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Cosmos

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY



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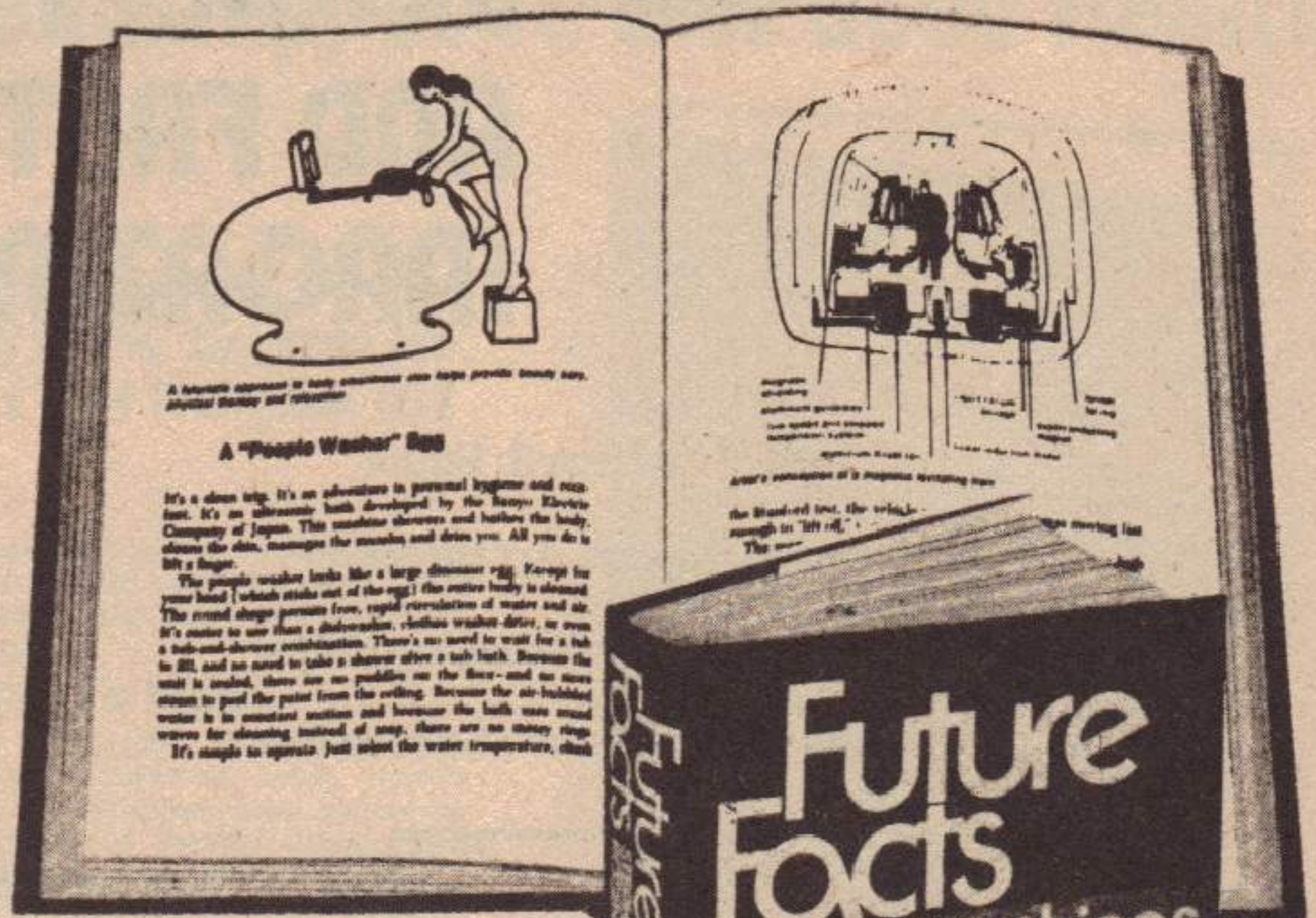
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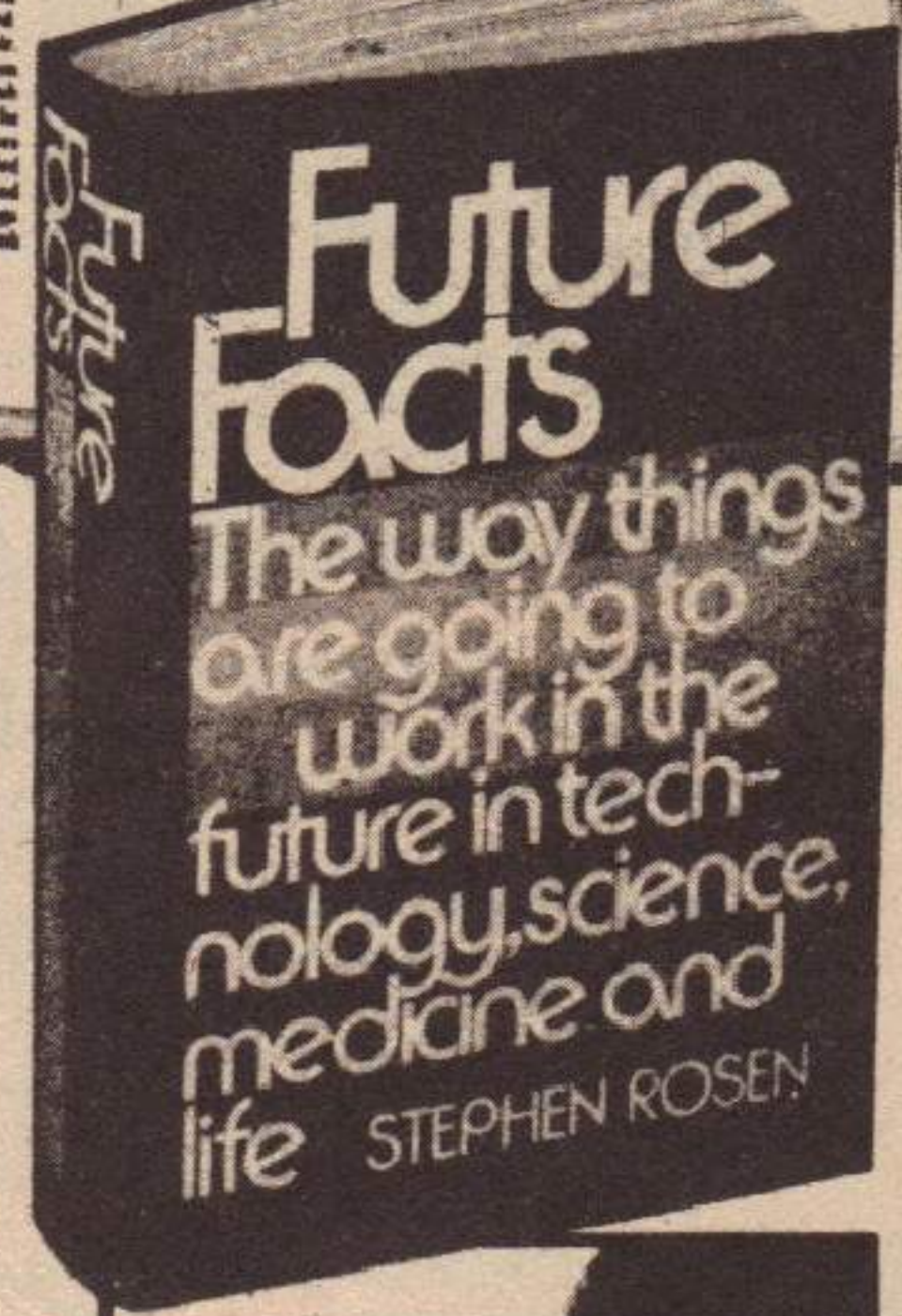
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The Man Behind FUTURE FACTS

