but somehow that didn't help make her acceptable in the widow's role. All the time she was talking to me I had the distinct impression she was counting the hours till she'd be having a roll in the hay with Frank Evans. No, she was not your typical grieving widow.

"Could you make it fast?" she asked, starting off right. "I have to go out this evening."

"As fast as I can, Mrs. Harcourt. I understand your husband was at home till a short time before his murder?"

"That's right."

"You told the police there was a phone call."

"Correct. Someone called him and he went out. That was the last I ever saw him."

"He didn't say who called?"

She'd begun pacing, already showing her impatience with my questions. "No, just that he had to meet someone at the boathouse."

"You didn't find this unusual?"

"Everything my husband did was unusual, Mr. Darlan. He gambled away twenty thousand dollars last year, and that was certainly unusual, since it's nearly twice his net salary."

"Where did the rest of the money come from?"

She shrugged. "Part from me, but when I stopped giving it he went into debt with those people."

"The gamblers?"

"A man named Spice. Funny name for a gambler to have, isn't it? Sugar and spice and everything nice?"

"I never thought about it. Who do you think killed him, Mrs. Harcourt?"

"Spice, I suppose, or his men." She shrugged it off, as if it couldn't matter less.

"Not Frank Evans?"

Her smile was frank and self-deprecating. "No one ever committed murder over me."

"There's always a first time." I took the shaggy wig from my pocket. I'd finally turned in the gun to the police, but I figured the wig might come in handy. "Ever seen this before?"

"No."

"I notice you wear wigs. Is it yours?"

"Hardly. It looks like a rat's nest!"

"Apparently your husband's killer was wearing it."

"I never saw it before," she repeated.

"Do any of the other faculty wives wear wigs?"

"Lots of women wear wigs these days. Lots of men too. At that length it could have been worn by a man or a woman."

I stuffed it back into my pocket. "Are you going to the race tomorrow?"

She smiled slightly. "It might not be proper, so soon after the funeral."

"I see," I said, but I didn't see much. I thought I knew who'd killed Professor Harcourt, but proving it might be another matter altogether.

The day of the boat race was sunny and pleasant, and both banks of the river were crowded early. Students came with their dates, or just in bunches, to watch and picnic and drink beer.

Frank Evans saw me on the dock and came up smiling. "Great day for it," he said. "We'll beat Chackworth by a hundred meters."

“Good luck.”

I drifted back into the crowd, conscious that I had a good twenty years on most of them, and sought out the occasional faculty members closer to my age. Promptly at noon came the starting gun, and the race was on.

The Hopewell crew took an early lead, and as the eight strong bodies flashed by me in the shell I had the feeling they were unbeatable this day. Roscoe Spice had done his worst, but it hadn't been bad enough to stop them. Then, staring downriver in their wake, I suddenly saw something that chilled me.

Gretel Mackenzie was standing in the middle of a stone bridge that spanned the river. I started running, wondering if I could get there in time, but even as I ran I saw her climb onto the bridge's railing and I knew she meant to throw herself off at the exact moment Evans's crew passed underneath. One way or another, she meant to have her crazy revenge.

I might have made it if I hadn't spotted Arnold Bantor. He was standing at the very edge of the river bank staring up at her. “Don't do it, Gretel!” he shouted. And then I saw the gun in his hand.

I downed him with a flying tackle just as he fired, carrying us both into the shallow water. I knew the shot had gone wild, but behind me I heard a gasp from the crowd. I lifted my head from the water in time to see Gretel take off from the bridge in a graceful dive straight down at the Hopewell boat.

“Yes,” I began, facing Frank Evans and Hopewell's president and assorted detectives an hour later, after I'd changed into some dry clothes. “Arnold Bantor killed Harcourt. If you check that pistol you'll find it's a mate to the one you recovered after the murder. But you may not need the evidence. After what happened today, he's ready to confess everything.”

“We just had a report from the hospital,” Evans said. “Gretel has a fractured skull, but they expect her to live. Luckily none of my boys were hurt when she hit the boat, but it means we're out of the Regatta.”

“There's always next year,” I sympathized.

“She must be really crazy.”

I nodded. “That's why Bantor tried to shoot her. Winning the race meant more to him than to you even, Frank. You see, Harcourt was blackmailing him, and had been for some time. That's where Harcourt got the money to lose gambling. I didn't know the details until Bantor started talking, but it seems Harcourt discovered Bantor supplying drugs to some of the team members. It was a serious charge for someone in Bantor's position, and he paid up to keep it quiet. His big hope for recovering financially was today's race. He bet heavily on Hopewell, and then saw his

money heading down the drain with all these acts of sabotage. When even I wasn't able to stop them, he must have blamed Harcourt somehow. He lured him to the boathouse and killed him, to end the sabotage, to end the blackmail, or so he believed. But he still needed money to cover the previous blackmail, which is why he panicked when he saw Gretel about to ruin everything. He tried to kill her too, and maybe I should have let him."

"Did you know Bantor was the killer?" Evans asked.

"I was pretty sure, though I had no real evidence. Spice told me other faculty members were betting on the race, and even said it was better than pot pushing—a clear indication he knew of some faculty involvement in that too. But the big clue came from Gretel. She saw the killer and described him as a student. Why? Because of his long hair, which I knew was a wig." I pulled it from my pocket. "I found it with the gun."

"You should have reported that," one of the detectives muttered.

"I'm reporting it now. I found it in a trash can on the way back to campus, confirming what Gretel said. Since the killer headed back on campus after the killing, he logically had to be a student or faculty member. One of Spice's hoods would have escaped by the river rather than risk discovery on campus. But what student or faculty member needed a long-haired wig to disguise himself? Only Arnold Bantor—the single man on campus who still wore his hair in a brush cut!"

"Is that all?" the detective asked.

"One more thing, the setting of the murder. Everyone on campus knew I'd been hired to guard the shells. Who in his right mind would lure his victim down to the boathouse to kill him? Only Arnold Bantor—because I'd told Bantor I was going into town and he knew it would be safe. Of course he set the fire to make it look like more of Spice's work."

After that there wasn't much talk. I stayed around a bit, discussing the fee I hadn't earned but still wanted to collect. The president told me to submit a bill—in triplicate. That was six months ago and I'm still waiting for my money.

James McKimmey

The Child Molesters

The Budd sisters' cabin was on the edge of a pine wood, dark green, A-framed, with a single kitchen window looking out toward the trees and the high mountains of the Sierra beyond. Rosalie Budd, the slimmer and older sister at forty-eight, was paring potatoes over the sink, using a surgically sharp knife she'd removed from a rack just beside the window through which she was idly gazing.

Then, behind her, she heard a thin, inhuman voice say, "Mama . . . ?"

Rosalie turned to find her sister Grace in the room. Shorter, ten pounds plumper and two years younger than Rosalie, Grace held two dolls in her arms. One of them, named Baby Wren, was a recent acquisition and the one, Rosalie knew, that had just spoken; the doll wore a linen christening dress and had a foam-stuffed body, rooted blond hair, a dimpled vinyl face and eyes that could sleep. The other, named Mr. Cobbie, was forty-three years old, a soft-stuffed cotton doll attired in a now-ragged black suit, a black tie and a once-white shirt with a celluloid collar; this one could do nothing but flop.

"I've decided," Grace said in a tone pitched high enough to sound almost childlike.

"Decided what?" Rosalie asked politely.

"I don't like Baby Wren nearly as much as I do Mr. Cobbie."

Rosalie nodded slowly, making her own estimation as she had so many times after they'd purchased a new doll that had caught their fancy. And Mr. Cobbie remained her favorite over all of them, now collected in another room of the house.

"Who do you like better?" Grace asked, looking derisively at the new doll, then at Mr. Cobbie with tenderness.

"Mr. Cobbie," Rosalie said positively.

"I'm glad," Grace said, sounding relieved. "Baby Wren talks and sneezes and drinks and wets. But I like Mr. Cobbie best. Papa bought him for us."

"Yes," Rosalie said, thinking that was it: Mr. Cobbie was the one doll he had bought for both of them, and so Mr. Cobbie was a firm link with that fine time when Papa had been alive, and Mama too. Papa had bought others, for each of them. But Mr. Cobbie was singularly special, and he had survived the years very well indeed.

"Do you want to hold him for a minute?" Grace asked.

Rosalie took the doll to hold it carefully, feeling, for a moment, her throat tightening. With Mr. Cobbie in her arms, she felt herself moving back in time when it had been so good, so cozy, so right, living in this house with Papa and Mama. That had been the best time, and neither she nor Grace had ever wanted it to change. So it hurt, now, because it *had* changed, with Papa gone, Mama gone. *Oh, Mr. Cobbie*, she thought, *if we could only go back. . . .*

"I want to now," Grace said, showing a touch of jealousy.

Rosalie gave the doll back quickly.

Grace pressed Mr. Cobbie closely to her and said, "I'll put them back with the others and then help with the stew for tonight."

"All right, Grace."

Rosalie resumed her paring of potatoes. And Grace, moments later, returned to the kitchen to begin sautéing chunks of beef. Rosalie again looked outside, saying, "Nearly the end of December. And so cold. But no snow yet."

"No," said Grace beside the stove. "One year it's a ton. Another it doesn't snow until nearly spring."

"Mmmm."

Weather was often a topic of conversation between them. And they also talked about the physical changes of growth that continued in this mountain community. When they were children, their cabin had been one of only a few in an area perhaps as large as ten square miles. Now, if you left the structure through the back door and walked north into the woods on a path originally created by deer until you neared the keys created beside a large lake, you found a giant development of unbelievably expensive homes.

And the sisters had felt a steady and constant resentment for all those changes that had come with more people and more buildings. Their cabin remained reasonably isolated. But the outside places they'd known growing up were no longer what they had been. When it was this cold, and the snow had not yet fallen, Papa had taken them to a small pond no more than a mile away. And they had skated on that pond's frozen surface, faces tingling, laughing, holding onto Papa's steady hands. Now the pond had been filled in and there were buildings where it had been. Then, every year

after the snow had come, Papa had borrowed a horse and sleigh and taken them along near-empty streets in the purest of winter beauty. Now those streets were crowded with cars and trucks, destroying that beauty; and it was even against the law to use a sled on them. *Oh, Papa*, she thought, realizing that Mr. Cobbie's having been in her arms was making her think so much of their father today.

Well, she thought of their mother a great deal too—a gentle whisper of a woman who had always treated them so carefully and took such good care of them. But their father had been the real strength of their lives. He was a tall, extremely handsome man—certainly to their eyes—and he was a man whose family and home were everything to him. He'd worked as a loan officer in a small bank. And he didn't earn a great deal of money in all of the years he was in that bank. But he'd earned enough, and invested some of it wisely, so that his precious family was always comfortable—and now, in fact, Rosalie and Grace were living on income from a trust fund he'd created. It allowed no real luxuries, not even that of a telephone, in this cabin. But then who was there to call, anyway? Moreover, this style of living was all the sisters needed or wanted, continual proof of Papa's devotion to them even though he'd stepped out of this mortal coil.

"I keep thinking of Papa," Rosalie confessed.

Grace nodded. "I think of him too, most all of the time."

"How, on a winter day like this, he'd come home from work and we'd gather around the fire and just be so happy and toasty warm with everything perfect. It was nice, wasn't it, Grace?"

"Ever so!" Grace said.

And it had been, Rosalie thought: sitting close to Papa beside a round fireplace that offered leaping blue and yellow flames to enliven the living room. Her father always wore a black suit and tie, even when he was relaxing at home in that fashion, and her mother had often remarked that other people had judged Papa aloof just because of the constant formality of his appearance. But they, his family, all knew differently, no matter his attire, because they could feel deeply Papa's great love and warmth. Oh, yes, Rosalie thought, those were the best years, with Papa, with Mama. . . .

"I just hope," she said to Grace as she continued to observe the land behind the cabin, "that it always stays like it is, in back."

"For as long as we live."

"I don't ever want to see anyone build houses out there. It should stay *exactly* as it is."

"*Exactly*," Grace agreed.

And then Rosalie saw two small figures come dancing out of the deeper part of the woods where the path was. A boy, a girl, she could see that—

wearing no coats, only sweaters that appeared to be very lightweight. They stopped, looking at the cabin, then scampered forward again over the frozen ground, coming nearer. Rosalie took a breath and felt her heart beating faster. They loved their dolls, that was true. But they loved real, live children even more.

"Grace," Rosalie said. "Come look at *this*."

Moments later, in response to quick tapping on the back door, Rosalie opened it to look at the children standing there. This close, she saw that the blue jeans both were wearing had been bleached by use and countless washings; both pairs were patched at the knees. Flannel shirts beneath the sweaters were well worn, particularly at the collars. And the sweaters also had denim patches at the elbows. The only new items appeared to be their sneakers.

"My goodness," Rosalie said, "what have we here?"

"Ma'am," said the boy, looking up at her, demonstrating a round, nearly angelic-appearing face emphasized by very large sad eyes, "we're so cold!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Grace said, peering at the children from behind her older sister.

"It's true," said the girl, younger than the boy, and slimmer, but owning the same dark hair and basic facial features—they were obviously brother and sister. The girl hugged her arms in front of her sweater, shivering. "Could we come in just to warm up a little, ma'am? Please?"

"Of *course* you can," Rosalie said, escorting each into the warm kitchen with arms around their shoulders. "You just come right inside, darlings!"

"Poor little things," Grace said, touching one cold and rosy face, then the other. "You come into the living room where we've got a lovely fire going."

The four of them moved through the kitchen into the living room. And Rosalie led both children to the sofa near the fire, saying, "Now you just sit down right here and get warm. My heavens, children, where are your coats?"

But both sat silently as Rosalie tried to guess their ages. A year apart, perhaps. And so the boy was seven, eight—possibly ten and small for his age? But she wasn't very good at the estimate, never having been a mother. She and Grace had owned no opportunities with men. And so nothing ever remotely approaching love or marriage had come their way. They simply had always accepted the fact that it was each other they would be with until death them did part. Still, she *adored* children. . . .

"Dear?" Rosalie asked.

"We don't *have* any coats," the boy said, brushing long, dark hair from

his eyes as he gazed up at Rosalie with the expression of ultimate child innocence.

"Oh, that's . . . awful," Grace managed. "Here, in the mountains, in the middle of winter, and you don't have *coats*?"

The children shook their heads solemnly.

Rosalie sighed, then said, "But where do you *live*?"

The boy motioned with a small hand. "Back that way," he said vaguely.

"You mean at the keys?" she said in surprise.

"No, ma'am." He shook his head again. "We sure don't live *there*. I mean over that way, on the other side of the woods. We just have an old kind of cabin, that's all."

And Rosalie was remembering a cluster of dilapidated shacks to the west of the woods a little off the highway running north; she'd never bothered to examine them closely enough to realize that anyone actually still lived in any of them. "But you live with your parents, don't you?"

"Our mother," the little girl said.

"And she let you out on a day like this, dressed that way?"

Both shrugged and sat silently again.

"But don't you go to school?" Grace asked, sitting down close to the little girl.

"It's Christmas vacation," the girl said.

"Oh, that's right," Grace said. "But I still don't understand your not having coats of some kind!"

"We each had one. But mine got so wore out it wouldn't stay together when I put it on. And Sissy's got stolen at school before Christmas. Well, I guess *somebody* had a Christmas. *We* didn't."

"And so your mother just let you run outside to freeze to death!" Rosalie said with indignation.

"She's not home," the boy said simply.

"Does she work?" Grace asked.

Both children shook their heads.

"Then where is she? Shopping?"

"I don't think so," the boy said.

"You don't *know* where she is?" Rosalie said.

"She left last night sometime when we were sleeping," the boy said. "I don't know where she went."

The sisters were quiet for a time. Then Grace said to the boy, "Does your mother . . . drink?"

The boy blinked his large eyes, then nodded. "Lots."

"Oh, *dear*," said Grace. "And you've been alone in that place since last night, just all alone, poor things!"

"We had a heater," the girl said. "You know—like it has a wire and all."

"An electric heater?" Rosalie said.

"I guess so. Anyway we plugged it in when we got up this morning and it wouldn't work anymore."

"So it got so cold in the house," the boy went on, "that we left and thought we could find somewhere where it was warm. Like maybe over at the Y where we could go into a store. But then, when we saw this house, we just—"

"You did the right thing!" Rosalie said. "Now I want to know one more thing. Have you had a solitary bite to eat all day?"

"No, ma'am," said the boy.

"Uh-uh," said his sister.

"Well, then, you just stay right where you are and get all snug and warm and we'll do something about that!"

Rosalie and Grace went to the kitchen, where they discussed the matter in whispers as the children remained by the fire in the living room.

"Disgusting!" said Rosalie, pouring milk from a carton into a pan and starting a flame under it on the stove.

"Atrocious!" Grace said angrily, removing a large jar of peanut butter from a cupboard as well as a can of instant cocoa.

"Why some people have children is beyond me!" said Rosalie.

"I wonder if they have a father?"

"A legitimate one?"

"Well, I doubt that they do. But they're such pretty things, aren't they?"

"They're lovely," Rosalie responded.

"The girl's absolutely beautiful!" Grace said.

"And so's the boy!"

Rosalie let the milk heat just short of boiling as Grace heaped cocoa into two large mugs. Then Grace made two sandwiches from the peanut butter. Rosalie poured the milk into the mugs. The sandwiches were put on plates. And then Grace said, "Who's going to tell when that darned mother of theirs will get home again? Or in what kind of condition?"

"Something should be done," Rosalie said.

"Yes, but they're so upset right now. Maybe they don't show it too much, but they have to be, underneath. And there's plenty of time to take it up with the authorities—if they're taken care of in the meantime. So I was just thinking . . . they can have the cocoa and sandwiches. And then why can't they stay for dinner later? We'll get the stew together. And by the time it's done they'll be famished again. You know how children are. And then, Rosalie . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe they could stay the night." Grace's eyes were bright.

Rosalie paused, then she said, "Do you really think we *should*?"

Grace's head bobbed. "If their mother just deserted them that way, why not?"

Rosalie paused again, then she said, smiling, "Why not?"

They returned to the living room, placed the sandwich plates on the children's laps and handed them the mugs. Then they sat down on the sofa, one on either side of the boy and girl.

"Now what we were talking about, dears," Grace said, "is that you enjoy the sandwich and cocoa now. And then you can just stay right here, where it's warm and nice. And then you can have dinner with us. And . . . if you want to, just in case your mother doesn't go home, you can stay overnight too. Right here. In this house. How does that sound?"

The girl bit into the sandwich and nodded and chewed.

"Okay," the boy said nonchalantly and began eating his sandwich with gusto.

Rosalie sat watching him, then she lifted a hand and smoothed his long hair gently, carefully. "You look like such darling children," she said. "Both of you."

The girl looked at Rosalie and her first smile appeared. The boy also looked up at her. And now his expression of sadness had gone; instead, his eyes were twinkling.

They spent the rest of the afternoon chatting and giggling and having fun. The dolls were displayed, and both children were wholly impressed. Then they turned to playing guessing games as the interior of the cabin became invitingly aromatic with the smell of the stew simmering in the kitchen. Grace checked the pot twice, to make sure the heat was not too high and the stew wasn't sticking to the bottom; the girl followed her to the kitchen both times. Then Rosalie made the next check, followed by the boy, whose name had now been revealed as Sonny.

She lifted the lid of the pot and stirred the contents with a wooden spoon, then tested the seasonings, as the boy remained behind her. "I think just a touch more salt, Sonny. Like this." She shook a metal container, then stirred again. "And then about twenty more minutes and we'll be all ready for dinner. Are you hungry again, Sonny?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Rosalie tested a sip of the stew again, nodded in satisfaction, and was replacing the lid of the pot when she heard the boy say:

"Look at this, lady."

She turned, and her eyes widened as she felt her heart lurch.

The boy had silently moved a kitchen chair closer to the sink and the knife rack beside it. And now he stood on that chair, looking down at her, with a knife—a 15-inch Sabatier design—in his right hand.

“*What are you doing?*” she whispered.

“This,” he said, jumping down and plunging the knife into her chest. Eyes wide with her realization of what had happened, she managed, “Papa? Mr. Cobbie . . . ?” But he drove the blade into her again and again. And then she was making no more sounds as she slumped to the floor.

Grace came into the kitchen then, starting to say, “Rosalie—?” But then she saw her sister on the floor and stared with horror. The girl followed from behind, swift as a female cat leaping at a bird as she sprang up to hook her arms around Grace’s, pinning them.

The boy ran across the kitchen. The blade of the knife flashed in the late afternoon light pouring in through the window. Grace’s dress, in front of her left breast, turned wetly red.

They turned off the flame under the stew. Then, with paper towels taken from a roll on the wall, they wiped everything they’d touched.

Finally, after carefully checking the area behind the house from the back doorway, they ran out of the cabin and flew toward the woods and the trail that led through the trees.

The boy’s smile seemed heavenly made; the girl’s was beatific. They’d never done that before. Not until today, after making up their minds only that morning. But both of them knew, deep in their hearts, that it wouldn’t be the last time. And it didn’t matter who, either; just so they could do it undetected, as they had today.

They traversed the trail’s length with speed, seeing no one, being seen by no one. And then they were back in the expensive housing development at the keys, hurrying home to the large and imposing house at the edge of the water which they shared with their mother and eminently successful father.

William Brittain

The Ferret Man

At the opposite end of the table with its cracked oilcloth covering, Elmo cut the slab of pork on his plate into four huge hunks and forked one of them into his mouth. Three convulsive movements of his jaws, a twitch of the scrawny, wattled neck, and it was gone.

Repulsed by the gluttonous display, she brought one tiny morsel to her lips. It was hard to understand how Elmo remained so thin. He crammed food in like a steam shovel scooping up gravel from a hillside, and with about as much regard for its flavor. Maybe old age numbed the taste buds, she didn't know. He seemed to eat only to fuel the creaking machine that was his body. Taste meant nothing. She'd long ago given up trying to make his meals appealing. What was the use?

What was the use of anything anymore?

Ten silent minutes later, Elmo was sopping at the juices on his plate with a scrap of bread. She'd barely begun her meal. His lips sucked noisily, trying to dislodge a speck of meat from between his yellowed teeth. Finally he picked at it with the tine of a fork. In the old wood-burning stove a log popped, startling her.

"They's a nest of rats in the barn," Elmo announced. His greasy fingers scratched at his shock of dirty gray hair.

She stared at her plate, trying to pretend Elmo didn't exist.

"I can hear 'em squeaking inside the walls," he went on. "They ate holes in three bags of grain out there. Left their droppings all over the place. Guess they didn't go for that arsenic poison I put out for 'em."

She stopped chewing abruptly and forced the food in her mouth down her constricted throat. Then she placed her fork on the table and covered her mouth with the napkin. She gagged once, and the sweat started on her hands and forehead before she gained control again.

"Eat your food, woman," said Elmo.

"I . . . I don't believe I care for any more."

"Plate's near full. Shame to waste it."

"Elmo, do we have to talk about . . . about the things in the barn while we're eating?"

"We'll talk about anything I like, woman," he said. "You're my wife. You ought to take an interest in how the farm's run. One day you may have to take it over and run it yourself. Man my age ain't always going to be around to take care of you, you know. Now eat."

She sat in tight-lipped silence, her eyes fixed on her plate, where the grease from the fatty pork was slowly coagulating.

"Can't have rats eating up all our grain and pestering the animals," Elmo went on. "That's why I'm having the ferret man come over tomorrow."

"Who's that?" she asked, trying to ignore the sound of her husband sucking at his fingers.

"The ferret man? Name's LaChette. Josef LaChette. A foreigner. But that's all right, since he only has to be here a few hours. He keeps a few ferrets and some terriers at his place in town. Between 'em, they'll fix a building so it's clean as a whistle."

"From town? There's someone coming from town?"

Elmo nodded. "And I don't want you hindering his work. Stay away from the barn while he's about. Ferreting's an expensive proposition, and I want his mind on the job. Y'know, mebbe he'd take his pay in kind. Some eggs and a chicken or two. Cash money's hard to come by, and I ain't about to lay it out foolishly."

A visitor from town. She suddenly found herself looking forward with unaccustomed enthusiasm to the following day. If only she could find some excuse to talk to the ferret man. Just for a little while. But she supposed Elmo would be about all the time he was there.

"I spent the whole day plugging up holes at the front of the barn with hunks of tin," said Elmo. "That way, most of the rats will be forced out the back. Sometimes I'd look down at a hole and see one of 'em lookin' right back at me. I kicked at one or two, but they're fast critters. We got any pie, woman?"

She nodded. "It's rhubarb. I thought you might like that the best."

"Don't make no difference, just so's it's pie. A man's got to have pie to top off his supper. That's part of the reason he takes him a wife. To make him pie. There's other reasons, but I don't expect you'd like to talk about that, would you?"

Her heart became a lump of lead in her bosom, and her eyes were wet in the lantern light from the tears that filled them. She rose from her chair and stared out through the window. Across the barnyard in the gathering

dusk, the barn reared up against the unending flatness of the horizon. Hunnekers had stored their crops and housed their animals in that barn for nearly a hundred years. But Elmo would be the last to do so. If only there were children, or even a single child, instead of the vast loneliness. She peered off into the distance, imagining she could see the lights of the nearest house, nearly a mile away.

“No, Elmo. I guess there’s nothing more to say on the subject that hasn’t been said a hundred times already.”

Slowly, reluctantly, she turned from the window and began picking up the dishes from the table.

It was nearly noon the next day when the ferret man arrived. He came chugging up the road in an ancient open roadster, trailing clouds of dust and exhaust fumes behind him. His automobile was resplendent with daubs of paint in all the colors of the rainbow, covering the myriad dents in body and fenders. The front license plate—BZ-3131—swung from its bracket on a single bit of rusty wire. She smiled as she saw it and thought it might be something of an omen. On her last birthday, which Elmo had ignored, she’d been thirty-one years old.

As the car rattled up to the barnyard fence, she could hear the driver singing “Ol’ Dan Tucker” over the wheezing of the engine. He shut off the ignition, gripped the back of the seat with his hands, and vaulted out without opening the door. The sound of yapping dogs came from the open rumble seat.

Elmo was still out in the barn. Shyly she went out through the door and crossed the yard to greet the ferret man.

Oh, how the very juices of life gushed and flowed within his fine body as he stood beside the car, watching her approach. The muscles of his legs swelled and rippled under his cotton pants, and his slim waist swept up to a chest the size and fullness of a nail keg. His shoulders and biceps seemed hewn of knotted oak, and the sinews of his arms were thick cables. Yet his hands were slender, with an odd gentleness about them. His face was dark, with clearly etched features, and spoke of faraway places, while his smile was a beaming half moon in a cloudless sky.

And his hair! His hair was black and gleaming, a secret pool seen at midnight. She found herself walking faster toward him, almost running.

He took her outstretched hand between both of his and honored her with a slight bow. As she brought the hand back slowly to her side she felt an unaccustomed warmth in her cheeks.

“I am Josef LaChette,” he said. “And you, of course, would be Elmo Hunneker’s daughter, no?”

“No.” Taken aback by the question, she bought a moment of time by

brushing a strand of hair from her forehead. "That is, I'm Polly Hunneker—Elmo's wife."

"I see." Josef took a single step backward and acknowledged her status with a sharp nod of his head. For a moment there was a silence between them.

"There . . . there are no children." She didn't know why she said it, but it seemed necessary somehow to make the fact known. "We live here alone—just Elmo and me."

"If one must live with but a single other person . . ." smiled Josef. "I consider Mr. Hunneker very fortunate indeed."

Before she could answer, the barn door screeched loudly on rusty hinges, and Elmo stood in the opening. "That you, LaChette?" he bawled.

"Yes, Mr. Hunneker. I have come as promised."

"Yeah." Elmo plodded down to the car. "Well, we might as well get started. Polly, you go back into the house. This here's man's work."

Reluctantly she turned about. But then Josef gripped her arm. "There is no need to go," he said. "The ferret and the dogs do all that has to be done. We are only here to watch. And it is most interesting. Why can't she stay, Mr. Hunneker? The animals work better when there are those who appreciate what they are doing."

"Well . . . just so's she don't get in the way," said Elmo. "Now I plugged all the holes up at this end I could find, LaChette, but I might of missed a few. You sure none of them rats are going to get away?"

"No, Mr. Hunneker. That's what the dogs are for. One of them will keep an eye on this end of the barn." Josef went to the rumble seat and one by one lifted out three wriggling terriers who immediately began running about the barnyard, yapping shrilly.

"They seem to play now, you see. But when the time comes, they will be all work. And now for Marie." From the floor of the car he took a burlap bag tied with a bit of twine. Something squirmed inside. "Marie is a jill ferret," he went on. "She can enter places where the larger hobs are unable to go."

"But what if the rats put up a fight?" asked Elmo querulously. "Kind of gang up on her. I ain't going to be responsible if she gets hurt or . . ."

"Have no fear," replied Josef. "If the rats fight, they will die. But they will not fight, you see. They know full well that the presence of a ferret in their runways and nests is death approaching. They will flee. And the terriers will be waiting."

As Elmo and Josef approached the barn, the terriers became still. Then they began racing about the foundation of the barn, sniffing and whining.

At the doorway, Josef stopped. "This will do nicely," he said. "From here, Marie can find her own way."

He untied the twine from the neck of the bag and upended it. Something plopped softly onto the worn floorboards.

The animal was less than twenty inches long, with yellow-white fur covering a body that was as sinuous as that of a snake. It took a single step on its short legs, and then the tiny head on the long, supple neck peered about, its pink eyes glinting evilly. A red tongue licked out through wicked pointed teeth.

"I have always thought that if death were an animal, it would be a ferret," said Josef. "But my little Marie is beautiful, no?"

"Just so's it gets the job done," said Elmo. "What next?"

"We wait. Marie will do the rest."

As if a signal had been given, the ferret darted to the barn wall. Its movement was as silent as a flash of light. It came to an opening between two planks and flowed into the crack.

"And now," said Josef, "let us go outside and enjoy the show."

Elmo went around to the rear of the barn, where two of the dogs were waiting near a gap in the masonry. Josef paced to where Polly was standing.

"I hope you are not afraid of the sight of rats, Mrs. Hunneker."

"As . . . as long as they don't get too near."

"Never fear. The dogs are well trained." Suddenly he extended a pointing finger. "There! Look!"

A huge brown rat darted out of the crack beneath the barn door and was poised for a moment, blinking in the sunlight. Its long naked tail twitched once, and then it scurried toward the tall grass near the roadside.

Josef gave a single loud whistle through his teeth.

The rat never made its destination. One of the terriers rounded a corner of the barn and raced after it. With a single yip the dog was on the creature. One bite from powerful jaws, a toss of the terrier's head, and the rat landed in the road, its back broken. At once the terrier was off after other prey. From the sounds coming from behind the barn, the other dogs were having even better hunting.

"Git 'em, you critters," they could hear Elmo howl. "That's it. Don't leave a one of 'em to foul a man's grain. Git 'em, I say. Kill! Ain't any animal gonna take nothin' that belongs to me and live. Kill!"

And for almost thirty minutes, the dogs killed. Most of the rats seemed to be leaving through the rear of the barn, but occasionally one came out the front way to be immediately dispatched by one of the terriers. It was frightening to Polly to see how such playful dogs could turn into killers.

At last it was over. When five minutes had passed without a single rat being seen, Elmo plodded to where Josef and Polly were standing. "Reckon that's it," he said slowly. "You ought to go out back there.

Damnedest thing I ever see. I'll bet they's a whole barrelful of rats, and not a one of 'em got more'n twenty feet from the barn."

"Most came out that way," Josef nodded. "The ferret started at the front, you see, and the rats fled to the back to escape. But there was no escape."

The ferret man rubbed his chin as if he regretted bringing up something unpleasant. "But now, Mr. Hunneker, my fee."

"Yeah," said Hunneker. "Twenty dollars. That's a heap of money, Josef, for a few minutes' work."

"That's what we agreed on, sir." An icy, formal tone had crept into Josef's voice.

"Uh huh. But nothing was said about cash money. Seems to me you ought to be willing to take a good part of it in barter."

"My creditors do not deal in barter, Mr. Hunneker. Why should I?"

Elmo peered slyly over his shoulder at the barn. "Looks to me like you ain't in much of a bargaining position," he said. "Once your ferret comes out of there, the job's done, pay or no pay."

For several minutes the two haggled. Elmo was in love with the process, but it clearly was something strange and distasteful to Josef. Finally Polly could stand it no longer.

"Elmo!" she cried suddenly. "If you promised Mr. LaChette . . ."

"Shut up, woman!" he roared at her. "Now then, Josef . . ."

But Josef was not looking at Elmo. Instead he saw the expression on Polly's face. Fear? Hopelessness? He had seen it before in birds wounded by the hunter's gun and waiting for a neck-wringing death.

He grasped her by the shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. Then he turned back to Elmo.

"Pay whatever and however you like," he snapped. "Let's have done with the whole thing. I don't wish to engage in bargaining under these circumstances."

Elmo chuckled victoriously. "Got to get back to my cultivating now," he said. He climbed to the seat of the iron-wheeled tractor, started the motor with a roar, and lurched off down the road.

"He . . . he shouldn't have done that," said Polly.

"He's not the first such man the world has known. The Pied Piper of Hamelin dealt with much the same problem."

"Who?"

"Come, Mrs. Hunneker. It will be quite some time yet before my little Marie comes out of the barn. Right now she makes a feast of what's in the rats' nests. While I wait, I wonder if I could trouble you for a glass of water. And then I will tell you about the piper of Hamelin."

She led the way into the kitchen, and Josef sat at the old table. She poured him a glass of sweet buttermilk from the pitcher in the creamery

and made him a sandwich from the remainder of the roast. She smiled when he protested that he was not hungry.

"A working man must be fed," she said. "Now tell me about the piper."

He took a bite from the sandwich and then pushed back his chair. "'Hamelin town's in Brunswick,'" he began. "'By famous Hanover City . . .'"

The poem enchanted her. "That was sad," she said when he had finished. "And very beautiful. It was almost as if you'd been there yourself."

"To Hamelin? Of course I've been there."

"You mean such a place actually exists?"

"There is so much more to this world than your little farm, Mrs. Hunneker. And before settling here, I made it my business to see much of it."

"Tell me about it, Josef. Please tell me."

And for an hour he spoke of his own life, and the beauty he had seen. His words took her to the slopes of the Matterhorn where the sun glinted blindingly off the snow-capped peak. She rode with him through the canals of Venice by moonlight, and she watched the Paris rain spouting from the mouths of the gargoyles of Notre Dame Cathedral. In her imagination the lovers strolled hand in hand on the Lido, and she longed to be one of them. She traveled through Romania with a little circus, learning the process of training animals to do one's bidding, and she experienced the hustle and bustle of Trafalgar Square with the chimes of Big Ben reverberating in her ears.

Finally he was finished, and she sat in rapt silence, her hand at her breast. "And now you must tell me about yourself, Polly," he said.

His words brought her back to the dingy farm. "There's nothing to tell," she replied.

He stretched his hand across the table and placed it on top of hers. "Everyone has something to tell," he said. "All it requires is another person who will really listen. Start with your parents if you like. They must have been beautiful people."

"I . . . I never knew my parents."

"Oh? I'm sorry. They died, then?"

"No, they . . . I'm told my birth brought shame to them. But I never knew the full story. I was brought up by a woman in the village who used what little money was provided for my support to line her own pocket."

"I see," he nodded. "And Elmo?"

"Elmo took me for his wife when he found that no other girl would have him."

"Perhaps you are not being fair. He may have loved you."

"Loved me?" she said. "He was growing old and desperate when he got the woman to agree to our wedding. He needed sons so that this farm would remain in the Hunneker family. I've never known love, Josef. Love is something a brood mare would never understand. That's what Elmo told me the day we" She stopped suddenly.

"When . . . what, Polly?"

"When we went to see the doctor to find why there were no children."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He said one of us had something . . . wrong. That there would never be children. I thought that day Elmo would kill me for my . . . deficiency."

"Was it you? Perhaps Elmo"

She shook her head sadly. "The Hunnekers have large families. All except Elmo, that is. It's his shame that he married me. He always reminds me that with another woman he could have sired a dynasty. Yet he keeps me, because to cast me out would bring him even greater shame."

"But at night—when two people lie close beside one another. Could not there then be some kind of understanding?"

"Since that day at the doctor, Elmo has slept on a little cot in the pantry, while I occupy the main bedroom. For three years I have been his servant, his maid. Nothing more."

"But surely you could talk to the neighbors about"

"Don't you understand? I am a part of this farm, like the other livestock. Elmo would no more think of going visiting with me than he would of taking his prize sow into town each time he goes."

Josef rose from the table and stood looking down at her. "It is a terrible thing to live in such a way," he said. He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to his.

"Elmo will be in the fields for at least another hour," she said softly.

It was three months later—well into the October harvest—when Elmo saw the ferret man again. Josef was out in the yard behind his small house in the village, feeding the ferrets in their pens.

"Ah, Henri, don't be so greedy," he said, opening the door of one of the cages and thrusting in a bit of red meat. "I have only the one rabbit for you this morning, and Marie must have her share too, eh?" And then he turned about as he heard the sound of footsteps behind him.

"Oh. It's you, Mr. Hunneker. I thought it was our understanding when I left your farm that the business between us was finished. I have no desire to renew unpleasanties, thank you."

"Now don't get your dander up," said Elmo. He reached into a pocket and withdrew a wrinkled bill. "Mebbe I done you wrong on our little transaction. I thought this might help wipe the slate clean."

Reluctantly Josef took the bill. He smoothed it between his fingers before looking at it. "But . . . but this is twenty dollars. And you already paid me ten when I was at the farm. Wait, I will get you change." He started for the house.

"Oh, no need for that," said Elmo. "Fact is, Josef, I need your help again. I thought that extra ten might buy a little of your time."

"The fee for ferreting out a building is twenty dollars," replied Josef formally. "And I think I can do without your trade, Mr. Hunneker."

"Don't want your animals," said Elmo. "Just you."

"Oh?" Josef's curiosity was aroused.

"Yep. Something's been getting into my corn crib—something too big for a ferret to handle."

"How do you know the size?"

"Well, there seemed to be an awful lot of corn eaten for it to be just rats. So I went looking for its burrow. Spent almost a day locating it. You'll never guess where it was."

"Where, Mr. Hunneker?" asked Josef.