Stephen Rosen's specialty is the future. He was trained in the astrophysics of cosmic radiation, and was a research scientist at IBM and the Institut d'Astrophysique in Paris. Dr. Rosen is now a consultant on new products, services and markets of the future to major foundations, Fortune 500 corporations, and other future-oriented firms.

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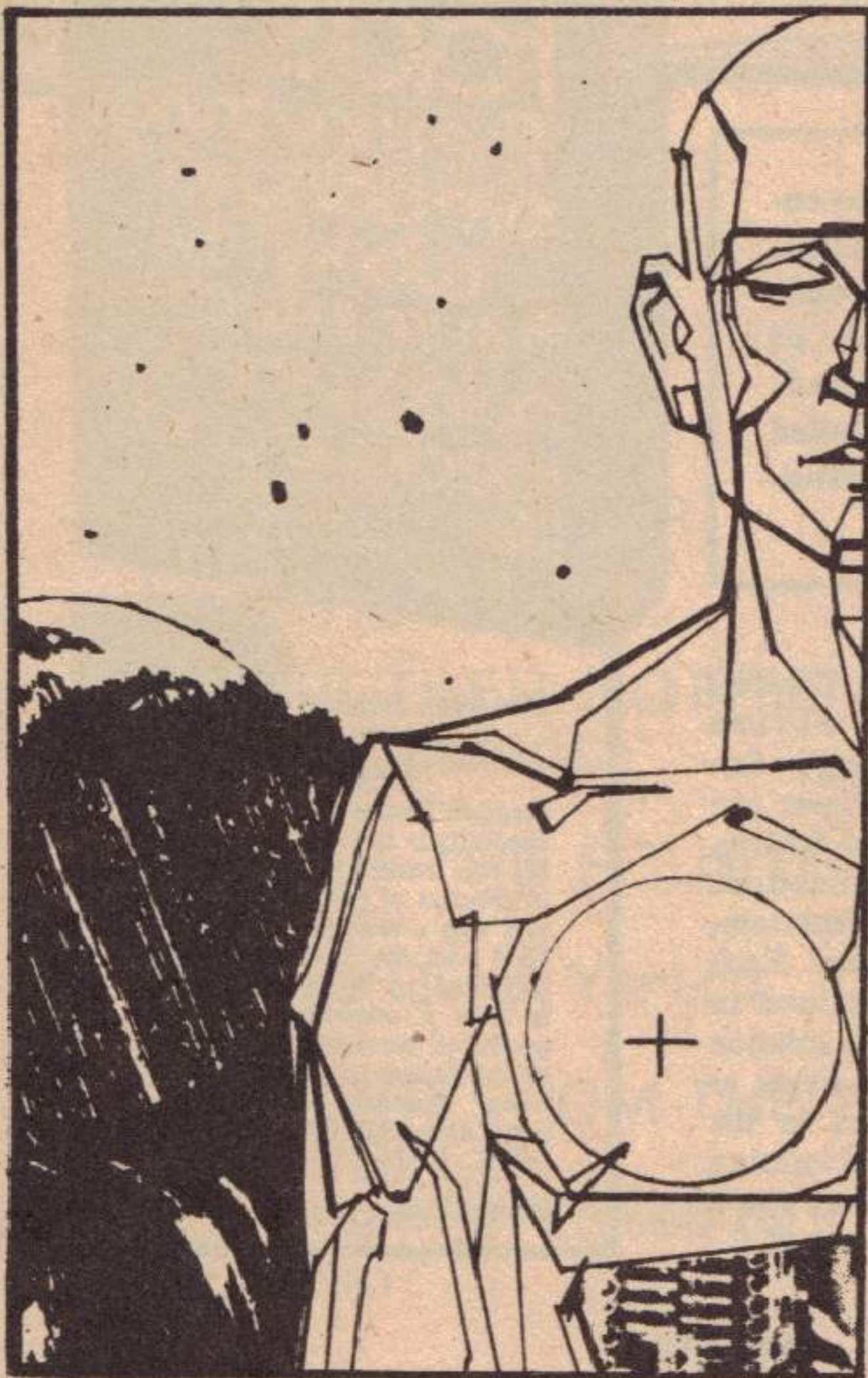
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How James E., a chain smoker in failing health, was able to stop smoking entirely in three weeks just by saying the Meditation on page 20, says Norvell.