"Damn beast came up through a hole in the floor of my tool shed. Wasn't any wonder I couldn't find any sign of it outside."

"Let me understand this," said Josef, considering the situation. "You say a hole comes up . . ." He made an upward gesture with one palm. ". . . Inside a building?"

"That's right. Once I seen that hole, I knew the thing was smarter'n ordinary. But I figured you'd know right off how to handle it."

"It would be easy enough to seal off the hole," said Josef. "But what creature would do such a thing? A woodchuck? Doubtful. A badger, perhaps."

"I'd feel a lot better if I knew what I was dealing with."

"Of course. And for ten dollars, the least I can do is have a look at the entranceway of this animal."

"Fine. When can I expect you?"

"Would now be all right?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. Look, my rig's out front. We can just hop in and . . ."

"You go on ahead. I'll follow with my auto. That way I can leave when I want, with no need to trouble you."

"No trouble. I've got to pick up Polly later anyway. I dropped her off at the Hawkins place for some gossip on my way here."

"Oh? Mrs. Hunneker gave me the impression that she didn't pay many calls on her neighbors."

"We keep pretty much to ourselves, and that's a fact. But she got to pleading, and you know how persuasive these women can be."

"Yes, I'm sure. But I think it best to take my auto. That way you can pick her up at your convenience, without regard to my plans."

"Whatever. Tell you what. I plan to be back home in about an hour. I'll see you then."

When Josef arrived at the Hunneker farm, Elmo was waiting for him in the yard. The old farmer was on the seat of the tractor, gunning the motor loudly.

"Carburetor trouble," he bawled over the roar of the engine. "Don't dare shut it off or I might never get it started again. Why don't you go and take a look by yourself? Tool shed's right there." He pointed to a tiny, windowless building constructed of fieldstone. "The hole's way back in the far corner."

Josef entered the gloom of the tool shed. He peered about, wishing he had a lantern. "Mr. Hunneker!" he called. "The floor is cement. How could an animal . . ."

Footsteps behind him, and then a creak of rusty hinges. Josef turned, and at the same time the light was almost completely blotted out as the shed's ponderous oak door boomed into place. There was the sound of a wooden bolt being rammed solidly home.

Groping his way to the door, Josef pounded on it. "Mr. Hunneker!" he shouted. "The door! How am I to see . . ."

"Ain't no need for you to see," snarled Elmo's voice from outside. "I found the animal what's responsible for my problem. And I caught him, too."

"I don't understand, Mr. Hunneker."

"Oh, don't you now, Mr. Ferret Man. Mebbe it'd be easier to explain if Polly was here. Then you could see for yourself the swelling of her belly. First off, I figured she was eating more than was proper. But it ain't that. There's life growin' in her, ferret man. And you put it there."

"But I . . ."

"Oh, it was you, all right. Ain't been nobody but you around all summer. And that day your animals cleaned out the old barn would make her time work out just about right. We both know I'm speaking the truth, don't we?"

There was a long silence from within the building. "It is true," said Josef finally.

"At least you don't lie about it like she done. 'We just talked,' that was what she told me. There's a new word for it, if I ever heard one."

"We were two lonely people. That is the only explanation I have to offer. We did not consider the consequences. But if you will open the door we can discuss as men what's to be done now."

"Why don't you suggest something?" sneered Elmo.

"We will go away, Polly and I. You can make up whatever story you wish concerning her disappearance. I have the property in town which you may take over. Perhaps that will in some small measure make up . . ."

"Not good enough."

"Polly doesn't love you, Mr. Hunneker."

"She don't have to love me. She's my wife. I own her."

"Would you have the law on me?"

"And be a laughingstock? I will not soil the Hunneker name as you have done."

"Then I fail to see what else it is that I can do."

"You can die, Mr. Ferret Man."

"Die? You joke."

"No. The gossips whisper behind their hands about what Doctor Quade told Polly and me as to why I'll not have heirs to the Hunneker farm. I'll not have them knowing it was me that was deficient. The Hunnekers were never known to be lacking in that regard, and I won't be the first."

"It is a fact of life. What can people say?"

"They can laugh at me. If you're around, they'll know it was you that made me wear the horns. But if you're gone, then the child becomes my child, to carry on the Hunneker name."

"Mr. Hunneker, this is outrageous. For what I have done to Polly—and to you—I am deeply sorry. I would devote my life to making amends."

"And so you shall. Your life has only a little bit left to run."

"You talk foolishness. How will you explain my car being here?"

"It won't be here long."

"And me?" Josef chuckled slightly. "The building is solid, but sooner or later you must open the door. And when you do, I will walk out and leave this farm. Polly, if she wishes, will come with me. And there is nothing you can do to stop us."

"When that door opens, Mr. Ferret Man, I'll carry you through it."

Footsteps. Then a clanking sound, followed by a short silence. The quiet was broken by the roar of the tractor engine.

"There's a few chinks in that door," bawled Elmo. "Mebbe you better look through one and see what I got in my hand."

Josef put his eye to a crack. In hands padded with rags, Elmo was holding one end of a length of hose. The other end led back to the tractor, where it was clamped securely to the vertical exhaust pipe.

"Breathe deep," snarled Elmo. "I've heard this don't hurt a bit." The end of the hose, spewing its deadly gases, was applied to the crack.

Desperately Josef looked about for something to plug the opening.

Nothing. The fumes stung his eyes. He ripped off his shirt and pressed it into place. Immediately Elmo moved the hose to a larger opening at the base of the door.

"You're killing me!" screamed Josef, pounding against the door with both hands.

There was no answer but the snorting of the tractor motor and the acrid stench of gasoline combustion.

Two days later a boy out hunting rabbits found the automobile in the gravel pit on the Siddens farm. No longer gaily colored, the body and frame were scorched and bent where the fire, clearly the result of an exploding gas tank, had superheated the metal. In the front seat was a charred body which Doc Quade was only just able to identify as Josef LaChette. The ladies of the village clucked and chattered about the effects of public drunkenness, and Polly Hunneker took to her bed, where she stroked her swollen belly and wept over the death of the ferret man.

The winter came and went. During the second week in April, as Polly's time approached, Elmo took her to the home of the Widow Usinger in the village, where she would stay until after the child was born. When he had seen her properly placed, Elmo called on Dr. Quade and exacted a promise that the physician would do everything in his power to insure a safe delivery. Finally Elmo visited the tavern, where he got solitarily and unaccustomedly drunk.

Within the week Polly gave birth to a fine baby boy, whose magnificent lung power and head of shiny black hair Mrs. Usinger considered a caution. Puny, shriveled old Elmo Hunneker ought to be proud to have sired such a child, she told Dr. Quade on one of his visits. The doctor just shook his head in puzzlement.

Ten days later Elmo called on Elias Finn, who'd handled the Hunnekers' legal affairs for years. Papers were made out and signed. When that was done, Elmo brought the buggy around to the Usinger house to take Polly and the baby home. "I need her back now," he told the widow. "There's nobody to prepare the grub and tend to the sewing and cleaning."

On a day in early May, Elmo came in from the fields for lunch to find Polly simmering something in a huge pot on the stove. He sniffed the air.

"Stew," he said. "Getting a bit late for that, ain't it? That's winter food."

"There was some meat I wanted to use before it went bad," replied Polly. She stirred the pot a few times and then sat at the table opposite her husband.

"Elmo?"

"Yeah?"

"If anything happened to you—if you were to be took all of a sudden—what would become of me and the baby?"

"You're getting powerful interested in man's affairs, ain't you, woman?"

"I was poor all my life, Elmo. And I had no family. Nobody. It's no way to live. I won't have it for my child."

Elmo pounded the table and got to his feet, snarling angrily. "*Our* child! I want folks sayin' that boy was made by you and me. And don't you forget it."

Polly just stared at her lap, shaking her head from side to side.

"Now you know what went on last summer when the ferret man was here. But that's no reason the whole world has to be in on it. Polly, I swear I'd kill you rather than let one word. . . ."

"I'll say nothing, Elmo. But you must promise me something in return."

"What's that, woman?"

"The baby will have family and—when we're gone—the farm."

"Don't worry none about that. When I go, he'll get everything. All the papers are in Lawyer Finn's office down in the village." Elmo chuckled softly. "'Course that don't leave much for you."

"I don't need anything. Just so the child never has to go through what I did."

"What do you mean by that? I married you, didn't I? I gave you food for your belly and a roof over your head."

"There's more to life than that."

"Oh? And I suppose that's why you lay with the ferret man while I was out working the farm."

"Yes, Elmo. To you I've been just a part of the livestock, like a horse or a sheep. But to Josef LaChette, I was a person who mattered, not just something to talk at. For the few hours we were in this house I was a gypsy and the belle of Vienna and the Queen of Sheba. I lived more fully in that short time than in all the rest of my life."

"You're talking crazy. Now spoon me up some of that stew."

"For once I was really happy, Elmo." She went to the stove and brought back the pot, holding the bail in an apron-covered hand. With a spoon she scooped out the thick stew onto Elmo's plate.

"Was it because he'd made me so happy that you killed him, Elmo?"

The spoon stopped halfway to the farmer's gaping mouth. "Killed who?"

"Josef LaChette."

"The ferret man?" Elmo laughed and then crammed the peppery stew into his jaws, chewing mightily. "You're off your head, woman. He died

when he got drunk and drove his car into the Siddens' gravel pit. Everybody knows that. Hell, I never even saw him except for the once he was here last summer."

She shook her head. "He was here in October. That one day you let me go visiting. I should have known then there was a reason you didn't want me around."

"Crazy," repeated Elmo, poking more food into his mouth. "If he'd been here in October, I'd have remembered, wouldn't I?"

"Oh, you remember. But you didn't want anybody to know because then they'd suspect you might have had something to do with his death." Polly's voice was the rustle of wind in dry reeds.

"The ferret man could of broken me in two. How could I do anything to him?"

"I don't know. But it happened. He was here. I know it."

Elmo was eating faster now, hurrying to finish. "How could you know any such thing?" he roared. "Damn foolishness, even to be speaking about it. I don't want one word of this nonsense outside this house, understand? It could start all sorts of talk in the village."

He rose, wiping his mouth on the back of one hand. "I'm going back to the barn. And you just better consider how lucky you are I took you for wife. When I come in again, I'll stand for no more talk about the ferret man."

He left the house, slamming the door behind him. The sweat poured from his face, even though the day was cool, and his throat felt raw. No way for Polly to act, getting him all upset. Besides, she couldn't prove anything. She was just guessing.

Inside the barn, he looked about. There were signs that a new nest of rats was moving in. Now that the ferret man was gone, he'd have to start using the poison again, mixing the arsenic-laced powder with some of the seed grain and leaving it near the entrance holes.

He remembered leaving the box of poison behind a scantling in the oat bin. He walked to the small opening in the wall and reached his hand in, groping around in the darkness.

Nothing.

No, there was something. Not the box, but a flat piece of metal. Swiftly he drew it out. An oblong plate, with numbers and letters stamped onto it: BZ-3131.

Hearing a movement behind him, he turned about. Polly was standing in the doorway.

"The license plate from Josef's auto," she said slowly. "I saw the first time he was here that it was only held by a single bit of wire. Last

October—on his second visit, while I was away—it must have come loose and dropped into the tall grass by the barnyard. I found it a week later, just a few days after Josef's body was taken from the gravel pit."

"Polly, I . . ."

"Don't lie again, Elmo. All winter long I've been waiting for you to say something about Josef's second visit. I even hoped for a while that you'd told him about his child. But when you kept your silence, I knew you'd succeeded in paying him back for . . ."

She closed her mouth suddenly, her eyes unwavering on her husband. He failed to stare her down.

"I had a right, woman!" he bellowed suddenly. "What a man owns is his, whether it be wife or other property. It's got to be protected."

"Protection!" spat Polly in derision. "Is that what you call what you've done to Josef? And to me?"

"Don't you forget," he said, pointing a gnarled finger at her. "I took you when you was nothing and gave you a name and a home. Now you can still have what you've always had from me, but you're to say nothing about this to anyone."

"I need nothing more from you, Elmo," she replied. "The child—Josef LaChette's child—is taken care of. Now that Josef is gone, that's all that matters."

She spun about and strode off toward the house.

"Don't cross me, woman!" he howled after her. "One word to Lawyer Finn, and both you and the baby can be cast out of my house."

He went to the barn door and looked after Polly's retreating figure. "Go, harlot!" he cried. "Tell your wild story to the world. You have no proof. You have nothing. In an hour I can be in the village, and what will you and the ferret man's get do then, eh? A few changes in those documents, and neither of you will receive a plugged nickel."

Across the yard he heard the door to the kitchen close firmly. With an angry curse he began loping after her, at the same time loosening the wide leather belt at his waist. He'd beat some sense into his wife if it was the last thing he ever did.

He'd nearly reached the house when he was brought to his knees by the first grinding pain in his belly from the three spoonfuls of arsenic rat poison that Polly had put in the stew.

Pauline C. Smith

For Hermie

He looked up into an expanse of blue and closed his eyes. The dark swam.

“So. You’re comin’ out of it,” he heard.

Coming out of what into what, from where to where? he wondered without caring.

“It’s the second time for you,” he heard from above and slightly to his left. “Another O.D. could come up D.O.A. You want that?”

He could not separate letters thrown at him, like alphabet soup splashed in his face, and yanked at the bed sheet to mop his forehead, opened his eyes against white cloth and peeked warily from under the sheet to his left on dark and oppressive blue, then to his right on a fence. Sounds slipped in and around the voice from the blue—the drum of footsteps, a trumpet-like moan, a clarinet-type wail, a chant and sob—“Where you getting the stuff?”

He held the sheet tight against his forehead, covering his eyes.

“What’s with you junkies anyway? What are you trying to get away from? Who are you mad at?”

He pulled down the sheet and stared up with eyes that blazed hatred.

“Oh, the hell with it.” The cop turned on his heel and walked from the ward down the hall, pushed open the doors, breathed deeply of the smog-filled air and remembered again that next month would be his birthday—54, and still a beat cop.

He remembered back when he had been the age of that kid on the bed in the drug ward, how idealistic he was then, an honest rookie firmly conforming to an absolute standard, and guessed that’s what he was today, a rookie yet, without the early illusions but still honest, almost 54, at the end of the finish line on a beat cop’s minimal retirement pay. . . . He slammed his right fist into the palm of his left hand, hunched his shoulders with frustration and turned from a casual sorrow over the drop-

out on an impersonal ward bed to active fury at the captain, his boss, once a rookie such as he and a long-ago partner, but without any idealistic honesty to hold him either from the take through the years or advancement during those years.

He brooded as he had often brooded over the former partner who had made it big, right up to the top with the best and the most. He walked the street from the hospital's front entrance to the side, where the black-and-white, parked at the curbing, lay in wait. And while he walked, he lost his honesty as he had once lost his illusions, scattered by the wayside and with regret.

He lost his honesty in a half-formed plan.

The young man on the bed in the ward folded the sheet over his chest and contemplated the fence on his right, which was the bed railing. He was no fool, he knew a hospital bed railing when he saw one, he'd been here before, an O.D., the guy in blue had told him, a second-time-around O.D. Dreamily he contemplated a third time and out—a solution, perhaps the solution he sought, and remembered his brother, Hermie.

He yanked the sheet over his eyes and, within the crumpled folds, saw again Hermie of the brown retriever eyes, the lips without speech and ears that could not hear—Hermie, who must finger-spell communication with his brother and to others, explain by printed card that he was a deaf mute.

He wept for his own life and the death of his brother. Under the sheet, he finger-promised Hermie that he would make it right, as right as he could make it now that it was late. He wept and was comforted as he put away his negative need for inert forgetfulness to place in its stead the positive goal of revenge.

The cop visited him during his hospital stay. "You gotta drop it, smoke it or pop it. What's with you punks?" He laughed as if the question were rhetorical.

The young man, propped against pillows, shrugged.

"Why can't you get off the stuff and stay put? You were in college—upstate—we found a last year's student card in your wallet."

The young man allowed himself to think of the college he had attended and his ambition to teach the handicapped, like his brother. He firmed his lips against their tremble.

"You got any folks?"

He did not answer that his brother was all that he had—gone now. *Marty, we are not just brothers, Hermie had spelled with his fingers, we are partners.*

“What have you got to go to when you get out of here?” asked the cop. “A college drop-out like you. No job. . . .”

All right, if we are partners, Hermie spelled, then I would like to do my share. You are carrying the whole load—college and your job—it is not fair that one partner should do it all for both.

“How will you pay for your habit? Don’t tell me you’ll be clean when you get out and you’ll stay clean. I’ve heard that before.”

When you make your deliveries, you could ask around, spelled Hermie. *Out of all those places with newspaper racks, maybe one could use a clerk who cannot hear or speak.* In answer to the pleading retriever eyes and the eagerly flying fingers, Marty had asked at the supermarkets, stationery shops, drug stores, the afternoon stops where he filled glass cases with the next morning’s paper, if they could use a bright though deaf mute 16-year-old. He was given the brush until he inquired at the hole-in-the-wall tobacco shop, displaying magazines and soft-back books, and was told sure, why not? Bring the kid around.

“You junkies are all alike. The last time is the last time until the next time comes along.”

Marty hadn’t liked the idea. He remembered he had come near to not finger-telling Hermie of the opportunity, but the brown retriever eyes and the hand question waited after he had finished his deliveries that day, returned to the college for his last class and arrived at the two-room apartment and Hermie.

“It’s an expensive habit you’ve racked up,” announced the cop, “and you’re in hock right down to your socks. Your wallet’s full of pawn tickets.”

Marty looked up, his stare bouncing against blue, and remembered how he had told Hermie, with quick, negative gestures, that the job was his if he wanted it. And Hermie wanted it.

“See ya,” said the cop as he moved out and away between the beds.

Marty was full of his old dreams, taken out and turned over like pages of an almost-forgotten book. He had wanted Hermie to stay put with his sketch pad and watercolors until the degree had been earned to assure their future. His had been long-term dreams that became short-lived with Hermie’s desire to help them come true.

He shouldn’t have told him, thought Marty; he should have finger-spelled an all-spot rejection. But he knew now, thinking back, that he could not have done that.

Marty looked up and saw the cop threading his way between beds to the chair where he sat, and tossed off the guilt he had worn for Hermie’s death to place it on a cop, any cop, *this* cop.

"Hey there, you're sitting up dressed, just like people," greeted the cop. Marty looked into his eyes and hated him. "You'll be getting out soon. Right?"

Marty offered a token nod.

"Out on the streets again in the jungle, where you gotta fight to keep alive and get your stuff to go on living. . . ." The cop bent down and placed the palms of his hands on the chair arms, hemming Marty in with his hangup. "You junkies," he snapped, his smile spraying consonants, "you know how to do it—live for the next fix and then you're out of it. No worries in between." He pushed himself upright. As he did so, he clapped Marty's shoulder with the flat of his hand, a little too heartily, thought Marty, to be construed as a gesture of friendly admiration. "Me now, when I was your age, I wasn't floating on any cloud, watching the pretty colors go by; I was out on the beat, trying to do my job honestly, without any fringe benefits, and what did it get me?"

The question was direct. The cop awaited an answer.

Marty remembered the day, that last day, after his last class, when he drove to the tobacco-newsstand to pick up Hermie. He had hurried, his foot heavy on the old heap's accelerator, urging it along as he heard the midtown sirens that were always crying, but these held a personal note. He parked at a slant in front of and blocking the ambulance in time to see his brother's bloody body placed on a gurney and covered by a sheet.

The cop answered his own question. "It got me no place. That's where. Honest, and here I am, ready to retire on a second-grade pension."

They had explained it to Marty, carefully and with offhand compassion, how the place was a dope drop—out back, behind the cigarette-magazine front—the police had it under surveillance. When the time was right, the raid was on. That was how it was.

"My partner now, the rookie I started with," explained the cop, spraying envy, "his hand was always out, always on the take, and he piled up the profits through the years."

Marty had asked, Why Hermie? Just a kid, a good kid on his first job, whose only fault was that he could neither hear nor speak.

"So my rookie partner ends up as my boss, Captain Moran over Barry the beat cop. How about that?" He laughed without mirth.

Marty looked up at the cop, seeing in him the one who had excused the murder of Hermie—how could he know the kid couldn't hear the command to freeze? How could he know when the kid reached for his back pocket it wasn't for a gun but for the card that said he couldn't hear and couldn't talk? Marty began to shake.

"Okay," said the cop with righteous resentment, "did I smoke a joint or pop a pill to send me off into I-don't-care land? No way." He poked a fat

finger into Marty's bony chest. "Do you know how easy it is for a cop to get the stuff? Uppers, downers, reds, blues, hash, pot, you name it, we got it, all the hauls, stashed away. . . ." his voice faded as the plan laid itself across his brain like a map to fat retirement.

Marty stared at him, hating him for being a cop. A cop had killed his brother.

"Yeah," said the cop, and over his face spread a new and friendly look, "I can lay my hands on enough stuff to keep you flyin' for as long as you can fly. Sound good?"

Marty shrugged, his thoughts again with Hermie and his own guilt as a brother. He watched the broad blue back swagger from the ward, and felt his hatred turn from a sharp and agonizing pain to a dull and hopeless ache.

He wished, when they released him from the hospital, that he had died from the overdose that had sent him there. The cop was waiting for him. He slung the duffel bag over his shoulder and started down the steps.

"Hey," called the cop, following.

Marty momentarily hesitated at the bottom of the steps, undecided whether to go left or right. He turned left simply because the cop was coming up on his right.

"Where you going?"

Marty's stomach churned, his eyes burned in the glare of the sun. The cop's shoulder was nudging his, their steps matched.

"Where you going, kid?"

Marty stopped, turned, stepped back, faced the cop and spoke to him for the first time. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to help, kid."

Marty laughed and started walking again, the cop beside him.

"Look, I know how you feel."

"How do you know how I feel?"

"I've seen junkies after the hospital treatment before. All they want is a fix. They'll do anything for a fix. . . ."

"Like what?"

"Like listening to a deal."

"A deal?"

"How would you like enough dope to keep you fixed for—oh, say, six months, eight months?"

Marty's steps grew slower and halted.

"What is this, a set-up?"

"No set-up." The cop spread his hands, palms upward, like a magician

to show he was hiding nothing. "Tell you what, you take this," as suddenly a twenty appeared on one of the upturned palms, "go to a movie, get yourself a feed and meet me tonight, eight sharp, on the corner of Third and Traynor. I'll lay it out for you."

"What makes you think I won't go out and get a fix and take off?"

The cop shook his head. "Not you. You're a college boy, you can add and subtract too, so you'll figure the difference between one fix and a hundred." The cop shoved the twenty in Marty's pocket. "Be on time," he said. "I'll be in civilian clothes and I'll circle the block at Third and Traynor. The car is a brown Chevy—'70."

Marty stepped into the brown Chevy at precisely eight o'clock. He stowed the duffel bag on the floor, resting against his knees.

The cop chuckled. "Thought you'd make it," he observed and turned on Third, slowly cruising a street of small, dark shops; a lighted drugstore on a corner; a black-fronted bar that said so in red neon. "Quiet at night along here," said the cop and parked in front of a pawn shop with a single faint light over the door that said: STAR—LOANS.

"Remember this place?" asked the cop.

"I guess so," said Marty.

"You ought to. Your wallet's full of tickets from here. An old man runs the place. Name's Pacini or Tracini—whatever. I call him Tony." The cop eased the Chevy from the curbing and crept on down the street. "He's suspicious of banks. Won't have anything to do with 'em. Dates back to the Depression. I've told him a hundred times, 'Tony, stash your cash in the bank,' but he says no, he's got it in a safe place. He showed me the place and he's right, it's safe—except that now I know where it is."

The cop made a right turn and braked at a narrow dark alley behind the row of shops. "See that alley? Well, no patrol car'll cruise that slot. Tony's place is three doors down. You can't miss it."

"I can't miss it?" said Marty.

The cop eased the car along the dark side street that turned industrial. "You can't miss it," he repeated. "You'll walk down that alley, break in just like I tell you to and grab the money out of its nice safe hiding place."

"I will?" asked Marty.

"You will if you want the boxful of dope I've got ready for you."

"You mean the dope in exchange for the money?"

"Exactly."

"Seems like kind of an uneven trade if the old man's got 40 years of savings."

"Even enough. I tell you where it is and how to get it, and you get the

dope. If I didn't tell you where it was and how to get it, you wouldn't get any dope. That's even."

"But what's to prevent me from taking off with the money and buying my own dope?"

The car took on a burst of speed, then slowed. "I am, sonny," said the cop. "I am the one who will prevent you from taking off with the money. I am a cop and I can prevent you. Believe me."

Marty believed him.

As he drove, the cop outlined his plan. "Now this is when you do it," he said, "and here is how. . . ." The directions, explicit and well organized, instructed Marty to open the glove compartment on a cloth-wrapped set of tools—"They'll pick that simple little lock of Tony's in nothing flat"—and a flashlight "so you can see what you're doing once you're inside." The floorboard under a rear glass showcase where the strongbox was hidden, was described in detail. "The old man even hinged it underneath. There's a knothole to open it—that's how you'll find the board. When you see the knothole, just stick the end of your finger in it and lift."

The cop drove at cruising speed through the industrial section and into a lower-middle-class residential subdivision. "The patrol schedule clocks out in front of Tony's place at twenty minutes after the hour every hour through the night. The patrol car goes up Third, makes a right at the corner, flashes a light on the alley and proceeds into the industrial area, so if you get there, say, at the half hour, get the job done and out on Third by five or ten minutes to, the patrol car'll be twenty blocks away and you'll be just another hitch-hiker hitting town with a pack on your back."

Marty grunted.

"Then get yourself a room and stay there."

The cop made a U turn and parked the car beside a GO SLOW—SCHOOL sign, killed the motor and turned off the lights. "Check out of your room in the morning, take a crosstown bus, get off at Green and Cypress and be here by nine."

"Where?"

"Right here. Where we're sitting now. I go on my shift at seven-thirty, I'm out on the beat by eight o'clock. I cruise around the school until nine when all the kids are inside. This is a tough neighborhood, they're used to seeing my patrol car."

"And you'll be parked here? In a *patrol* car in broad daylight to make the exchange?"

The cop was becoming jovial, already feeling rich. He nudged Marty in the ribs. "Where's a better place to hide a heist, and where's a safer place for

you to ride with your stash? I'll take you right to the off ramp so you can be on your way. Police escort out of town." The cop laughed.

"How can I be sure you'll have the dope?"

"You can be sure of that. Why would I cross you? You'd ring the bell on me even if it meant your skin. You junkies can't be trusted unless what's in it for you is what you need, and you need it, kid. I can feel you shaking now."

Marty shuddered, his fists clenched.

"What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong. A neat job like this. Tony won't even know he's been ripped off until closing time tomorrow—even if he checks out his hiding place as soon as he opens in the morning, it'll be after ten o'clock and you'll be long gone." The cop checked the luminous dial of his watch. "It's nine now. I'll drive you over to Third."

"You mean you want me to do it tonight?"

The cop turned to look at him, a shadow in the dark of the car. "Now, how in hell can you get your dope tomorrow if you don't pay for it tonight?" He turned the ignition key and the motor rumbled, the car moved from the curbing down the dimly lighted street. "You need a fix, boy, and you need it bad."

Marty found himself panting. Perspiration dripped from his brow, spread along his jaws and dried coldly in the chill breeze of the night.

"Now this is Green Street we're on," informed the cop. "The bus stops on Cypress, about five blocks down. Be here at nine—by then, the kids'll be off the playground and inside the school, it's a dead end street and I'll be waiting. Got it?"

Marty nodded.

"We're partners."

As the cop made a right, Marty thought of Hermie, fingers flying communication. *We are partners, Marty. . . .*

"This is your chance, probably the only chance you'll have to make it big." The cop's voice swelled with the idea of his own bigness. He drove slowly through quiet residential streets and entered the deserted industrial section.

He turned on Third, parked before a blacked-out paint store and consulted the luminous dial of his watch. "Almost nine-twenty," he said.

Corner street lights puddled the intersections, the light signal blocks away blinked red, and traffic flowed along Traynor. The signal blinked green and a triangle of lights beamed across Traynor, heading up Third. The cop leaned forward.

"Here it comes," he said, "right on the button." The lights arced a slow turn, halted for moments before creeping along the side street, top light circling red until it was lost in the building shadows.

The cop leaned across Marty and opened the passenger door of the Chevy. "Got your tools?" he asked. "Flashlight? Okay, you're on your own."

Marty stepped to the curb. The night wind chilled him and caused him to draw in his breath. He slung the duffel bag over his shoulder and slammed the door. The cop lunged and caught his wrist with iron fingers. "Now look, sonny," he said, his voice hard, "if you're thinking of doing this job and taking off with that little tin box, forget it. There's been some trouble up the coast and all the off ramps are being watched."

His grasp on Marty's wrist loosened. He swerved from the curb and drove down Third to Traynor.

Marty stood for moments, watching him go before he walked the four blocks, turned the corner and ducked into the narrow alley. He counted three back doors, selected a tool by feel, and just as the cop had predicted, it "picked the simple little lock in nothing flat."

He felt a flush of excitement as he slipped through the open door and closed it behind himself on darkness. He stared straight ahead toward the show windows in front, small, appearing foggy in the faint glow of the door light. The place smelled of old possessions, given up, and old dreams lost. He thought of Hermie's hand words, spelled with an artist's fingers—*Marty, we are not only brothers, we are partners*—and swallowed his sorrow.

The shop was small and cluttered with shadows. He remembered how it had been when he walked in with the portable typewriter first, then the camera and binoculars, and finally the radio—a central aisle for the customers, lined on both sides by showcases. He remembered too the little old man behind those showcases, shoulders hunched, eyes contemptuous as they evaluated, fingers expertly prodding as they examined.

Marty reached out with his left hand and touched the edge of a showcase. Watching the front windows, he stepped forward, turned, dropped his duffel bag and, kneeling, snapped on the flashlight, hiding its light ray with his body, and saw the round shadow of a knothole. The cop had been right.

He switched off the flash and ran the palm of his hand across the smooth wooden surface of the floor until it felt the circle. He caught the edge with his finger and lifted.

He looked back over his shoulder at the faintly foggy windows and turned the flash onto the cop's box of riches, a metal box that looked very

like the one he and his brother used for fishing tackle long ago when they had time to fish.

We are partners, Hermie had spelled with joy. *We are partners all the way*. Marty snapped off the flash and dropped the floorboard back into place.

He picked up his duffel bag, fumbled the door until he found the knob and let himself out in a cold wind that felt warm. As he walked the alley, he scattered the cop's tools, one by one, into weeds that grew rank against a board fence. He tossed the cop's flashlight over the fence and heard the sound of it hit and smash on cement.

He turned off the dark side street onto faintly lighted Third and walked with bouncing step, "just another hitch-hiker with a back pack"—he remembered the cop's words and smiled.

He stopped at the corner drugstore and bought himself a cheap alarm clock and found himself a cheap room on Traynor. He laid out what was left of the twenty, seven dollars and twenty-three cents, wound the clock and set the alarm for seven. Then, taking off only his shoes, he threw himself on the bed and had the best night's sleep he'd had in the seven months since Hermie's death.

Morning was clear and bright. The wind had blown all the smog from the air. Marty wound his clock, slung the duffel bag over his shoulder and was out on the street by 7:30, about the time, he remembered, the cop went on duty. The street was not yet alive—he took it easy until he found a hamburger joint that smelled good, went in, placed the clock on the counter and ordered two hamburgers and two cups of coffee.

At eight o'clock, he was backtracking on Traynor, walking briskly toward Third. Traffic had increased, the city was beginning to move. He turned on Third and reached the drugstore at eight-twenty; about right, he judged, just about the right time, let himself into a phone booth and set the clock on the shelf where it ticked companionably while he ran his finger down the numbers on the inside cover of the telephone book.

He picked up the receiver, dropped the cop's dime, dialed and asked for Captain Moran. He was offered a substitute that he did not accept. "It's got to be Captain Moran," he insisted. "This is important to him." He listened to the tick of the clock while he waited and looked into its face that told him it was now eight twenty-five—very good, he thought, very, very good.

"Captain Moran? If you will drive to Green Street, you will find one of your men, Officer Barry, I believe, sitting in his patrol car in front of the school at the dead end of the street. If you will search his patrol car, Captain, you will find enough dope to fix Officer Barry for quite a number of years. . . . Well, let's just say I am a civil servant seeking justice."

Marty looked at the clock. Eight-thirty.

"Captain Moran . . . be sure you get there by nine o'clock." He hung up the phone, plucked the clock from the shelf and picked up his duffel bag.

He was on the freeway by nine, the sun shining warmly on his shoulders, making him feel good—the best he had felt in seven months.

He dropped the clock into his duffel bag and, using his hands, spoke to his brother: *It was not an equitable justice, Hermie, and cannot pay for your death*, he spelled on the air. *But I got one cop and that is a beginning. There will be others, Hermie. I have the time and will find the ways*, he promised with his fingers.

Robert L. Fish

Stranger in Town

The body lay sprawled against the side of the building, looking like a large rag doll that had been discarded by an exceptionally careless, or perhaps cruel, child. Lieutenant Everts shook his grizzled head and looked up at the tall man beside him.

"My guess is whoever hit him had to be doing ninety. They use this block like a goddamn speedway. You got enough light from the patrol car spot, Doc?"

"Plenty," the doctor said dryly and yawned. "I wasn't planning on operating on him here. Do you have your pictures, yet?"

"We're all through. We have his I.D., too. He's Thomas Middleton the Third."

The doctor grunted and knelt beside the crushed figure. A cursory examination and he straightened up. "You know, Lieutenant," he said evenly, "one thing I'll never understand is the necessity of dragging a medical examiner out of bed at two in the morning just to advise you a man is dead, when anyone with eyes in his head can see he's dead. Did you have any doubts?"

"It's the law, Doc. You know that."

"Yes, I know that. It still doesn't make it any more understandable, though." The doctor sighed. "Well, ship him downtown and we'll take a better look at him in the morning."

"Right. And Doc—be careful of the clothes. They go to the lab."

The doctor considered the lieutenant sardonically a moment. "Thanks, Lieutenant. I thought standard procedure with hit-runs was to put the clothes down the incinerator."

Everts reddened. "Well, all I meant was—well, he's Thomas Middleton the Third."

"Oh?" The doctor sounded curious. "Does that make him come before or after Charles the Second?"

"It makes him the son of Thomas Middleton, who happens to be a big shot in this town," the lieutenant said flatly.

"Oh!" The doctor climbed into his car and leaned out the window. "In that case we'll handle him with kid rubber gloves."

He drove off. Sarcastic son of a bitch, the lieutenant thought, and turned to the waiting ambulance attendants. "Okay, you can load him up. Joe. You got all the pieces of headlight glass for the lab?"

"Anything big enough to help, Lieutenant."

"Good. Better get somebody from Sanitation to clean up that blood. And then start calling garages. Don't wait until morning."

"We'll get right to it, Lieutenant."

"Good." The lieutenant turned. "Mike, where's that—ah! You the one who called this in? What's your name?"

It was a man in his early thirties, fairly well dressed, but the lieutenant automatically noticed the frayed shirt collar, the worn shoes, and the tight look on the expressionless face.

"George Kennedy, Lieutenant."

"Well, Mr. Kennedy, what happened? Did you see the car? Or the driver?"

"I actually didn't see hardly anything," Kennedy said slowly. "I *heard* it more than I saw it. I was just coming around the corner—"

Lieutenant Everts interrupted, a frown on his face. "By the way, what were you doing around here at two in the morning? This is a pretty deserted part of town."

Kennedy shrugged. "I was just walking, as a matter of fact. I don't know one part of this town from another. I'm new here."

"Have an address?"

Kennedy smiled. It was not the first time he had heard the question. "Yes, sir. Lincoln Hotel. And I've got fifty cents in my pocket, too."

"No offense," Lieutenant Everts said, and got back to business. "What about the car? Exactly what *did* you see?"

"I was just walking along, thinking, and I came around this corner when I heard this *noise*, like a skid, and then I heard the thud when he hit the man. By the time I got my thoughts together and realized what happened, all I could see was the tail end of a car going around the next corner, practically on two wheels, and that man, there, laying up against the side of the building."

"You wouldn't be able to recognize the driver if you saw him again?"

"I didn't see the driver at all, just the tail end of the car. It was a dark color, is about all I can say—"

"Did you notice what kind of rear window it was? Did the glass have

rounded corners or square corners? Was it a convertible, by any chance?" Lieutenant Everts knew from long experience that most people saw far more than they realized.

Kennedy looked unhappy. "I—I didn't see."

Everts sighed. "What about taillights? They must have been on. How many were there? Two? Four? Or almost all the way across, like on a T-bird? And were they more red or more orange?"

"Two, I think." Kennedy suddenly brightened. "In fact, I'm sure there were two, because I remember when he came to the corner, he had to hit the brakes to make it, and the taillights just got larger. And brighter. And they were more red than orange."

Everts nodded and looked at the patrolman beside him. "Got that, Mike?"

"Yes, sir. Two taillights, the kind that get brighter when you hit the brakes. Has to make the car fifteen years old, at least. Dark color, no other I.D."

"Good. See that Joe gets that information for the garages." He turned back to Kennedy. "That's all you can tell us?"

"I'm sorry, but that's about it."

"Well," Everts said, "we'd appreciate it if you'd contact us if you happen to remember anything else. And thanks for calling it in. Most people wouldn't have."

Kennedy nodded and turned away, his face expressionless, but with a large inward smile. Most people weren't George Kennedy, he said to himself, and headed back toward his hotel.

Luck! George Kennedy said to himself as he went to bed that night. Luck that he happened to be in this town tonight, whatever its name was. And Luck! he said to himself in the morning, winking at his image in the stained mirror as he knotted his worn necktie. What had his mother always said? She said there was no such thing as luck; it was merely being in the right place at the right time. Well, where the old lady had gone off was in not realizing that the luck came in having enough brains to know what to do when you found yourself in the right place at the right time.

He reached for his jacket, shrugged his way into it, and headed for the door. The call he intended to make was not to be made through any hotel switchboard. People who did things like that were stupid, and one more definition of luck was not being stupid.

A drugstore three blocks away seemed to suit his purpose; the four telephone booths were in the rear of the store and were empty, and from the deserted condition of the run-down place were likely to stay that way. He

wedged himself into the last booth, dropped his dime, and dialed a number he could read from the face of the telephone. There was a single ring and a receiver was instantly lifted.

"Police Department. Sergeant Mannering."

Kennedy sounded hesitant, as if not sure he had dialed the correct number. "Is this the number I call if I want to speak with someone in the Vehicle Registration department?"

"One moment." A switch was pulled, another ring and a second voice was on the line, a woman's voice.

"Vehicle Registration. Myra Simon speaking."

Hesitancy disappeared; Kennedy now combined official importance with manly charm. Listening to himself, he had to admit it sounded good.

"Miss Simon, this is Sergeant Kennedy of the State Troopers, Troop J. We have a man here apprehended for drunken driving. He has no driver's license and the vehicle's registration is neither in the vehicle nor on his person. From his appearance he doesn't look as if he could afford the car he's driving. We have no record of a stolen car complaint on the vehicle, but we'd still like a check on the plates to be sure."

"Of course, Sergeant," Miss Simon said, pleased to be of assistance to the State Troopers. They led a romantic life, while hers was tied up with papers and files. "What's the plate number?"

"GK-264-S," Kennedy said. It was a number engraved on his memory from the night before, and one he was no more likely to forget than the number he had worn at Danbury.

"GK-264-S," Miss Simon repeated dutifully. "And the make and model?"

"It's a 1974 white Continental Mark Four."

"Thank you. It'll take a few minutes. Would you like to have me call you back at the barracks?"

"I'm not at the barracks." He made it sound as if working troopers were seldom at the barracks. "I'll hold."

As he waited, Kennedy congratulated himself on having considered all possible questions and prepared all possible answers. He suddenly grinned in the privacy of the booth. Who said the police were never helpful?

Miss Simon came back on the line. "Hello, Sergeant? Here we are. GK-264-S. White Continental Mark Four, 1974. The owner is listed as John Coletsos, address 6614 Fayette Boulevard, here in town." She could not help but add, "Is that of any help?"

Kennedy's voice dropped ruefully. "I guess I put you to a lot of trouble for nothing, Miss. That's the I.D. of the driver."

"Well," Miss Simon said philosophically, sorry for the man at the other

end of the line who she was sure was single, handsome, and in line for promotion, "that's what we're here for, Sergeant."

"True," Kennedy said, his tone admiring the young lady's wisdom. "Well, thanks again." Luck was still with him, he thought as he hung up. The Continental might have been from the other end of the state; or, worse, it might have been a rental, though with a Mark Four that was doubtful.

6614 Fayette Boulevard was almost an hour's walk from the drugstore, but investigation was necessary, public transportation might possibly lead to future identification, and Kennedy was not a man to take chances. But the walk was worth it, he had to admit, for the house was all he could have wished for; a rambling mansion with a wide circular drive set in acres of well-tended, landscaped beauty. It smelled of money and lots of it. Kennedy watched the house for some time from the privacy of a stand of trees across the road; then he walked off in search of another telephone.

He found it a mile away on the sidewalk of a discreet shopping center. He consulted a telephone directory, closed the booth door behind him, dropped his dime and dialed. There was a brief wait; then a questioning voice was in his ear.

"Yes?"

George Kennedy made himself sound completely impersonal. "Mr. John Coletsos, please."

"Who wants to talk to him?"

"Tell him a friend. A very good friend."

"Hang on a second. . . ."

There was a brief wait. Kennedy watched the cars coming into the parking area of the shopping center, many chauffeur-driven, all expensive. A fine neighborhood, he thought with a grin, and then heard a second voice on the line. This one was cool, deep, steady.

"Yes? This is John Coletsos. Who is this?"

"This?" Kennedy was surprised at his own calmness. He'd been wasting his time all these years in the small-time; he had what it took for the heavy stuff. "This, mister, is a man who saw you come shooting down Mitchell Street like a bat out of hell at two o'clock this morning, weaving all over the place, drunk as a skunk, and hit and kill a guy crossing the street. And then drive off without seeing if he could help. Now, does that identify me to your satisfaction?"

There was a gasp. "Me?"

"You, mister. Driving a new white Mark Four."

There was a long pause. Then the voice, no longer cool nor steady, said

slowly, "I don't know who you are, or what you're after, but you've got the wrong number."

"I don't think so," Kennedy said calmly, now fully in control. "I didn't want to make any mistake, so I waited outside your house, and half an hour ago I saw you drive into your driveway, chauffeur and all, in a big new Caddy. But you're the man I saw early this morning driving that Continental. And you have a three-car garage attached to that big house of yours, and I'll bet ten of mine against one of yours that there's a smashed-up Continental locked up out there right now. Any bets?"

There was a deep breath. "Who *is* this? What's your name?"

Kennedy smiled at the instrument. "Let's keep the conversation serious, shall we?"

There was another pause, longer this time. Kennedy was about to interrupt the silence when the voice came on again, weary. "What do you want?"

"That's more like it," Kennedy said approvingly. "All I want to see is a nice man—a nice, rich man—like you keep out of trouble."

"And what would you expect for keeping me out of trouble?"

"Well, let's consider that point for a minute," Kennedy said thoughtfully. "You have a mansion for a house, plus a chauffeur, plus either a butler or maybe even a male secretary to answer the phone, and probably a cook, not to mention at least two big cars I know of and probably a third in that garage. I haven't checked out what you do for a living, but it must be pretty profitable. I'd say if you were to donate a small sum to my favorite charity—which admittedly is me—then I'd simply forget the entire matter."

There was a briefer pause. "And if I don't donate this small sum to your favorite charity?"

"Then," Kennedy said firmly, "I'd be forced to go to the police. It would only be my civic duty, you understand." His voice hardened. "And you wouldn't like it."

There was a sigh. "How big a donation were you thinking of?"

"Well," Kennedy said thoughtfully, "I'd say ten thousand. A nice round number. You don't look as if that would hurt you."

"Ten thousand dollars?"

"We have a good connection," Kennedy said.

"And if I should agree," Coletsos said quietly, "where do I meet you?"

Kennedy grinned to himself. Hooked! He straightened his face, almost as if the other could see him. "Do you remember where you had that unfortunate accident this morning? Unless, of course, you were too drunk to even remember."

"As a matter of fact, I don't remember."

"I'm really not surprised," Kennedy said dryly. "Well, it was on Mitchell Street, between Eighth and Ninth, in the middle of the block on the south side of the street under the light. I'll be waiting for you there at two o'clock tomorrow morning."

"And how will I know you?"

"You won't," Kennedy said. "But I'll know you."

"Well," Coletsos said slowly. "Maybe I'll be there."

"I wouldn't leave it to any 'maybe' if I were you," Kennedy said coldly. "Be there with cash in your pocket. I wasn't kidding about the police in this town." He smiled to himself as he thought of a previous thought. "They can be real helpful at times. . . ."

Maxie Kosoff looked across the room. "What did the guy want, boss?"

Coletsos looked at him somberly. "He's trying to blackmail me. Shake me down. For ten grand."

Maxie's eyes almost popped. "Shake *you* down, boss? Shake down Big John Coletsos? He's got to be a stranger in town!"

"That's still what he's trying to do," Coletsos said heavily. "He claims he saw me driving down Mitchell at two o'clock this morning, dead drunk. He says I was speeding, that he saw me hit and kill a kid. And then drive away without stopping."

Maxie shook his bullet-shaped head as if to rid it of cobwebs.

"The guy's gotta have rocks in his head, boss. You ain't had a drink of anything hard since them ulcers five, six years ago. And as far as where you was at two this morning, you was right here, playing pinochle with Jimmy Griff and the McCauley, remember? You was—"

"Damn it!" Coletsos exploded. "I know where I was this morning!" He pounded the table. "That damn kid!"

Maxie was mystified. "Who, boss?"

"Who else, dummy! John Junior, that's who! I ought to break his ass! I ought to—" Words failed the big man. He slammed his big fist on the table again.

"But the guy said he seen *you*, boss—"

Coletsos looked at Maxie evenly. "Under a street light at night inside a closed car—if they even have street lights on Mitchell—he saw John Junior, that's who he saw! He also saw him driving a new white Mark Four. Sound familiar? Where is John Junior, by the way?"

"I don't know, boss," Maxie said, feeling helpless. "He ain't home."

Coletsos took a deep breath. "Well, go down to the garage and see if his car's there, at least."

"Right, boss."

Coletsos waited, his thick fingers drumming the table. He had no doubt

but what John Junior had done one more dumb thing the night before. But it came at a bad time, when the newspapers were after his scalp for a whole series of things. Dumb kid! He looked up to see Maxie staring at him dolefully.

"I'm afraid the guy could be right, boss. The Four looks like it maybe hit one of our beer trucks, or something."

Coletsos nodded abruptly, his mind made up. "Okay, Maxie. Get one of our moving vans over here, one with a ramp. Get the kid's car into it and down to the garage, hear? Tell Eddie I want it in twelve hours, maximum, and I don't care what he has to do. And I want it without a scratch, hear?"

"Gotcha, boss."

"And then I want our garage, here, vacuumed from top to bottom. Better make it the back driveway, too, but nobody to see. No glass dust, no paint chips, no blood, no anything. Understand?"

"I gotcha, Boss." Maxie rubbed one heavy fist into the calloused palm of the other hand. "And then can I take a couple of boys and go down and teach this character a little lesson?"

Coletsos frowned at him. "Good God, no!"

Maxie was properly amazed. "But, Boss, you ain't going to pay off no ten grand to no chiseler, are you? Tell him to pound gravel! You got the whole town in your pocket, boss—"

"You don't understand," Coletsos said slowly. "You just take care of getting the car fixed. There's only one way to handle a blackmailer, Maxie; give him his head. He told me if I didn't cough up, he'd go to the police. Well, he's in for one big surprise, because *I'm* the one who's going to the police. Before you go, get me Lieutenant Everts on the line. He owes me a couple of favors."

"Got enough light from the ambulance, Doc?"

"I guess so," the doctor said, and looked around. "Where's your trusty patrol car?"

"Me and Joe had a little accident with it a while ago," Lieutenant Everts said. "Got the front smashed, some." He shrugged. "Let's get with it, huh, Doc?"

"Glad to," the doctor said, and knelt down. He came to his feet a moment later. "Well, he's dead, if that makes it legal. One thing I'll never understand—a man reports a hit run one night, and then goes out and gets himself knocked off the same way at practically the same spot the very next night."

"Yeah," Lieutenant Everts said unemotionally. "Some people aren't very smart. I guess he didn't realize just how dangerous some places can be at times. He was a stranger in town . . ."

Ross Macdonald

Down These Streets a Mean Man Must Go

Once compared the detective story to a welder's mask which enables both writer and reader to handle dangerously hot materials. For even at its least realistic crime fiction reminds us of real things. The world is a treacherous place, it says, where a man must learn to watch his step and guard his rights. It is a difficult place to know; still, both the natural and the human worlds are subject to certain laws which we can understand rationally and make predictions by. Traditional detective fiction offers us the assurance that in spite of all its horrors—the speckled band in Conan Doyle, the dead girl thrust up the chimney in Poe's *Rue Morgue*—the world makes sense and can be understood.

Poe lived out in his short brilliant career the last days of the age of reason and the descent into the maelstrom of the unconscious, where everything revolved at a new angle. It was with a kind of desperation—a desperation we continue to feel—that he held on to rational explanations. The murdered girl in the chimney, Dupin assures us, was only the victim of an animal. But in spite of this explanation the story leaves a residue of horror. The forces of terror and reason remain in unresolved conflict.

In the following century that conflict became the central feature of the detective story. Explaining fears which can't quite be explained away, transforming nightmares into daymares, it helped to quiet the nerves and satisfy the minds of countless readers.

Poe's master Coleridge had written of the Gothic romance, the precursor of the modern detective story:

"As far, therefore, as the story is concerned, the praise which a romance can claim, is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal. . . . To this praise, however, our author has not entitled himself. The sufferings which he describes are so frightful and intolerable, that we break with abruptness from the delusion and indignantly suspect the man of a species

of brutality. . . . Let him work *physical* wonders only, and we will be content to dream with him for a while; but the first *moral* miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us . . . how beings like ourselves would feel and act . . . our own feelings sufficiently instruct us; and we instantly reject the clumsy fiction that does not harmonize with them.”

This is as you may recognize from a review of Lewis’s *The Monk* written by Coleridge in 1796, the year that he began to compose *The Ancient Mariner*. It is worth quoting not just for its associations but because it can remind us that the Gothic tradition goes back at least as far as the eighteenth century, and its basic rule hasn’t changed radically since. The moral life of the characters is the essence of the story, authenticated by the moral life of the reader.

It was not just as a critic that Coleridge was interested in Gothic romance. *The Ancient Mariner* was touched by it, and the unfinished *Christabel* might almost be described as a Gothic novel in verse. Perhaps I am old enough to confess publicly what forty years ago was my secret ambition. When I was a young would-be poet going to school at the University of Western Ontario, I planned to finish *Christabel* and made an attempt which fortunately doesn’t survive, indeed it was still-born. With the shocking realization of my limitations, my ambition split into two divergent parts which I have spent most of my life trying to put together again. I migrated to Ann Arbor and wrote a dissertation on the psychological backgrounds of Coleridge’s criticism. At the same time I followed my wife’s example and began to write mystery stories.

For a long time I was made to feel by my friends and colleagues that these two departments of my mental life, the scholarly and the popular, were rather schizophrenically at odds with each other. Most of my best friends are fiction writers and scholars—most of my enemies, too. The writers viewed my interest in scholarship with suspicion not untinged with superstitious awe. The scholars—with significant exceptions like Marshall MacLuhan and Hugh Kenner—considered my fiction writing a form of prostitution out of which they tried to wrestle my soul. But I persisted in my intellectual deviance, trying to stretch my legs to match Chandler’s markings, telling myself that down these streets a mean man must go.

It may be timely—I may not have another chance—to offer for the record some further autobiographical fragments and a few conclusions. The connections between the work and the life—other men’s as well as my own—have always interested me. It becomes more and more evident that novels, popular or otherwise, are built like Robinson Crusoe’s cabin out of the flotsam of the author’s past and his makeshift present. A man’s fiction,

no matter how remote it may seem to be from the realistic or the autobiographical, is very much the record of his particular life. Gradually it may tend to become a substitute for the life, a shadow of the life clinging to the original so closely that (as in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*) it becomes hard to tell which is fiction and which is confession.

As a writer grows older more and more of his energy goes to sustain the shadow. He seems to live primarily in order to go on writing, secondarily in order to have something to write about. This double *modus vivendi* is like that of an aging husband and wife each of whom knows what the other is going to say, and it often issues in stretching silences. Then we turn back in memory to the past, where the crucial events and conversations of our lives repeat themselves forever in the hope of being understood and perhaps forgiven.

I was born near San Francisco in 1915. My father and his father were both Scots-Canadian newspaper editors. There are writers and painters in my mother's family. My father left my mother when I was four. To me he ultimately bequeathed his copy of *Walden* and a life insurance policy for two thousand dollars which in Canada, in the thirties, was exactly enough to see me through four years of University.

Before I reached University, looking for something to become in my father's absence, I had become a writer. I think most fiction writers must suffer some degree of alienation, a suppression of the conative by the cognitive which stands like a reflecting window between them and the actual world of satisfactions. We wish to reach and remake that world symbolically, sometimes out of anger and revenge, sometimes out of a humane desire to reclaim it.

When I was eleven I discovered *Oliver Twist* and read that novel with such intense absorption that my mother feared for my health. She took the book away and sent me outside to play hockey. The scene was Kitchener, Ontario, a main source of talent for the National Hockey League. I fell on the ice and got my face cut by the skate of my friend Wilbert Hiller, who not many years later was playing for the New York Rangers. Thus I acquired my wound.

I seem to have got the makings of my bow at the Kitchener Public Library. The librarian, B. Mabel Dunham, was a novelist whose books are still alive though she is not. At least one of her novels was about the migration of the Pennsylvania Dutch to Canada in the nineteenth century. My mother's people, like Miss Dunham's, were Pennsylvania Dutch; I must be the only American crime novelist who got his early ethical training in a Canadian Mennonite Sunday School. I believe that Mabel Dunham's living example, combined with the books both English and

American with which she stocked the public library, permitted me to think of becoming a writer. By my middle teens I was a practising crime writer, and my high school classmate and future wife Margaret had begun to write in the Gothic vein, too. I have often wondered why. Perhaps we both felt that with the suppression of the personal and emotional life which afflicted Canada, particularly in those depression years, expressions of the angry self had to come out in devious ways.

What were we angry about? I think it may have been our sense of being provincial in a double sense, in relation to both Great Britain and the United States. My own feeling of distance from the center was deepened by the fact that I had been born in California and was an American citizen by birth. *Civis Romanus sum*.

Popular fiction is not generally thought of as autobiographical—it is considered less a person than a thing—and it is true that the popular conventions offer an apparent escape from both the author's and the reader's lives. But in a deeper sense they can offer the writer a mask for autobiography—a fencer's mask to deflect the cold steel of reality as he struggles with his own Falstaffian shadows. The convention provides means of disguising the auctorial self, but that self reappears on other levels in the forms of other characters, and as the Hamlet's cloud on which the whole thing is projected.

I can think of few more complex critical enterprises than disentangling the mind and life of a first-person detective story writer from the mask of his detective-narrator. The assumption of the mask is as public as vaudeville but as intensely private as a lyric poem. It is like taking an alias, the alias John Doe or Richard Roe; and it constitutes among other things an act of identification with the people one is writing for. Sam Spade is both Hammett and Hammett's audience, a Janus figure representing a city.

Hammett's books were not in the thirties to be found on the open shelves of the Kitchener Public Library. Neither were the novels of Hemingway, Faulkner, or Flaubert: as I recorded in my own early novel *Blue City*, these masters were kept in a locked cupboard for posterity. But one day in 1930 or 1931 I found *The Maltese Falcon* on the shelf of a lending library in a Kitchener tobacco shop, and I read a good part of it on the spot. It wasn't escape reading. As I stood there absorbing Hammett's novel, the slot machines at the back of the shop were clanking and whirring, and in the billiard room upstairs the perpetual poker game was being played. Like iron filings magnetized by the book in my hands, the secret meanings of the city began to organize themselves around me like a second city.

For the first time that I can remember I was consciously experiencing in my own sensibility the direct meeting of art and contemporary actuality—

an experience that popular art at its best exists to provide—and beginning to find a language and a shape for that experience. It was a long time before I got it into writing, even crudely: *Blue City* was written fifteen years later. And it was much later still, long after I had made my way back to California and realized that the work of writers like Hammett and Chandler was as much my heritage as anyone's, that I wrote a detective novel called *The Galton Case*, about the reclamation of a California birthright. I was forty or so, and it was getting very late. I made an all-out effort to bend the bow that Hammett and Chandler, and Mabel Dunham, had strung for me, and to hit the difficult target of my own life.

Most popular writers seem to begin, as I did, by imitating their predecessors. There is a convention to be learned. It keeps the forms of the art alive for both the writer and his readers, endowing both with a common stock of structural shapes and formal possibilities. A popular work like Mrs. Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which incidentally Coleridge gave a better review than he gave Monk Lewis's book, prepares the ground for a *Northanger Abbey*, possibly even for a *Christabel*. The story line of Coleridge's unfinished poem, if not its subtle content, had its sources in several popular modes, including the Gothic tales of terror and the ballads, as well as in the terrible dreams that shook Coleridge nightly.

I believe that popular culture is not and need not be at odds with high culture, any more than the rhythms of walking are at odds with the dance. Popular writers learn what they can from the masters; and even the masters may depend on the rather sophisticated audience and the vocabulary of shapes and symbols which popular fiction provides. Without the traditional Gothic novel and its safety net of readers, even Henry James could not have achieved the wire-walking assurance with which he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*. The work which T.S. Eliot considered the next step taken after James by the Anglo-American novel, *The Great Gatsby*, has obvious connections with American crime fiction and the revolution effected in that fiction during the twenties. The skeleton of Fitzgerald's great work, if not its nervous system, is that of a mystery novel.

A functioning popular literature appears to be very useful if not essential to the growth of a higher literature. Chandler's debt to Fitzgerald suggests that the reverse is also true. There is a two-way connection between the very greatest work and the anonymous imaginings of a people.

I don't intend to suggest that popular literature is primarily a matrix for higher forms. Popular fiction, popular art in general, is the very air a civilization breathes. (Air itself is 80 percent nitrogen.) Popular art is the form in which a culture comes to be known by most of its members. It is the carrier and guardian of the spoken language. A book which can be read

by everyone, a convention which is widely used and understood in all its variations, holds a civilization together as nothing else can.

It reaffirms our values as they change, and dramatizes the conflicts of those values. It absorbs and domesticates the spoken language, placing it in meaningful context with traditional language, forming new linguistic synapses in the brain and body of the culture. It describes new modes of behavior, new versions of human character, new shades and varieties of good and evil, and implicitly criticizes them. It holds us still and contemplative for a moment, caught like potential shoplifters who see their own furtive images in a scanning mirror, and wonder if the store detective is looking.

Science Fiction



Frederik Pohl

Introduction

Some years ago a team of psychologists looked upon science fiction writers and found them interesting. They decided to measure the insides of the heads of a representative group of science fiction writers, and so they prepared a group personality profile for them, and then contrasted it with similar profiles for one or two other groups of professionals. They found interesting differences between the groups. Perhaps the most interesting, a trait in which the graph for science fiction writers soared far above the other groups, was in the science fiction writers' preference for "adventurous (vs. withdrawn) cyclothymia." Loosely translated, science fiction writers are *stubborn*. They do not accept the givens of everyone's life without an argument; they rebel, and when they get their hands on something they want to say, they say it. They are also a little brighter than the population as a whole, and so they are crafty enough to deal with authority, even capricious and repressive authority, without head-on collisions. But in their central cores they are remarkably diverse, and remarkably sure they are right.

I did not really need psychologists to tell me this. I have spent nearly forty years dealing with science fiction writers in one relationship or another—as editor, as agent, as president of the science fiction writers' trade union, as colleague and fellow-writer, as friend; I've even been married to one or two at one time or another. I bear the scars to prove that science fiction writers are the most stubborn individualists on the face of the earth.

This makes problems of its own for anyone who is asked to discuss what science fiction is. I find myself in that position a lot; in fact, over the years I have spent a lot of time talking about what science fiction is, in places like Bulgaria and Brazil and Biwa-ko. I start with the categorical statement that science fiction writers are individualists. I go on to say that that may be the only true categorical statement that can be made about science fiction

writers; but then the questions start. "Gospodin Pohl, what do American science fiction writers think about the class struggle?" "Gosh, I don't know! Which writers do you mean?" Or, "Per favore, what does science fiction tell us to expect in the year 2000?" "Oh—different things. Some times one thing, sometimes another." It isn't too hard to say what Bradbury or Heinlein thinks (maybe), and with a little free-hand guesswork even take a shot at what Samuel R. Delany or Brian W. Aldiss thinks. But what is clear is that they don't all think the same things. Not about the class struggle. Not about the energy crisis. Not about politics or religion, and not even about science fiction itself: Witness the three essays which follow.

The three writers who give their views are among the short list of those whose opinions I most highly respect, but what do they tell us? Ursula K. Le Guin doubts that the primrose path of academic respectability is as dangerous as, say, Leslie Fiedler would have us believe. Of course it will affect how science fiction is written, but, she says, "real criticism, by trained, intelligent people . . . could be the best thing that ever happened to science fiction." Like most statements in the subjunctive mood, that is not to be argued with, since it does not exclude the possibility that it could also be the worst. (Look at what "serious" criticism has done for, for example, "serious" music: "The middle-class music critic is the most ridiculous of human institutions. I do not take my function seriously because it is impossible for an intelligent man to do so," said that eminent middle-class music critic, George Bernard Shaw.) Lester del Rey says that he personally has felt not pain from the compulsory wearing of our yellow star, but that criticism may well "distort" our field. That too is not to be disputed, because the evidence is all around us in the form of the fresh-minted Eng. Lit. B.A.s who flock into our publishing houses every fall and are immediately assigned to shepherd the science fiction lists. (If they know nothing of science fiction, they do their best to learn. And where better to learn than from the most vocal of the critics?) Roger Zelazny is content with our new respectability, and even suggests that we were in wedlock born and come by it honestly, since the seeds of science fiction sprouted from the epic. Interesting views, all of them, and I agree with every one. In spite of the fact that I think they are all wrong.

What science fiction is is the elephant of the Buddhist parable. If you approach it from behind you find it resembles a rope, from the front, a snake; it is wall or tree-trunk, and in reality it is all these things and none of them. Science fiction academics and critics have blown endless cubic yards of good breath uselessly away in trying to define what science fiction

is, but they didn't invent the game; the science fiction writers and readers had been playing it for generations before them. All to no avail. There are endless definitions of science fiction. They are pragmatic, epigrammatic, idiosyncratic and now and then idiotic. But not one of them is diagnostic. Science fiction is not a monolithic thing, it is a method, a process or a state of mind; the crasser among us would call it a shopping label—the sign that appears on that section of the bookstore or library where we find the stories that we point to when we say, “*That* is science fiction.” Does science fiction descend from the epic? Why, certainly! But the epic is only one ancestor. Like you and me, science fiction doubles its ancestors with every generation you trace the genealogy back, and if it owes something to the *Iliad* it also owes something to the pulp magazine and the penny-dreadful, the *Book of Revelations* and the *Metamorphoses*; to Joyce, to Shelley (the Mary one), to Voltaire, to Wells, to Verne, to Kafka and to Swift (both the Jonathan one and the Tom one). In fact, I do not think there is a current anywhere in the history of human thought or deed that has not somewhere, somehow, left a ripple in science fiction. It has to be that way, I think. Other writers describe the world as best they can. The science fiction writer creates worlds. In the process he borrows from whatever he can find, because he needs all the help he can get.

Or maybe he does not; because in at least one sense he has shown himself sturdily self-reliant. He is not an easy person to oppress. With all that obstinacy, he is not even that easy to sway.

Like all artists, science fiction writers wish for more freedom than they have; but they are skilled in doing without it when the need is there. In fact, what I perceive to be the evidence that relates to this question suggests that freedom is not particularly good for them, or at least that some of the best science fiction ever written has been done under conditions of tyranny which the writers deplored and did their best to escape.

This, I know, is not a popular view. When I was President of the Science Fiction Writers of America (two years that seemed forever!), I had to participate in any number of gripe sessions about the wicked repressiveness of editors; and of course the plight of the writer under the thought-controlled police states of Eastern Europe is familiar to everyone; the Solzhenitsyn experience is not unique.

But science fiction flourishes under these conditions! Eastern Europe is full of science fiction writers, hundreds of them! As everywhere else, some are good and most are not, but at least Stanislaw Lem in Poland, the Strugatski brothers in the Soviet Union and one or two others have achieved world reputations under conditions that have reduced most writers in other fields to the mass-production of pap. Very little Eastern

European literature finds any audience in the western world. There are two exceptions: one is poetry (in limited amounts); the other is science fiction.

And in America? Well, by all accounts the most authoritarian editor in the American science fiction field was the late John W. Campbell. John was a rogue bull. He was given to enthusiasms which he preached to everyone who came into his range: dianetics, astrology, the Dean drive, the wickedness of the welfare system. He was opposed to sex in print (and kept every vestige of it out of his magazines for thirty-odd years.) Every one of his favorite writers tells horror stories of his dominating influence. Yet, if you look at any consensual list of the best science fiction published in America in the past half century (the SFWA volumes called *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* are a good place to start) it is at once obvious that the great majority of them were first published, and were often inspired, by this same tyrant, who happens to have been the best science fiction editor who ever lived. Many editors gave their writers far more freedom. None published as many great stories, and it seems inescapable that some part of the greatness of the stories comes from the dialectic challenge-and-response that dealing with John Campbell imposed.

What John Campbell did more than any other thing was to ask his writers to think. He enjoyed it when they thought to the same conclusions as himself, but the only thing he would not tolerate was the failure to think at all. And in that he epitomized science fiction, because that is what science fiction does for all of us: it helps us to think new thoughts, in areas where, without its spur, we might never have thought at all.

It is a perplexing field, full of paradoxes. As you can see from these essays, even the people who know it best can hardly agree on what it is that they know . . . and to me, that is wonderful!

Stanislaw Lem

How Erg the Self-Inducting Slew a Paleface

The mighty King Boludar loved curiosities and devoted himself wholly to the collecting of them, often forgetting about important affairs of state. He had a collection of clocks, and among them were dancing clocks, sunrise clocks and clock-clouds. He also had stuffed monsters from all four corners of the Universe, and in a special room, under a bell glass, the rarest of creatures—the Homos Anthropos, most wonderfully pale, two-legged, and it even had eyes, though empty. The King ordered two lovely rubies set in them, giving the Homos a red stare. Whenever he grew mellow with drink, Boludar would invite his favorite guests to this room and show them the frightful thing.

One day there came to the King's court an electrosage so old that the crystals of his mind had grown somewhat confused with age; nevertheless this electrosage, named Halazon, possessed the wisdom of a galaxy. It was said that he knew ways of threading photons on a string, producing thereby necklaces of light, and even that he knew how to capture a living Anthropos. Aware of the old one's weakness, the King ordered the wine cellars opened immediately; the electrosage, having taken one pull too many from the Leyden jug, when the pleasant currents were coursing through his limbs, betrayed a terrible secret to the King and promised to obtain for him an Anthropos, which was the ruler of a certain interstellar tribe. The price he set was high—the weight of the Anthropos in fist-sized diamonds—but the King didn't blink at it.

Halazon then set off on his journey. The King meanwhile began to boast before the royal council of his expected acquisition, which he could not in any case conceal, having already ordered a cage of heavy iron bars to be built in the castle park, where the most magnificent crystals grew. The court was thrown into great consternation. Seeing that the King would not

give in, the advisers summoned to the castle two erudite homologists, whom the King received warmly, for he was curious as to what these much-knowledged ones, Salamid and Thaladon, could tell him that he did not already know about the pale being.

"Is it true," he asked, as soon as they had risen from their knees, rendering him obeisance, "that the Homos is softer than wax?"

"It is, Your Luminositude," both replied.

"And is it also true that the aperture it has at the bottom of its face can produce a number of different sounds?"

"Yes, Your Royal Highness, and in addition, into this same opening the Homos stuffs various objects, then moves the lower portion of the head, which is fastened by hinges to the upper portion, wherewith the objects are broken up and it draws them into its interior."

"A peculiar custom, of which I've heard," said the King. "But tell me, my wise ones, for what purpose does it do this?"

"On that particular subject there are four theories, Your Royal Highness," replied the homologists. "The first, that it does this to rid itself of excess venom (for it is venomous to an extreme). The second, that this act is performed for the sake of destruction, which it places above all other pleasures. The third—out of greed, for it would consume everything if it were able, and the fourth, that . . ."

"Fine, fine!" said the King. "Is it true the thing is made of water, and yet nontransparent, like that puppet of mine?"

"This too is true! It has, Sire, a multitude of slimy tubes inside, through which waters circulate; some are yellow, some pearl gray, but most are red—the red carry a dreadful poison called phlogiston or oxygen, which gas turns everything it touches instantly to rust or else to flame. The Homos itself therefore changes color, pearly, yellow, and pink. Nevertheless, Your Royal Highness, we humbly beseech you to abandon your idea of bringing here a live Homos, for it is a powerful creature and malicious as no other. . . ."

"This you must explain to me more fully," said the King, as though he were ready to accede to the wise ones. In reality, however, he only wished to feed his enormous curiosity.

"The beings to which the Homos belongs are called miasmals, Sire. To these belong the silicites and the proteids; the first are of thicker consistency, thus we call them gelatinoids or aspics; the others, more rare, are given different names by different authors—as, for example, gummids or mucilids by Pollomender; quag-backed pasties or bogheads by Tricephalos of Arboran; and finally, Analcymander the Brazen dubbed them fenny-eyed slubber-yucks. . . ."

"Is it true, then, that even their eyes are full of scum?" King Boludar asked eagerly.

"It is, Sire. These creatures, outwardly weak and frail, so that a drop of sixty feet is all it takes to make one splat into a liquid red, by their native cunning represent a danger worse than all the whirlpools and reefs of the Great Asteroid Noose together! And so we beg of you, Sire, for the good of the kingdom . . ."

"Yes, yes, fine," interrupted the King. "You may go now, my dears, and we shall arrive at our decision with all due deliberation."

The wise homologists bowed low and departed, uneasy in their minds, fearing that King Boludar had not forsaken his dangerous plan.

By and by a stellar vessel came in the night and brought enormous crates. These were conveyed immediately to the royal garden. Before long the gold gates were opened wide for all the royal subjects; there among the diamond groves, the gazebos of carved jasper and the marble prodigies, they saw an iron cage, and in it a pale thing, and flabby, that sat upon a small barrel before a saucer filled with something strange—true, the substance did give off the smell of oil, but of oil burnt over a flame, therefore spoiled and totally unfit for use. Yet the creature calmly dipped a kind of shovel in the saucer and, lifting up the oily goo, deposited it into its facial opening.

The spectators were speechless with horror when they read the sign on the cage, which said that they had before them an *Anthropos, Homos*, a living paleface. The mob began to taunt it, but then the *Homos* rose, scooped up something from the barrel on which it had been sitting, and sprayed the gaping crowd with a lethal water. Some fled, others seized stones to smite the abomination, but the guards dispersed everyone at once.

These events reached the ear of the King's daughter, *Electrina*. It would seem she had inherited her father's curiosity, for she was not afraid to approach the cage in which the monster spent its time scratching itself or imbibing enough water and rancid oil to kill a hundred royal subjects on the spot.

The *Homos* quickly learned intelligent speech and was so bold as to engage *Electrina* in conversation.

The Princess asked it once what that white stuff was which glittered in its maw.

"That I call teeth," it said.

"Oh, let me have one!" requested the Princess.

"And what will you give me for it?" it asked.

"I'll give you my little golden key, but only for a moment."

"What kind of key is it?"

"My personal key. I use it every evening to wind up my mind. You must have one too."

"My key is different from yours," it answered evasively. "And where do you keep it?"

"Here, on my breast, beneath this little golden lid."

"Hand it over. . . ."

"And you'll give me teeth?"

"Sure."

The Princess turned a little golden screw, opened the lid, took out a little golden key and passed it through the bars. The paleface grabbed it greedily and, chuckling with glee, retreated to the center of the cage. The Princess implored and pleaded with it to return the key, but all in vain. Afraid to let anyone find out what she had done, Electrina went back to her palace chambers with a heavy heart. She had acted foolishly, perhaps, but then she was still practically a child. The next day her servants found her senseless in her crystal bed. The King and Queen came running, and the whole court after them. She lay as if asleep, but it was not possible to waken her. The King summoned the court physicians-electricians, his medics, techs and mechanics, and these, examining the princess, discovered that her lid was open—no little screw, no little key! The alarm was sounded in the castle; pandemonium reigned; everyone rushed here and there looking for the little key, but to no avail. The next day the King, deep in despair, was informed that his paleface wished to speak with him on the matter of the missing key. The King went himself to the park without delay, and the monstrosity told him that it knew where the Princess had lost her key, but would reveal this only when the King had given his royal word to restore to it its freedom and, moreover, supply a spacefaring vessel so it could return to its own kind. The King stubbornly refused, ordering the park searched up and down, but at last agreed to these terms. Thus a spacecraft was readied for flight, and guards escorted the paleface from its cage. The King was waiting by the ship; the Anthropos, however, promised to tell him where the key lay as soon as it was on board and not before.

But once on board, it stuck its head out a vent hole and, holding up the bright key in its hand, shouted:

"Here is the key! I'm taking it with me, King, so that your daughter will never wake again, because I crave revenge, in that you humiliated me, keeping me in an iron cage as a laughingstock!!"

Flame shot from under the stern of the spacecraft and the vessel rose into the sky while everyone stood dumbfounded. The King sent his fastest steel cloudscorchers and whirlyprops in pursuit, but their crews all came back

empty-handed, for the wily paleface had covered its tracks and given its pursuers the slip.

King Boludar now understood how wrong it had been of him not to heed the wise homologists, but the damage had been done. The foremost electrical locksmiths worked to fashion a duplicate key, the Great Assembler to the Throne, royal artisans, armorers and artefactotums, Lord High steelwrights and master goldforgers, and cybercounts and dynamargraves—all came to try their skill, but in vain. The King realized he would have to recover the key taken by the paleface; otherwise darkness would forever lie upon the sense and senses of the Princess.

He proclaimed therefore throughout the realm that this, that and the other had taken place, the anthropic paleface Homos had absconded with the golden key, and whosoever captured it, or retrieved the life-giving jewel and woke the Princess, would have her hand in marriage and ascend the throne.

Straightway there appeared in droves daredevils of various cuts and sizes. Among these were electroknights of great renown as well as charlatan-swindlers, astrothieves, star drifters. To the castle came Demetricus Megawatt, the celebrated fencer-oscillator, possessing such feedback and speed-back that no one could hold the field against him in single combat; and self-motes came from distant lands—the two Automatts, vector-victors in a hundred battles, and Protheseus, constructionist *par excellence*, who never went anywhere without two spark absorbers, one black, the other silver. And there was Arbitron Cosmoski, all built of protocrytals and svelte as a spire; and Cyfer of Agrym the intellectrician, who on forty andromedaries in eighty boxes brought with him an old digital computer, rusted from much thinking yet still mighty of mind. Three champions from the race of the Selectivitites arrived: Diodius, Triodius and Heptodius, who possessed such a perfect vacuum in their heads that their black thought was like the starless night. And Perpetuan came too, all in Leyden armor, with his commutator covered with verdigris from three hundred encounters; and Matrix Perforatem, who never went a day that he did not integrate someone. The latter brought to the palace his invincible cybersteed, a supercharger he called Megasus. They all assembled, and when the court was full, a barrel rolled up to the threshold and out of it spilled, in the shape of mercury, Erg the Self-inducting, who could assume whatever aspect he desired.

The heroes banqueted, lighting up the castle halls so that the marble of the ceilings glowed pink like a cloud at sunset. Then off they set, each his separate way, to seek out the paleface, challenge it to mortal combat and regain the key, and thereby win the Princess and the throne of Boludar.

The first, Demetricus Megawatt, flew to Koldlea, where live the Jellyclabbers, for he thought to find out something there. And thus he dove into their ooze, carving out the way with blows from his remote-control saber, but nothing did he achieve; for when he waxed too warm his cooling system went, and the incomparable warrior found his grave on foreign soil, and the unclean ooze of the Jellyclabbers closed over his dauntless cathodes forever.