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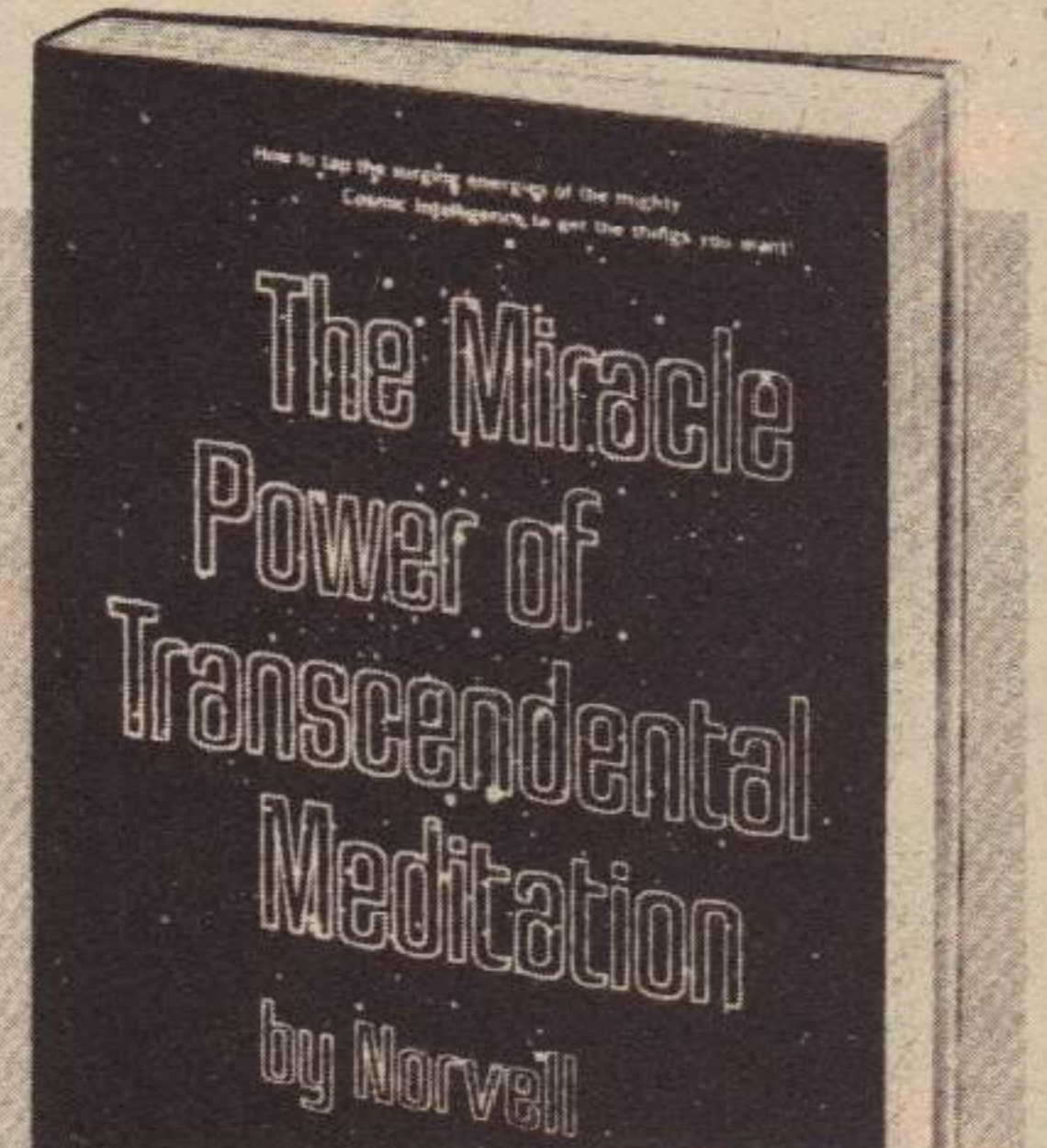
And take the case of the woman who wanted a big raise. After saying a Meditation, her boss called her into his office, and like a man in a trance, gave her the exact raise she had asked for!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NORVELL is a towering figure in the vanguard of Psychic and Metaphysical research. He has gleaned the golden wisdom of the Ancient Ones from his travels in the Mid-East and Far East, where he visited Greece, Egypt and India and gathered knowledge from the Masters from the Mystical Lands of Tibet. Then he combined these Ancient Truths with the very latest scientific discoveries in Meditation, Alpha Biofeedback and ESP, to develop the dynamic teachings that have helped thousands of people across the country to achieve their life-long desires.



jected on a screen. See how to do it on page 97, Norvell says.

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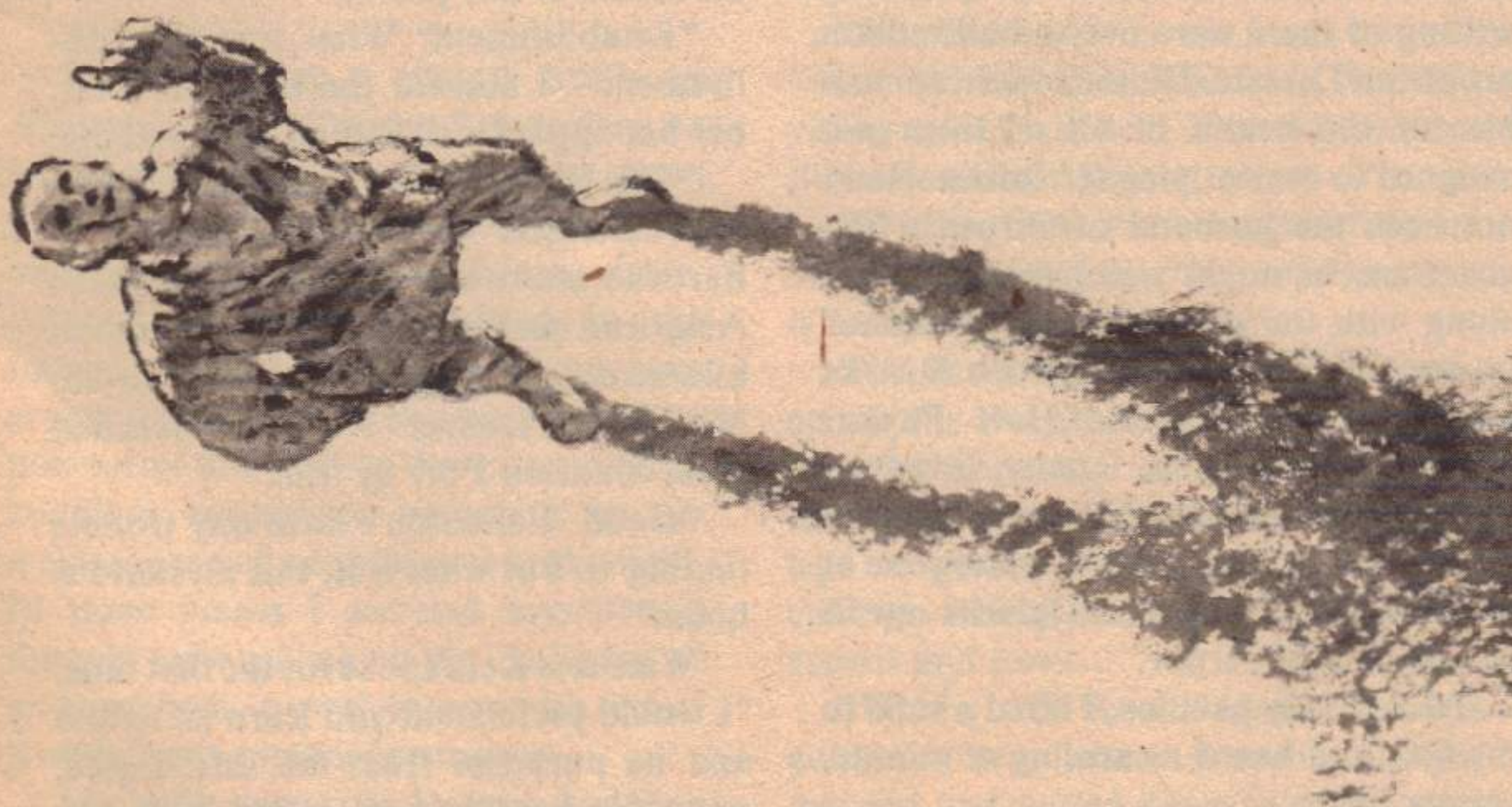


George Schelling



THE HOUSE OF COMPASSIONATE SHARERS

By MICHAEL BISHOP



And he was there, and it was not far enough, not yet, for the earth hung overhead like a rotten fruit, blue with mold, crawling, wrinkling, purulent and alive.

—Damon Knight, "Masks"

In the Port Iranani Galenshall I awoke in the room Diderits liked to call the "Black Pavilion." I was an engine, a system, a series of myoelectric and neuromechanical components, and The Accident responsible for this clean and enamel-hard enfleshing lay two full D-years in the past. This morning was an anniversary of sorts. I ought by now to have adjusted. And I had. I had reached an absolute accommodation with myself. Narcissistic, one could say. And that was the trouble.

"Dorian? Dorian Lorca?"

The voice belonged to KommGalen Diderits, wet and breathy even though it came from a small metal speaker to which the sable curtains of the dome were attached. I stared up into the ring of curtains.

"Dorian, it's Target Day. Will you answer me, please?"

"I'm here, my galen. Where else would I be?" I stood up, listening to the almost musical ratcheting that I make when I move, a sound like the concatenation of tiny bells or the purring of a stope-car. The sound is conveyed through the tempered porcelain plates, metal vertebrae, and osteoid polymers holding me together, and no one else can hear it.

"Rumer's here, Dorian. Are you ready for her to come in?"

"If I agreed, I suppose I'm ready."

"Dammit, Dorian, don't feel you're bound by *honor* to see her! We've spent the last several brace-weeks preparing you for a resumption of normal human contact." Diderits began to enumerate: "Chameleodrene treatments... hologramic substitution... stimulus-response therapy.... You ought to want Rumer to come in to you, Dorian."

Ought. My brain was—is—my own, but the body Diderits and the other kommgalens had given me had "instincts" and "tropisms" peculiar to itself, ones whose templates had a mechanical rather than a biological origin. What I ought to feel, in human terms, and what I in fact felt, as the inhabitant of a total prosthesis, were as dissimilar as blood and oil.

"Do you *want* her to come in, Dorian?"

"All right. I do." And I did. After all the biochemical and psychiatric preparation, I wanted to see what my reaction would be. Still sluggish from some drug, I had no exact idea how Rumer's presence would affect me.

At a parting of the pavilion's draperies, only two or three meters from my couch, appeared Rumer Montieth, my wife. Her garment of overlapping latex scales, glossy black in color, was a hauberk designed to reveal only her hands, face, and hair. The way Rumer was dressed was one of Diderits's deceits, or "preparations": I was supposed to see my wife as little different from myself, a creature as intricately assembled and synapsed as the engine I had become. But the hands, the face, the hair—nothing could disguise their unaugmented humanity, and revulsion swept over me like a tide.

"Dorian?" And her voice—wet, breath-driven, expelled between parted lips...

I turned away from her. "No," I told the speaker overhead. "It hasn't worked, my galen. Every part of me cries out against this."

Diderits said nothing. Was he still out there? Or was he trying to give Rumer and me a privacy I didn't want?

"Disassemble me," I urged him. "Link me to the control systems of a delta-state vessel and let me go out from Diroste for good. You don't want a zombot among you, Diderits—an unhappy anproz. Damn you all, you're torturing me!"

"And you, us," Rumer said quietly. I faced her. "As you're very aware, Dorian, as you're very aware... Take my hand."

"No." I didn't shrink away; I merely refused.

"Here. Take it."

Fighting my own disgust, I seized her hand, twisted it over, showed her its back. "Look."

"I *see* it, Dor." I was hurting her.

"Surfaces, that's all you see. Look at this growth, this wen." I pinched the growth. "Do you see that, Rumer? That's sebum, fatty matter. And the smell, if only you could—"

She drew back, and I tried to quell a mental nausea almost as profound as my regret... To go out from Diroste seemed to be the only answer. Around me I wanted machinery—thrumming, inorganic machinery—and the sterile, actinic emptiness of outer space. I wanted to be the probeship *Dorian Lorca*. It hardly seemed a step down from my position as "prince consort" to the Governor of Diroste.

"Let me out," Rumer commanded the head of the Port Iranani Galenshall, and Diderits released her from the "Black Pavilion."

Then I was alone again in one of the few private chambers of a surgical complex given over to adapting Civi Korps personnel to our leptotic little planet's fume-filled mine shafts. The Galenshall was also devoted to patching up these civkis after their implanted respirators had atrophied, almost beyond saving, the muscles of their chests and lungs.

Including administrative personnel, Kommfleet officials, and the Civi Korps laborers in the mines, in the year I'm writing of there were over a half million people on Diroste. Diderits was responsible for the health of all of them not assigned to the outlying territories. Had I not been the husband of Diroste's first governor, he might well have let me die along with the seventeen "expendables" on tour with me in the Fetneh District when the roof of the Haft Paykar diggings fell in on us. Rumer, however, made Diderits's duty clear to him, and I am as I am because the resources were at hand in Port Iranani and Diderits saw fit to obey his Governor.

Alone in my pavilion, I lifted a hand to my face and heard a caroling of minute, copper bells...

Nearly a month later I observed Rumer, Diderits, and a stranger by closed-circuit television as they sat in one of the Galenshall's wide conference rooms. The stranger was a woman, bald

but for a scalplock, who wore gold silk pantaloons that gave her the appearance of a clown, and a corrugated green jacket that somehow reversed this impression. Even on my monitor I could see the thick sunlight pouring into their room.

"This is Wardress Kefa," Rumer informed me.

I greeted her through a microphone and tested the cosmetic work of Diderits's associates by trying to smile for her.

"She's from Earth, Dor, and she's here because KommGalen Diderits and I asked her to come."

"Forty-six lights," I murmured, probably inaudibly. I was touched and angry at the same time. To be constantly the focus of your friends' attentions, especially when they have more urgent matters to see to, can lead to either a corrosive cynicism or a humility just as crippling.

"We want you to go back with her on *Nizami*," Diderits said, "when it leaves Port Iranani tomorrow night."

"Why?"

"Wardress Kefa came all this way," Rumer responded, "because we wanted to talk to her. As a final stage in your therapy she's convinced us that you ought to visit her... her establishment there. And if this fails, Dorian, I give you up; if that's what you want, I relinquish you." Today Rumer was wearing a yellow sarong, a tasseled gold shawl, and a nun's hood of yellow and orange stripes. When she spoke she averted her eyes from the conference room's monitor and looked out its high windows instead. At a distance, I could appreciate the spare aesthetics of her profile.

"Establishment? What sort of establishment?" I studied the tiny Wardress, but her appearance volunteered nothing.

"The House of Compassionate Sharers," Diderits began. "It's located in Earth's western hemisphere, on the North American continent, nearly two-hundred kilometers southwest of the gutted Urban Nucleus of Denver. It can be reached from Manitou Port by 'rail.'"

"Good. I shouldn't have any trouble finding it. But what is it, this mysterious house?"

Wardress Kefa spoke for the first time: "I would prefer that you learn its nature and its purposes from me, Mr. Lorca, when we have arrived safely under its several roofs."