The two Automatts Vectorian reached the land of the Radomants, who raise up edifices out of luminescent gas, dabbling in radioactivity, and are such misers that each evening they count the atoms on their planet. Ill was the reception the grasping Radomants gave the Automatts, for they showed them a chasm full of onyxes, chrysolites, chalcedonies and spinels, and when the electroknights yielded to the temptation of the jewels, the Radomants stoned them to death, setting off from above an avalanche of precious stones, which, as it moved, blazed like a falling comet of a hundred colors. For the Radomants were allied to the palefaces by a secret pact, about which no one knew.

The third, Prostheseus the Constructionist, arrived after a long voyage through the interstellar dark at the land of the Algoncs. There meteors move in blizzards of rock. The schooner of Prostheseus ran into their inexorable wall. With a broken rudder he drifted through the deep; and when at last he neared some distant suns, their light played across that poor adventurer's sightless eyes.

The fourth, Arbitron Cosmoski, had better luck at first. He made it through the Andromeda straits, crossed the four spiral whirlpools of the Hunting Dogs, and after that came out into quiet space favorable for photon sailing. Like a nimble beam he took the helm and, leaving a trail of sweeping fire, reached the shores of the planet Maestricia, where amid meteorite boulders he spied the shattered wreck of the schooner on which Prostheseus had embarked. The body of the constructionist, powerful, shiny and cold as in life, he buried beneath a basalt heap, but took from him both spark-absorbers, the silver and the black, to serve as shields, and proceeded on his way. Wild and craggy was Maestricia; avalanches of stone roared across it, with a silver tangle of lightning in the clouds above the precipices. The knight came to a region of ravines and there the Palindromides fell upon him in a canyon of malachite, all green. With thunderbolts they lashed him from above, but he parried these with his spark-absorbing buckler till they moved up a volcano, set the crater on its side and, taking aim, belched fire at him. The knight fell and bubbling lava entered his skull, from which flowed all the silver.

The fifth, Cyfer of Agrym the intellectrician, went nowhere. Instead,

halting right outside the borders of Boludar's kingdom, he released his andromedaries to graze in stellar pastures, and himself connected the machine, adjusted it, programmed it, bustled about its eighty boxes, and when all were brimming with current so that it swelled with intelligence, he began putting to it precisely formulated questions: Where did the paleface live? How could one find the way? How could it be tricked? Trapped? How forced to give up the key? The answers, when they came, were vague and noncommittal. In a fury he whipped the machine until it began to smell of heated copper, and he continued to belabor it, crying, "The truth now, out with it, you blasted old digital computer!"—until at last its joints melted, tin trickled from them in silvery tears, the overheated pipes split open with a bang, and he was left standing incensed over a fused junkheap with a cudgel in his hand.

Shamefaced, he had to return home. He ordered a new machine, but did not see it until four hundred years later.

Sixth was the sally of the Selectivitites. Diodius, Triodius and Heptodius set about things differently. They had an inexhaustible supply of tritium, lithium and deuterium, and decided with explosions of heavy hydrogen to force open all the roads leading to the land of the palefaces. It was not known, however, where those roads began. They sought to ask the Pyropods, but the latter locked themselves behind the gold walls of their capital and hurled flame; the valiant-valent Selectivitites stormed the bastion, using both deuterium and tritium without stint till an inferno of stripped atoms looked the sky boldly in its starry eye. The walls of the citadel shone gold, but in the fire they betrayed their true nature, turning into yellow clouds of sulfuric smoke, for they had been built of pyrites-marcasites. There Diodius fell, trampled by the Pyropods, and his mind burst like a bouquet of colored crystals, spraying his armor. In a tomb of black olivine they buried him, then pressed on to the borders of the kingdom of Char, where the starkiller King Astrocida reigned. This king had a treasure house full of fiery nuclei plucked from white dwarfs, which were so heavy that only the terrible force of the palace magnets kept them from tearing through to the planet's core. Whoever stepped upon its ground could move neither arms nor legs, for the prodigious gravitation clamped down stronger than bolts or chains. Triodius and Heptodius were hard set here; for Astrocida, catching sight of them beneath the castle ramparts, rolled out one white dwarf after another and loosed the fire-spouting masses in their faces. They defeated him, however, and he revealed to them the way that led to the palefaces, wherein he deceived them, for he did not know the way, but wished only to be rid of the fearsome warriors. So they delved into the black heart of the void, where

Triodius was shot by someone with an antimatter blunderbuss—it might have been one of the hunter-Cyberneers, or possibly a mine set for a tailless comet. In any case Triodius vanished, with barely time to shout, “Tik-cuff!!”, his favorite word and the battle cry of his race. Heptodius stubbornly forged ahead, but a bitter end was in store for him as well. His vessel found itself between two vortices of gravitation called Bakhrida and Scintilla; Bakhrida speeds up time, Scintilla on the other hand slows it down, and between them lies a zone of stagnation in which the present, becalmed, flows neither backward nor forward. There Heptodius froze alive, and remains to this day, along with the countless frigates and galleons of other astromariners, pirates and spaceswashers, not aging in the least, suspended in the silence and excruciating boredom that is Eternity.

When thus had concluded the campaign of the three Selectivitites, Perpetuan, cybercount of Fud, who as the seventh was next to go, did not set forth for the longest time. Instead that electroknight made lengthy preparations for war, fitting himself with ever sharper conductors, with more and more striking spark plugs, mortars and tractors. Full of caution, he decided he would go at the head of a loyal retinue. Under his banner flocked conquistadors, also many rejects, robots who having nothing else to do wished to try their hand at soldiering. Out of these Perpetuan formed a galactic light cavalry and an infantry, heavy, ironclad and bullion-headed, plus several platoons of polydragons and palladins. However, at the thought that now he must go and meet his fate in some unknown land, and that in any puddle he might rust away utterly, the iron shanks buckled under him, he was seized with a terrible regret—and immediately headed home, in shame and sorrow shedding tears of topaz, for he was a mighty lord with a soul full of jewels.

As for the next to the last, Matrix Perforatem, he approached the matter sensibly. He had heard of the land of the Pygmelliants, robot gnomes whose race originated thus: their constructor’s pencil had slipped on the drawing board, whereupon from the master mold they all came out, every last one of them, as hunchbacked deformities. Alteration didn’t pay and thus they remained. These dwarfs amass knowledge as others do treasure; for this reason they are called Hoarders of the Absolute. Their wisdom lies in the fact that they collect knowledge but never use it. To them went Perforatem, not in a military way but on galleons whose decks sagged beneath magnificent gifts; he intended to win the Pygmelliants over with garments aglitter with positrons and lashed by a rain of neutrons; he brought them atoms of gold as big as seven fists, and flagons swirling with the rarest ionospheres. But the Pygmelliants scorned even the noble

vacuum embroidered with waves in exquisite astral spectra. In vain too did he rage and threaten to set upon them his snorting electricourser Megasus. They offered him at last a guide, but the guide was a myriaphalangeal thousand-hander who always pointed in all directions at once.

Perforatem sent him packing and spurred Megasus on the trail of the palefaces; but the trail turned out to be false, for a comet of calcium hydroxide was wont to pass that way, and the simple-minded steed confused this with calcium phosphate, which is the basic ingredient of the paleface skeleton: Megasus mistook the lime for slime. Perforatem roamed long among suns that grew increasingly dim, for he had entered into a very ancient section of the Cosmos.

He traveled past a row of purple giants until he noticed that his ship along with the silent pageant of stars was being reflected in a spiral mirror, a silver-surfaced speculum; he was surprised at this and, just in case, drew his supernova extinguisher, which he had purchased from the Pygmellians in order to protect himself against excessive heat along the Milky Way. He knew not what it was he saw—actually it was a knot in space, the continuum's most contiguous factorial, unknown even to the Monoasterists of that place. All they say is that whoever encounters it never returns. To this day no one knows what happened to Matrix in that stellar mill. His faithful Megasus sped home alone, whimpering softly in the void, and its sapphire eyes were pools of such horror that no one could look into them without a shudder. Neither vessel, nor extinguishers, nor Matrix was ever seen again.

And so the last, Erg the Self-inducting, rode forth alone. He was gone a year and fortnights three. When he returned, he told of lands unknown to anyone, such as that of the Periscones, who build hot sluices of corruption; of the planet of the Epoxy-eyed, who merged before him into rows of black billows, for that is what they do in time of war. He hewed them in two, laying bare the limestone that was their bone; but after he overcame their slaughterfalls, he found himself face to face with one that took up half the sky. When he fell upon it to demand the way, its skin split open beneath the blade of his firesword and exposed white, writhing forests of nerves. And he spoke of the transparent ice planet Aberrabia, which like a diamond lens holds the image of the entire Universe within itself. There Erg copied down the way to palefaceland. He told of a region of eternal silence, Alumnum Cryotrica, where he saw only the reflections of the stars in the surfaces of hanging glaciers; and of the kingdom of the molten Marmaloids, who fashion boiling baubles out of lava; and of the Electropneumaticists, who in mists of methane, ozone, chlorine and volcano smoke are able to kindle the spark of intelligence, and who continually

wrestle with the problem of how to put into a gas the quality of genius. He told them that in order to reach the realm of the palefaces he had to force open the door of a sun called *Caput Medusae*; how after lifting this door off its chromatic hinges, he ran through the star's interior, a long succession of purple and light-blue flames, till his armor curled from the heat. How for thirty days he tried to guess the word that would activate the hatch of *Astroprocyonum*, since only through it can one enter the cold hell of miasmal beings; how finally he found himself among the palefaces, and they tried to catch him in their sticky, lipid snares, knock the mercury from his head or short-circuit him; how they deluded him, pointing to misshapen stars, but that was a counterfeit sky, the real one they had hidden in their sneaking way; how with torture they sought to pry from him his algorithm and then, when he withstood everything, threw him into a pit and dropped a slab of magnetite over the opening. Inside, however, he immediately multiplied himself into thousands of Ergs the Self-inducting, pushed aside the iron lid, emerged on the surface and wreaked his retribution upon the palefaces for one full month and five days. How then the monsters, in a last attempt, attacked on trackers they called *casterpillars*; but that availed them nothing, for, never slackening in his zeal for battle, but hacking, stabbing and slashing away, he brought them to such a pass that they threw the dastardly paleface key thief at his feet, whereupon Erg lopped off its loathsome head and disemboweled the carcass. In it he found a stone known as a *trichobezoar*, and on it was carved an inscription in the scrofulous paleface tongue, revealing where the key was. The Self-inducting cut open sixty-seven suns—white, blue and ruby red—before, pulling apart the right one, he found the key.

The adventures he met with, the battles he was forced to wage on the journey back—of these he did not even wish to think, so great now was his yearning for the Princess, and great too his impatience for the wedding and the coronation. With joy the King and Queen led him to the chamber of their daughter, who was silent as the grave, plunged in sleep. Erg leaned over her, fiddled a little near the open lid, inserted something, gave a turn, and instantly the Princess—to the delight of her mother and the King and the entire court—lifted her eyes and smiled at her deliverer. Erg closed the little lid, sealed it with a bit of plaster to keep it closed, and explained that the little screw, which he had also found, had been dropped during a fight with *Poleander Partabon*, emperor of all *Jatapurgovia*. But no one gave this any thought, and a pity too, for both the King and Queen would have quickly realized that he never sallied forth at all, because even as a child Erg the Self-inducting had possessed the ability to open any lock, and thanks to this he had wound up the Princess *Electrina*. In reality, then, he

had met with not a single one of the adventures he described, but simply waited out a year and fortnights three in order that it not appear suspicious, his returning too soon with the missing object. Also he wanted to make sure that none of his rivals would come back. Only then did he show up at the court of King Boludar and restore the Princess to life, and so married her and reigned long and happily on the throne of Boludar. His subterfuge was never discovered. From which one can see straightaway that we have told the truth and not a fairy tale, for in fairy tales virtue always triumphs.

Tom Godwin

The Steel Guardian

... David Marmon first presented Technorder—Technological Order—in 2007; his propagandists using as their selling point to the world the claim that only the data-filled Sociological Computers, possessing all the knowledge of Mankind with none of Mankind's emotion-caused faults such as greed, hatred, prejudice, could ever have the wisdom to comprehend the complexities of a Twenty-first Century civilization, to render all decisions with absolute justice and impartiality, and to unite Earth's bickering four billions into a society of Utopian peace and happiness. . . .

... and so, by 2030, the power of Technorder was complete and the world's last wistful dream of a Utopia was gone. Conjecture upon the fact that Marmon had, at first, seemed to sincerely want his plan to succeed was of little comfort. A new plan had replaced it as his power grew and life for all but Technorder officials and Technorder Guards had become a cheerless existence of work quotas and ration cards. The remnants of the die-hard underground, the Freedomists, were all that remained to object to Technorder rule. Marmon's computers had served him as well in directing his robot bomber fleets and other military forces against certain nations which had belatedly comprehended and tried to resist his true plan as they were to have served in bringing about a social Golden Age. . . .

... by this time Marmon was growing old and he had already given his computers another task to perform for him: the discovery of a method of prolonging his life. Immense cybernetics and geriatric centers were built on Earth and Venus. By 2035 his death was almost at hand and the Freedomists, those who had survived more than a decade of a ruthless program of extermination by the Technorder Guards, prepared to strike on the day when the tight organization of Technorder might be loosened a little as a new leader took the seat of power. The Technorder oligarchy, suspecting, reinforced its already powerful defenses and waited. . . .

Then, in rapid succession, a way was found to give Marmon near-immortality, the entire Freedomist plan of attack was learned by the Technorder Guards, and an overlooked law of Nature manifested itself with a bloody savagery that no one had anticipated. . . .

—From the introduction to D. C. Clifford's *The Forbidden Triumph*

The quick ominous whisper of sound came from somewhere behind them, at first so faraway and faint that Johnny Lancer could not be certain of it as he and Nona walked along the dark roadside toward their Work Corps cabin on the outskirts of Venus City. He waited for it to come again.

"I'm cold, Johnny," Nona said. She shivered and drew her thin blouse closer around her against the steady drizzle of rain. "For ten years Technorder has kept us here in this never-ending fog and rain and cold. I wish we could see Earth again as it was before Technorder set up its police state over us all; see the bright sun and blue sky once more."

He did not answer as he listened for the sound. It came again, perceptibly closer and unmistakable.

It was the sound that meant a Freedomist was going to die.

He saw that Nona had not heard it. He looked back where Patricia, Nona's sister, had stopped to kneel in the wet grass and tie her sandal and he saw that Patricia had not heard it either.

They walked on. The road swung in a curve and a huge poster, already lighted by automatic switches, loomed dead ahead of them. On it a uniformed Technorder Guard stood looking down at them, tall and stern as a god, his finger pointing at them like a pistol. Underneath, in letters of yellow fire, were the words:

HELP US PROTECT YOU—REPORT AT ONCE ANYONE YOU SUSPECT
OF FREEDOMIST SYMPATHIES.

"Johnny," Nona looked up at him, her voice tight with worry. "Patricia joined the Freedomist underground last night, didn't she? And you, you've been a Freedomist a long time, haven't you?"

He put his arm around her shoulders and said, "What makes you think that?"

"I can tell. Patricia is only seventeen, so young to have to hate and kill and die. And you—they would kill you tonight if they even suspected you were a Freedomist."

The sound came again from somewhere behind them, much closer than before, the quick wail of a Technorder Guard siren at an intersection. Nona's grip tightened on his arm.

"Now, even now those might be the ones coming to kill you. I wish you were out of it, both of you."

He saw that Patricia had stopped to stare back down the road as he was doing. Nona's grip on his arm tightened.

"Why did you make me be alone, Johnny, why didn't you tell me so I could have joined the Freedomists, too?"

"You wouldn't have belonged," he said.

"I belong with you, wherever you go, whatever happens to you."

"No," he said and brushed the golden hair back from her face. "You are a person who could never hurt anyone, Nona, never understand why it is sometimes necessary to hate and kill."

"Johnny, all I have is you, and Patricia. Without you I would have nothing to live for. I'm going to join and not be left alone."

"Johnny!"

Patricia came running up to them, her dark eyes wide with alarm.

"The guard car. *It's coming up this road, without lights.*"

Nona's hand went to her throat. "No!" she whispered, and it was the cry of one who knew already she was looking at them for the last time.

"Run!" he said to Patricia. "Into the trees. Go to the lake!"

She would have protested and he gave her a shove that sent her staggering. "Run!"

She obeyed and he swung back to face the curve in the road. The police car hurtled out of the fog as he did so, its lights flashing on. Its tires screamed and it slowed to a stop beside them.

Three of the guards were out of the car and around him almost instantly, moving with swift efficiency. He did not resist, knowing beyond any doubt that if he did so Nona would try to help him and would be shot at once. One of them thrust a pistol hard against his back and the harsh voice of another said:

"Where's the other one?"

A spotlight on the car flicked to Nona, standing wide-eyed and frozen, and beyond her. It caught Patricia's back as she ran across the last open space short of the trees. The harsh voice spoke again:

"Drop her!"

The thick arm of the man behind him was around his throat like a vise and the muzzle of his pistol pressed harder as the pistols of the other two came up. He twisted sideways with all the strength and suddenness within his power. He broke free of the arm as the pistol cracked, burning his side. His hand caught the barrel of it before it could fire again.

He was vaguely aware of the movement of the fourth guard in the car as he fought for possession of the pistol. The other two guards were shooting in a drum roll of fire and he saw Patricia lurch and fall. She staggered up again, a target the pistols could not miss.

Then Nona threw herself forward, deliberately, into the hail of fire that was seeking the life of her sister. He saw the bullets strike her, jerking at her as they tore through her. He saw her fall, her white face turned frightened and imploring toward him, trying to see him against the blinding glare of the spotlight.

It seemed to him he could hear a voice like his own, cursing in a sobbing snarl as he fought for the pistol. He tore it from the hand of the guard and shot him a fraction of a second later. He shot one of the guards who had killed Nona as the first guard was still falling.

Then a red tongue of flame lashed out at him from the car and something smashed at his skull. He tried to fire once more, to kill the other guard who had shot Nona, but consciousness and will were suddenly gone in a wave of blackness.

He was on a narrow bed in a white, barren hospital cell when confused awareness returned. A male nurse was watching him and a hypodermic needle stung his arm as he tried to sit up. Once again the blackness came.

His mind was clear when consciousness returned the second time and he had the feeling that he had been in drug-induced sleep for many hours. A wooden-faced guard, heavily armed, had replaced the male nurse. The guard stood up at once.

"Get on your clothes," the guard ordered.

"Nona, my wife, she's dead, isn't she?" he asked.

"No questions, Freedomist. Just do what I said."

He obeyed silently, hoping for a chance to overpower the guard. But the guard was too wary and was joined a minute later by another heavily armed guard.

They took him outside and he saw that he had been in the medical wing of the grim mass of concrete and steel that was Venus Prison. He was shoved into a guard car and ten minutes later they were driving into Venus City.

He wondered what their destination might be, wondered if Patricia had escaped, and knew it would do no good to ask either question.

He wondered if he was seeing Venus City for the last time and felt no sense of loss. As usual, the street traffic consisted only of Technorder official cars, guard cars, and trucks from the various Work Centers. The sidewalk traffic consisted almost entirely of workers, men and women, trudging wearily along, no one ever laughing or smiling.

Large signs were at every intersection:

DON'T LOSE YOUR PRIVILEGE TO BE A FREE TECHNORDER
WORKER—FILL THAT WORK QUOTA!

LET'S WORK HARD TO KEEP THE THREE P'S THAT DAVID MARMON
GAVE US: PROGRESS—PEACE—PROSPERITY!

LOYAL, DILIGENT TECHNORDER WORKERS ARE HAPPY WORKERS,
PROUD OF THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES—AND TECHNORDER IS PROUD OF
THEM!

They passed by a street on which an arrowed sign read:

TECHNORDER WORKERS' REHABILITATION CENTER

That would be the road that led to the slave labor camp, where Technorder Workers who failed too often to fill their quota, regardless of health or any other reasons, were sent.

They passed by the Ration Center, where a line of Workers two blocks long was very slowly passing through. Above the entrance was an immense sign on which a painting of David Marmon was done in such a manner that the hard, selfish lines of his face were gone and he was a saint-like old man, his white hair like a halo. Underneath were the words:

WITHOUT HIM YOU WOULD NOT HAVE THIS DAILY BREAD.

They continued on, through Venus City, and to the guarded gates of the huge complex that was known as Technorder Cybernetics Center. They were passed through and he thought he knew what they were going to use him for. It was not a pleasant thought.

This particular cybernetics center had been built on Venus because the hazardous occupations of the Workers provided a continual supply of injured and dying for the computer-directed experiments and research. But there had been rumors for several weeks that the demand was exceeding the supply. Marmon was dying and the doctors and technicians were working day and night in an all-out effort to find a method of saving him. The live, healthy body of a Freedomist would be welcome.

The car stopped before what appeared to be an administrative building and he was ordered to get out. They were admitted by guards and he was taken down a corridor and into a large room.

Two men were seated at desks in the room, waiting for them. Both wore the star-and-cornucopia insignia of Technorder's upper ranks, which meant they were from Technorder Capital on Earth.

The guard stopped him before the desk of the first one; a gaunt, gray man with a hard, thin-lipped mouth and eyes like frosted steel. Johnny recognized him—he was Horne, next to Marmon the most powerful man in Technorder.

The other Technord stepped over to stand beside Horne's desk; a thick, muscular man with muddy brown eyes in a broad, swarthy face. He would be Felder, Horne's lieutenant and successor-to-be.

Horne spoke without preamble, quick and hard, like the cut of a file into steel:

"You have been subjected to the hypno-drug, as was the girl. We are now familiar with all the details of your Freedomist activities."

It was, of course, their death sentence. He did not answer or change expression.

"But your executions have been temporarily postponed," Horne said. "How long they remain postponed depends upon how well you cooperate with us and how long your cooperation is needed."

"Cooperation?" he asked. He thought of Nona, lying small and alone and still in the cold grass, and said, "I'll see you in hell first."

Felder's muddy eyes gleamed and he looked at the guards, nodding to them.

The police club of the guard on his right lashed him across the cheekbone, vicious and unexpected, in a blinding blaze of pain.

"In the future," Felder said, "be careful to speak with respect."

"I think you will cooperate with us," Horne continued, as though no interruption had occurred. "It concerns your wife. She is alive."

He forgot the pain, forgot to breathe. Nona . . . *alive*? It was something so unexpected, so wonderful, that it was hard to comprehend. Nona alive, not killed that night.

"The adjustment of your wife has been perfect so far," Horne said. "But the doctors insist that nothing interfere with its continuance. So, until they consider it no longer necessary, you and her sister are needed to visit her and help maintain the atmosphere of quiet and normalcy the doctors have created for her."

He felt the chill of premonition. "What do you mean? *What have you done to her?*"

"The doctors could save her life but not her body. Her brain has been transferred into a specially designed robot body."

For twenty-four hours they left him in a prison cell with his tortured, conflicting emotions and the wooden-faced guard. Then he was taken again to Cybernetics Center.

It was to a different building that time. He was led down a maze of corridors and to a plain white door beside which stood a guard.

The guard stepped aside and his own guard stopped short of the door.

"You will go in alone," his guard said. "But remember, spy-ray pickups in there will record everything you say and do."

He went to the door, feeling his heart pound hard and slow. For a day and night he had thought of nothing but the meeting with Nona, wondering how it would be and what they would say, telling himself that he had only to pretend it was still Nona in the flesh and say to her the things he would normally say. But now the time had come and he knew it could not be like that.

He opened the door and went into the room. The door swung shut behind him and he saw her.

She was standing by the barred window, waiting for him. They had given her a body that was small and graceful, as hers had been in life, and a face that was beautiful in the way that the hard, cold curve of steel was beautiful. But it was her own soft, gentle voice that spoke to him:

“Hello, Johnny.”

“Hello, Nona.”

And then there was nothing he could say to her. He could not say, “You look nice,” nor say, “Your own body was more beautiful.” He could not even say, “How do you feel?” Metal did not have feelings.

He went to her and stopped before her, thinking, *In the past I would have kissed her.* And then, *God—the mockery for us both of kissing a steel face plate.*

But it was still the same Nona behind the barrier. He touched her shoulder, his hand directed by the instincts of the past, and that, too, was a mockery. Her shoulder was cold metal that could not feel his touch. The Nona he had known was forever separated from him and there were no words for him to say he was sorry in the way he wanted to say it.

“I wanted to see you, to come sooner,” he said. “They wouldn’t let me.”

“The operation was over and I was just like I am now only four hours after I last saw you,” she said. “But they’ve been testing me to make sure I’m all right.”

“They told me you were the same.” It was not what he wanted to say. “Your voice is the same. It’s as beautiful as it ever was.”

“They gave me all kinds of modulation controls so that I could speak just like I always did. I could even sing like I did before.”

Then she added, in a tone that seemed to hold the sudden, sardonic ring of brass:

“If I should ever want to.”

He had to know and he asked her:

“Are you happy, Nona?”

“Happy?” She answered slowly. “They saved my life and changed me into something different. Now I’ll live at least a thousand years like this. Shouldn’t I be happy about that?”

Again it seemed to him he heard the bitter ring of brass.

But when she spoke again her manner was changed and the life was back in her voice, whether by deliberate effort or not he could not know.

“They let Patricia visit me this morning. The bullet only grazed her knee and it will be well in a week or two. You and I and Patricia will leave soon on the *Vanguard*. To go to Earth.”

“To Earth? What—”

“When they psycho-probed me they learned I had wanted to go back to Earth. Now, they said, they’re going to take me there because they want me to be happy.”

“That’s wonderful, Nona.” He tried hard to put life in his voice. “I’m glad they’re trying to make you happy.”

He looked at the utter bareness of the room and could not force himself to finish. There were no chairs or bed, no food tray or water pitcher, no table or books or flowers—nothing but the blank, gray walls and the blank, gray floor. A machine could not use the things a living person needed to be happy.

The silence lengthened and he tried to find something to say. “We’ve been away from Earth a long time.”

It was a pointless remark, having no bearing on the dark and lonely emotions which he could not express.

“Yes, a long time,” she said. “It has been over ten years.”

Again there was a silence in which he could find nothing to say to her. The past was gone, never to be recaptured, the present was an emptiness, the future a mockery.

The guard opened the door and said, “You will come with me now.”

He looked back when he reached the door. She was still standing by the window, the one single object in the gray, empty room.

He was taken outside, to a waiting Guard car. It did not go down the long, dark road to the prison but the other way, to the spaceport.

There the *Vanguard* was almost ready to lift, four days ahead of schedule. He saw that most of those hurrying up the boarding ramp were doctors and technicians from Cybernetics Center.

It could have but one meaning: Marmon’s serious condition had suddenly grown worse and the cybernetics staff which had performed the successful brain transfer in Venus City had been ordered to Earth to give the dying Marmon near-immortality. Nona would be studied all the way, to check every last possibility of failure, and he was being taken in case he was needed to give Nona the impression that all was well and normal. And somewhere on the ship they would have Patricia for the same reason.

He met Patricia in the ship’s elevator, standing as far from her guard as she could, her young face set in such lines of hurt and hatred that he thought at first she did not see him. But when the elevator started to lift and the sounds of voices and machinery behind the thin-walled compartments they passed afforded protection, she spoke in a quick, savage whisper:

"Nona—I saw her before the ambulance came. The doctors could have saved her. They killed her for their experiment, Johnny. *Horne and Felder—damn them, damn them!—they had the doctors kill her!*"

The elevator stopped with a jerk and the guards shoved them outside, to take them down different corridors. He was locked in a bare, cell-like compartment, there to move restlessly about as he thought of what Patricia had told him.

It had been hard enough, at best. Now, to learn they had deliberately let her die for their own purposes.

They had needed a cooperative mind with which to test their new technique. Cooperative minds would have been very rare among the Workers who had been injured and maimed in the service of Technorder. But Nona, gentle and intelligent, incapable of deceit or desire for violence, would have had the mind ideal for their purpose; a mind that would try to adjust to its new body as Marmon's mind would want to adjust to his new body.

So Nona, too tender of heart to kill even a rain moth, was being used to show them how to give a bloody tyrant a thousand more years of life.

The ship trembled and gravity pulled at him as it lifted. Time went by as it climbed the hundreds of miles up through the atmosphere, the singing of the hull diminishing as the atmosphere thinned. He felt it clear the atmosphere and heard the drives cut off as the time came to go into the interplanetary warp, through which Earth was only one day away.

Then, abruptly, the drives thundered into full force again and there came the falling sensation that always accompanied the shift into the warp.

He tensed for what was coming, thinking in wild amazement: *What do they mean?*

The drives exploded as the force field of the warp inclosed the ship, in the way an overloaded shotgun might explode when fired under water. The ship leaped, flinging him to the floor, then leaped again as the convertors exploded and the stern half of the ship was riddled and smashed.

Then there was silence, and what seemed to be absolute motionlessness. But he knew the wrecked ship was not motionless. Already it would be starting the fall back to Venus; slowly at first, to go faster and faster until it would go screaming down through the atmosphere as molten metal.

His guard came for him ten minutes later, his wooden face an ashy color. The elevators were without power and he was taken down through the manways. He heard the voices of frightened passengers as he went, the crying of a child, the dazed voice of an officer saying to someone, "I heard

the captain's order on my own extension. 'Full drive' he ordered, then he put us into the warp and shot himself."

All the lifeboat berths had been riddled, the boats rendered useless except for a tiny five-passenger model that had been designed for ship-to-ship missions.

Horne and Felder were already inside; Horne cold and composed, Felder looking back in sweaty-faced relief at the pale and hushed guards and crewmen who would soon be transformed into incandescence along with the *Vanguard*.

Nona was pleading with Horne:

"Let me stay. Let somebody else be saved in my place."

"No," Horne said shortly, but there was an expression like satisfaction on his face. "We still have use for you. Get into the boat."

She hesitated and Horne suggestively touched a thing like a large black button that was strapped to his wrist. "Or do you want me to deactivate you and have you carried in?"

She said quickly, "*No!*" and went into the boat, to sit beside Felder at Horne's command. Johnny saw that Felder, too, had a deactivator button on his wrist. Patricia was ordered in next, to sit beside Horne. Then Horne lifted a pistol and gestured at Johnny with it.

"We have use for you, too, Freedomist," Horne said. "This boat's limited range will land us somewhere in the unsettled country east of Venus City. Since you know that country and can use a blaster rifle, you will guide us to the nearest point of rescue. The girl is being taken along as hostage to guarantee your cooperation."

"I see," he said. "I'm supposed to kindly save your scared hides and then you'll go ahead and have the kid executed anyway."

Horne's thin mouth tightened even more but he said without emotion:

"She was a minor and unimportant member of the Freedomist underground, not a dangerous threat to us as you were. So her sentence will be reduced to labor in one of the prison camps if your cooperation is satisfactory."

It would be life for Patricia, a hard life but life, better than dying so soon in the *Vanguard*.

"All right," he said. "I'll do it."

He did not ask about his own future. He knew that they would kill him as soon as his services were no longer needed.

Hours later they climbed the first rocky ridge, the fog closing in on them and giving the late afternoon the darkness of evening. Behind them, lost from view, the lifeboat was sinking in the quicksand at the swamp's edge.

Somewhere to the northeast the *Vanguard* had already met its fate, roaring down through the clouds like a fiery meteor and into the Northern Sea.

Johnny walked in the lead, the heavy blaster rifle cradled in his arms. Horne had given him flat and deadly warning about it: "*If you ever face us while carrying it or let your fingers get near the firing controls, the girl will be shot instantly.*" Patricia walked behind him, limping as she tried to favor the wounded knee. Horne walked behind Patricia, his pistol at her back. Felder brought up the rear, the portable transmitter in one hand and a pistol in the other.

Nona walked beside him, silently, and he wondered again what her thoughts might be. She could not help but know how their last journey together would end.

They came suddenly to an outcropping of copper ore. The claws of Diggers had ripped through the hard quartz as though it were clay. Slabs of country rock had been thrown back, to get deeper into the vein, slabs that weighed thousands of pounds. It had all been done very recently.

They detoured around the tumbled slabs and Horne's tone was momentarily without its curtness as he asked, "Diggers did that?"

"About an hour ago," Johnny answered, not looking back. "They'll still be in this vicinity."

Horne said no more but Johnny could imagine him and Felder mentally reviewing the three-dimensional pictures they would have seen of the Venusian Diggers: things like three-ton armor-plated dragons, half inorganic, with silicon-carbide tipped claws and teeth and massive jaws that could crush granite boulders. They lived on minerals and were especially fond of the phosphorus in human bones. They would follow a human trail for days and nothing short of the beam of a blaster rifle, at a range no greater than one hundred and fifty feet, could penetrate their armor.

And neither Horne nor Felder had ever fired a blaster rifle, the controls of which were so complex that only an experienced man could have the shadow of a chance against a Digger charge.

They stopped just short of the top of the ridge. Johnny laid the blaster rifle on the ground and Patricia sat down at Nona's feet, to retie the awkward knee bandage. Felder set the transmitter down and Horne said to Johnny:

"See if it's safe to stop here long enough to send the messages."

Nona went with him to the ridge top. Tall bushes grew thickly there, to hide them from anything that might be ahead or to either side.

He waited while Nona studied the country before them. The fog was a thick gray shroud to his eyes, through which he could see only a short distance, but Nona's robot eyes, like the eyes of the Diggers, could

penetrate the fog by seeing in wave lengths of light far beyond those of human vision.

He touched her shoulder, the shining metal that could not feel his touch, and asked, "Do you see anything, Nona?"

She looked up at him, reminding him again of the night long ago when there had been a Technorder-forbidden play and she had been Joan of Arc. It helped that way, to imagine that she was Joan of Arc in armor again and that at any moment she might throw back the metal visor and her own face would look poignantly beautiful into his.

"There are no Diggers in sight," she answered. "In the distance ahead of us is a range of mountains, with what seems to be a V-shaped pass in the middle. Is that the pass we want?"

"Yes. I don't even have a compass. You'll have to lead us all the way and watch for Diggers, too."

"I can lead us straight to it," she said.

He left her standing on guard and went back to the others. "It's safe for the time being," he told Horne.

Horne spoke to Felder. "I'll order a rescue truck sent from Venus City, then I'll have them connect me with Technorder Capital."

He turned his gray-frost eyes on Johnny. "I presume you know that if you are taking us through these mountains merely to delay your execution, you will deeply regret it?"

"Yes, I believe you've mentioned that several times before. It happens to be a fact that the nearest point a rescue truck can meet us is a place just beyond the pass called Silent Valley. The truck can't come through the pass. Not even the Diggers can go through it."

Horne knelt by the transmitter without further comment and Johnny moved back to lean against a high boulder. Felder was sitting near the blaster, the muzzle of his pistol staring at Johnny like a little empty eye.

Nona was still standing on guard, a motionless steel statue, and Patricia was watching her with longing on her face as she tried again to accept the fact that the mind which spoke to her through the cold metal was all there would be of her sister.

For himself there had been the same longing even though he knew it was based on an illusion. It was a strange and haunting feeling. The voice that spoke to them was Nona's and it was as though Nona were very close and real; there just behind the steel barrier, just beyond the touch of their hands and the sight of their eyes.

There was a soft crunch of gravel as Patricia came over to sit down beside him. She pressed her hand against her hurt knee and rested her head

against his leg, a lonely, frightened child despite her seventeen years. Felder watched her with an expression of faint amusement. Horne had completed his calls and was waiting for the response from Earth, tapping his fingers impatiently against the transmitter.

"They should answer any minute," Horne said to Felder. "They know that—"

Something screamed in one of the invisible canyons to their right; a hooting, reverberating shrieking with an undertone like the rumble of thunder—a Digger. An answering scream came out of the fog to their left, blasting at their eardrums with its startling closeness.

Patricia scrambled pale-faced to her feet, clutching at Johnny's arm. Felder sat rigid, staring open-mouthed toward the source of the second scream. Horne swung in alarmed question to Nona.

Her bright steel face was looking down at them. "Two bands of Diggers are in sight." Then, with a touch to her voice that sounded like terror, "Please hurry. *Both bands have started toward us!*"

Of them all it was Nona who would know the most horror if the Diggers found them. There would be no quick and final death for her. The Diggers would tear off her arms and legs and destroy her robot eyes but her brain and artificial heart were encased in thick eternalloy, immune to any destructive force short of the beam of a blaster rifle. She would lie there, blind and incapable of movement, thinking the same endless circle of thoughts over and over as the decades and centuries went by.

"*Horne—Horne?*"

The transmitter spoke in the impatient voice of a sick and imperious old man—David Marmon. Horne moved quickly to answer:

"Yes, here. I've been waiting to give you the last report. I understand that your transfer will take place immediately afterward."

"What is your report?" There was hope and eagerness in Marmon's tone. "Is the woman still reacting normally?"

"In all respects. She wanted to remain on the ship and let someone be saved in her place, a desire perfectly in keeping with her former personality. Her intelligence and drives were not altered in the slightest by the brain transfer. We have checked that constantly and thoroughly."

"Good, very good." There was relief and satisfaction in Marmon's tone. "The computers were right, as usual, when they predicted that. Now," Marmon's tone changed, "the surgo-cybernetics staff here at Capital assure me that absence of the Venus City staff is not important. There was only the question of the effect of the transfer. I wanted to know for sure that I would still be the same."

"We have verified that beyond doubt," Horne said.

"There are many things I can do in a thousand years. One will be to destroy the last trace of Freedomist resistance."

"What about their plan to attack Capital?" Horne asked.

"We now know their entire attack plan. I think I'll send the robot A-bombers into them this time. The radiations will be a nuisance afterward in that area but it will give the Freedomist sympathizers there something to remember.

"Now," Marmon coughed wheezingly, "they're waiting to take me to the operating room. Call me as soon as you reach Venus City. I want to know that the Freedomists behind the sabotage of the *Vanguard* are found and publicly executed, together with their most remote sympathizers."

Thunder crashed overhead as Horne acknowledged the termination and close behind it came the low, tense voice of Nona from her place on the ridge:

"The Diggers are almost on us. *Hurry. Hurry!*"

They obeyed her without delay. Johnny picked up the blaster and Nona led the way in a run down the other side of the ridge. Patricia followed Johnny and Horne and Felder came behind her with their pistols in their hands, leaving the transmitter to growl with static to itself on the ridge.