"Is it a brothel?" This question fell among my three interlocutors like a heavy stone.

"No," Rumer said after a careful five-count. "It's a unique sort of clinic for the

treatment of unique emotional disorders." She glanced at the Wardress, concerned that she had revealed too much.

"Some would call it a brothel," Wardress Kefa admitted huskily. "Earth has become a haven of misfits and opportunists, a crossroads of Glatik Komm influence and trade. The House, I must confess, wouldn't prosper if it catered only to those who suffer from rare dissociations of feeling. Therefore a few—a very few—of those who come to us are kommthors rich in power and exacting in their tastes. But these people are exceptions, Governor Montieth, KommGalen Diderits; they represent an uneasy compromise we must make in order to carry out the work for which the House was originally envisioned and built."

A moment later Rumer announced, "You're going, Dor. You're going tomorrow night. Diderits and I, well, we'll see you in three E-months." That said, she gathered in her cloak with both hands and rearranged it on her shoulders. Then she left the room.

"Good-bye, Dorian," Diderits said, standing.

Wardress Kefa fixed upon the camera conveying her picture to me a keen glance made more disconcerting by her small, naked face. "Tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," I agreed. I watched my monitor as the galen and the curious-looking Wardress exited the conference room together. In the room's high windows Diroste's sun sang a Capella in the lemon sky.

They gave me a private berth on *Nizami*. I used my "nights," since sleep no longer meant anything to me, to prowl through those nacelles of shipboard machinery not forbidden to passengers. Although I wasn't permitted in the forward command module, I did have access to the computer-ringed observation turret and two or three corridors of auxiliary equipment necessary to the maintenance of a continuous probe-field. In these places I secreted myself and thought seriously about the likelihood of an encephalic/neural linkage with one of Kommfleet's interstellar frigates.

My body was a trial. Diderits had long ago informed me that it—that *I*—was still "sexually viable," but this was something I hadn't yet put to the test, nor did I wish to. Tyrannized by morbidly vivid images of human viscera, human excreta, human decay, I had been rebuilt of metal,

porcelain, and plastic *as if* from the very substances—skin, bone, hair, cartilage—that these inorganic materials derided. I was a contradiction, a quasi-immortal masquerading as one of the ephemera who had saved me from their own short-lived lot. Still another paradox was the fact that my aversion to the organic was itself a human (i.e., an organic) emotion. That was why I so fervently wanted out. For over a year and a half on Diroste I had hoped that Rumer and the others would see their mistake and exile me not only from themselves, but from the body that was a deadly daily reminder of my total estrangement.

But Rumer was adamant in her love, and I had been a prisoner in the Port Iranani Galenshall—with but one chilling respite—ever since the Haft Paykar explosion and cave-in. Now I was being given into the hands of a new wardress, and as I sat amid the enamel-encased engines of *Nizami* I couldn't help wondering what sort of prison the House of Compassionate Sharers must be. . . .

Among the passengers of a monorail car bound outward from Manitou Port, Wardress Kefa in the window seat beside me, I sat tense and stiff. Anthrophobia. Lorca, I told myself repeatedly, you must exercise self-control. Amazingly, I did. From Manitou Port we rode the sleek underslung bullet of our car through rugged, sparsely-populated terrain toward Wolf Run Summit, and I controlled myself.

"You've never been 'home' before?" Wardress Kefa asked me.

"No. Earth isn't home. I was born on GK-world Dai-Han, Wardress. And as a young man I was sent as an administrative colonist to Diroste, where—"

"Where you were born again," Wardress Kefa interrupted. "Nevertheless, this is where we began."

The shadows of the mountains slid across the wraparound glass of our car, and the imposing white pylons of the monorail system flashed past us like the legs of giants. Yes. Like huge, naked cyborgs hiding among the mountains' aspens and pines.

"Where I met Rumer Montieth, I was going to say; where I eventually got married and settled down to the life of a bureaucrat who happens to be married to power. You anticipate me, Wardress." I didn't add that now Earth and Diroste were equally alien to me, that the probeship *Nizami* had bid fair to assume first place among my loyalties.

A 'rail from Wolf Run came sweeping past us toward Manitou Port. The sight pleased me; the vibratory hum of the passing 'rail lingered sympathetically in my hearing, and I refused to talk, even though the Wardress clearly wanted to draw me out about my former life. I was surrounded and beset. Surely this woman had all she needed to know of my past from Diderits and my wife. My annoyance grew.

"You're very silent, Mr. Lorca."

"I have no innate hatred of silences."

"Nor do I, Mr. Lorca—unless they're empty ones."

Hands in lap, humming bioelectrically, inaudibly, I looked at my tiny guardian with disdain. "There are some," I told her, "who are unable to engage in a silence without stripping it of its unspoken cargo of significance."

To my surprise the woman laughed heartily. "That certainly isn't true of you, is it?" Then, a wry expression playing on her lips, she shifted her gaze to the hurtling countryside and said nothing else until it came time to disembark at Wolf Run Summit.

Wolf Run was a resort frequented principally by Kommfleet officers and members of the administrative hierarchy stationed in Port Manitou. Civi Korps personnel had built quaint, gingerbread chateaus among the trees and engineered two of the slopes above the hamlet for year-round skiing. "Many of these people," Wardress Kefa explained, indicating a crowd of men and women beneath the deck of Wolf Run's main lodge, "work inside Shays Mountain, near the light-probe port, in facilities built originally for satellite-tracking and missile-launch detection. Now they monitor the display-boards for Kommfleet orbiters and shuttles; they program the cruising and descent lanes of these vehicles. Others are demographic and wildlife managers, bent on resettling Earth as efficiently as it may be done. Tedious work, Mr. Lorca. They come here to play." We passed below the lodge on a path of unglazed vitrifoam. Two or three of Wolf Run's bundled visitors stared at me, presumably because I was in my tunic sleeves and conspicuously undaunted by the spring cold. Or maybe their stares were for my guardian. . . .

"How many of these people are customers of yours, Wardress?"

"That isn't something I can divulge." But she glanced back over her shoulder as if she had recognized someone.

"What do they find at your establish-

THE HOUSE OF COMPASSIONATE SHARERS

ment they can't find in Manitou Port?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lorca; I'm not a mind reader."

To reach the House of Compassionate Sharers from Wolf Run, we had to go on foot down a narrow path worked reverently into the flank of the mountain. It was very nearly a two-hour hike. I couldn't believe the distance or Wardress Kefa's stamina. Swinging her arms, jolting herself on stiff legs, she went down the mountain with a will. And in all the way we walked we met no other hikers.

At last we reached a clearing giving us an open view of a steep, pine-peopled glen: a grotto that fell away beneath us and led our eyes to an expanse of smooth white sky. But the Wardress pointed directly down into the foliage.

"There," she said. "The House of Compassionate Sharers."