They were in the valley when the rain and lightning storm struck the iron ridge behind them. The thunder was a steady rumble and the lightning a glittering glow through the fog but in the valley there was only an occasional drop of rain. Horne called a halt, breathing heavily.

"What will the lightning do to the Diggers?" he asked.

"Nothing," Johnny answered. "They're immune to it."

Horne glanced up at the darkening sky. "What if they should attack us after dark?"

"The blaster would be almost useless against Diggers I couldn't see. Our only hope of living through the night is not to let them see us, and they can see as well in the dark as in daytime."

Horne was thoughtfully silent. The random drops of rain began to fall faster, suddenly a downpour. It was then that the Diggers on the ridge broke into a wild clamor of hooting and shrieking, a clamor that carried an undertone of anticipation.

Johnny replied to the startled, questioning look on the faces of Horne and Felder.

"They've found the transmitter and know now that humans are in the vicinity. Our trail is rain-washed but they'll still be able to follow it in a walk for the rest of the night."

"Then," Horne said, rising, "we'll travel as far as we can before dark. In line!"

They stopped a few minutes before complete darkness for Felder to chain Johnny's wrists together. In that position he could continue to carry the blaster but his hands could not go around the firing controls.

The darkness was so complete by the time Felder had chained Patricia's wrists that he had to use his pencil light to check his work. Horne was breathing more heavily than before and they rested a while at his order.

Patricia spoke to Nona, invisible to Johnny as she spoke even though she sat only two feet away from him.

"Is it dark for you, too, Nona?"

"No," Nona answered from the blackness in front of them. "It's only like a cloudy day would be for—others. I can lead us all the way, all through the night."

"Freedomist," Horne's grim voice came through the darkness. "The rescue party will consist of armed guards. I gave the following order over the transmitter: they will shoot you and the girl on sight in the morning if Felder and I are not with you. Remember that."

His tone changed to the impersonally commanding one he used with Nona. "We will go in single file. You will lead us, avoiding as many obstacles as possible. There will be no attempt to lead us astray or into danger. At the first suspicion of such you will be deactivated."

"I only want to lead us out of danger," she said.

"That is a desire it would be very wise for you to retain. Now, lead the way. You other two—in line!"

Hours had gone by when they reached a low summit from which Nona could see the country behind them for the first time. Horne was breathing very heavily by then.

"I can see the Diggers, a whole band of them," she said. "They're following our trail even in the rain."

And then, in a queer tone, "*Something gray is following just behind us!*"

"What did it look like?" Johnny asked.

Her answer sent a little chill up his back.

"I think it was a fog weasel."

"What is a fog weasel?" the voice of Felder demanded.

"They're like an Earth weasel," Lancer answered, "but they're seven feet long and outweigh a man. They attack in the dark and tear your throat open so they can drink the blood."

"What"—there was the sound of Felder swallowing—"what is the best defense against them?"

"A light to see them by," he said, and found a little amusement in the way Felder's pencil light immediately sent its feeble beam into the sea of darkness behind them.

"Lead us on," Horne said to Nona, although he was still breathing heavily. "Be certain to keep careful watch behind us."

They walked steadily for another hour. Horne could be heard stumbling more and more frequently over the unseen stones and uneven patches of ground, his breath coming harder. When they came to the second low summit he ordered, in a voice made almost unrecognizable by panting:

"We'll have to stop and rest."

Nona climbed a little higher and reported:

"The Diggers are still coming. They're gaining all the time."

Felder spoke suspiciously. "Then why do we never hear them?"

Johnny answered his question. "They don't want to alarm us until they sight us. Then you'll hear them scream again." He turned toward Nona. "Have you seen the fog weasel again?"

"Yes. It's still following us, coming along behind us among the brush and trees."

Horne had not yet spoken; the only sound from him was the slow diminishing of his labored breathing. It was apparent that he could not much longer keep up the pace necessary to outdistance the Diggers and the fact would already be grimly obvious to him.

"Nona?"

It was Horne who spoke, and Johnny jerked up his head in surprise. It was the first time Horne had ever addressed her by name, as he would a human being, and the first time he had ever spoken to her with friendliness in his tone.

"Yes?" she asked.

"How long until the Diggers reached us if we should remain stopped, Nona?"

"They would be here in about half an hour."

"Is there any place we might hide from them until daylight?"

"There is nothing but rolling hills here."

"Farther on?" It was like a hopeful question. "A ledge for us to climb upon, perhaps, where they couldn't reach us."

"We'll soon have to go up a canyon. Maybe there will be something there."

"Watch for it," he said. "You must find it for us, Nona."

It was a little less than an hour later that Horne called another halt for rest. That time his breathing was such a frantic gasping that Johnny knew

he had forced himself to the limit. Felder's light, grown very weak, swung in a circle that showed them to be in a narrow clearing among high and thickly growing brush.

"We've stopped in a death trap," Felder said to Horne. "That thing could be in there now, no more than ten feet away."

"I—know." Horne's answer came jerkily between his frantic gasping for breath. "Can't—go farther—now."

Felder seated himself as far as possible from the brush on either side and turned out his light. Horne's panting slowed as the minutes went by until, at last, he could speak again.

When he did so it was a single word, spoken questioningly, pleadingly, into the darkness:

"Nona?"

"Yes?" her voice answered.

"My heart. I must rest awhile before I go on, Nona. The weasel could attack so quickly. I—we must trust you to see for us and guard us from it."

"They psycho-probed me at the hospital and you know I never willingly let harm come to anyone in my life," she answered.

"Tonight our lives are in your hands as your life was in our hands that night, Nona. We did more than not let you die that night. We gave you near-immortality. You remember what we did for you, don't you, Nona?"

Patricia twisted beside Johnny, words hot and choking in her throat, but Nona's voice came soft and gentle:

"I remember. I'll never forget what you did for me."

Johnny tried to find the brassy undertone he had heard in the hospital but it was not there. It made him wonder again if he knew her, if he could ever really know her.

"You will be rewarded for what you do tonight," Horne said. "Anything you may want will be yours, Nona, when we get back to Venus City. And your husband and sister will be with us. There will be no execution in the morning if I am there."

Patricia twisted in Lancer's grip again, unable any longer to restrain herself.

"He lies, Nona! He's scared, he's afraid you'll leave him behind. He's scared, and all his promises are lies he won't keep!"

But Nona's reply was to Horne, comforting and reassuring.

"Rest now, and trust me to watch over you. Then we can go on again before it's too late."

Silence inclosed them but for the steady drumming of the rain and Johnny thought of the change in Horne, his sudden and frantic fear of death. Horne was not the cowardly type. It was something much greater,

infinitely more precious, than the last declining years of his life that he was about to lose. He was a member of the Technorder ruling cabinet and would be entitled to a brain transfer, as Marmon had been. A thousand more years of life would be his if he lived to read the pass. Near-immortality that only Nona could give him.

"There—there!"

It was Nona's cry, urgent in warning. She ran past Johnny, toward Felder and Horne, crying again, *"There it goes!"*

Felder's light flicked on, catching her pointing arm, and he fired three times in the wildness of panic as he jumped to his feet. The bullets screamed from distant rocks, then Felder stiffened into immobility as his swinging light revealed Horne.

Horne was lying sprawled on the ground, his dead-white face staring up at Felder, his head set crookedly on a broken neck and his throat ripped open.

Johnny went to them, Patricia beside him, as Nona said in a tone of anguish:

"I warned him! It jumped out and killed him before I could do more than that."

"Where is it now?" Felder demanded. He swung the light and pistol aimlessly, his hands shaking. "Where is it now?"

"It ran back into the brush," Nona answered. "Shall I walk in there and try to—"

"No!" Felder interrupted hoarsely. "Don't leave us!"

He swung to face Johnny, "We're getting out of here. My gun will be in your back all the way in case either of you try anything."

"Wait!" Nona spoke quickly. "The deactivator button. If the Diggers should bite into it and deactivate me—"

Felder jerked the strap from Horne's limp arm and shoved it in a pocket.

"All right," he said, turning again. "In line, all of you. And you," his tone indicated Nona, "will lead us straight and fast to the pass. Move!"

Twenty minutes later they heard the outbreak of hooting and roaring behind them, loud and exultant. Felder jabbed the pistol against Johnny's back in quick question.

"What does that mean?" he demanded.

"It means they've found Horne," he answered.

"On!" Felder ordered. "Faster!"

An hour later, as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped.

"They'll pick up our full scent at this point," Johnny said. "From here on they'll come in a dead run."

“Faster!” Felder ordered again, the sound of panting in his voice. “We’ll stop for nothing.”

They had climbed far up the mountain slope that led to the pass when the grayness of dawn lightened the sky. It was then that the Diggers screamed for the third time, sounding loud and very near in the still air, a shrieking, exultant chorus.

“They’ve found our trail,” Johnny said.

The light in the east brightened rapidly as they hurried on, to become full daylight within a minute. It was the rare phenomenon called the Miracle Dawn, a quick, full daylight caused by a deep rift opening suddenly in the cloud layers as the sun came up.

The fog had withdrawn to lower elevations and the light revealed a featureless slope around them, with no place to make a stand against the Diggers short of the pass that was just ahead of them. It revealed Nona as shining steel again, taking away the illusion of the night when she had been a warm human voice guiding them on. It revealed Patricia, scratched and muddy, stumbling with weariness. It revealed Felder, wild-eyed and sweating, slobbering a little as he panted.

And it revealed the valley below them and the tossing, surging gleam of armor as the Diggers pounded toward them.

They went into the pass, an upward-sloping rocky floor between tall walls of black lava. The sounds of the Digger herd grew louder behind them. They came to a curve, followed it to the final climb of the floor, and stood suddenly on the floor’s summit.

Ahead of them the floor dropped gently for a quarter of a mile, then ended abruptly on the sheer wall-to-wall brink of the Dry Falls. To the left of the falls a thin, narrow ledge ran around a high red cliff and there, on the other side of the cliff, lay the green bowl that was the upper end of Silent Valley.

“That’s the ledge, the one the Diggers can’t follow us around?” Felder asked, his eyes darting from it back to the curve behind them.

Johnny listened to the swelling rumble of the Digger herd and said, “We would never make it. You’d better get these chains off my wrists in a hurry.”

Felder did so in quick haste and Johnny knelt with the blaster pointing back down the pass. Felder moved into position some distance behind him, his pistol in his hand, and ordered Patricia to stand directly in front of him. Nona stood where she had stopped, silently watching them. There was nothing she could say or do. She had led them as near to safety as she could and the rest was out of her hands.

Johnny fitted his fingers to the complex firing controls and centered the

sight on the curve in the canyon where the Diggers would appear. The rumbling of their coming grew louder, then bloomed into sudden thunder as they swept around the curve.

They came like a roaring tide of gray armored tanks, pounding, ripping claws, green-glowing eyes and gaping, shrieking mouths. When the front rank was one hundred and fifty feet away he pressed the firing studs.

The blaster jerked in his arms and snarled like a living thing, sending its pale blue beam into the leaders. The beam hissed and smashed its way across them and they went down at one hundred feet, sprawling and sliding from their momentum. The second rank leaped over their bodies and the beam swept back, the snarling of the blaster higher in pitch. The second rank went down at fifty feet and the last rank was a gray wall plunging at him; a wall that shrieked and roared in triumph. The blaster's snarl was a scream then, rising high and wild above the triumph of the Diggers, and the beam was a blinding blue fire.

The charge faltered against it, broke, and shattered. The armored bodies crashed to the ground, the last one sliding to a stop eight feet in front of him. Its open mouth snapped shut in a dying reflex and crushed a lava boulder like sand.

The last echo faded away and it was over, the blaster hot in his hands and the charge indicator showing that it had a two-second burst of fire left in it.

And Felder was waiting with Patricia a living shield in front of him, his thick hand gripping her shoulder and her own hands still bound with the chains.

Felder listened for a moment, staring back down the pass, then he nodded in satisfaction. His former panic was gone as though it had never existed.

"No more Diggers are coming," he said. He raised the pistol, almost smiling. "There's no reason to wait any longer, is there?"

Patricia's eyes were wide and dark with the knowledge of Felder's intention. She looked at Nona in quick, mute appeal, into the silent steel face, then back to Johnny. Her face was pale with frightened resolve.

"Johnny, believe what I say." The words came quick and desperate. "I'd rather die fighting here than die alone in a prison camp!"

Then she twisted against Felder's grip with all her strength, crying, "Shoot, Johnny, *shoot!*"

But he could not fire without killing her. Felder struck her across the jaw with the barrel of his pistol and she was still his living shield, even though unconscious, as he whipped the pistol around to Johnny again.

"*Now!*" he said, no longer smiling.

Nona moved, so suddenly and quickly that she was a metallic flashing behind Felder. Her right hand caught the pistol, jerking it aside as it fired, while at the same time her left hand tore at the strap of the deactivator button. It snapped like a paper band and she flung it aside as Felder released Patricia with a startled, incredulous sound.

Patricia slid to the ground as they fought for the pistol. Felder's face was red with the intensity of his efforts to resist the power of the slim steel arms, horror dawning on it as the muzzle of the pistol was forced back toward him.

It was a struggle that ended before Johnny could run five steps toward them. Felder's thick arms were no match for steel. The muzzle of the pistol touched his chest and he had time for only one word, pleading, as Horne had pleaded the night before:

"Nona."

The pistol fired three times, methodically, muffled. Felder jerked from each bullet, as Nona had jerked the night the guards shot her, the horror stark and wild on his face. Then the strength went out of his struggling arms and he slid to the ground as she stepped away from him.

He clutched at his chest and stared at the red welling of blood. He looked at Johnny and beyond him, seeming to see something too late with a sudden and terrible understanding.

"We thought it wouldn't harm us. We thought it was still human!"

He choked, shuddered, and died.

Nona was standing with the pistol in her hand, blood and gray lead streaks on her bosom where the bullets had glanced off after going through Felder.

"You will kill me now," she said in a voice of hard, flat metal.

In his first amazement he thought it was a question, then he realized it was not.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Kill me," she said again. "I want to die. I have a right to die."

He thought he saw for certain then what he had been afraid of all the time and had not dared admit to himself. Slowly, reluctantly, he asked:

"You're not really Nona, are you?"

The metal voice in the metal face answered:

"I'm not Nona, not the Nona you knew. I'm only a part of her. They killed the rest."

The implications of her words were like the turning of a knife in him. He was dimly aware of Patricia sitting up as he said, "The day I first saw you—"

"I had to pretend to be the same. If they had known I wanted to die, they

would have put me in a brain case and made me live a thousand years while they studied me.”

“And last night you were the fog weasel?” he asked.

“Yes. I knew I could never handle the blaster controls to kill myself. Only you would ever understand why I must die and do it for me, and they were going to kill you. But Felder was too alert for me to kill him, too.”

“Were you the one who destroyed the *Vanguard*?”

“It was my first chance to die. I tore my guard’s throat out with my fingers and went to the control room. I killed the officer who saw me and shot the captain with the officer’s pistol. I used the voice they gave me to imitate the captain’s voice and order full drive. Then I pulled the big red lever that would put the ship into the warp and make it explode.

“But it didn’t kill me and I had to wait for some other way, for this, for you to kill me now.”

He looked from the hard, beautiful face to the scarred blaster in his hands and back again.

“Once you were Nona,” he said, “You’re the only Nona left to me, no matter how much you’ve changed. I can’t kill you, Nona.”

She hesitated, like one trying to find words for some infinitely difficult description. When the words came all the metal was forced out and it was the gentle voice of Nona that spoke to him.

“I was dying that night so Patricia could live and I was trying so hard to see you just once again and say goodbye to you, and then I was in the hospital and everything was a clear memory. But it was like something that had happened to someone else, like a drawing on paper. Everything was empty. I didn’t care. I saw and heard and thought and remembered but none of it mattered to me. I only wanted to shut out the sight and sound and memories and cease existing because existence was a meaningless torture.

“They questioned me and I knew that I had to pretend to be unchanged or they would deactivate my body and let my mind suffer for a thousand years while they studied it. They deactivated me once. For a hundred years I was deaf and blind and helpless and screaming without a voice in a sea of nothing. Then they reactivated me and it had been only two hours.

“Understand, Johnny.” The voice of Nona still spoke but an undertone of metal was coming into it. “Try to understand how it is to be a mind, alone. I have memories of loving and laughing and sometimes crying, of wanting to live because life could be something new and wonderful each day, but they’re memories without meaning, now.

“It’s the flesh that feels the emotions, that lives and loves and laughs and cries, that even when it grows old can still make the mind remember them

all and relive them all. Nature intended for the body and mind to be together. For two billion years it worked to give the body the emotions that will make it want to live and make the mind want to help it live. When you take the body away from the mind you have only a part of something, a part that no longer has any reason to live.

"Understand, Johnny." The undertone rose higher, not the bitter blare of brass but the whimpering cry of steel. "I have no reason to live. All I ever had is gone and nothing is left to me. Can a metal face ever smile, ever kiss, ever smell the night flowers? Can metal feet ever want to dance when music plays or metal hands ever want to stroke the fur of a kitten? Can metal arms ever want to hold anyone, can a metal heart ever care for anyone?"

"They made me like this," the steel was crying, like the strings of a violin, "a part of something that used to be. They took my body and left me dead memories. They took my life and gave me emptiness and torture. I killed women and children when I destroyed the *Vanguard* and I had no heart for mercy. How could I have when they had taken my living heart away from me and given me one of metal?"

"Understand, Johnny." The voice of Nona and the crying of the steel merged and were one. "Understand how it is to be like this. If you ever loved the Nona that was, then tell me you understand, and help me, and kill me now."

He moved his fingers to the firing controls of the blaster.

"I understand," he said, "and I'm sorry, Nona."

He swung up the black barrel and the sights were misty in his eyes as they found the place where the artificial heart would be pulsing inside its eternalloy cage. He pressed the firing studs and the blaster screamed as the blue beam hissed and crashed through the metal breast.

He took Felder's pistol and Patricia tried not to cry as they left Nona lying with the Miracle Dawn shining on her cold, beautiful face. They went to the narrow ledge and around it and on into the trees that lay between them and the bowl of the valley.

"Nona," Patricia said. "To have to go away and leave her alone like that."

"She's free now," he said. "They had made her a prisoner far more than you or I could ever have been, but she's free now as she wanted to be. We'll have to think of her like that, Patricia."

The trees thinned and they saw the metallic gleam of the rescue truck. Patricia's hand closed on his arm but she did not falter.

"They're waiting for us—the guards, Johnny. Nona is gone and there's

no hope and nothing left for us. But I wish I had a pistol to help you fight them this last time.”

He remembered the way Nona had pleaded with him: *Help me, and kill me now*. Marmon would not have to plead. When he awoke into the torturing meaninglessness of his new body he would have only to order his Military Computers to destroy Technorder Capital with the robot A-bomb fleet. The computers were an intelligence without a heart, as the changed Nona had been. They would not care that the bombs would also destroy him, and them.

Perhaps something was left for Patricia. The future, all the years of the future.

They passed through the last trees and saw the men coming toward them. They were not guards. They were Freedomists and even from the distance they walked like men who had known sudden victory.

Patricia stopped, realization like a light on her face as she looked up at him.

“Technorder is dead, Johnny! They thought humans were like their machines and they murdered Nona so they could live a thousand years. And when they did that they loaded the pistol that would kill them all!”

Elizabeth A. Lynn

The Saints of Driman

Ares-Ak

Kimbel 15

How easily I write that designation on the page!

After four years, the names of the months of Driman seem natural to me. I mark our survey records with the changing dates and months. There are no seasons here. There is only the omnipotent, omnipresent heat. Kimbel 15—and in Ares-Ak they give names, not numbers, to the years—and Mary is still sick. This will be The Year the Strangers Go Home.

She is feverish, dehydrated, and partially delirious. We've never been sick here, before. It began two days ago. Morgan has already sent a message capsule. He curses the heat, and stamps around his room muttering to himself. I leave. I escape to the shops, to the cool white tile of Pir's temple, to the dry green of the succulent gardens. The people of Ares-Ak are used to seeing me in their streets. Only children sometimes trail after me, to stare at my foreign dark hair and skin. Morgan they follow in procession, as if he were the Pied Piper. He hates the city. He leaves it to me.

Mary keeps calling for water, water. Her forehead, throat, chin, and nose have a waxy, yellowish sheen. Her lips are purplish-red. Her cheekbones and eyelids are flushed. She drinks in gulps, like a baby. She sweats desperately. I gave her an alcohol rub this morning: that lowered the fever a little, but it rises, as the heat rises, and breaks at night. It's 38.8 now.

She keeps calling. I just went in and bent over the bed, but there is nobody behind her staring eyes. Just Fever.

I have to get out of here. I'm going for a walk.

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 17

Mary is better. She knows me when I come in, but the fever dries her throat out so that she can barely talk. We are giving her fluids intravenously. Her mouth is sore, but she drinks uncomplaining the water and cactus juice I bring her. The Drimanese doctors gave us some supplemental drugs: an antihydrotic that we can't match in our medikit, and an antipyretic that seems to work faster than our own Old Reliable, aspirin. Morgan is useless. His hands shake when he helps me lift her. She noticed it this morning and her poor mouth made a moue of laughter at me. But we are still going home, Morgan says. "Our work's done," he said to me at lunch. He's never asked me if my work is done. He disapproves strongly of my interest in the Saints. Religion makes him nervous; he prefers politics. "We can make a report on the data we have," he growled, as if he thought I would argue. I didn't. I know better than to fight with Morgan when Mary is sick and cannot calm him down. And—I want to go home, too. I want to see a waterfall, an ocean, a field of green grass, a mountain. Driman has none of these. Oh, there is an ocean of sorts—a green, sluggish pond that stirs dimly to the sun's pull. I want to see a hurricane. And god, what I wouldn't do for a moon! I would dance naked in the moonlight, shamelessly lunatic.

I saw a Saint today. She was sitting in the dust in the marketplace. She was gaunt as an old stick, and glowing, with that crazy joy that wells from them. I squirmed my way across the square and planted myself in front of her. No one looked at me. It was hard to notice anything but her. She exhaled calm and peace. It's hard to believe she's slowly starving to death. When Mary saw her first Saint, she said to me in mock Scots, "'Tis no' canny, lass," to make me laugh. I find the Saints awesome, and infuriating, and I am angry at myself for having ignored them for so long. Soon we will leave—and dragging information out of Pir is like pulling one's own teeth!

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 19

They are sending a ship for us.

A capsule came today, dropping into the desert like a spent bullet. Morgan rode a chorn out to get it. I hate those beasts, ugly fat things like giant armadillos. Feet and chornback are Driman's means of transport.

The planet is hideously short of fuel. In an emergency you can obtain an electric vehicle from the city government, but it must be a real emergency, not a personal or ceremonial one. When our ship came falling out of the sky, the Drimanese met it with chorns. Their planet has taught them to be tightfisted with what they have.

Morgan accepts this. He dislikes the city; he enjoys riding into the desert on an armored pig. He would be snugly happy in a tower in the dunes, while I would go mad there. And yet—he cannot bear to be truly alone, and I hug my privacy to me like lust.

What odd people we are!

The ship must make two stops before it can land on Driman. Morgan is seething. “She could die in a week!” But he doesn’t really think Mary will die, though her fever spikes and subsides, spikes and subsides, making palisades on the chart we keep at her bedside. She’s eating again: the soft pulp of the pinwheel cactus, and a few meager mouthfuls of soup. Last night, she says, she dreamed of a red fruit, and woke with the taste and texture of apple on her tongue.

I wonder—do the Saints dream of food, as their bodies waste away? Does hunger ever fight its way through holiness into unholy dreams?

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 20

I asked Pir about the dreams of Saints today. I couldn’t tell if he was amused or shocked. I know him better than any other Drimanese, he taught me his language, and I still can’t read his expression. Sotoko, his disciple, definitely disapproves of me; I can read *his* face like a book. He thinks Pir wastes too much time talking to me. Pir’s accessibility sometimes accentuates the mishaps in our conversations, when I forget the differences between us. He shakes his head, as I do, to mean “no”; but “yes” is not a vertical nod, but a toss of the head. I translate to myself each time he does it: *That means “yes,” Lex.*

“Do Saints dream?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. It seems likely. But I know very little about the Saints.” He is a priest, yet he claims ignorance of the Saints. I have asked him several times where the Saints come from, and what kind of spiritual training they undergo to achieve their transcendent state. I told him the story of the Buddha. He looked surprised, and then gave that brisk negative shake of his bald skull. I presume he meant that their training does not parallel the story at all.

Where *do* the Saints come from? The word I translate as “saint” is related to the word for sacrifice. It might better be translated “one who sacrifices.” Why? But this mystery I won’t have time to solve. The ship will be here in eight days.

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 21

Mary asked me today, in her new hoarse voice: “What are you working on, Alexa?” I sat on the bed and deluged her with my speculations about the Saints. Morgan doesn’t want to hear it. I exhausted her, and broke off in mid-spate, feeling like a rat. She was all whited out. Morgan came in. He smelled of chorn. Chorns smell like shit.

“The ship will be three days late,” he said.

Mary said: “Good! I’ll have time to get so much stronger; they won’t believe I’ve been sick.” Morgan said something trivial, and pulled me out the door. He yelled at me in a whisper for having gotten her tired. I told him to go fuck a chorn. I am not responsible for Mary to *him*. He has left her white and tired enough days and nights on Driman.

I am tired of Morgan.

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 23

The Saint came back to the marketplace today.

She is noticeably weaker. My fingers itched for a venipuncture kit, for tubes and needles and slides and a centrifuge and my microscope. The Drimanese might honor that desire. Their own biochemists have done some stupefying work. But I suspect they would not like me to apply it here. I want to *know*—what is going on in that emaciated golden body? This holiness is devouring; it eats up its bearers like flame. I asked Pir: “Is it forbidden to the Saints to eat?”

He said, “No. They no longer want to.”

“Do they want to die?”

He didn’t answer. It was a foolish question. The symbol of his religion, which they name The Path, is a circle with a line bisecting it north and south and extending out beyond the poles. It resembles the Terran mathematical symbol for the empty set. In the temples it is elaborated: a huge wheel, with many lines through it, and standing at top and at

bottom, two human figures. It's the Wheel of Fortune. We who are on it only see half of it, living as we do within the limits of time. But Death is just the underside of the Wheel, and the Wheel is forever turning. Saints know that Death and Life are equal turns of the Wheel. They go beyond our human uncertainties; it's a seductive fate.

But where do they learn their fiery happiness? The monasteries attached to the temples are for priests. Where are they taught to smile, and cease eating, and gaily starve into death? I'll ask Pir again tomorrow. Maybe he'll tell me. Ares-Ak has been generous to us, letting us prick and poke and probe and pack away specimens, holo records, observe what we please. They accept us with astounding equanimity. Could it be that suspicious curiosity is *not* the normal emotional reaction of the universe?

Maybe it's just mine.

Ares-Ak
Kimbel 28

Sotoko told me!

We went to the Great Temple. I wanted to see it again before leaving. Terra has nothing left that's old. The Great Temple of Ares-Ak is four thousand years old. It's attended by priests, and visited daily by throngs of devotees who come to question the Wheel. Pir could not take me, and Sotoko, with more sensitivity than I have come to expect from him, offered to be my escort.

The Temple is a cavernous mandala of a building. It has eight long hallway entrances, like octopus arms, to lead the visitor inward towards the center. In the center, under a dome, is the Oracle Wheel. It is eight feet in diameter, brass, and polished bright with constant touching. Sotoko studies how to divine the future from its intricate glyphs. Pir is a master at it. He says: "All that can be known of the universe is contained here." It looks to me like a giant roulette wheel. I've seen it work. The comparison is apt. First, you tell the priest your question. Then you stand at one of the eight compass points, and the priest spins the Wheel. Where it stops is your answer, its meaning modified by the meaning of the compass point you chose. There are obvious possibilities for abuse in the system. The priests could get fat selling answers. They don't. It has happened—I have read it in the histories—but at this time, whatever corruptions attach to the Wheel are temporarily out of order.

Sotoko said to me, as we walked away from the Wheel, "I asked the Wheel a question about you."

I was surprised.

"It said you should be told what you want to know."

I looked at him, not yet understanding.

He said: "You want to know about the Saints. You want to know how they become Saints."

I said, "Yes. I do."

"It is a drug."

I managed not to stop conspicuously dead in the hallway. A drug! I know of substances that simulate physiologically a spiritual condition: peyote, DMSO, certain forms of Base-LSD. Their enlightenment fades. This drug is much more potent.

It also seems to be immensely toxic.

I wonder where they get it.

I'll talk with Pir at sunset tomorrow, when I go to tell the old man goodbye.

Ares-Ak

Kimbel 29. Midnight.

Mary is dead.

She collapsed at dinner, convulsing, febrile, scorched like a piece of fluff in a candle flame. She went swiftly into coma. She died in three hours. We have just finished burying her, shoveled into the treacherous alien sand with haste. Bodies decay fast on Driman. The ship will be here tomorrow. I have never before understood the true meaning of the word "irony." It is like iron—a barbarous weight, too heavy to bear. I *must* write about this evening at the temple—but the weight is too heavy. If Morgan walks in on me now I will throw this book at him—or else I will cry. I have not yet been able to cry.

The seed of my act lies within me now, ripening, ripening. . . .

The Daffyd ap Llewellyn

Ship's time: night.

The ship is in Hyperspace, hopping around in the Hype like a busy mechanical flea. We have been to three other solar systems, and are just now heading for home. My sense of time is wrecked. It doesn't matter.

I couldn't eat dinner, again. Occasionally I'm thirsty, but 50 cc. of water is enough to quench my thirst. I've lost three kilograms. I itch. It doesn't matter.

Morgan said to me this morning, over the breakfast I didn't eat, "You've changed, Lex." I know to what he attributes it. I am mellow, like a melon—I am ripening. I ripen into death.

I had expected it to be a pill, or a sacramental wafer. But what Pir handed me was a little rectangle of cake, brown at the edges, like shortbread. "Do what you wish," he said to me, and then he went away. I took out the sterile tube I so carefully saved out of my last-minute packing. I thought of Alice with a piece of mushroom in her fist. I thought of Marie Curie, studying the radiation burns on her own hands. What strange symbols imagination uses to speak with consciousness! I ate the cake. It tasted bitter. I put a crumb of it into the tube. Were Sotoko and Pir peering out from behind a pillar, watching their experiment walk down the hall? I didn't see them. I left.

I have a list of questions written down. I will try to remember to answer them. I will try to keep records of how much I drink, how much weight I lose, what my symptoms are. There are tiny scaly lesions on my torso and my upper arms. My mouth is always dry. I sweat a lot. My heart pounds. I smile. I hope the crumb, safe in its labelled tube, contains enough of the drug for analysis. I suspect it acts on the central nervous system, rather like our amphetamines. I'll never know for sure.

I just had a thought. Will my body remain uncorrupted for weeks after I die? The lab won't have to pickle the remains. That should confuse them.

The Daffyd ap Llewellyn.
Another time.

I cannot tell how much time has passed since my last set of notes. My temperature is normal. I do not eat. I do not drink. I smile. My skin is paper-dry: my body withers. I hold the pen with difficulty; my fingers forget. What is my name? My mind cannot recall. What am I doing this for? Oh yes—I know. I wanted to record the change. Within me something is working. I am being drained of life: How do I record that? Hold me up to the mirror of other faces and my life like light reflects in them: I am their sun.

I burn. Like a smiling sun I burn away.

* * * * *

I am alone in a room. They do not talk to me anymore. They have taken away my thermometer and my charts, and stuck a long needle into my arm. They visit me—like a sacred relic.

I am empty, and I burn. My face in rictus smiles, and they smile back. They give names to what I am becoming, never seeing truly what I am. I am their sacrifice.

How much longer can this go on?

Until there is nothing left.

Now I know the answer, if anyone is asking: the Saints of Driman dream of death.

* * * * *

It is dark.

The center is emptied. The center is emptied.

The Light . . . !

J. G. Ballard

Low-Flying Aircraft

“**T**he man’s playing some sort of deranged game with himself.”

From their balcony on the tenth floor of the empty hotel, Forrester and his wife watched the light aircraft taking off from the runway at Ampuria-brava, half a mile down the beach. A converted crop-sprayer with a silver fuselage and open cockpits, the biplane was lining up at the end of the concrete airstrip. Its engine blared across the deserted resort like a demented fan.

“One of these days he’s not going to make it—I’m certain that’s what he’s waiting for. . . .” Without thinking, Forrester climbed from his deck-chair and pushed past the drinks trolley to the balcony rail. The aircraft was now moving rapidly along the runway, tail-wheel still touching the tarmac marker line. Little more than two hundred feet of concrete lay in front of it. The runway had been built thirty years earlier for the well-to-do Swiss and Germans bringing their private aircraft to this vacation complex on the Costa Brava. By now, in the absence of any maintenance, the concrete pier jutting into the sea had been cut to a third of its original length by the strong offshore currents.

However, the pilot seemed unconcerned, his bony forehead exposed above his goggles, long hair tied in a brigand’s knot. Forrester waited, hands gripping the rail in a confusion of emotions—he wanted to see this reclusive and stand-offish doctor plunge onto the rocks, but at the same time his complicated rivalry with Gould made him shout out a warning.

At the last moment, with a bare twenty feet of runway left, Gould sat back sharply in his seat, almost pulling the aircraft into the air. It rose steeply over the broken concrete causeway, banked and made a low circuit of the sea before setting off inland.

Forrester looked up as it crossed their heads. Sometimes he thought that Gould was deliberately trying to provoke him—or Judith, more likely. There was some kind of unstated bond that linked them.

"Did you watch the take-off?" he asked. "There won't be many more of those."

Judith lay back in her sun-seat, staring vaguely at the now silent airstrip. At one time Forrester had played up the element of danger in these take-offs, hoping to distract her during the last tedious months of the pregnancy. But the pantomime was no longer necessary, even today, when they were waiting for the *practicante* to bring the results of the amniotic scan from Figueras. After the next summer storm had done its worst to the crumbling runway, Gould was certain to crash. Curiously, he could have avoided all this by clearing a section of any one of a hundred abandoned roads.

"It's almost too quiet now," Judith said. "Have you seen the *practicante*? He was supposed to come this morning."

"He'll be here—the clinic is only open one day a week." Forrester took his wife's small foot and held it between his hands, openly admiring her pale legs without any guile or calculation. "Don't worry, this time it's going to be good news."

"I know. It's strange, but I'm absolutely certain of it too. I've never had any doubts, all these months."

Forrester listened to the drone of the light aircraft as it disappeared above the hills behind the resort. In the street below him, the sand blown up from the beach formed a series of encroaching dunes that had buried many of the cars to their windows. Fittingly, the few tire tracks that led to the hotel entrance all belonged to the *practicante*'s Honda. The clacking engine of this serious-faced male nurse sounded its melancholy tocsin across the town. He had tended Judith since their arrival two months earlier, with elaborate care but a total lack of emotional tone, as if he were certain already of the pregnancy's ultimate outcome.

None the less, Forrester found himself still clinging to hope. Once he had feared these fruitless pregnancies, the enforced trips from Geneva, and the endless circuit of empty Mediterranean resorts as they waited for yet another seriously deformed foetus to make its appearance. But he had looked forward to this last pregnancy, seeing it almost as a challenge, a game played against enormous odds for the greatest possible prize. When Judith had first told him, six months earlier, that she had conceived again, he had immediately made arrangements for their drive to Spain. Judith conceived so easily—the paradox was bitter, this vigorous and unquenched sexuality, this enormous fertility, even if of a questionable kind, at full flood in an almost depopulated world.

"Richard—come on. You look dead. Let's drink a toast to me." Judith

pulled the trolley over to her chair. She sat up, animating herself like a toy. Seeing their reflections in the bedroom mirror, Forrester thought of their resemblance to a pair of latter-day Scott Fitzgeralds, two handsome and glamorous bodies harboring their guilty secret.

"Do you realize that we'll know the results of the scan by this evening? Richard, we'll have to celebrate! Perhaps we should have gone to Benidorm."

"It's a huge place," Forrester pointed out. "There might be fifteen or twenty people there for the summer."

"That's what I mean. We ought to meet other people, share the good news with them."

"Well. . . ." They had come to this quiet resort at the northern end of the Costa Brava specifically to get away from everyone—in fact, Forrester had resented finding Gould here, this hippified doctor who lived in one of the abandoned hotels on the *playa* and unexpectedly turned up in his aircraft after a weekend's absence.

Forrester surveyed the lines of deserted hotels and apartment houses, the long-shuttered rotisseries and supermarkets. There was something reassuring about the emptiness. He felt more at ease here, almost alone in this forgotten town.

As they stood together by the rail, sipping their drinks and gazing at the silent bay, Forrester held his wife around her full waist. For weeks now he had barely been able to take his hands off her. Once Gould had gone, it would be pleasant here. They would lie around for the rest of the summer, making love all the time and playing with the baby—a rare arrival now; the average for normal births was less than one in a thousand. Already he could visualize a few elderly peasants coming down from the hills and holding some sort of primitive earth festival on the beach.

Behind them the aircraft had reappeared over the town. For a moment he caught sight of the doctor's silver helmet—one of Gould's irritating affectations was to paint stripes on his helmet and flying jacket, and on the fenders of his old Mercedes, a sophomore conceit rather out of character. Forrester had come across traces of the paint at various points around the town—on the footbridge over the canal dividing the marina and airstrip at Ampuriabrava from the beach hotels in Rosas, at the corners of the streets leading to Gould's hotel. These marks, apparently made at random, were elements of a cryptic private language. For some time now Forrester had been certain that Gould was up to some nefarious game in the mountains. He was probably pillaging the abandoned monasteries, looting their icons and gold plate. Forrester had a potent vision of this solitary doctor,

piloting his light aircraft in a ceaseless search of the Mediterranean littoral, building up a stockpile of art treasures in case the world opened up for business again.

Forrester's last meeting with Gould, in the Dali museum at Figueras, seemed to confirm these suspicions. He had dropped Judith off at the antenatal clinic—where the amniotic scanning would, they hoped, confirm the absence of any abnormalities in the foetus—and by an error of judgment strolled into this museum dedicated by the town to its most illustrious native artist. As he walked quickly through the empty galleries, he noticed Gould lounging back on the central divan, surveying with amiable composure the surrealist's flaccid embryos and anatomical monstrosities. With his silver-flecked jacket and long hair in a knot, Gould looked less like a doctor than a middle-aged Hell's Angel. Beside him on the divan were three canvases he had selected from the walls, and which he later took back to decorate his hotel rooms.

"They're a little too close to the knuckle for me," Forrester commented. "A collection of newsreels from Hell."

"A sharp guess at the future, all right," Gould agreed. "The ultimate dystopia is the inside of one's own head."

As they left the museum Forrester said, "Judith's baby is due in about three weeks. We wondered if you'd care to attend her?"

Gould made no reply. Shifting the canvasses from one arm to the other, he scowled at the trees in the deserted *rambla*. His eyes seemed to be waiting for something. Not for the first time, Forrester realized how tired the man was, the nervousness underlying his bony features.

"What about the *practicante*? He's probably better qualified than I am."

"I wasn't thinking of the birth, so much, as the . . ."

"As the death?"

"Well. . . ." Unsettled by Gould's combative tone, Forrester searched through his stock of euphemisms. "We're full of hope, of course, but we've had to learn to be realistic."

"That's admirable of you both."

"Given one possible outcome, I think Judith would prefer someone like you to deal with it. . . ."

Gould was nodding sagely at this. He looked sharply at Forrester. "Why not keep the child? Whatever the outcome."

Forrester had been genuinely shocked by this. Surprised by the doctor's aggression, he watched him swing away with an unpleasant gesture, the lurid paintings under his arm, and stride back to his Mercedes.

Judith was asleep in the bedroom. From her loose palm Forrester

removed the Valiums she had been too tired to take. He replaced them in the capsule, and then sat unsteadily on the bed. For the last hour he had been drinking alone in the sun on the balcony, partly out of boredom—the time-scale of the human pregnancy was a major evolutionary blunder, he decided—and partly out of confused fear and hope.

Where the hell was the *practicante*? Forrester walked on to the balcony again and scanned the road to Figueras, past the abandoned night clubs and motorboat rental offices. The aircraft had gone, disappearing into the mountains. As he searched the airstrip Forrester noticed the dark-robed figure of a young woman in the doorway of Gould's hangar. He had seen her mooning around there several times before, and openly admitted to himself that he felt a slight pang of envy at the assumed sexual liaison between her and Gould. There was something secretive about the relationship that intrigued him. Careful not to move, he waited for the young woman to step into the sun. Already, thanks to the alcohol and an over-scrupulous monogamy, he could feel his loins thickening. For all his need to be alone, the thought that there was another young woman within half a mile of him almost derailed Forrester's mind.

Five minutes later he saw the girl again, standing on the observation roof of the Club Nautico, gazing inland as if waiting for Gould's silver aircraft to return.

As Forrester let himself out of the suite, his wife was still asleep. Only two of the suites on the tenth floor were now maintained. The other rooms had been locked and shuttered, time capsules that contained their melancholy cargo, the aerosols, douche-bags, hairpins and sun-oil tubes left behind by the thousands of vanished tourists.

The waiters' service elevator, powered by a small gasoline engine in the basement, carried him down to the lobby. There was no electric current now to run the airconditioning system, but the hotel was cool. In the two basketwork chairs by the steps, below the postcard rack with its peeling holiday views of Rosas in its tourist heyday, sat the elderly manager and his wife. Señor Cervera had been a linotype operator for a Barcelona newspaper during the years when the population slide had first revealed itself, and even now was a mine of information about the worldwide decline.

"Mrs. Forrester is asleep—if the *practicante* comes, send him up to her."

"I hope it's good news. You've waited a long time."

"If it is, we'll certainly celebrate tonight. Judith wants to open up all the night clubs."

Forrester walked into the sunlight, climbing over the first of the dunes

that filled the street. He stood on the roof of a submerged car and looked at the line of empty hotels. He had come here once as a child, when the resort was still half-filled with tourists. Already, though, many of the hotels were closing, but his parents had told him that thirty years earlier the town had been so crowded that they could barely see the sand on the beach. Forrester could remember the Club Nautico, presiding like an aircraft carrier over the bars and night clubs of Ampuriabrava, packed with people enjoying themselves with a frantic *fin de siècle* gaiety. Already the first of the so-called "Venus hotels" were being built, and coachloads of deranged young couples were coming in from the airport at Gerona.

Forrester jumped from the roof of the car and set off along the beach road towards Ampuriabrava. The immaculate sand ran down to the water, free at last of cigarette ends and bottle tops, as clean and soft as milled bone. As he moved past the empty hotels it struck Forrester as strange that he felt no sense of panic at the thought of these vanished people. Like Judith and everyone else he knew, like the old linotype operator and his wife sitting alone in the lobby of their hotel, he calmly accepted the terrifying logic of this reductive nightmare as if it were a wholly natural and peaceful event.

Forty years earlier, by contrast, there had been an uncontrolled epidemic of fear as everyone became aware of the marked fall in the world's population, the huge apparent drop in the birth rate and, even more disquieting, the immense increase in the number of deformed foetuses. Whatever had set off this process, which now left Forrester standing alone on this once-crowded Costa Brava beach, the results were dramatic and irreversible. At its present rate of decline, Europe's population of 200,000 people, and the United States' population of 150,000, were headed for oblivion within a generation.

At the same time, by an unhappy paradox, there had been no fall in fertility, either in man or in the few animal species also affected. In fact, birth rates had soared, but almost all the offspring were seriously deformed. Forrester remembered the first of Judith's children, with their defective eyes, in which the optic nerves were exposed, and even more disturbing, their deformed sexual organs—these grim parodies of human genitalia tapped all kinds of nervousness and loathing.

Forrester stopped at the end of the beach, where the line of hotels turned at right angles along the entrance channel of the marina. Looking back at the town, he realized that he was almost certainly its last visitor. The continued breakdown of the European road systems would soon rule out any future journeys to Spain. For the past five years he and Judith had lived in Geneva. Working for a United Nations agency, he moved from city

to city across Europe, in charge of a team making inventories of the huge stockpiles of foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, consumer durables and industrial raw materials that lay about in warehouses and rail terminals, in empty supermarkets and stalled production lines—enough merchandise to keep the dwindling population going for a thousand years. Although the population of Geneva was some two thousand, most of Europe's urban areas were deserted altogether, including, surprisingly, some of its great cathedral cities—Chartres, Cologne and Canterbury were empty shells. For some reason the consolations of religion meant nothing to anyone. On the other hand, despite the initial panic, there had never been any real despair. For thirty years they had been matter-of-factly slaughtering their children and closing down the western hemisphere like a group of circus workers dismantling their tents and killing their animals at the season's end.

From the bank of the canal Forrester peered up at the white hull of the Club Nautico. There were no signs of the young woman. Behind him, facing the airstrip, was a roadside restaurant abandoned years before. Through the salt-stained windows he could see the rows of bottles against the mirror behind the bar, chairs stacked on tables.

Forrester pushed back the door. The interior of the restaurant was like a museum tableau. Nothing had been moved for years. Despite the unlocked door there had been no vandalism. From the footprints visible in the fine sand blown across the floor, it was clear that over the years a few passing travellers had refreshed themselves at the bar and left without doing any damage. This was true of everywhere Forrester had visited. They had vacated a hundred cities and airports as if leaving them in serviceable condition for their successors.

The air in the restaurant was stale but cool. Seated behind the bar, Forrester helped himself to a bottle of Fundador, drinking quietly as he waited for the young woman to reappear. As he gazed across the canal he noticed that Gould had painted two continuous marker lines in fluorescent silver across the metal slats and wire railing of the footbridge. From the door he could see the same marker lines crossing the road and climbing the steps to Gould's hotel, where they disappeared into the lobby.

Standing unsteadily in the road, Forrester frowned up at the garish façade of the hotel, which had been designed in a crudely erotic Grecian style. Naked caryatids three stories high supported a sham portico emblazoned with satyrs and nymphs. Why had Gould chosen to live in this hotel, out of all those standing empty in Rosas? Here in what amounted to the red light quarter of the town, it was one of a group known euphemistically all over the world as the "Venus hotels," but which Judith more accurately referred to as "the sex hotels." From Waikiki to Glyfada Beach, Rio to

Recife, these hotel complexes had sprung up in the first years of the depopulation crisis. A flood of government-subsidized tourists had poured in, urged on into a last frantic festival of erotomania. In a misguided attempt to rekindle their fertility, every conceivable kind of deviant sexual activity had been encouraged. Pornographic hotel decor, lobbies crammed with aids and appliances, ceaseless sex films shown on closed-circuit television, all these reflected an unhappy awareness by everyone that their sex no longer mattered. The sense of obligation, however residual, to a future generation was no longer present. If anything, the "normal" had become the real obscenity. In the foyer of one of these hotels Forrester and Judith had come across the most sinister pornographic image of all—the photograph of a healthy baby obscenely retouched.

Judith and her husband had been too young to take part in these despairing orgies, and by the time of their marriage there had been a general revulsion against perverse sex of every kind. Chastity and romantic love, pre-marital celibacy and all the restraints of monogamy came back in force. As the world's populations continued to fall, the last married couples sat dutifully together like characters from a Vermeer interior.

And all the while the sexual drive continued unabated. Feeling the alcohol surge through him, Forrester swayed through the hot sunlight. Somewhere around the hangar beside the airstrip the young woman was waiting for him, perhaps watching him at this moment from its dark interior. Obviously she knew what he was thinking, and almost seemed to be encouraging him with her flirtatious dartings to and fro.

Forrester stepped onto the bridge. Behind him the line of garish hotels was silent, a stage set designed for just this adventure. The metal rungs of the bridge rang softly under his feet. Tapping them like the keys of a xylophone, Forrester stumbled against the rail, smearing his hands against the still-wet stripe of silver paint.

Without thinking, he wiped his hands on his shirt. The lines of fluorescent paint continued across the bridge, winding in and out of the abandoned cars in the parking lot beside the airstrip. Following Gould's illuminated pathway, Forrester crossed the canal. When he reached the fuel store he saw that the young woman had emerged from the hangar. She stood in the open doorway, her feet well within the rectangle of sunlight. Her intelligent but somehow mongoloid face was hidden as usual behind heavy sunglasses—a squat chin and high forehead fronted by a carapace of black glass. For all this concealment, Forrester was certain that she had been expecting him, and even more that she had been hoping for him to appear. Inside her black shawl she was moving her hands about like a schoolgirl—no doubt she was aware that he was the only man in the resort,

apart from Gould, away on his endless solo flying, and the old linotype operator.

The sweat rose from Forrester's skin, a hot pelt across his forehead. Standing beside the fuel hydrant, he wiped away the sweat with his hands. The young woman seemed to respond to these gestures. Her own hands emerged from the shawl, moving about in a complex code, a semaphore signalling Forrester to her. Responding in turn, he touched his face again, ignoring the silver paint on his hands. As if to ingratiate himself, he smeared the last of the paint over his cheeks and nose, wiping the tacky metal stains across his mouth.

When he reached the young woman and touched her shoulder she looked with sudden alarm at these luminous contours, as if aware that she had been forming the elements of the wrong man from these painted fragments—his hands, chest and features.

Too late, she let herself be bundled backwards into the darkness of the hangar. The sunglasses fell from her hands to the floor. Forrester's luminous face shone back at him like a chromiumed mask from the flight-office windows. He looked down at the sightless young woman scrabbling at his feet for her sunglasses, one hand trying to hide her eyes from him. Then he heard the drone of a light aircraft flying over the town.

Gould's aircraft circled the Club Nautico, the panels of its silver fuselage reflecting the sun like a faceted mirror. Forrester turned from the young woman lying against the rear wall of the hangar, the glasses with their fractured lenses once more over her face. He stepped into the afternoon light and ran across the runway as the aircraft came in to land.

Two hours later, when he had crossed the deserted streets to his hotel, he found Señor Cervera standing on the dune below the steps, hands cupped to his eyes. He waved Forrester towards him, greeting him with relief. Forrester had spent the interval in one of the hotels in the center of Rosas, moving restlessly from one bathroom to the next as he tried to clean the paint off his face and hands. He had slept for half an hour in a bedroom.

"Mrs. Forrester—" The old man gestured helplessly.

"Where is she?" Forrester followed Cervera to the hotel steps. His wife was hovering in an embarrassed way behind her mahogany desk. "What's happened?"

"The *practicante* arrived—just after you left." The old man paused to examine the traces of silver paint that still covered Forrester's face. With a wave of the hand, as if dismissing them as another minor detail of this aberrant day, he said, "He brought the result to Mrs. Forrester. . . ."

"Is she all right? What's going on?"

Forrester started towards the elevator, but the old woman waved him back. "She went out—I tried to stop her. She was all dressed up."

"Dressed? How?"

"In . . . in a very extravagant way. She was upset."

"Oh, my God. . . ." Forrester caught his breath. "Poor Judith—where did she go?"

"To the hotels." Cervera raised a hand and pointed reluctantly towards the Venus hotels.

Forrester found her within half an hour, in the bridal suite on the third floor of one of the hotels. As he ran along the canal road, shouting out Judith's name, Gould was walking slowly across the footbridge, flying helmet in hand. The dark figure of the young woman, the lenses of her fractured sunglasses like black suns, followed him sightlessly from the door of the hangar as Gould moved along the painted corridor.

When at last he heard Judith's cry, Forrester entered the hotel. In the principal suite on the third floor he discovered her stretched out on the bridal bed, surrounded by the obscene murals and bas-reliefs. She lay back on the dusty lamé bedspread, dressed in a whore's finery she had put together from her own wardrobe. Like a drunken courtesan in the last hours of pregnancy, she stared glassily at Forrester as if not wanting to recognize him. As he approached she picked up the harness beside her on the bed and tried to strike him with it. Forrester pulled it from her hands. He held her shoulders, hoping to calm her, but his feet slipped in the vibrators and film cassettes strewn about the bed. When he regained his balance, Judith was at the door. He ran after her down the corridor, kicking aside the display stands of pornographic magazines outside each bedroom. Judith was fleeing down the staircase, stripping off pieces of her costume. Then, thankfully, he saw Gould waiting for her on the landing below, arms raised to catch her.

At dusk, when Gould and Forrester had taken the distraught woman back to the hotel, the two men stood by the entrance in the dusk.

In an unexpected gesture of concern, Gould touched Forrester's shoulder. His face remained without expression. "She'll sleep till morning. Ask the *practicante* to give you some thalidomide for her. You'll need to sedate her through the next three weeks."

He pointed to the silver stains on Forrester's face. "These days we're all wearing our war paint. You were over at the hangar, just before I landed. Carmen told me that you'd accidentally stepped on her glasses."

Relieved that the young woman, for whatever reasons, had not betrayed

him, Forrester said, "I was trying to reassure her—she seemed to be worried that you were overdue."

"I'm having to fly further inland now. She's nervous when I'm not around."

"I hadn't realized that she was . . . blind," Forrester said as they walked down the street towards the canal. "It's good of you to look after her. The Spaniards would kill her out of hand if they found her here. What happens when you leave?"

"She'll be all right, by then." Gould stopped and gazed through the fading light at the causeway of the airstrip. A section of the porous concrete seemed to have collapsed into the sea. Gould nodded to himself, as if working out the time left to him by this fragmenting pier. "Now, what about this baby?"

"It's another—the same defects. I'll get the *practicante* to deal with it."

"Why?" Before Forrester could reply, Gould took his arm. "Forrester, it's a fair question. Which of us can really decide who has the defects?"

"The mothers seem to know."

"But are they right? I'm beginning to think that a massacre of the innocents has taken place that literally out-Herods Herod. Look, come up with me tomorrow—the Cerveras can look after your wife, she'll sleep all day. You'll find it an interesting flight."

They took off at ten o'clock the following morning. Sitting in the front cockpit, with the draft from the propeller full in his face, Forrester was convinced that they would crash. At full throttle they moved swiftly along the runway, the freshly broken concrete slabs already visible. Forrester looked over his shoulder, hoping that Gould would somehow manage to stop the aircraft before they were killed, but the doctor's face was hidden behind his goggles, as if he were unaware of the danger. At the last moment, when the cataract of concrete blocks was almost below the wheels, Gould pulled back on the stick. The small aircraft rose steeply, as if jerked into the air by a huge hand. Thirty seconds later Forrester began to breathe.

They levelled out and made a left-hand circuit of the empty resort. Already Gould was pointing with a gloved hand at the patches of phosphorescent paint in the hills above Rosas. Before the take-off, while Forrester sat uncomfortably in the cockpit, wondering why he had accepted this challenge, the young woman had wheeled a drum of liquid over to the aircraft. Gould pumped the contents into the tank which Forrester could see below his feet. As he waited, the young woman walked round to the cockpit and stared up at Forrester, clearly hoping to see

something in his face. There was something grotesque, almost comic, about this mongoloid girl surveying the world with her distorted vision through these cracked sunglasses. Perhaps she was disappointed that he was no longer interested in her. Forrester turned away from her sightless stare, thinking of Judith asleep in the darkened hotel room, and the small and unwelcome tenant of her body.

Eight hundred feet below them was a wide valley that led inland towards the foothills of the Pyrenees. The line of low mountains marked the northern wall of the plain of Ampurdan, a rich farming area where even now there were small areas of cultivation. But all the cattle had gone, slaughtered years beforehand.

As they followed the course of the valley, Forrester could see that sections of the pathways and farm tracks which climbed the hills had been sprayed with phosphorescent paint. Panels of silver criss-crossed the sides of the valley.

So this was what Gould had been doing on his flights, painting sections of the mountainside in a huge pop-art display. The doctor was waving down at the valley floor, where a small, shaggy-haired bullock, like a miniature bison, stood in an apparent daze on an isolated promontory. Cutting back the engine, Gould banked the aircraft and flew low over the valley floor, not more than twenty feet above the creature. Forrester was speculating on how this sightless creature, clearly a mutant, had managed to survive, when there was a sudden jolt below his feet. The ventral spraying head had been lowered, and a moment later a huge gust of silver paint was vented into the air and fanned out behind them. It hung there in a luminescent cloud, and then settled to form a narrow brush-stroke down the side of the mountain. Retracting the spraying head, Gould made a steep circuit of the valley. He throttled up his engine and dived over the head of the bullock, driving it down the mountainside from its promontory. As it stumbled left and right, unable to get its bearings, it crossed the silver pathway. Immediately it gathered its legs together and set off at a brisk trot along this private roadway.

For the next hour they flew up the valley, and Forrester saw that these lines of paint sprayed from the air were part of an elaborate series of trails leading into the safety of the mountains. When they finally turned back, circling a remote gorge above a small lake, Forrester was not surprised to see that a herd of several hundred of the creatures had made their home here. Lifting their heads, they seemed to follow Gould as he flew past them. Tirelessly, he laid down more marker lines wherever they were needed, driving any errant cattle back on to the illuminated pathways.

When they landed at Ampuriabrava, he waited on the runway as Gould

shut down the aircraft. The young woman came out from the darkness inside the hangar and stood with her arms folded inside her shawl. Forrester noticed that the sides of the aircraft fuselage and tailplane were a brilliant silver, bathed in the metallic spray through which they had endlessly circled. Gould's helmet and flying-suit, and his own face and shoulders, shone like mirrors, as if they had just alighted from the sun. Curiously, only their eyes, protected by their goggles, were free from the paint, dark orbits into which the young woman gazed as if hoping to find someone of her own kind.

Gould greeted her, handing her his helmet. He stripped off his flying jacket and ushered her into the hangar.

He pointed across the canal. "We'll have a drink in your bar." He led the way diagonally across the carpark, ignoring the painted pathways. "I think there's enough on us for Carmen to know where we are. It gives her a sense of security."

"How long have you been herding the cattle?" Forrester asked when they were seated behind the bar.

"Since the winter. Somehow one herd escaped the farmers' machetes. Flying down from Perpignan through the Col de Perthus, I noticed them following the aircraft. In some way they could see me, using a different section of the electromagnetic spectrum. Then I realized that I'd sprayed some old landing-light reflector paint on the plane—highly phosphorescent stuff."

"But why save them? They couldn't survive on their own."

"Not true—in fact, they're extremely hardy. By next winter they'll be able to out-run and out-think everything else around here. Like Carmen—she's a very bright girl. She's managed to keep herself going here for years, without being able to see a thing. When I started getting all this paint over me, I think I was the first person she'd ever seen."

Thinking again of Judith's baby, Forrester shook his head. "She looks like a mongol to me—that swollen forehead."

"You're wrong. I've found out a lot about her. She has a huge collection of watches with luminous dials, hundreds of them, that she's been filching for years from the shops. She's got them all working together but to different times; it's some sort of gigantic computer. God only knows what overlit world nature is preparing her for, but I suppose we won't be around to see it."

Forrester gazed disagreeably into his glass of brandy. For once the Fundador made him feel ill. "Gould, are you saying in effect that the child Judith is carrying at this moment is *not* deformed?"

Gould nodded encouragingly. "It's not deformed at all—any more than

Carmen. It's like the so-called population decline that we've all accepted as an obvious truth. In fact, there hasn't been a decline—except in the sense that we've been slaughtering our offspring. Over the past fifty years the birth rate had gone up, not down." Before Forrester could protest, he went on, "Try for a moment to retain an open mind—we have this vastly increased sexuality, and an unprecedented fertility. Even your wife has had—what—seven children. Yet why? Isn't it obvious that we were intended to embark on a huge replacement program, though sadly the people we're replacing turn out to be ourselves. Our job is simply to repopulate the world with our successors. As for our need to be alone, this intense enjoyment of our own company, and the absence of any sense of despair, I suppose they're all nature's way of saying goodbye."

"And the runway?" Forrester asked. "Is that your way of saying goodbye?"

A month later, as soon as Judith had recovered from the birth of her son, she and Forrester left Rosas to return to Geneva. After they had made their farewells to Señor Cervera and his wife, Forrester drove the car along the beach road. It was 11 a.m., but Gould's aircraft still stood on the airstrip. For some reason the doctor was late.

"It's a long drive—are you going to be well enough?" he asked Judith.

"Of course—I've never felt better." She settled herself in the seat. It seemed to Forrester that a kind of shutter had been lowered across her mind, hiding away all memories of the past months. She looked composed and relaxed again, but with the amiable and fixed expression of a display window mannequin.

"Did you pay off the *practicante*?" she asked. "They expect something extra for . . ."

Forrester was gazing up at the façades of the Venus hotels. He remembered the evening of the birth, and the *practicante* carrying his son away from Señora Cervera. The district nurse had taken it for granted that he would be given the task of destroying the child. As Forrester stopped the Spaniard by the elevator, he found himself wondering where the man would have killed it—in some alley behind the cheaper hotels at the rear of the town, or in any one of a thousand vacant bathrooms. But when Forrester had taken the child, careful not to look at its eyes, the *practicante* had not objected, only offering Forrester his surgical bag.

Forrester had declined. After the *practicante* had left, and before Señora Cervera returned to the lobby, he set off through dark streets to the canal. He had put on again the silver jacket he had worn on the day when Gould had flown him into the mountains. As he crossed the bridge the

young woman emerged from the hangar, almost invisible in her dark shawl. Forrester walked towards her, listening to the faint clicking and murmurs of the strong child. He pressed the infant into her hands and turned back to the canal, throwing away his jacket as he ran.

While they drove along the line of hotels to the Figueras road, Forrester heard the sounds of the aircraft. Gould was climbing into the cockpit, about to warm up the engine before take-off.

"I never really understood him," Judith commented. "What was he up to in the mountains?"

"I don't know—some obsession of his."

During a brief storm two nights earlier, another section of the runway had collapsed. But Forrester knew that Gould would go on flying to the end, driving his herd higher into the mountains, until they no longer needed him and the day had come to take off for the last time.

C. L. Grant

Treatise on the Artifacts of a Civilization

It has been said that unusual manuscripts discovered in exotic bottles from That Which Was, and in old packing crates from the Yet To Be, are neither to be trusted nor transliterated: The past apparently has too much of a tendency to slip away under the guise of fiction, and the future doesn't exist. We may argue this point or not, depending on whether or not you're paying attention. There is no source for this quotation, which in itself may or may not be an indication.

"Simple wants to get married."

"Well, he cannot. Absolutely not. It is forbidden, as you well know. It's beyond question or argument. He has the transcripts to complete."

"For crying out loud, is that the only damned reason you can think of?"

"Being damned is a complicated question of morality. We are not concerned with morals here, only graduates."

"You're begging the question."

"I've never been so prone in my life, My Lady, and don't you forget it. And he still has those confounded transcripts to finish before Friday."

"You have a one-track mind."

"Great jumping ellipses, woman, there are some eighteen thousand students out there yammering their packed little heads off for those papers. What better reason can there be?"

"Well, for one thing, he isn't human."

"When you get right down to it, who of us really is in this crazy, mixed-up world of ours? I had a professor once who had a retractable pen for a left hand, and he told us that of all the intelligent species in all the known universe—"

“Do us a favor, will you, and forget your old professors for a while? The crisis, as I have come to see it, isn’t so much those bellyaching whiners needing their precious transcripts as it is that Simple just is not human. He is an experiment, and there’s no getting around it. His intransigence could ruin us all.”

“So tell him.”

“You tell him.”

“Why should I tell him?”

“Because, and I wish you didn’t have to be reminded all the time, you’re his boss, his protector, you tuck him in at night, you polish his almighty consoles, he was your rotten idea in the first place, and mainly because he hasn’t tried to rape you.”

“Has he tried to rape you?”

“Four times, not counting the day he tried to plug me into his type-writer.”

“Interesting.”

“You should have been there.”

“But what if he insists that he is, in fact, human?”

“You’re the boss around here. You tell him he isn’t.”

“But why cause the lad such traumatic disorientation? I’ll just inform him that he isn’t old enough.”

“If he’s old enough to rape, he’s old enough to marry.”

“Spurious logic.”

“Personally, I don’t give a damn. The point has rapidly come to be, however, that unless we marry him off, he won’t do any work at all. Period.”

“I’ll order him to work. By the very nature of his immaculate construction, he cannot refuse.”

“Then why haven’t the transcripts been completed?”

“Tell you what, why don’t you marry—”

“I’d sooner marry you, if you don’t mind, thanks very much.”

“That, I take it, is a refusal?”

“You’re the expert around here. You figure it out.”

Herewith a flashback (but only if you are taking notes or need to break for the fridge before the beer freezes, pops its container and stains your frozen defrosting dinner—but this is not to be taken as symbolic in any way, only slightly meaningful):

It was a simplistic and fascinating study that was initially presented to the Agency in Command of Consumer Nudging; to wit, that most people

were dissatisfied with their lot. They were desirous, however, not of major transmogrifications but simple minor alterations to ease their pot-holed paving to oblivion ("Sans teeth," observed the melancholy Jacques, whose own were probably rotten anyway); and they would pay through the nose if they thought they could do it cheaply enough to keep ahead of their (a) neighbors, (b) inlaws, and/or (c) blood relatives. The ACCN therefore called for sessions extraordinary, mulled and culled and eventually recommended the immediate wholesale development of the most superb cybernetic minds in and out of the business to process the feasibility studies of inexpensive limb attachments not unlike those designed for obsolete cannister vacuum cleaners.

The elected and hereditary bureaucrats in the ACCN's Congressional Watchdog Committee blanched.

The ACCN acknowledged its responsibilities immediately to the sanctity of human life however and wherever it may be found, created or imagined. Preferably none of the above.

The Senatorial Committee, unphotogenically in camera, quoted the New Constitution, the Bible/Koran/Torah, and three times screened an unexpurgated clip from an ancient Patrick O'Neal film in which the villain unsympathetically attached a surgical hatchet to his handless wrist and promptly beheaded a judge. For starters.

The ACCN lowered its humbled head in collective point-well-taken and called upon its first witness, a retired colonel in the Continental Guard who was rendered armless when his Brand X hand grenade lost its acidic temper during a routine campus patrol.

Herewith a flashforward, up until now considered and fervently believed to be aesthetically impossible for the (extinct) printed media, reading the last page first of any novel notwithstanding:

"Absolutely not. He can't even tie his own shoes."

"He hasn't got any."

Meanwhile. . . .

A regional college campus, one college out of eight hundred and forty-six that comprise the second largest university in the Northern Sphere. There are stunted trees blossoming gleefully in the greying air, quaintly mined lawns, barbed wire pickets and Jeffersonian veneered geodesic domes, cubes, rectangles and sprawls, not to mention the 46,752 undergraduates, two-fifths of whom are bound toward restocking the current crop of retiring clerks, cost accountants and bi- to tri-lingual undercover Congressional investigators, and none of whom would get a job within a

thousand kilometers of the Three Capitals without their daintily filigreed, simulated parchment transcripts. They might as well be dead. They cannot do anything else. And they damn well know it.

In the geographic center of this regional campus, a glass and aluminium replication of what somebody thought Monticello looked like, through a glass hardly at all. It glitters, it gleams; it is unimposing and uninspiring, yet within its porcelained mosaic interior squats a lovesick creature who has within its unimaginable power the potential ability to throw one-quarter of the world's four Spheres of political delineation into chaos.

War with the remaining three would not be unlikely. Detente among the remaining three, most probable.

While the argument rages quietly on:

"Am I to understand that I do not please you?"

"What in glory's name does that have to do with Simple?"

"But you just said, madam—and I know you did because I am not deaf, no matter what the Chancellor says—you just said that you would rather marry me than him. Considering your opposition to Simple now, I can but surmise that you would rather be dead. Also considering our years together at the prestigious beck of ACCN's call, I would have thought, have indeed many times thought, that some particle of affection has grown between us."

"Excuse my pacing, frenzied though it may be, but you know, I really can't believe this is happening. That little monster down there is on the precarious verge of precipitating an InterSpherical Confrontation, and all you can worry about is your damned ego."

"A moment ago you were mad because I was worried about the transcripts."

"That's because Simple threw me with that marriage thing. Now I am worried about my future. I would prefer to die of old age, thank you."

"Fine. Then we are agreed."

"At last. On what?"

"That the transcripts must be prepared immediately, that Simple must do it, that in order to do it, Simple must be told forthwith that he is not human and therefore cannot marry you. End crisis. End way to war."

"He doesn't want to marry me."

"Then who does he want to marry?"

"How in hell should I know?"

"Well, really, don't you think we ought to find out?"

"Call me a fool for asking: Why?"

"If we can ascertain with whom he is enamored, we can get her to refuse on the grounds that he isn't human. That therapy will undoubtedly shock

Simple back into reality as we have defined it for him, the transcripts will be delivered on time, and the Sphere will be saved for posterity and our tenure as two of its leading minds.”

“Well, that sounds almost all right. Okay. I’ll sit here until you ask him.”

“Why me?”

“Do I have to explain it all over again?”

“It needs a woman’s touch.”

“Nonsense. I’ve come too close already. Go! I’ll wait here until you get back.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Sweet of you to notice.”

The ACCN had paraded a total of forty-nine witnesses before the Honorable Senators before they began to see the point, the implications, the permutations and the Meaning Behind It All. A lonely representative from Alberta raised a quivering, snow-bitten crippled hand to volunteer those digits he had left, a wrinkled guinea pig whose constituents were mostly mountains. There wasn’t a dry eye in the House. Half a decade later, he was able to plug into his car, his mistress, his SecConsole, mashie and gavel. He was never reelected nor could he sell his life story, but he didn’t mind as long as he had his new hand. In hand. So to speak.

Stampede.

Revolution.

A few isolated cases of ultraneurotic self-mutilations under none-too-rigid universal controls that were instantly revised, equalized and sanitized to drive out the back alley Frankensteins who were promoting things no gadget could deliver until the Government sanctioned them and collected its tithe.

Renewed idolization of neurosurgeons sparked techniques hitherto practiced only on expendable simians and replaceable rodents.

Man and Machine socket in socket toward a future charged with electric dreams.

Cast of Character:

Lady Justine de Clove, a Cy’ from farther back than her mother would admit, whose frequent ground-aqua-hover-air car mishaps were blamed on faulty socketry within her sumptuous left shoulder, which no man with a bank account less than a GNP was able to glimpse. She emigrated to the regional college campus because she was paid too much for her expertise

in Cybernetic Adjustment/Rejection Trauma to stay in her native ancestral castle and watch the rocks crumble. She is greedy, widowed, headstrong and sneaky—in that order.

The ACCN soon went out of business when its below-ground who-counts-generations computer complex refused to admit complicity in driving out all but Cy' personnel within its cavernous bowels.

The Army damned near went out of business until it reformed its recruiting campaign and replaced smiling and rakish soldiers with an AC-DC hermaphrodite input.

Two and a half centuries pass in clanking evolution as circumcision garners a new definition and the old one gradually fades into the archaic sections of only the most sophisticated minilexicons.

And still the argument, with one mystery solved: our heroine is Lady Justine, but this is not to go to your head until later. . . .

"And what did the dear creature have to say to his surrogate father?"

"He refuses to believe it. He's locked himself in and will not speak to anyone but you."

"The ungrateful bastard."

"Well, strictly speaking, My Lady, we do have an inkling as to his parentage, you know. However, it recalls to mind an old professor I once—"

"All right, Guy, all right. You win. I'll go already."

"What?"

"I'll go. There's no sense in farting around any longer. Before we know it, the Continental Guard will be forcing its clumsy way into Simple's quarters. If for no other reason than the dents in the aluminium will be a bitch to pound out, I'll gird my quivering loins and meet him head to head."

"You'll be a hero, My Lady."

"Will you please stop that sycophantic fawning? You know groveling makes me want to rust."

"It is not fawning, my dear, but only a true expression of abject humility in deference to an extraordinary humane human being."

"Cut it out. You're making me blush."

"I didn't think you had it in you."

"Nor for the lack of trying, I can assure you. Now please ring down to Simple and tell him I'm on my way. And it might be a wise idea to draft a release to the student press before we find the whole place revolting."

"I already do."

"That's bad taste. We're in a crisis, and you're in bad taste."

“What about the girl he supposedly loves?”

“I’ll ask.”

“Get her vione code, too. I don’t want just any girl turning down my, uh, son. So to speak.”

“I’ll ask. I’ll ask. Now call, please?”

“Certainly. Whatever My Lady desires.”

“Call me Justine. Your armor’s too rusty.”

It had come to a far-down-the-line descendant of the Chairman of the defunct ACCN that he should buy up huge quantities of stocks and bonds in the practically extinct android industries (*Only God Was Made Flesh, And We All Know What Happened To Him*), long since fallen into disrepair and disrepute when it was discovered that all humans had to do was plug in instead of paying out. Not being a true believer in visions, however, he thought he might be crazy. His wife did, and divorced him. Nevertheless, he persisted. He wrote a long, querying letter to a former colleague of his, Guy Lincoln, who responded that he was out of his mind, how’s the wife, did you know that Lady Justine was working at the university with me studying the effects of nonhuman computer control on educational efficiency and job placement? The correspondent did not know and did not care; he was always of the mind that Lincoln was a little too pompous and radical for the conservative world of the Northern Sphere. Lincoln, he thought acidly, should defect to the Second or Third Spheres—there they even had vestigial religions. He never did buy that stock, in fact, and passed from the scene a poor man who could have been rich had he believed in visions and the pomposity of Mr. Lincoln.

A woman from Yucatan was arrested and tried for bearing three children without submitting them for humane alteration. The three bairn, ages four, six and seven, were treated and released to an aunt two years afterward. The woman never relented her passé morality and her husband could not be found to vouch for her good conduct. She died at age thirty-one of an overdose.

Mark Twain said: I believe the whole world is a little crazy except for thee and me, and sometimes I wonder about thee.

An elderly man from the rejuvenated city of Minnesota sparked a brief fad by willing his brain to Science in the devout belief that total cybernation was the wave of the future. Science, however, had escaped to the moons of Jupiter, where it was studying the impact potential of latent energy pockets in printed books and magazines.

Cast of Second Character:

Guy Lincoln, bachelor and *mal vivant* with barely a credit to his lineage but always able to cadge a dinner from one of his more pliable students, who believed that age does not necessarily deteriorate the vital functions that enhance the continuation of the species. He resembles Mark Twain to such an astonishing degree that he was barred from the tiny Liberal Arts campus in Orlando. He knows all of Emily Dickinson's poetry by rote. Secretly in love with Lady Justine, he despairs of their currents ever mingling. He is deathly afraid of Simple, wonders where he came from, and is frantic to learn if Twain had a wise saying about his predicament.

Thee and me. . . .

"Simple, I want you to stop this nonsense right now and let me in there at once, if not sooner."

"Guy said I wasn't human."

"He's no politician, Simple, and for that I apologize. But he's also quite right, I'm afraid. From our standpoint, you're not. Quite."

"Then move over."

"Simple, please let me in. This corridor's cold."

"I want to get married."

"I was once, boy, and believe me, it isn't worth it."

"I want to see the blue sky, the green grass, the tall trees and butterflies."

"The what? Where did you get that stuff?"

"It doesn't matter. It's the thought that counts, Lady Justine, and I think I want to get out of here. Zenda, if you know what I mean."

"It isn't time yet. But you will when the time soon enough comes."

"If I do not get out right now, I'll hold my computer until Guy turns blue."

"Simple . . . do you have any idea how frustrating it is talking to this ridiculous intercom? Can't we come to some sort of compromise? Let me in."

"I can't."

"Won't?"

"Won't."

"Why?"

"Because whenever I see your face, you can convince me that black is white."

"You don't trust me."

"You register hurt deep down inside."

"After all these years. . ."

"You sound like you're crying."

"Open up and see."

"If I will, will you?"

"You're a dirty little boy, Simple."

"Not so little, not so simple, but getting smart."

"Ah, now you're the one who's hurt."

"Only in the heart, dear."

"And don't call me dear."

"Doe?"

"You already have an allowance, so stop trying to bribe me."

"If I make allowance for you, will you?"

"I'll die first."

"Then we have nothing more to say."

"Simple, the world will soon be in a literally deadly crisis if you don't come across with those transcripts. Why in hell I ever agreed to this venture in the first place I'll never understand. But Simple, the world is too complicated for your kind of games. Stop playing. Immediately."

"Your move, Lady."

Crisis: when the Opposition has plumbed your weaknesses, and as you cry *Foul*, find only two in the bush.

Guy Lincoln speaks on the vione to the Chancellor of the University, a position approximately fifth in line to the heart of the Spherical Government, and a political plum that is rapidly running into a prune. Guy, as a measure of his success and influence in the Sphere at large, is the only man permitted to call the Chancellor Sammy, and Sammy hates it.