I saw nothing but afternoon sunlight on the aspens, boulders huddled in the mulch cover, and swaying tunnels among the trees. Squinting, I finally made out a geodesic structure built from the very materials of the woods. Like an upland sleight, a wavering mirage, the House slipped in and out of my vision, blending, emerging, melting again. It was a series of irregular domes as hard to hold as water vapor—but after several redwinged blackbirds flew noisily across the plane of its highest turret, the House remained for me in stark relief; it had shed its invisibility.

"It's more noticeable," Wardress Kefa said, "when its external shutters have been cranked aside. Then the House sparkles like a dragon's eye. The windows are stained glass."

"I'd like to see that. Now it appears camouflaged."

"That's deliberate, Mr. Lorca. Come."

When we were all the way down, I could see of what colossal size the House really was: it reared up through the pine needles and displayed its interlocking polygons to the sky. Strange to think that no one in a passing helicopter was ever likely to catch sight of it...

Wardress Kefa led me up a series of plank stairs, spoke once at the door, and introduced me into an antechamber so clean and military that I thought "barracks" rather than "bawdyhouse." The ceiling and walls were honeycombed, and the natural flooring was redolent of the outdoors. My guardian disappeared, returned without her coat, and escorted me into a much smaller room shaped like a tapered well. By means of a wooden hand-crank she opened the shutters, and

varicolored light filtered in upon us through the room's slant-set windows. On elevated cushions that snapped and rustled each time we moved, we sat facing each other.

"What now?" I asked the Wardress.

"Just listen: The Sharers have come to the House of their own volition, Mr. Lorca; most lived and worked on extrakomm worlds toward Glaktik Center before being approached for duty here. The ones who are here accepted the invitation. They came to offer their presences to people very like yourself."

"Me? Are they misconceived machines?"

"I'm not going to answer that. Let me just say that the variety of services the Sharers offer is surprisingly wide. As I've told you, for some visitants the Sharers are simply a convenient means of satisfying exotically aberrant tastes. For others they're a way back to the larger community. We take whoever comes to us for help, Mr. Lorca, in order that the Sharers not remain idle nor the House vacant."

"So long as whoever comes is wealthy and influential?"

She paused before speaking. "That's true enough. But the matter's out of my hands, Mr. Lorca. I'm an employee of Glaktik Komm, chosen for my empathetic abilities. I don't make policy. I don't own title to the House."

"But you *are* its madam. It's 'wardress', rather."

"True. For the last twenty-two years. I'm the first and only wardress to have served here, Mr. Lorca, and I love the Sharers. I love their devotion to the fragile mentalities who visit them. Even so, despite the time I've lived among them, I still don't pretend to understand the source of their transcendent concern. That's what I wanted to tell you."

"You think me a 'fragile mentality'?"

"I'm sorry—but you're here, Mr. Lorca, and you certainly aren't fragile of limb, are you?" The Wardress laughed. "I also wanted to ask you to... well, to restrain your crueler impulses when the treatment itself begins."

I stood up and moved away from the little woman. How had I borne her presence for as long as I had?

"Please don't take my request amiss. It isn't *specifically* personal, Mr. Lorca. I make it of everyone who comes to the House of Compassionate Sharers. Restraint is an unwritten corollary of the only three rules we have here. Will you hear them?"

I made a noise of compliance.

"First, that you do not leave the session chamber once you've entered it. Second, that you come forth immediately upon my summoning you..."

"And third?"

"That you do not kill the Sharer."

All the myriad disgusts I had been suppressing for seven or eight hours were now perched atop the ladder of my patience, and, rung by painful rung, I had to step them back down. Must a rule be made to prevent a visitant from murdering the partner he had bought? Incredible. The Wardress herself was just perceptibly sweating, and I noticed too how grotesquely distended her earlobes were.

"Is there a room in this establishment for a wealthy and influential patron? A private room?"

"Of course," she said. "I'll show you."

It had a full-length mirror. I undressed and stood in front of it. Only during my first "period of adjustment" on Diroste had I spent much time looking at what I had become. Later, back in the Port Iranani Galenshall, Diderits had denied me any sort of reflective surface at all—looking glasses, darkened windows, even metal spoons. The waxen perfection of my features ridiculed the ones another Dorian Lorca had possessed before the Haft Paykar Incident. Cosmetic mockery. Faintly corpse-like, speciously paradigmatic, I was both more than I was supposed to be and less.

In Wardress Kefa's House the less seemed preminent. I ran a finger down the inside of my right arm, scrutinizing the track of one of the intubated veins through which circulated a serum that Dederits called hematocybin: an efficient, "low-maintenance" blood substitute, combative of both fatigue and infection, which requires changing only once every six D-months. With a proper supply of hematocybin and a plastic recirculator I can do the job myself, standing up. That night, however, the ridge of my vein, mirrored only an arm's length away, was more horror than miracle. I stepped away from the looking glass and closed my eyes.

Later that evening Wardress Kefa came to me with a candle and a brocaded dressing gown. She made me put on the gown in front of her, and I complied. Then, the robe's rich and symbolic embroidery on my back, I followed her out of my first-floor chamber to a rustic stairwell seemingly connective to all the

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Think how many secrets must be hidden all around you! Things your spouse won't tell . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Reed is one of the nation's leading mind-power experts. Presently engaged as a writer on developments in the behavioral sciences, his revelations about the unseen world of the mind have been read by millions. A graduate of the City University of New York, his own life is living proof of "Automatic Mind-Command."

A Master Researcher, Metaphysician, and Psychic Advisor, he has helped countless men and women find true happiness. He has the rare ability of writing clearly and simply so that even the most profound Truths can be plainly understood by anyone.

your neighbors won't say . . . your boss keeps quiet about . . . ALL BROUGHT INTO THE OPEN JUST FOR YOU!! They'll tell you all their secrets, but they won't know why.

Hold on now, because I haven't told you yet about the best part of "Automatic Mind-Command."

You may have to bolt your door to keep people from overwhelming you with love, gifts, favors, rewards! Perfect strangers will be walking up to you and asking, "How are you? Can I do anything for you?" They will never suspect that "Automatic Mind-Command" is impelling them to like you, please you . . . and automatically want to help you.

INSTANTLY YOUR LIFE IS CHANGED!

At first, I couldn't believe it. And yet I know this to be true from my own personal experience . . . time after time. For example . . .

A STRANGER HANDS HIM \$500—Harry G., a low-paid factory worker, wanted to start a business of his own. All he needed was cash to get started, but no one would give him the money. Finally someone told him how to use "Automatic Mind-Command"—and Harry laughingly tried it. A short time later, a perfect stranger handed him \$500—saying he'd heard about Harry's plan, and was eager to help him get started!

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RECEIVES NEEDED CASH QUICKLY!—Mrs. Thelma J. reports, "I needed money badly." Her husband hadn't worked in months, and their savings were running out. Then she discovered "Automatic Mind-Command"—and turned on the power immediately! The next morning she received a package containing several hundred dollars from friends and well-wishers she never knew existed!