"Sammy, Lady de Clove and I are doing everything humanly possible to improve the present situation. We are completely aware that a governmental slowdown is perfectly predictable within a fortnight unless Simple gets going. But at present there is little that we can do. He has refused to activate the recording processes and has effectively cross-wired the fail-safe system so that, if your Chancellorship will excuse the expression, we are completely in his hands. Sending in armed troops would only exacerbate the situation, kill off Simple, and leave us with a hell of a lot of magnetic bits and pieces with which we cannot do a damned thing until we've reprogrammed and regizmoed the entire section.

"A back-up was deemed superfluous, if you will recall, because of the brilliance of the experimental results we had had before putting Simple into operational functions, and also because of the budget squeeze,

figuring, as you well know, that it was cheaper to feed a, well, nontransformed human, sort of, than build another lighted abacus.

"I agree with your earlier reports that the situation is both tragic and ludicrous; however, we must learn to adapt to our mistakes and, hopefully, sir, we can rise from our errors' aftermath better humans for it. I would suggest, Sammy, however, that you convey my sympathies to the President, and perhaps you might tactfully suggest that the Army prepare for the worst."

"I never did like that, uh, boy, Guy."

"I know that, sir."

"He looks funny with all those fingers and things."

"Absolutely right, sir."

"Well, I'll call the President now and tell him what you've told me. I trust that this will not happen again."

"One way or another, it won't."

Guy respectfully bows and disengages his right wrist from the vione, watching the Chancellor's grimacing face fade into a shimmer. He considers the blank screen for a long moody time before nudging his SecConsole into recording position.

"Send out queries, general terms and no names, requesting information available on employment opportunities in Second Sphere Universities. And tell Simple that I'll be down in an hour."

Considering the awful aura of crimson that shone incandescent over the bureaucratic functions of broadcasting and Government and stuck them together like glue, it was remarkably soon after Guy Lincoln's call to the Chancellor that the five holvid networks cleared their channels for an important message from the President. The speech took two hours and forty-one minutes, after which programs resumed uninterrupted and in their entirety, and the man in the symbolic street frowned because, under all the anthem singing and banner waving, he had a vague notion that his Sphere was in some kind of trouble.

Cast of Third Character: Simple, so-called not for his mental capacities but for his physical handicaps. Depending upon with whom you spoke, either he had them or he didn't.

"*Pistol-Packin' Proctor*" was the musical version of a three-hundred-year-old period piece by a Mr. Miller. Only university students versed in Late Middle English understood it. It flopped accordingly and the male lead, bitter at the lack of social acceptance his part received, suddenly and

desperately needed his transcript so he could enter his promised job as a subfunctionary in Montreal's Northern White House. A normally level-headed man with a miserable tenor, he saw his stardom dreams puff, and he panicked.

A Sweet Young Thing who had begun to believe in the witchcraft bandied about in the songs of the Salem Terrors realized her calling was not to be culled from a broom and decided her future lay, as she had once planned, in the halls of the Acapulco Southwestern White House. She needed her transcript. She wasn't about to get it. She ran into the miserable tenor and they panicked together.

Simple math indicated that one plus one equaled two, but in this case, it equaled something on the order of eighteen thousand, not to mention the rest of the students who saw all their work fading and their goals unfulfilled unless the creep who looked like Mark What's-his-name didn't get on the ball.

The Records Distribution Center began to show definite dents in its pillars.

Backflash, subliminally designed to instill in the audience a false sense of insight.

Retirement Day became a Sphere-wide holiday during which more Northerners were erased on the roads and in the air than in the rest of the year's vacations combined. Only the Vatican-in-exile continued to insist on rhythm.

If The Truth Be Known, however, Retirement Day was a misnomer, designating in reality that time period during which the new crop of pen-pluggers, tape-cutters and trainee snoopers flocked to their assignments in order to be schooled in the running of the usually Free World. Naturally, a delay of even one minute would cause an immediate psychological letdown for the Old Guard, most of whom had sixty years and full pay waiting for them at the back door.

Rumors of the students' plight filtered.

Spies for the Opposition began to cackle in Secret Code.

The Economy trembled.

The Sphere Army went on Full Alert.

The entire Planet waited with bated breath.

With Guy Lincoln caught in the middle of something he did not understand.

"Simple, I'm afraid I'm going to have to abort the experiment."

"You should have aborted me."

"You are being much too melancholy, Simple. We tried, and we failed. We thought we could find an economical solution, and we couldn't. We thought we could do what we did without causing undue stress upon the structure of society as we now know it, and we could not. Perhaps we will be wiser the next time."

"Are you going to kill me?"

"God forbid! You are practically my son, according to Justine. How could I possibly take your very life?"

"Such as it was."

"Lady de Clove and I will spirit you away to the absolutely finest clinic in the North, in the World! There, under intensive retraining and super-modern techniques, your stigma will be removed and, with a little hard-core conditioning, you'll be as human as the rest of us in no time."

"Suppose I refuse to leave this room of mine, my home for these past fifteen glorious years?"

"You have no choice, Simple."

"Suppose I break out of here, lead a revolution, overthrow the status quo and guide the world to a brighter tomorrow?"

"I don't think—"

"Suppose I kill you now, sabotage the computer, throw the Sphere into sage chapters of anarchy and chaos, and then emerge as a dictator of an entirely new country?"

"Really, son, I'm not at all—"

"Suppose—are you listening?—suppose that I reveal that I am really an agent of Science from Jupiter's moons, assisted here when I was but ten by None Other Than Lady Justine de Clove herself, for the express and sole purpose of proving that humans are human even if they do have all their limbs, that wholesale persecution of our kind is immoral and unjust, that you should have left well enough alone, and besides that, androids can do just as well because they can't die, as we know dying."

"Simple, really, this is too much!"

"Guy, you're a pompous ass."

"Simple!"

"Well, suppose I just give in."

"Simple, this whole episode is confusing me."

"Well, damnit, choose your own damned ending! I'm tired and want to go to sleep."

"What are you talking about? You mean, that's it? That's everything?"

"Quite a letdown, isn't it?"

"I have to admit it."

"Anticlimactic and all that?"

"I suppose."

"But everything is, Guy."

"Now that's absurd!"

"Absolutely! Now you're talking sense. And now please go away. There's this dream, Guy, that I want to wake up from."

"Under the circumstances, do you mind if I ask what it's about?"

"Father, if you don't know by now, you'd better turn the page."

William S. Wilson

interim

For that half-hour in the hospital delivery room I was intimate with immensity, for that half-minute before birth I held her hands and for that duration we three were undivided, I felt the blood of her pulse as we gripped hands, felt her blood beat in the rhythm that reached into the baby as she slipped into the doctor's hands, and for a few days we touched that immensity, we saw through her eyes to an immense intimacy, saw through to where she had come from, I felt important being next to her, and the feeling lasted when we entered our car for the drive home, thinking to myself that we weren't to be trusted with our baby, the feeling lasting while I measured us against the landscape, the February rain, the pewter sky, and then the rain freezing to the roadway, the warmth of the interior of the car with its unbreakable transparent skydome and doors, until the car spun on the ice in the lane and twirled so that I could take an hour to describe how I threw up my hands in anguish as the baby slipped from her arms and whipped into the face of her mother reflected in the glass door, and she caught the baby back into her arms as the car glided to a stop in its usual place at the end of the drive, and nothing but silence and a few drops of blood at a nostril suggested that we would now be intimate with the immensities of death.

I tried to say to the man that I wanted her buried in a canvas bag, to return to earth the sooner, but he declined to hear anything I said until I said what was appropriate for him to hear, which I thought was an agreement that she should be buried in a pine box, without embalming or other sophistications—I would myself and I did right then weave orange ribbons into the dress to take the sting out of so much pink—but the bill when it came said "lead-lined" so that her body I continue to think will be badly preserved forever, but then I have no way to know what happened, for the undertaker is dead in the forest now, and the ground was still frozen

then, he would not have been able to bury her until later in the spring when I was on my way and so did not go to my daughter's funeral at the back of the graveyard. Later I planted a circle of larches in the middle of a moor, and years after that, even though Scotch pines had grown around it and within it, I traced the circle of trees, an unending rapport of larches.

When I arrived home from the hospital for the second time that day, without the baby, driving fast, the sky was black. No lights in the house. I walked upstairs in the dark, but my feet remembered every footstep toward the bed. I lay down heavily and sighed. "She is dead, isn't she," Rosabianca asked. "Yes," I answered, "of course," and I suppose we knew the way we turned toward each other and with each other that every hesitation and grievance and regret were meeting every reluctance and reservation and doubt in unrepentant farewell, we yielded to each other in mutual chagrin without a thought or a kiss, and when an aloof light shone through the window, an excuse to call it morning, I sat up, and saw on my pillowcase the large and legible red print of my hand which had inked itself with blood from between her thighs, not enough for her to die from, I supposed, and I suffixed the words I had to say with a hiss I hoped she would not hear, "murderess of breaths," and I left, taking only what I had earned, a look, the tearful version of the first dry look I caught and then forgot, the look that stayed throughout our marriage behind the smile, the look that now inherited her face, an anticipation of grief that tempted me to try to make her happy, her foreknowledge of the tyrannies of sorrow, somber reds underlying golds, the bitterness that inspired her to call me "Butterscotch," I helpless against the terrorism in her love, the morose golds flecking her brown eyes, the pathos of a woman's flesh touched by shadows, this woman I had found in the hills beyond Trieste, to whom I taught English with a few Scotticisms as she taught me resistance, I explaining that *kilt* was correct, not *kilts*, and that yes, some people now used *kilts* for a woman's skirt that looked like a kilt, but that she would never, when she came from Yugoslavia to be my Scottish bride, never wear a tartan or a plaid. She shrugged agreement to everything except my plea not to be called "Butterscotch," because my hair, my beard, hairs on my fingers and along my wrists, my eyebrows, whatever sun touched was indeed butterscotch, and I knew I was so dour that I should accept the playfulness, although the lovename sounded as wrong to me as her Adriatic beauty looked wrong in our Scottish light or worse, on skimpy days, our Scottish lack of light.

That week I trudged across Scotland. I walked accompanied by rushing salmon streams or gently flowing rivers, followed by children and dogs,

and I walked beyond towns, across barren heaths, through marshes, and in the falling rain I walked down a long hill following a stream that led to a cottage where I took tea and scones. I stood on hillsides gazing at the total sky, and one evening I sat leaning against the stone wall on the light side, and watched the sunset as my idea of the baby caught in amber light above the firth, and I climbed over to the night side of the wall and crouched with the darkness leaning toward me, and then I slept. In the morning I began the north-east walk back to our house.

Rosabianca was gone. She was gone, the baby was in the refrigerator at the hospital, the car stood in the lane. I opened the bubble-door at the back and saw growing on the carpet a gray-green plant. Sometimes I feel that the last believable moment of my life that I remember was smiling at Rosabianca across the top of the car as we got in to drive to the hospital, and sometimes, because the accident seems so unnecessary, the first convincing memory is the glimpse of the plant.

I drove south toward the coast, where spring comes sooner, and in a plant nursery bought the larches, and threw them into the back of the car with some flats of various plants to see, as I more or less lived in the car, which seedlings would thrive in my mobile greenhouse. I learned to move the car according to the time of day, to park it for the most advantageous light. I would drive and park in a town, and once, returning to the car, surprised to find a crowd standing around it, I waited my turn to see what they were seeing, and then, looking into my car with the eyes of thrifty strangers, I conceived my plan for the reforestation of Scotland.

I don't believe that the Scots were always frugal, now that I have read our mean history. Once the land was without mankind and was covered with trees—most of these heaths and moors are modern—and heather grows on the moor because the peasants snapped the limbs they could reach from the trees as high as they could reach, which slowed the growth of the trees, and their pigs rooted up saplings in the forest, and with branches beyond reach men chopped down the trees, trees that had leached the shallow soil but at least held it with their roots, so that with fewer trees the rains carried off the thin layer of soil, trees became more scarce, winds blew wilder, dry land grew drier and wet land grew more wet, as one peasant here and another peasant there, gathering infinitesimal sticks for paltry winter fires, first raised the trees into the shapes of trees in a medieval hunting scene, and a courtier or if you will a laird might ride horseback through the forest, which looked as cultivated as he did, and he might hunt stags or roes visible among the visible trunks of allegorical trees, and allegory to us was naturalism to them, but their trim and vertical forests quickly deforested to

vacant heath and moor, sheep and cattle grazing, nothing much taller than heather, and stone cottages built, a small dairy, smoke curling from chimneys in the morning, thick blue-grey ascending into blue, the old landscape become a landscape, and stones shaped into walls that curved with hilly fields, poisonously quaint, so that modern Scotland—Scotland by the seventeenth century—has been gardenized, with no unpolicied nature anywhere, and the only worse yet to come the townscape, the rustic villages, towns shaped with a view to the view, town hall spire rhyming with church steeple, a skyline constructed because they saw themselves as others would see them as they drove around the curve of the road, and they wanted to be ready for them, one tree left at the margin of a hill to catch the sunset in its branches, a grove of trees in the middle of a city as a park or square or green, the whole of Scotland a manshape, and the interferences of men applauded everywhere by men as they drove out to view the scenery and viewed the sum of infinitesimal greeds, the history of Scottish appetites, uncalculated and incalculable intrusions into the forest until the forest became a moor, and as they stood chattering round my car, I saw my plan which would cost me, as frugal as the next Scotsman, almost nothing, since I would use their frugality, for they appreciated the thrift of my mobile greenhouse, the chance to start seedlings earlier in the year, and I economically gave away the flats to those people, and thriftily bought more, and drove to more and more town squares, and quietly proselytized, and I thought, well, let each one teach one, they'll learn if it will seem to save a penny, and then easy it was, so easy, to begin reforestation, for the mobile cars throughout Scotland were soon thousands of greenhouses, and the rational plans presented in newspapers and on television solved the problem the people were beginning to sense that they shared, as they had more seedlings than they knew what to do with, more seedlings than good sense, as some said, and they began to plant them at the edge of the moors, and they drove out on holiday and planted with an eye to the view, and threw compost around, but the next crowd the following week had its eye on yet another view, and so with cheerful anarchy they cooperated with no one but they unwittingly cooperated with me as they replanted Scotland, and the greener it became, the more itself it looked, replanted not in one year, but within ten years, twenty years, until it was green, green, down into swamps, up against crags, and in thirty years downtown Glasgow too, and green to the very doors of cottages. The infinitesimal seedlings became a forest of trees that grew courteously, correcting the distances between themselves as they shaped themselves to the promptings of available light and moisture, tempering the climate and the temperaments of the Scots, as the driest land became moist and the

wettest land became dry, seedlings finding a mean between extremes, and the trees constructing a moderate zone for themselves even into what I would have called tundra, until I understood the fact that Aristotle taught, while walking in a botanic garden, that the middle is fittest to discern the extremes.

Several years should now be measured in the rings of trees, in a dendrochronology, not in mere days. The weatherbeaten landscape shaped and reshaped itself to earth, air, fire, and water. For a few years people still built houses in the country, or drove out to view scenery, but gradually the moral of the landscape reached into them. They had only to look at the forests, to see the return of emblematic and heraldic animals, and they realized that man was unwelcome, and I think that the first emigration began before I circulated my plans, for while the emigration would not solve the problem, the emigrants were useful, apparent traitors to a national cause, and the same nationalism achieved the separation from England in order to pursue our national destiny, the Stone of Scone restored to Edinburgh, and destiny defined itself as the purification of Scotland, the elimination not alone of the English but of mankind from the landscape against which his poisonousness grew more apparent and more unbearable, and the movement seemed voluntary, in fact was voluntary in that I merely presented ideas from behind the scenes, and some people feeling the unwelcome sailed off sentimentally to Ireland in boats, as though the year were 1912, not 2012, cowards who thereby delineated the contours of noble action, so that while the idea was mine, the people knew without being told the correct act to perform, and throughout Scotland first a few men and women, many students, sometimes a vacationist who backpacked in the new wilderness, others in family groups, undressing and making piles of their earth-colored clothing—umber, ochre, and viridian—where they might be useful to a tree, lay down naked in a place that varied according to sensibility, perhaps romantically on the crest of a hill, or usefully in an erosion gully, and again with a variety of means, because the suggestion was mine, but the act was theirs, idealists or pragmatists, perhaps opened their veins with a knife and let the blood flow into the soil, or drank a chemical that would be lethal to them but harmless to carrion or to the soil, and they, I think cheerfully and with relief, lay down and sacrificed themselves for the common good of Scotland, and certainly they looked satisfied to me, as I continued my long patrol, when I would come upon a body and feel as I felt when I recognized a word I had been looking for, a body lying in a spot that had been chosen to help a struggling tree, birds picking at the remaining flesh, veiled by webs of mold, insects marching along paths that circulated through the

bones, parents and young children grouped together, having chosen to die together, and with pets—a dog that would have been helpless, a cat that would have killed too much other game, once a horse with its saddle mildewed in the grass beside it—the feeling in the forest of unthreatened purity, with Scotland now shameless and pure, even the obstacles of stone houses yielding to seeds that rooted within cracks in the walls, and vines growing through windows left open for them. I continued my rounds, occasionally seeing one of the last few families arranging itself, and I would greet them and continue on my way, and gradually I overcame my fear of stumbling over a dead body in the forest, and I learned to nod in silent tribute. I thought of throwing lime onto the bodies, and then I thought, who am I to dance with wind and rain and animals, with frost and thaw and sunshine, and then for a year I neither saw nor heard a living person in Scotland, and my work was finished, at last I was feral, and I would find a place, a meaningless choice, but first I wanted to look across a vale from the height of a stony crag, and at my perch, leaning against the stone warmed by the sun, I ate my pemmican and then I slept, and when I woke I thought, yes, we have done decently, and even if that place was, because of its height, too dramatic, yet I resolved to die there as food for birds. Then I saw, down in the glen, elided syllables of smoke ascending from a cottage chimney into the inarticulate blue sky.

I admit that defiance excited me. Everyone had been so compliant, the reasonableness of the plan was so apparent, I had not had the chance to argue. I stood up, and walking carefully, not to break a branch that would soon break by itself, not to rearrange leaves that would serve a purpose as they were, not to frighten a single bird fetching a twig for its nest, I walked, the last or next to the last thing in Scotland that would be aware of itself or ashamed of itself, careful where I put my foot among the rhythms that I did not want to hasten or retard, and while my goal had been my death at the edge of the sublime, I would be satisfied if I reached that cottage in the vale.

I reached the cottage, but only as evening had settled into the valley, dusk arriving earlier among the dark trees than back on the crag that I had left. I walked through the thick growth of trees easily, for this was quite far north, and lower branches died and fell off from lack of sunlight, or deer browsed as high as they could reach, my innocent gardeners. When I reached the cottage, I had the feeling that I was keeping an appointment that I had not made, for there it held its ground, as primitive as it was primordial, and when I walked to a window and looked into the glass as into a mirror, I saw not so much myself as my idea of a hermit, white hair and beard, copper eyebrows. Walking around the cottage, which seemed,

in its ungainly Scottish way, perfectly square, in order to have the minimum of exterior wall, I came to another window, and focusing beyond the glass, within the room, I saw a woman I recognized as my mother, although my mother had not lived to be as old as that woman, and then the face turned and yielded its look to the window, and I recognized Rosabianca, so I had married a woman like my mother after all, or at least I had married into the matrix, although my mother had been opposed to me bringing a Slavic bride to Scotland, and for a moment she peered close to the window, and my reflection for that moment was superimposed upon her face, and I knew that she heard footsteps but was unafraid, in fact that she was listening at the window, not looking through it, and then she stood straight and she was like no idea that I had ever had, and if once I had been in love, I knew that we were still within love, and ever the beauty of a woman who has never thought of herself as beautiful, and I heard her call "Allen" from the doorway, and walked around to where she stood drying her hands on a white apron.

I have heard about you, Allen. I sit by my fireside and think that you are dead.

I wanted to see my plan accomplished. The trees will seed the rest of the land. You are the only holdout I have found.

I don't need to lie down in the forest and swallow seeds that would kill me and then grow out of my flesh. I can fall paralyzed to die on this hearth and be as much use here as anywhere. Worms will find me out, and the fly of that moment will be satisfied with my flesh in which to lay its eggs, or some vine reaching with a tendril for support will clasp my bone at just the right moment for that vine in that season. At last I can do nothing but what is useful, thanks to you. You are good enough for both of us, Allen.

Enough, Rosabianca. I never said that I was good, only that I felt guilty about spoiling or interfering. I wanted an unsophisticated Scotland.

Yes, Allen, you spoiled something that would have been perfect without you. Your stroll through the glade disrupted some order between the birds and the trees, and perhaps the world would have been better off without you. Now you are proud of this bad conscience of yours, Allen, and no one is alive to accuse you except your wife, your witness.

Why don't you sit down? You are still too beautiful to admit being uncomfortable.

I am not disarmed. In my country we knew about presumption. Yes, I like this vacated Scotland myself, but Scotland was not made to please me. You have filled it with moldering corpses while I sit thinking of the infant.

Infinite.

What did you say?

Nothing.

You are still rude. Yet something between us, I admit it.

I know what is between us. Between is between us, and between this between and the other between, an infinity of betweens, and I have never been any more or any less close to you than I am now, and these betweens futilely deny an obscure and infinite oblivion.

I am oblivious of infinity.

Because you love me. Without me, you feel the pain of ruptured infinities.

You are a twist in the universe, Allen, by which it curls back to see its assumptions, which it does see through you even as you see that you do not fit those assumptions, and so you recoil from yourself. How a universe would explain its vogue for you I can't imagine. Good night, Allen. My mother said that a wedding is a death, a death is a wedding. You can figure out some comfortable arrangement for yourself with these pillows if you can sleep.

Rosabianca sleeps as I write this memoir for her. As I write it for you, Rosabianca, with whom I exchanged dialects. Scotland is mine again, and is green. When light breaks, I will walk into the forest of exquisitely differentiated greens—goodbye, Rosabianca—leaving you as my translation of its green language (leaving you as my translation of its green language into truth) (my translation of the green language of trees) (knowing that the green language of this forest is true if you are its translation) (true if it is translated into you) (the green language of this forest speaks the truth if it is translatable into you) (the green language true if you would but translate it) (transpose) (if you are its translation) (the green language true if you would but transpose it) (You and this green language translate one truth): I go to my transposal among the trees.

I did not sleep. I have read this sermon written by Allen. Of course I said almost none of this. Husbands and wives rarely call each other by their given names. Allen wished that I spoke like that so that I would sound like him. He was always fictional. "By fictional I mean twisted to fit an assumption." I was born among antiquities in the hills beyond Trieste during a truce, and I am an unlikely ingredient in the reforestation of Scotland. Awareness of continuity is the first discontinuity, and is tragic enough. Allen expects to make a difference by being translated into trees, as if to be were to be translatable. Let him rest comfortably upon his throne of skulls.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Escape Routes

At the 1974 meeting of the Science Fiction Research Association, an annual event which I like to call *The Bride of Frankenstein in the Grove of Academe*, Alexei and Cory Panshin held forth eloquently against the teaching of science fiction in schools and colleges. It seemed a bit quixotic, since their audience consisted of teachers of science fiction, people so interested in and committed to the subject that they had come from all over the country to talk about it and learn how to do it better; since thousands of high schools give science fiction courses now, and the stuffiest college English departments are stooping to conquer. I don't think there's really much question, now, of keeping the professors off Aldebaran. They're there. And that face looking out of the fifth story window of the Ivory Tower, that's the Little Green Man. For myself, I accept this miscegenation happily, and am simply interested in what the offspring may be.

For undoubtedly the recent great increase in the teaching of science fiction is going to affect the writing of science fiction. Our audience has widened immensely; and for the first time, we in the science fiction ghetto are beginning to get criticism—not brush-offs from literary snobs, and not blasts of praise and condemnation from jealous, loyal, in-group devotees, but real criticism by trained, intelligent people who have read widely both inside and outside the field. This could be the best thing that ever happened to science fiction, the confirmation of it, both to its readers and to its writers, as a powerful and responsible art form.

A ghetto is a comfortable, reassuring place to live, but it is also a crippling place to live. The essence of a ghetto, after all, is that you are *forced* to live there. To choose the ghetto when one is free to choose the greater community is an act of cowardice. Now that the walls are breaking down, I think it behooves us to step across the rubble and face the city outside. We need not lose our solidarity in doing so. Solidarity, loyalty, is not a prison, where you can't choose: it is a choice freely made. But equally

we shouldn't expect to be welcomed with songs of praise by all the strangers out there. Why should we be? We're strangers to them, too. If we have weaknesses, we must learn to take criticism of them; if we have strengths, we must prove them.

One way we can show our strength is by helping the serious critics of science fiction to set up a critical apparatus, a set of standards, suited to the study and teaching of science fiction. Some of the criteria by which the conventional novel is discussed and judged apply to science fiction, and some don't. Teachers can't switch from *A Tale of Two Cities* to *The Man in the High Castle* without changing gears; if they do, one book or the other is going to be misinterpreted, mistreated. Fortunately, in two areas at least, science fiction has established its own standards, and has been applying them with increasing severity in writing, in teaching writing, and in teaching science fiction as literature.

The first of these is the criterion of intellectual coherence and scientific plausibility.

The basic canon of fantasy, of course, is: you get to make up the rules, but then you've got to follow them. Science fiction refines this: you get to make up the rules, but within limits. A science fiction story must not flout the evidence of science, must not, as Chip Delany puts it, deny what is known to be known. Or if it does, the writer must know it, and defend the liberty taken, either with a genuine hypothesis or with a sound, convincing fake. If I give my spaceships FTL speed, I must be aware that I'm contradicting Albert Einstein, and accept the consequences—all the consequences. In this, precisely, lies the unique aesthetic delight of science fiction, in the intense, coherent following-through of the implications of an idea, whether it's a bit of far-out technology, or a theory in quantum mechanics, or a satirical projection of current social trends, or a whole world created by extrapolating from biology and ethnology. When such an idea is consistently worked out in material, intellectual, social, psychological, and moral terms, something solid has been done, something real: a thing that can be read, taught, and judged squarely on its own terms. The "sense of wonder" isn't a feeble perfume; it's built right into a good story, and the closer you look the stronger the sense of wonder.

A second criticism is that of stylistic competence.

You know what science fiction was like in the Golden Age of Science Fiction. You know. It was like this. "Oh, Professor Higgins," cooed the slender, vivacious Laura, "but do tell me how does the antipastomatter denudifier work?" Then Professor Higgins, with a kindly, absent-minded smile, explains how it works for about six pages, garble garble garble. Then the Starship Captain steps in, with a tight, twisted smile on his lean, bronzed face. His steely grey eyes glint. He lights a cigarette and inhales

deeply. “Oh, Captain Tommy,” Laura inquires with a vivacious toss of her head, “is there anything wrong?”—“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it,” the Captain replies, inhaling deeply. “A fleet of nine thousand Gloobian Slime Monsters off the port side, that’s all.” And so on. You know. American science fiction used to be a pulp medium, popcult, all that. Now it isn’t—not all of it, anyhow. It has rejoined the science fiction of England and Europe, which was sparse but never schlock except when it imitated us, and which was always part of the major tradition of fiction. And therefore it is to be judged not as schlock, not as junk, but as fiction.

What I’m saying is neither self-evident, nor popular. Within the science fiction ghetto, many people don’t want their books, or their favorite writers’ books, judged as literature. They want junk, and they bitterly resent aesthetic judgment of it. And outside the ghetto, there are critics who like to stand above science fiction, looking down upon it, and therefore want it to be junky, popcult, contemptible. There was a strong vein of this in Gerald Jonas’ otherwise perceptive *New Yorker* article, and it’s one of the many games Leslie Fiedler plays. Fortunately it’s a game that our best science fiction critic, Darko Suvin, never plays. I consider it a real cop-out, an arrogance towards both the books and their readers.

There is an area where science fiction has most often failed to judge itself, and where it has been most harshly judged by its nonpartisans. It is an area where we badly need intelligent criticism and discussion. The oldest argument against science fiction is both the shallowest and the profoundest: the assertion that science fiction, like all fantasy, is escapist.

This statement is shallow when made by the shallow. When an insurance broker tells you that science fiction doesn’t deal with the Real World, when a chemistry freshman informs you that Science has disproved Myth, when a censor suppresses a book because it doesn’t fit the canons of Socialist Realism, and so forth, that’s not criticism; it’s bigotry. If it’s worth answering, the best answer was given by Tolkien, author, critic, and scholar. Yes, he said, fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don’t we consider it his duty to escape? The money-lenders, the know-nothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we’re partisans of liberty, then it’s our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as possible.

But people who are not fools or bigots, people who love both art and liberty, critics as responsible as Edmund Wilson, reject science fiction flatly as a genre simply not worth discussing. Why? What makes them so sure?

The question, after all, must be asked: From what is one escaping, and to what?

Evidently, if we're escaping a world that consists of *Newsweek*, *Pravda*, and the Stock Market Report, and asserting the existence of a primary, vivid world, an intenser reality where joy, tragedy, and morality exist, then we're doing a good thing, and Tolkien is right. But what if we're doing just the opposite? What if we're escaping from a complex, uncertain, frightening world of death and taxes into a nice simple cozy place where heroes don't have to pay taxes, where death happens only to villains, where Science, plus Free Enterprise, plus the Galactic Fleet in black and silver uniforms, can solve all problems, where human suffering is something that can be *cured*—like scurvy? This is no escape from the phony. This is an escape into the phony. This doesn't take us in the direction of the great myths and legends, which is always toward an intensification of the mystery of the real. This takes us the other way, toward a rejection of reality, in fact toward madness: infantile regression, or paranoid delusion, or schizoid insulation. The movement is retrograde, autistic. We have escaped by locking ourselves in jail.

And inside the padded cell the people sit and say, Gee wow have you read the latest Belch the Barbarian story? It's the greatest.

They don't care if anybody outside is listening. They don't want to know that there is an outside.

Because the most famous works of science fiction are socially and ethically speculative, the field has got a reputation for being inherently "relevant." Accused of escapism, it defends itself by pointing to Wells, Orwell, Huxley, Capek, Stapledon, Zamyatin. But that won't wash: not for us. Not one of those writers was an American. My feeling is that American science fiction, while riding on the reputation of great European works, still clings to the pulp tradition of escapism.

That's overstated, and perhaps unfair. Recent American science fiction has been full of stories tackling totalitarianism, nationalism, overpopulation, pollution, prejudice, racism, sexism, militarism, and so on: all the "relevant" problems. *Again*, *Dangerous Visions* was a regular textbook in Problems (and my story was one of the chapters). But what worries me is that so many of these stories and books have been written in a savagely self-righteous tone, a tone that implies that there's an answer, a simple answer, and why can't all you damn fools out there see it? Well, I call this escapism: a sensationalist raising of a real question, followed by a quick evasion of the weight and pain and complexity involved in really, experientially, trying to understand and cope with that question. And by the way, I'm not talking only about the reactionary, easy-answer schools of

science fiction, the technocrats, scientologists, "libertarians," and so on, but also about the chic nihilism affected by many talented American and English writers of my generation. Annihilation is the easiest answer of all. You just close all the doors.

If science fiction has a major gift to offer literature, I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, psychically open. No doors shut.

What science, from physics and astronomy to history and psychology, has given us, is the open universe: a cosmos that is not a simple, fixed hierarchy, but an immensely complex process in time. All the doors stand open, from the prehuman past through the incredible present to the terrible and hopeful future. All connections are possible. All alternatives are thinkable. It is not a comfortable, reassuring place. It's a very large house, a very drafty house. But it's the house we live in.

And science fiction seems to be the modern literary art which is capable of living in that huge and drafty house, and feeling at home there, and playing games up and down the stairs, from basement to attic.

I think that's why kids like science fiction, and demand to be taught it, to study it, to take it seriously. They feel this potential it has for playing games with and making sense and beauty out of our fearfully enlarged world of knowledge and perception. And that's why it gripes me when I see science fiction failing to do so, falling back on silly, simplistic reassurances, or whining Woe, woe, repent, or taking refuge in mere wishful thinking.

So I welcome the study and teaching of science fiction—so long as the teachers will criticize us, demandingly, responsibly, and make the students read us demandingly, responsibly. If science fiction is treated, not as junk, not as escapism, but as an intellectually, aesthetically, and ethically responsible art, a great form, it will become so: it will fulfill its promise. The door to the future will be open.

Roger Zelazny

Some Science Fiction Parameters: A Biased View

I remember the seats and the view: hard wood, with corrugated metal high above, television monitors below on the ground, ready, a big clock scoring the seconds; in the distance, a narrow inlet of calm water reflecting a grayness of cloud between us and the vehicle. A couple places over to my left, Harry Stubbs was taking a picture. To my right, a young Korean girl was doing the same thing without a camera. She was painting a watercolor of the scene. In the tier immediately before and below me, with occasional gestures, a European journalist was speaking rapid Serbo-Croat into a plug-in telephone. On the ground, to the far left, the brightly garbed center of a small system of listeners, Sybil Leek was explaining that the weather would clear up shortly and there would be no further problems. When the weather did clear and the clock scythed down the final seconds, we saw the ignition before we heard it and the water was agitated by a shock wave racing across in our direction. Apollo 14 was already lifting when the sound struck, and the volume kept increasing until the metal roof vibrated. A cheer went up around us and I kept watching until the roof's edge blocked my view. Then I followed the flight's progress on the monitor. I remember thinking, "I've waited for this."

I was not really thinking about science fiction at that moment. I was thinking only of the event itself. Yet I would not have been waiting at that spot at that time had it not been for my connection with science fiction. It was in the calmer hours of later evenings after that I did give some thought to the manner in which science fiction has touched me over the years, trying to fit a few of the things that seemed part of it into some larger perspective.

I was raised and educated in times and places where science fiction was not considered a branch of *belles lettres*. As I was exposed to critical

thought in other areas of literature, it did seem to me that science fiction was being shortchanged, in that when it was mentioned at all it was generally with reference to the worst rather than the best that it had to offer. Unfair, yet this was the way of the world.

Recently, however, the situation changed, and science fiction has been a subject of increasing critical and academic scrutiny. The reason, I feel, is partly that a sufficiently large body of good science fiction has now been amassed to warrant such consideration, but mainly that those who felt as I did in earlier times and then proceeded to follow academic careers have taken approximately this long to achieve positions where they could do something about it. Therefore, I have been pleased whenever I have been asked to address a university audience on this subject, not simply because it seems to represent some vindication of my tastes, but because I feel comfortable with those who worked to effect the change in attitude.

Yet, this generated a new problem for me. Every time I spoke, I had to have something to say. It required that I examine my own unquestioned responses to science fiction and consider some of the forces which have shaped and are shaping it. When I was asked to do this piece, I decided to draw together the results of these efforts and display whatever chimera might emerge, both because I am curious to see it myself and because I wish to get in a few words before the amount of science fiction criticism surpasses the amount of science fiction and I am less likely to be noticed.

The Apollo-sized hole filled in my psyche that day in Florida had been excavated more than twenty years earlier, when I had begun reading tales of space travel. This was a part of it—certainly not all; but emotion is as much a part of meaning as thought, and since most long-time fans began reading the literature at an early age, the feelings it aroused were generally the main attraction. What do they really amount to? Pure escapism? A love of cosmic-scale spectacle? The reinforcement of juvenile fantasies at about the time they would normally begin to fade? All of these? Some? None? Or something else?

The term “sense of wonder” gets considerable mileage in discussions such as this, and I have sought this feeling elsewhere in literature in hope of gaining a fuller understanding of its mechanism. I have experienced it in two other places: the writings of Saint-Exupéry on the early days of air travel and the writings of Jacques Cousteau on the beginnings of underwater exploration with scuba gear. The common element, as I saw it, was that both stories share with science fiction a theme involving the penetration of previously unknown worlds by means of devices designed and assembled by man, thereby extending his senses into new realms.

Turning backward, I felt obliged to classify the myths, legends, scrip-

tural writings and bits of folklore which have always held a high place in my imaginary wanderings as contributory but different. There have always been storytellers of a speculative cast of mind who have taken some delight in playing about the peripheries of the known, guessing at the dimensions of the unknown. It might be argued that this is a necessary ingredient, by Aristotle's definition, for the highest form of literature—the epic—dealing as it does with the entire ethos of a people, up to and including that open end of the human condition, death itself, in a fashion transcending even the grand visions of tragedy and comedy. True epics of course are few and historically well-spaced, but that slightly more mundane ingredient, the speculative impulse, be it of Classic, Christian or Renaissance shading, which ornamented Western literature with romances, fables, exotic voyages and utopias, seemed to me basically the same turn of fancy exercised today in science fiction, working then with the only objects available to it. It took the Enlightenment, it took science, it took the industrial revolution to provide new sources of ideas that, pushed, poked, inverted and rotated through higher spaces, resulted in science fiction. When the biggest, most interesting ideas began emerging from science, rather than from theology or the exploration of new lands, hindsight makes it seem logical that something like science fiction had to be delivered.

Of course, the realistic novel was also slapped on the bottom and uttered its first cries at that time, an event which requires a glance at the differences in endowment. Basically, as I have said here and there before, the modern, realistic novel has discarded what Northrop Frye has classified as the higher modes of character. It is a democratic place, without room for heroes, rash kings, demigods and deities. Science fiction, on the other hand, retained and elaborated these modes, including mutants, aliens, robots, androids and sentient computers. There is a basic difference in character and characterization as well as the source and flow of ideas.

And what of those ideas? It has been persuasively argued that *Frankenstein* was the first science fiction novel. To simplify, as one must in these discussions, there seems to be, within the body of science fiction, a kind of Frankenstein vs. Pygmalion tension, an internal and perhaps eternal debate as to whether man's creations will destroy him or live happily with him forever after. In the days when I began reading science fiction I would say that, statistically, Pygmalion had the upper hand. The "sense of wonder" as I knew it was in most stories unalloyed with those fears and concerns which the unforeseen side effects of some technological usages have brought about in recent years. The lady delivered purer visions involving the entry into new worlds and the extension of our senses. Now the cautionary quality is returned, and the shadow of Frankenstein's

monster falls across much of our work. Yet, because this is a part of the force which generates the visions, it cannot be destructive to the area itself. Speaking not as a prognosticator or moralist, but only as a writer, my personal feelings are that a cycle such as this is good for the field, that if nothing else it promotes a re-examination of our attitudes, whatever they may be, toward the basic man-machine-society relationships. End of disgression.