In all history, few indeed are the ones who have recognized "Automatic Mind-Command." The rest, who do not use it, pay the penalty in suffering, wishing, hoping, dreaming . . . Now I say to you: Wish no more!

HOW TO GET STARTED IN JUST 3 MINUTES!

Minute #1—Fill out the No-Risk Coupon and mail it to us.

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After that, sit back, relax—and see how this power can work for you. It's as simple as that! It won't cost you one penny unless it works!

IN THAT INSTANT, YOU WILL ALREADY BE ABLE TO USE "AUTOMATIC MIND-COMMAND" FOR THE FIRST TIME . . . for money, love, healing, protection, and much more!

Imagine the thrill—after a lifetime of "scrimping" and "penny-pinching"—to see a tidal wave of riches rolling into your life from every direction—pay raises, bonuses, gifts, legacies . . . a rising tide of good fortune!

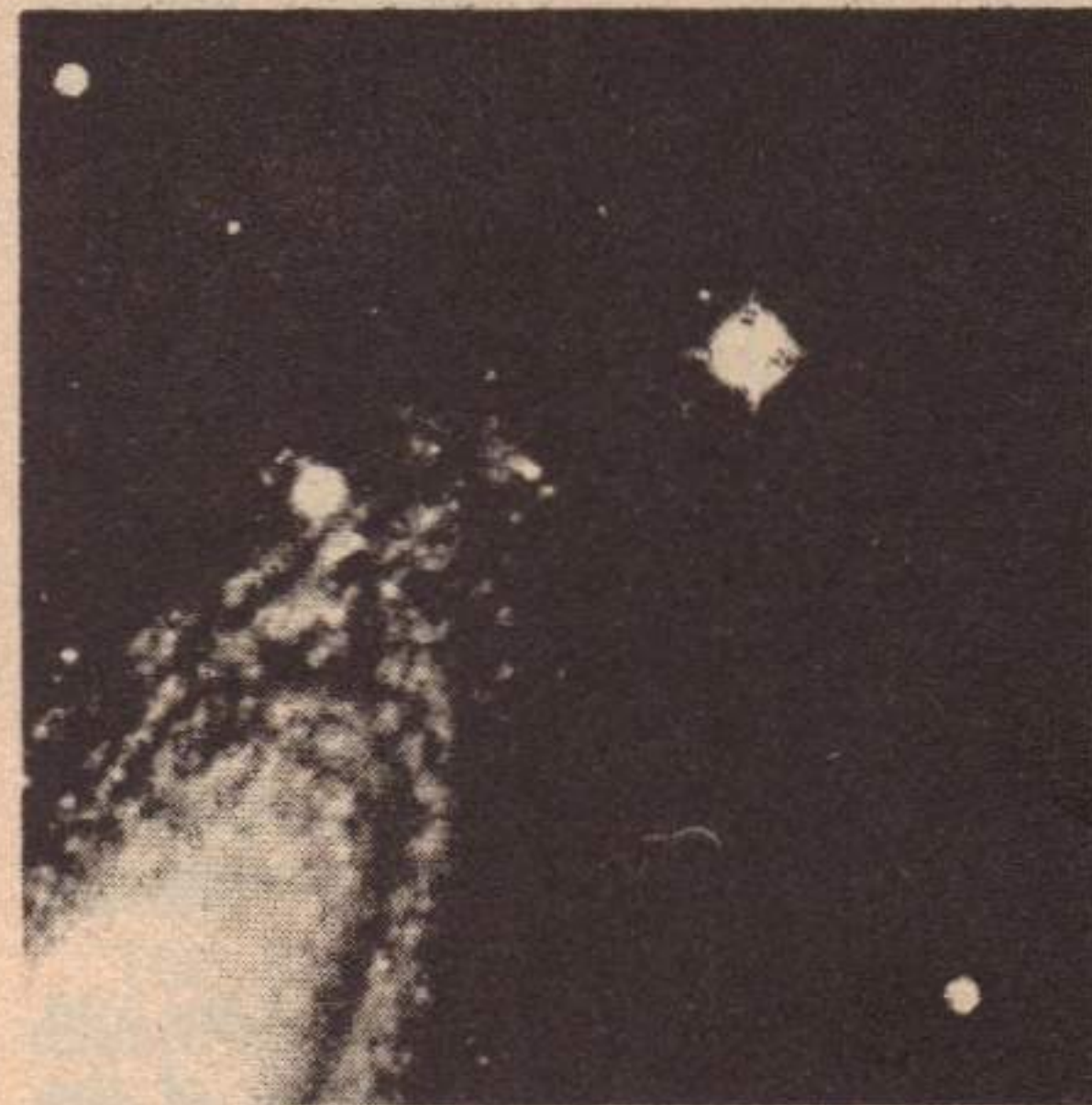
MORE AMAZING CASE HISTORIES!

And it's all just *minutes* away!

Larry S. wanted to see his girlfriend—although he had no idea where she was—and no way of

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contacting her by letter or phone. From far away . . . he began using "Automatic Mind-Command!" In that instant, his girlfriend knew what she had to do. She dropped what she was doing, excused herself and hurried to visit him. Arriving in record time—she hugged and kissed him, explaining that "something" told her he wanted and needed her, and what could she do for him!

Now here's a most fantastic use of "Automatic Mind-Command"—one I'm sure you'll agree proves that here is a power which staggers the imagination!

For example, cases of health-symptoms relieved with "Automatic Mind-Command!" John C. reports that his hearing now seems normal again! Warren W.'s blurred eyesight cleared, sharpened, and now seems normal! Lydia E. says her arthritic symptoms of soreness and stiffness in the fingers were relieved when nothing else seemed to help, and Mrs. M. S. was surprised when her leg pain disappeared. Bella S., who complained of "ulcerative colitis" with stomach cramps and diarrhea, obtained fast relief . . . And others report relief from complaints of high blood pressure, heart symptoms, "migraine" headaches, weakness, dizziness, fatigue, and more.

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THE HOUSE OF COMPASSIONATE SHARERS

rooms in the House.

The dome contained countless smaller domes and five or six primitive staircases, at least. Not a single other person was about. Lit flickeringly by Wardress Kefa's taper as we climbed one of these sets of stairs, the House's mid-interior put me in mind of an Escheresque drawing in which verticals and horizontals become hopelessly confused and a figure who from one perspective seems to be going up a series of steps, from another seems to be coming down them. Presently the Wardress and I stood on a landing above this topsy-turvy well of stairs (though there were still more stairs above us), and, looking down, I experienced an unsettling reversal of perspectives. Vertigo. Why hadn't Diderits, against so human a susceptibility, implanted tiny gyrostabilizers in my head? I clutched a railing and held on.

"You can't fall," Wardress Kefa told me. "It's an illusion. A whim of the architects."

"Is it an illusion behind this door?"