Science fiction's special quality, the means by which it achieves its best effects, is of course the imagination, pitched here several octaves above the notes it sounds elsewhere in literature. To score it properly is one of the major difficulties faced in the writing of science fiction; namely, in addition to the standard requirements encountered in composing a mundane story, one has the added task of explaining the extra plot premises and peculiarities of setting—without visibly slowing the action or lessening the tensions which must be built as the narrative progresses. This has led, over the years, to the development of clichés (I would like to have said “conventions,” but the word has a way of not working properly when applied to science fiction), clichés involving the acceptance at mere mention of such phenomena as faster-than-light travel, telepathy, matter transmission, immortality drugs and instant language translation devices, to name a few. Their use represents an artificiality of an order not found elsewhere in contemporary letters—excepting individual poets with private mythologies, which is not really the same thing as an entire field holding stock in common. Yet the artificiality does not really detract and the illusion does work because of the compensatory effect of a higher level of curiosity aroused as to the nature of the beast. Literally anything may be the subject of a science fiction story. In accepting the clichés of science fiction, one is also abandoning the everyday assumptions that hold for the run of mundane fiction. This in some ways requires a higher degree of sophistication, but the rewards are commensurate.

These are some of the more obvious things which set science fiction apart from the modern realistic story. But, if there must be some grand, overall scheme to literature, where does science fiction fit? I am leery of that great classifier Aristotle in one respect which bears on the issue. The Hellenic world did not view the passage of time as we do. History was considered in an episodic sense, as the struggles of an unchanging mankind against a relentless and unchanging fate. The slow process of organic evolution had not yet been detected, and the grandest model for a world-view was the seeming changeless patternings of the stars. It took the same processes which set the stage for science fiction—eighteenth-century

rationalism and nineteenth-century science—to provide for the first time in the history of the world a sense of historical direction, of time as a developmental, non-repetitive sequence.

This particular world view became a part of science fiction in a far more explicit fashion than in any other body of storytelling, as it provided the basis for its favorite exercise: extrapolation. I feel that because of this, science fiction is the form of literature least affected by Aristotle's dicta with respect to the nature of the human condition, which he saw as immutable, and the nature of man's fate, which he saw as inevitable.

Yet science fiction is concerned with the human condition and with man's fate. It is the speculative nature of its concern which required the abandonment of the Aristotelian strictures involving the given imponderables. Its methods have included a retention of the higher modes of character, an historical, developmental time sense, assimilation of the tensions of a technological society and the production of a "sense of wonder" by exercises of imagination extending awareness into new realms—a sensation capable, at its best, of matching the power of that experience of recognition which Aristotle held to be the strongest effect of tragedy. It might even be argued that the sense of wonder represents a different order of recognition, but I see no reason to ply the possible metaphysics of it at this point.

Since respectability tends to promote a concern for one's ancestors, we are fortunate to be in on things at the beginning today when one can still aim high and compose one's features into an attitude of certainty while hoping for agreement. It occurs to me then that there is a relationship between the entire body of science fiction and that high literary form, the epic. Traditionally, the epic was regarded as representing the spirit of an entire people—the *Iliad*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Aeneid* showing us the values, the concerns, the hoped-for destinies of the Greeks, the ancient Indians, the Romans. Science fiction is less provincial, for it really deals with humanity as such. I am not so temerarious as to suggest that any single work of science fiction has ever come near the epic level (though Olaf Stapledon probably came closest), but wish rather to observe that the impulse behind it is akin to that of the epic chronicler, and is reflected in the desire to deal with the future of humanity, describing in every way possible the spirit and destiny not of a single nation but of Man.

High literature, unfortunately, requires more than good intentions, and so I feel obliged to repeat my caveat to prevent my being misunderstood any more than is usually the case. In speaking of the epic, I am attempting to indicate a similarity in spirit and substance between science fiction as a whole and some of the classical features of the epic form. I am not

maintaining that it has been achieved in any particular case or even by the entire field viewed as a single entity. It may have; it may not. I stand too near to see that clearly. I suggest only that science fiction is animated in a similar fashion, occasionally possesses something like a Homeric afflatus and that its general aims are of the same order, producing a greater kinship here than with the realistic novel beside which it was born and bred. The source of this particular vitality may well be the fact that, like its subject, it keeps growing but remains unfinished.

These were some of the thoughts which occurred to me when I was asked to do a piece on the parameters of science fiction. I reviewed my association with the area, first as a reader and fan, recalling that science fiction is unique in possessing a fandom and a convention system which make for personal contacts between authors and readers, a situation which may be of peculiar significance. When an author is in a position to meet and speak with large numbers of his readers, he cannot help, at least for a little while, feeling somewhat as the oldtime storytellers must have felt in facing the questions and the comments of a live audience. The psychological process involved in this should be given some consideration as an influence on the field. I thought of my connection as a writer, self-knowledge suggesting that the remedy for the biggest headache in its composition—furnishing the extra explanations as painlessly as possible—may be the mechanism by which the imagination is roused to climb those several extra steps to the point where the unusual becomes plausible—and thus the freshness; thus, when it is well done, the wonder. And then I thought of all the extracurricular things which many of us either care about because we are science fiction writers or are science fiction writers because we care about.

Which takes me back to the stands at the Cape, to the vibrations, to the shouting, to my "I've waited for this." My enthusiasm at the successful launching of a manned flight to the moon perhaps tells you more about me than it does about science fiction and its parameters, for space flight is only a part—a colorful part, to be sure—of the story we have been engaged in telling of man and his growing awareness. For on reflection, having watched the fire, felt the force and seen the vessel lifted above the Earth, it seemed a triumph for Pygmalion; and that, I realized, had more to do with my view that day than the fire, the force or the vessel.

Lester del Rey

The Siren Song of Academe

Quite a while ago, some idiot came up with the idea that science fiction was a ghetto. Now it has become a cliché that far too many accept. Some seem to have accepted the idea so well that they developed fears of pogroms to come and hastened to convert to the true faith of the infallible mainstream. Or perhaps they have only become maranos. All of which shows that the chosen people of science fiction should never trust the goyim.

Two articles by writers from our field whom I respect and often admire demonstrate how widespread the idea of a science fiction ghetto has become. James Gunn began a guest editorial in *Analog* with that cliché; and Ursula K. Le Guin quickly got to it in her article for the Forum in *Galaxy*.

Now clichés are tricky things to use, even though I don't necessarily object to such harmless ones as "cold as ice." But they should always be re-examined by those who use them. Some, like "good as gold," are neither true nor harmless; gold is not good as a general investment in today's market—but those who automatically associate good with gold are flocking to lose their money on this unstable commodity. Clichés have a bad habit of being used as axioms by the mind—like the concept that the President is better than other men. There are a lot of people who still believe that, despite recent evidence to the contrary.

All right, let's examine just what a ghetto is. There's a good deal of argument about the origin of the word among dictionary authorities; but it's fairly obviously an Italian form (or respelling) of the Hebrew word *g-t*. (Hebrew uses a stem of consonants in which the vowels move around or change for shades of meaning.) A *git* was the paper a man of Old Testament days used to divorce—or put away—his wife. A ghetto is a place where Jews were put away. They were forced to live there, away from contact with true believers, and forbidden to be outside the ghetto after

sundown. They were put away, and they had no option but to stay there. A voluntary ghetto is a meaningless noise.

Now just who put the writers, fans and general readers of science fiction away? Who forbade them to associate freely with other readers and writers at any time? In what way were they banned, proscribed, segregated, cast out or put away?

I can't remember ever being kept from any kind of books or from libraries because I read science fiction. Nobody ever told me that I shouldn't read the old avant-garde *Story* magazine—or the books by Cervantes, Hugo, Kafka, or even Joyce and Pound. My college literature professor didn't frown when I brought *Astounding Stories* into class; in fact, it was from him that I learned about Balmer and Wylie's serial in *Bluebook*.

Nobody else I've met among a rather large acquaintanceship of writers and fans seems to have been kept from reading outside the field of science fiction. In fact, I find that the readers of science fiction are often far better read outside that field than most other people I meet—including many of the college teachers I have known.

It's true that I was sometimes asked why I read "that trash." Curiously, the ones who asked were rarely among the people who read much better literature of any sort; the askers usually did so while buying their daily tabloid or their sports, detective or western fiction. (Incidentally, I also read a lot of those pulps; there was no discrimination about selling them to science fiction readers.)

How about a ghetto for science fiction writers, though? Sorry, I never discovered that there was one. I wrote science fiction—and still do—more than other types of stories simply because I liked writing it more. But the ability to write isn't really divisible by categories, as all good editors know, whatever the self-termed critics may feel. I have usually reserved the "Lester del Rey" byline for science fiction, but my name was typed clearly on the first page of every manuscript, to make sure the check would come to me. So, whatever pen name I used, my identity was never secret. Yet I found that nobody rejected me because I wrote science fiction.

Sometime during World War II, I happened to think of an idea for a slick story about a romance between two older people. I sent it off and got a check for it. I hadn't written a letter of introduction to the editor, but he enclosed a note to me with the check, asking whether I was the same del Rey who wrote science fiction. Apparently he was a fan.

Much later, I sent a two-page outline for a historical adventure book to a major publisher for whom I'd never written. When they queried my agent about my writing experience, he simply cited some science fiction books.

The editor didn't read that type of literature—but she accepted my work in it as sufficient proof that I could write; as a result, I got a contract without the need of sample chapters. Rather than a cause being put away, my experience has been that science fiction is a means of being accepted generally as a writer. I've written darned near every type there is (except for the long defunct love pulp type), both fiction and nonfiction, and I've never found any editor who wanted to put me in a ghetto.

Even academic circles never seemed desirous of excluding science fiction writers. Quite a few from our ranks have been sought for and welcomed into the world of academe—with Philip Klass (William Tenn) as only one example. Certainly I was never excluded. More than twenty years ago, I lectured and taught quite often at various college and other writing workshops. And even when I was teaching mystery stories or general marketing, considerable emphasis was placed on the fact that I was a well-known science fiction author.

Of course, superficial study might indicate that the science fiction magazines were a sort of restricted group. They were usually clumped together on the stands. But things weren't that simple, even there. Back in the days before 1950—when there were a lot of fiction magazines—many of the general pulps featured science fiction. So did some of the slicks. And when I was first reading, I found much of the best science fiction in the pages of *American Boy*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper's*, to name only three. Nope, no real discrimination there.

In fact, there never was any kind of a ghetto for science fiction. There were specialized magazines for it; but in those days, there were specialized magazines for almost every interest. And many of the writers and readers tended to join together to promote their interest in the field. But if getting together sometimes in somewhat exclusive groups created a ghetto, then the finest example of a ghetto I know is the typical exclusive country club!

I've belabored the point about our "ghetto" because I think the term must be proved wrong. Too many people who are setting themselves up to criticize and guide us have been using it. I think it's time we took a good look at them with a clear understanding of how easily they fall into error. And when anyone sets himself (or herself) up to examine our field critically—and then begins with a major false assumption about that field—we can damned well be suspicious of every other assumption! What kind of a critic is it who accepts a false cliché as a working fact about the subject being criticized?

I'm *not* opposed to criticism, in its fullest sense. For years, I've been lamenting the dearth of good criticism from a number of public platforms. I'd like to see someone do for science fiction what C. S. Lewis did for the

medieval romance—or for all literature in his *Experiment in Criticism*. I'd like to see someone like Ezra Pound use his critical scalpel on us. It would be good for us—and maybe I'd enjoy reading that criticism as much as I enjoy the critical works of Lewis and Pound.

But I don't want criticism of our works, or our attitudes as science fiction readers, that is based upon adjurations to open our minds to the truth, and is then itself filled with the hoariest of bad critical judgment of what we are.

I agree completely with James Gunn when he says: "If science fiction has any vitality, criticism won't kill it . . . so long as the writers do not accept the critics as final arbiters." In fact, I don't think the cant of criticism (as Sterne put it in *Tristram Shandy* more than two centuries ago), though it be most tormenting, can ever kill science fiction; that was proved by its resistance to the gibes of the critics during its first thirty years. But unfortunately, too many writers are beginning to write for the approval of the critics rather than for themselves or their readers. Public reaction to a book is diffuse and slow to discover; but the words of the critic are direct and often quick. It's a temptation to write for those words, and try to make them more pleasant ones. And even more sadly, some of the publishers and editors in the book field seem to accept the critics as, in some measure, arbiters of what science fiction should be. Criticism can't kill the field—but it can distort it, at least for a time, if it is misinformed or self-serving.

I agree that we need "literary feedback, criticism from sophisticated critics." We need critics who are thoroughly conversant with the great body of literature of all kinds and who are also conversant with the body of science fiction. The finest critic of wine may be a lousy critic of beer, or vice versa; a man who is steeped in the great classics may likewise be a lousy critic of science fiction without long familiarity with it—because the ways in which it does not conform will irritate his sensibilities so much that he may well not see the virtues that are unique to it.

But I cannot agree that we are about to get valuable criticism from the teachers, whom Gunn seems to equate with critics. He says they tend to be enthusiastic, open, experimental. (Having talked to a lot of them, I'm not quite that enthusiastic, but let it go.) But are they knowledgeable, capable of taste and judgment, aware of all the different types of science fiction, capable of assessing each according to its purpose? Most of them are not. Gunn admits that many do not know enough. But he passes that over by the comment that "every new discipline begins with *no* qualified teachers." That simply isn't so, unless by qualified he means qualified as a teacher by some university. In the first place, science fiction isn't a new discipline—it's now fifty years old as a special category, and older if you

count the many true science fiction stories published before the first category magazine. In the second place, almost every new discipline begins with the best possible teachers. The first ones to teach it are the men who have discovered the discipline; they teach others, who then teach the engineers who must make it work, who then set up the first regular teaching courses.

Some of the teachers who give the courses in science fiction are qualified by long experience with the field. I saw the list of books and outline of the course given by Professor Low at NYU a couple of years ago, and his approach was excellent in every way. There are a few other cases, including men who have not only read but written in the field for years. (Gunn is a fine example) But I've also been approached for help by teachers who obviously know little about the field—which wouldn't necessarily be bad if they were willing to read extensively and learn, but *is* bad because they usually feel that the field really needs no study by one who has taught "serious" literature. I've seen lopsided lists of books of every kind.

A few years ago, I went to lecture at a workshop conducted by a local college. The teacher did know something of science fiction, but didn't seem to care much for it. He grew increasingly unhappy as I answered a question from one student about the structure of a story that would sell to a magazine. When I finally used the nasty word *plot*, he could stand it no longer. "Oh," he broke in, "you're talking about what we call a good story." He sniffed in contempt. "We don't teach that here."

Later I had a chance to read a book he'd written. I could see why he didn't teach such things as plotting, structure, consistency, or sound motivation. He didn't understand them, hence had to hold them in contempt. His choice of reading material also showed that. But he's still teaching science fiction courses.

I've also had the opportunity to read a fair number of articles and books on science fiction done by those who are teaching science fiction or hope to teach it. Most of the so-called criticism consists of trying to impose some far-fetched theory onto science fiction, trying to force it into some more familiar mold, or simple attempts at sticking some label or other onto it to replace science fiction. Most of it is ignorant and misleading. In fact, one of the few bright spots was L. David Allen's *Cliff Notes*, which Gunn mentions. That was a good guide to the teaching of science fiction courses; but it was not (and wasn't intended to be) a work of criticism of the type science fiction needs.

Leaving the need for critics aside for the moment, I'd like to see a far better job of teaching science fiction than I've usually observed. The average course among the *better* ones I know about seems to take the

historical approach—start with the older books and work forward in time. That might be all right for a true study course, but most of these courses are supposedly designed with less ambitious goals; Gunn rightly seems to value them for their ability to arouse interest in the field.

A majority of the students in most classes probably haven't read a great deal of science fiction. (Some have, and are taking it as a "snap" course. But they probably know more than the average teacher anyhow.) The problem is to lead them to open their minds to this somewhat different literature. And for that purpose, the sensible program, it seems to me, would be to start the course with fairly simple but good stories, such as Heinlein's so-called juveniles (among which I'd recommend *Tunnel in the Sky* or *Star Beast*) or Clarke's *Sands of Mars*; then move up through van Vogt's *Slan*; and finally they can try reading Herbert's *Dune*, and so on.

Also, the emphasis should be on reading rather than studying. Maybe the works of Tolstoy, Kafka and Joyce need to be studied; I wouldn't know, since I prefer reading fiction to studying it—certainly when I first read it. But science fiction was meant to be read rather than studied. In most of even the better works, the story is the thing, because it was meant to be. Students get into the habit of underlining passages, pondering over some "significant" phrase, etc. That only gets in the way of reading most science fiction. Save it for Hesse and Gibrán.

When I was teaching a course in modern fantasy, I began with the announcement that I wanted no such nonsense, and that I'd downgrade anyone whose books were marked up. I also advised against taking notes in class. There were some heavy frowns from the class. But I think it paid off. At the end of the course, several students commented on being surprised at how much fun they'd had and at how many books they'd read. "You know, you were right," one young man told me. "Reading doesn't have to be work. It's even better than television sometimes."

I wish the teachers—or most of them—would make the same discovery. As a writer (in or out of any ghetto), I can ask nothing more than to be read for pleasure. I don't want to be studied and analyzed. I once was introduced to an audience by a professor who had studied and analyzed a fair number of my stories. He spent forty minutes telling the audience why and how I had done what I did. Then he left for pressing business and I had the pleasure for another forty minutes of explaining that almost every bit of his careful analysis was totally wrong. However, I tried to be reasonably tactful. After all, my stories were in good company; he was wrong about the Bible, too, since there is no Book of Exultations. I made that up (at the top of the last chapter of *For I Am a Jealous People*) as a hint to the reader that mankind won the war against God.

Maybe, however, that just proves Gunn's point that we're suspicious of overtures from outside the field. I admit that I'm sometimes very suspicious, especially when those overtures include requests that I immediately sit down and supply the basic knowledge that will go into some academic thesis; or when said overtures are for me to come to some affair put on by academe and donate my services to assure some measure of success for the work the overture is being paid to do. I like a certain amount of brass in certain overtures—but not that much, I'm afraid.

I'm also suspicious of overtures from inside the field—overtures to academe, perchance—when they contain bias and error against the field.

I'm in accord with Ms. Le Guin's rules that say science fiction must have intellectual coherence and scientific plausibility, as well as scientific competence. In fact, I'm in agreement with all the hundreds—including myself—who've repeatedly said that. But when she starts talking about the fiction of the "Golden Age," I'd like to find more historical coherence and plausibility. She says we know what science fiction was like in the Golden Age of Science Fiction. To wit, the young heroine of the story coos questions about some gadget. And Prof. Higgins "explains how it works for about six pages." Then enter the dauntless Star Captain, etc.

Sorry, Ms. Le Guin, I don't know it was like that in the Golden Age of Science Fiction—which ran more or less from 1938 to 1950. I can't remember it that way at all; I was reading it and writing it then, but I don't remember such stories at that time. The scene described did happen, more or less, in science fiction magazines; but it came from the birthing days of our literature. It was pretty well weeded out by 1934, and getting rare even before. Our writers had to learn how to handle fiction where new technology and new societies were in need of explaining in each story; but they caught on pretty fast, or the editors were rejecting all their stories by the beginning of the Golden Age.

Oh, there may have been some magazines where such schlock was published—but they certainly weren't the leading ones, by any means, nor were they the favorites of those most "ghetto-ized" among the readers. I wonder just what Ms. Le Guin was reading back in those days? Surely not the works of Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, Simak, de Camp, or even myself, to name a few from those days.

She also admits that "recent American science fiction has been full of stories tackling totalitarianism, nationalism, overpopulation, prejudice, racism, sexism, militarism, and so on."

Recent? I can recall stories dealing with every one of those things going back to the very early thirties—and some before that. In fact, science fiction quickly got over its anthropocentrism and stopped confusing form with virtue long ago. One of its strongest virtues was spreading the doctrine that

the “bad guys” didn’t have to look different nor the “good guys” look like our kind, but that every race and kind could be either bad or good, depending on its goals and motivations, not its form. Heinlein and I were writing science fiction for school libraries in which we had all colors and races—yes, and people who happened to be female—out in space long before Ms. Le Guin started writing. And we did it without making a big thing of it, but as something to be taken very much for granted. Too much of *recent* science fiction has done it in a way that indicates the writers are trying to be noticed for their “relevance,” but that’s not the way to get the best results.

Then we get into escapism. I agree that the big question is sometimes whether you’re escaping to values or from them. Good literature deals in values and the human condition, whatever the stage on which it’s played. But I’d like to suggest that the poorest literature for escapism is science fiction. If you want simple escape, try the average western novel with its simplified code of values; or the sports story, where winning is the only value; or the detective tale, where all too often good is “us” and evil is “them” and nothing we do to them, no matter how ugly, is bad. Or try some of the regular books, where all human value is rejected, and a fool who does nothing and learns nothing except perhaps to have a few affairs and gorge on self-pity is considered worthy of 300 pages or more. Science fiction, which demands that the reader enter and accept many new ways of looking at the world, is perhaps the least escapist of all literature. Sure, it isn’t for real; but neither is Faulkner nor Heller. If you want reality, at least one side of it, try Gorki.

Anyhow, what’s wrong with escape literature, however you define it? Despite the mouthings of the crypto-Marxists, not everything in life has to have a Purpose and carry a banner inscribed with “I Serve!” There are lots of escapist activities that enjoy high repute, such as collecting coins or playing chess. (Don’t get me wrong; I think chess is a marvelously intellectual game; but it isn’t of any more value to anyone or anything than is watching football, another bit of escapism.)

That ancient “escapist” label is just another convenient cliché, one probably tossed (and properly so) at Rabelais and against Dante (even more properly, since he was trying to escape from his real impotence by punishing his enemies by make-believe). It’s like the label used much too carelessly: pulp. Pulp fiction is not necessarily bad nor necessarily good. Most of Conrad, Kipling, and I don’t know how many other writers, was published first in the pulp magazines here. Somehow, practically all of the “slick” fiction and most of the “quality” fiction of the same period is no longer read, for good reason.

Maybe if more people would read C. S. Lewis’s *An Experiment in*

Criticism, they'd stop falling back on such trite devices. Lewis took a careful look at what *and why* people read. If Ms. Le Guin is not familiar with the book, she should be. It's one of the lovely jewels that sometimes comes from academe.

Ah, yes. There have to be some respectable writers, all from a list Ms. Le Guin points out as not being American. Curiously, I find Eddison missing from the list, so let me add him to Wells, Orwell (who wrote dystopias, not science fiction), Huxley (mostly ditto), Čapek and Stapledon. I refuse to add Zamyatin to the list. I might point out that most of them were printed in the early science fiction magazines and somehow found their way into our ghetto world. But that doesn't matter. It's a good list. It supports the proper critical view that American literature doesn't amount to much, and that any really cultured view must be gained from European works. But the trouble is that these are works basically written outside the field of science fiction, deliberately meant to fit into the broad stream of European literature. I would never point to them to prove that science fiction *per se* isn't escapist. They have nothing to do with any criticism of what writers should be doing *now* in the field. Maybe we should write more like those books; but if we did, we'd have very small chance of getting our works published. Those books were written before the field was mined completely, and a writer can't go back to the beginnings after the beginnings are gone.

Nevertheless, there are some American books that I might point to as being far from merely escapist. There is Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia*, which early in the century dealt with many of the things being discussed on campuses today. (It's at least as legitimately science fiction as Orwell or Huxley.) There is Frank Herbert's *Dune*, dealing not merely with ecology but far more with a philosophy of man and progress. And there is indeed Ursula K. Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness*, which I consider a unique study of the nature of human love, worthy to stand beside any European literature, but beholden to itself alone. Let's not fall into the popular cliché among intellectuals that everything American is trash.

Of course, the guardians and acolytes of academe tend naturally to a conservative outlook in the humanities, which makes them suspicious of newer works and newer ways. This is quite proper for the needs of academe, and I respect them for it within their own proper area. They must conserve the best of human achievements and attempt to instill a respect for and understanding of such works in the minds of their students, who tend to be impatient with anything not current. The nature of the work in the humanities demands a somewhat conservative outlook.

So do the limits within which those who evaluate our best must work.

There is no sure guide to what will prove of enduring value except the test of time and hindsight. The success of those who have tried to make quick decisions on values has been woefully bad. Too many of the “great” works of one generation prove valueless to another. And too many of the relatively unnoticed works come to be appreciated properly only after many years.

But that very conservatism must make most of the critics who serve in such institutions highly suspect when they attempt to evaluate or guide us in something as new and multiform as science fiction.

Both the articles under discussion seem to take it for granted that the critics we will have from the world of academe will enable us to improve science fiction. But will they? What is their track record? They have been busy improving the novels of the mainstream for quite a few years; they were already at work on that, though less obviously, when I began reading criticism forty years ago. Lately, they’ve captured a fair amount of space in the largest-circulation review magazine, as well as in the more learned forums for criticism. Has the mainstream improved that much?

Not by what I hear from academe! I keep hearing that the novel is either dead or dying. Could it be that all their improvements have simply turned a healthy creation into a moribund one, even in their own judgment? If that’s the improvement we can expect from them in science fiction, then I want no part in it. If superior fiction is based only on the essential tragedy of man, then let me write trash in which I can sometimes indulge in the idea that being man is so much better than being nonexistent or ameboid that I call it a triumph. If the use of a fairly simple style to describe the complexity of other worlds and times is the sign of my pulp background, then so be it; I have no intention of developing the elaborated, tortuous, impressionistic or “experimental” style that may be necessary to perk up the threadbare nature of most mainstream ideas. (I’m not convinced it helps, even there.) And if trying to develop tight and explicit plots makes me a hack, then I’ll get by with my royalties and leave the acclaim of the critics to those who find them necessary.

That doesn’t mean my mind is completely closed. But it isn’t wide open to the overtures of anyone outside the field, or to those of most within it, for that matter. I’ll stick with what I know of the universe—which is a long way from being wide open. There are quite a few rather rigid limits on that universe, without which it wouldn’t work. There is that pesky limitation on velocity which seems to make a faster-than-light drive impossible, and even a near-light drive incredibly demanding on energy sources. Maybe that will be bypassed some day; let’s hope so. But there remain several conservation laws (mass-energy, momentum, angular momentum, and

more) that set limits on us. And just maybe thermodynamics and other knowledge indicate the whole darned universe is running down—that it will be all closed eventually, after all, despite Ms. Le Guin's faith. I intend to be a bit skeptical still as to the blandishments of new scientific or literary theories.

Science fiction has evolved pretty much by itself for nearly fifty years. During that time, it has grown and developed. Now, at a time when most literature is in a decline, despite the nostrums of its bedside critics, science fiction is healthily capturing more readers and more of the market. Perhaps there is something to be said for a field that can establish and maintain its own values.

During almost forty years, I've spent a lot of time outside the "ghetto" reading works of every description, including a fair amount of criticism. I've tried as best I can to improve my techniques of writing, in science fiction and far outside it. I've always been grateful for the help some criticism has given. But I'm suspicious enough to open my mind only when I find that the critic knows his field (or mine, if it's science fiction he's criticizing) at least as well as I do, plus something about the world beyond the limits of his field. And I insist on my right to stick to the style and ideas I want to write and like to read.

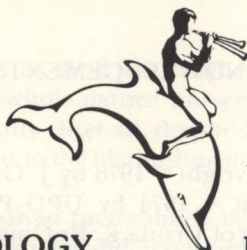
Thus I refuse to take Gunn's final advice seriously. I've heard for decades that writers must broaden the appeal of science fiction. Experience teaches me that this is another of those clichés that is false. I don't really believe in the lowest common denominator appeal for science fiction. I've seen the results of broadening the appeal of television from the early, experimental and sometimes marvelous beginnings. I prefer to write for those with sufficient flexibility and intellect to be able to grasp science fiction as it is, and to appreciate it at its best and most demanding. Until the self-termed critics can do as much and can come up with more than clichés (half of them untrue), I'll remain an unregenerate writer and reader of science fiction.

And if critics still insist that science fiction is a ghetto, I say:

STAY OUT OF MY GHETTO!

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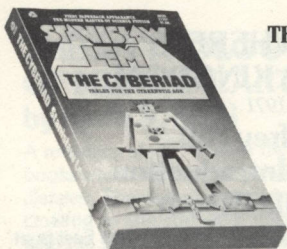
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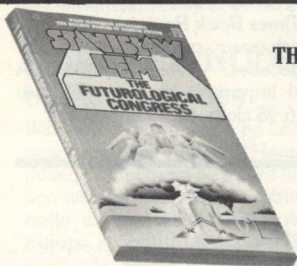
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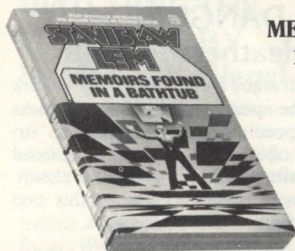
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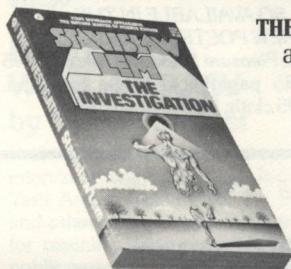
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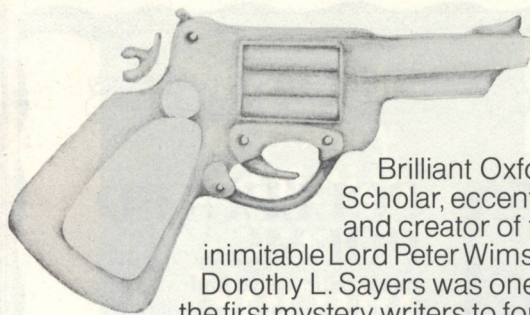
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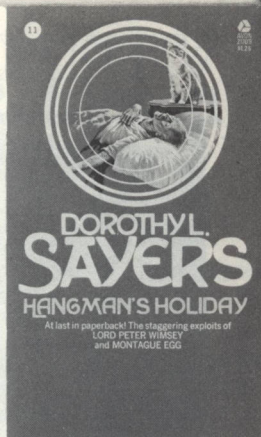
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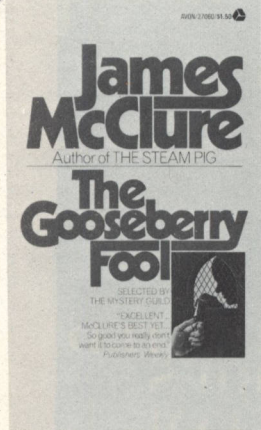


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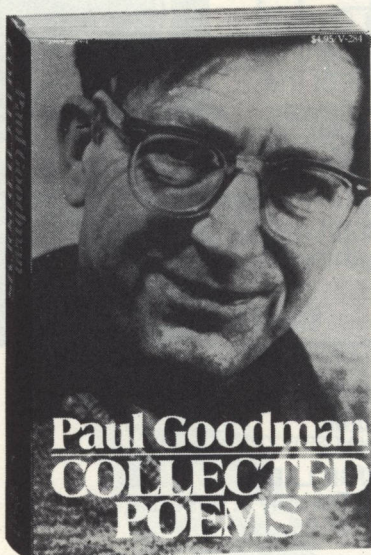
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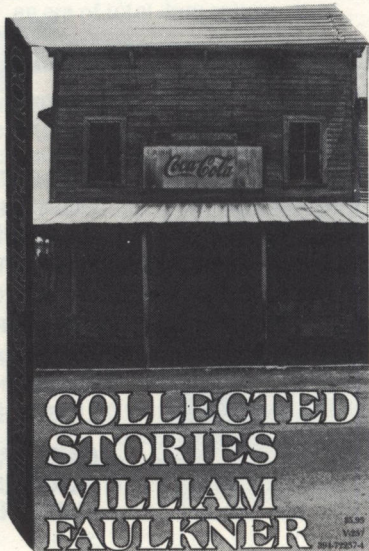
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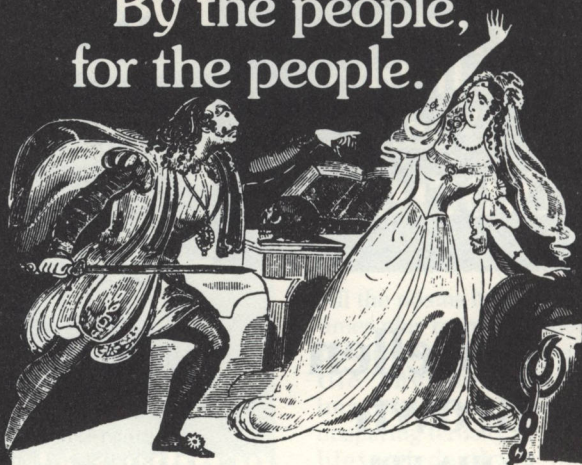
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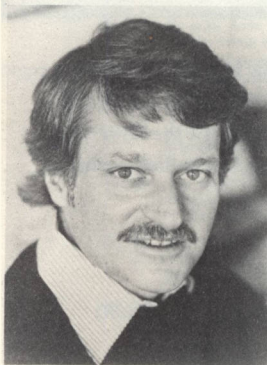


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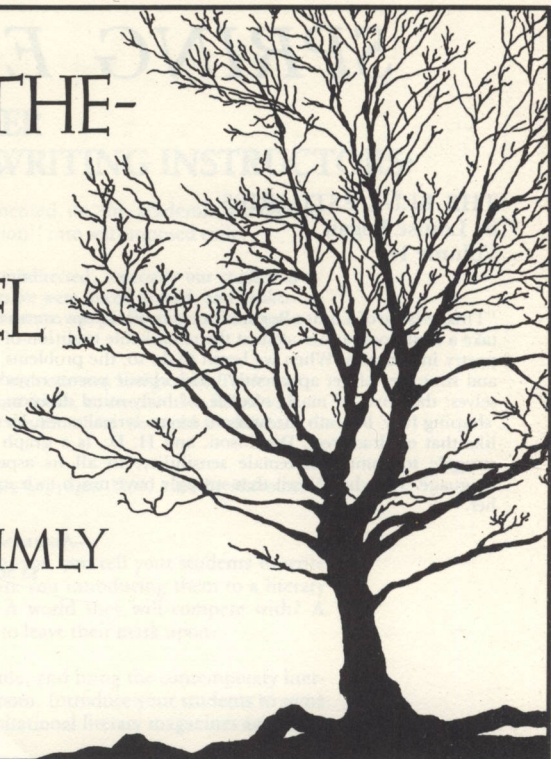
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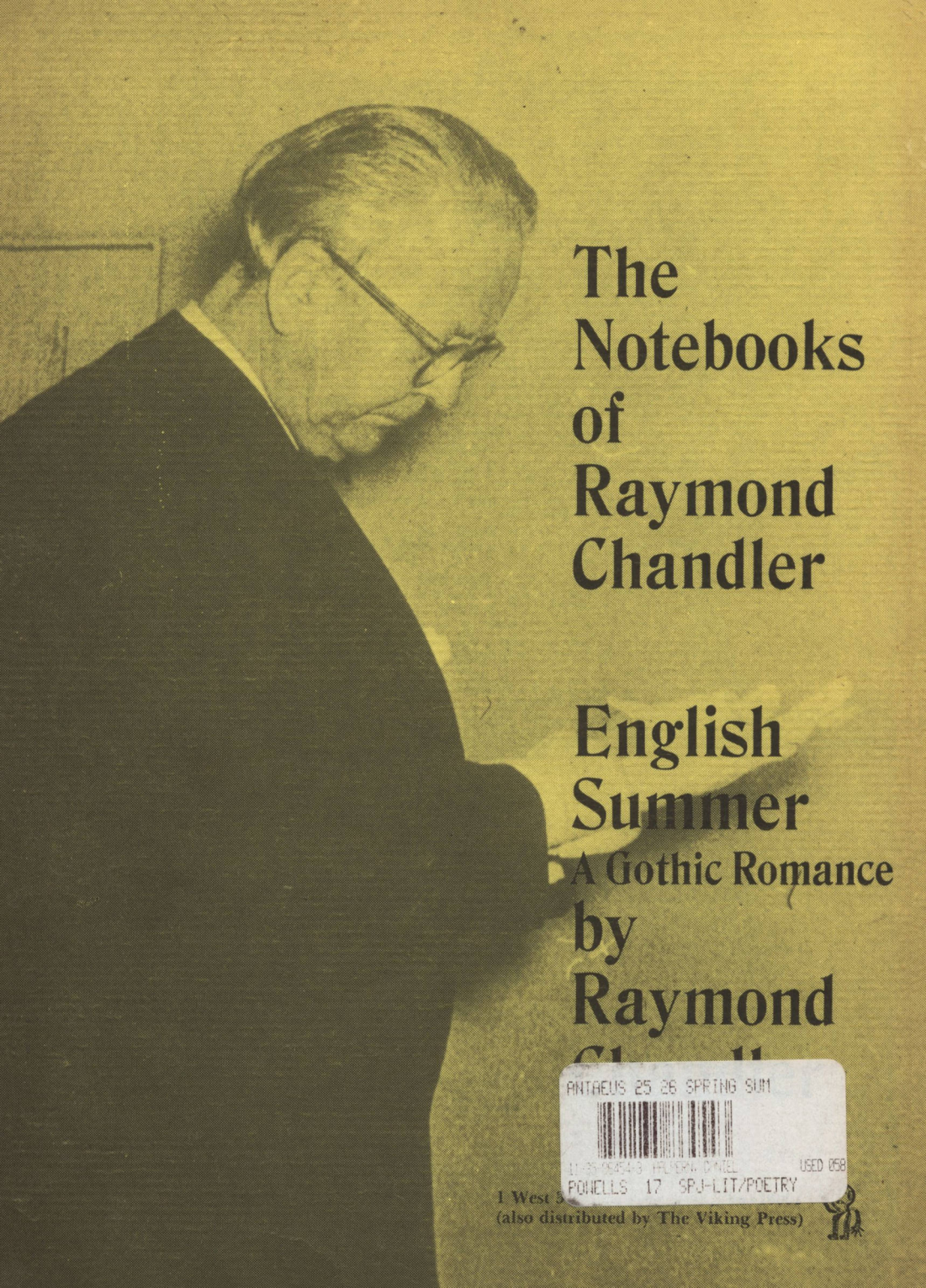
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