"Oh, the Sharer's real enough, Mr. Lorca. Please. Go on in." She touched my face and left me, taking her candle with her.

After hesitating a moment I went through the door to my assignation, and the door locked of itself. I stood with my hand on the butterfly shape of the knob and felt the night working in me and the room. The only light came from the stove-bed on the opposite wall, for the fitted polygons overhead were still blanked out by their shutters and no candles shone here. Instead, reddish embers glowed behind an isinglass window beneath the stove-bed, strewn with quilts, on which my Sharer awaited me.

Outside, the wind played harp music in the trees.

I was trembling rhythmically, as when Rumer had come to me in the "Black Pavilion." Even though my eyes adjusted rapidly, automatically, to the dark, it was still difficult to see. Temporizing, I surveyed the dome. In its high central vault hung a cage in which, disturbed by my entrance, a bird hopped skittishly about. The cage swayed on its tether.

Go on, I told myself.

I advanced toward the dais and leaned over the unmoving Sharer who lay there. With a hand on either side of the creature's head, I braced myself. The figure beneath me moved, moved weakly, and I drew back. But because the Sharer didn't stir again, I reassumed my previous stance: the posture of either a lover or a

man called upon to identify a disfigured corpse. But identification was impossible; the embers under the bed gave too feeble a sheen. In the chamber's darkness even a lover's kiss would have fallen clumsily. . . .

"I'm going to touch you," I said. "Will you let me do that?"

The Sharer lay still.

Then, willing all of my senses into the cushion of synthetic flesh at my fore finger's tip. I touched the Sharer's face.

Hard, and smooth, and cool.

I moved my finger from side to side; and the hardness, smoothness, coolness continued to flow into my pressuring fingertip. It was like touching the pate of a death's-head, the cranial cap of a human being: bone rather than metal. My finger distinguished between these two possibilities, deciding on bone; and, half panicked, I concluded that I had traced an arc on the skull of an intelligent being who wore his every bone on the outside, like an armor of calcium. Could that be? If so, how could this organism—this entity, this *thing*—express compassion?

I lifted my finger away from the Sharer. Its tip hummed with a pressure now relieved and emanated a faint warmth.

A death's-head come to life. . . .

Maybe I laughed. In any case, I pulled myself onto the platform and straddled the Sharer. I kept my eyes closed, though not tightly. It didn't seem that I was straddling a skeleton.

"Sharer," I whispered. "Sharer, I don't know you yet."

Gently, I let my thumbs find the creature's eyes, the sockets in the smooth exoskeleton, and both thumbs returned to me a hardness and a coldness that were unquestionably metallic in origin. Moreover, the Sharer didn't flinch—even though I'd anticipated that probing his eyes, no matter how gently, would provoke at least an involuntary pulling away. Instead, the Sharer lay still and tractable under my hands.

And why not? I thought. *Your eyes are nothing but two pieces of sophisticated optical machinery. . . .*

It was true. Two artificial, light-sensing, image-integrating units gazed up at me from the sockets near which my thumbs probed, and I realized that even in this darkness my Sharer, its vision mechanically augmented beyond my own, could *see* my blind face staring down in a futile attempt to create an image out of the information my hands had supplied me. I opened my eyes and held them open. I could see only shadows,

but my thumbs could *feel* the cold metal rings that held the Sharer's photosensitive units so firmly in its skull.

"An animatronic construct," I said, rocking back on my heels. "A soulless robot. Move your head if I'm right."

The Sharer continued motionless.

"All right. You're a sentient creature whose eyes have been replaced with an artificial system. What about that? Lord, are we brothers then?"

I had a sudden hunch that the Sharer was very old, a senescent being owing its life to prosthetics, transplants, and imitative organs of laminated silicone. Its life, I was certain, had been *extended* by these contrivances, not saved. I asked the Sharer about my feeling, and very, very slowly it moved the helmetlike skull housing its artificial eyes and its aged, compassionate mind. Uncharitably I then believed myself the victim of a deception, whether the Sharer's or Wardress Kefa's I couldn't say. Here, after all, was a creature who had chosen to prolong its organic condition rather than to escape it, and it had willingly made use of the same materials and methods Diderits had brought into play to save me.

"You might have died," I told it. "Go too far, Sharer—go too far with these contrivances and you may forfeit suicide as an option."

Then, leaning forward again, saying, "I'm still not through, I still don't know you," I let my hands come down the Sharer's bony face to its throat. Here a shield of cartilage graded upward into its jaw and downward into the plastically silken skin covering the remainder of its body, internalizing all but the defiantly naked skull of the Sharer's skeletal structure. A death's-head with the body of a man. . . .

That was all I could take. I rose from the stove-bed and, cinching my dressing gown tightly about my waist, crossed to the other side of the chamber. There was no furniture in the room but the stove-bed (if that qualified), and I had to content myself with sitting in a lotus position on the floor. I sat that way all night, staving off dreams.

Diderits had said that I needed to dream. If I didn't dream, he warned, I'd be risking hallucinations and eventual madness; in the Port Iranani Galenshall he'd seen to it that drugs were administered to me every two days and my sleep period monitored by an ARC machine and a team of electroencephalographers. But my dreams were almost always nightmares, descents into klieg-lit charnel

houses, and I infinitely preferred the risk of going psychotic. There was always the chance someone would take pity and disassemble me, piece by loving piece. Besides, I had lasted two E-weeks now on nothing but grudging catnaps, and so far I still had gray matter upstairs instead of scrambled eggs. . . .

I crossed my fingers.

A long time after I'd sat down, Wardress Kefa threw open the door. It was morning. I could tell because the newly-canted shutters outside our room admitted a singular roaring of light. The entire chamber was illumined, and I saw crimson wall-hangings, a mosaic of red and purple stones on the section of the floor, and a tumble of scarlet quilts. The bird in the suspended cage was a redwinged blackbird.

"Where is it from?"

"You could use a more appropriate pronoun."

"*He? She?* Which is the more appropriate, Wardress Kefa?"

"Assume the Sharer masculine, Mr. Lorca."

"My sexual proclivities have never run that way, I'm afraid."

"Your sexual proclivities," the Wardress told me stingingly, "enter into this only if you persist in thinking of the House as a brothel rather than a clinic and the Sharers as whores rather than therapists!"

"Last night I heard two or three people clomping up the stairs in their boots, that and a woman's raucous laughter."

"A visitant, Mr. Lorca, *not* a Sharer."

"I didn't think she was a Sharer. But it's difficult to believe I'm in a 'clinic' when that sort of noise disrupts my midnight meditations, Wardress."

"I've explained that. It can't be helped."

"All right, all right. Where is *he* from, this 'therapist' of mine?"

"An interior star. But where he's from is of no consequence in your treatment. I matched him to your needs, as I see them, and soon you'll be going back to him."

"Why? To spend another night sitting on the floor?"

"You won't do that again, Mr. Lorca. And you needn't worry. Your reaction wasn't an uncommon one for a newcomer to the House."

"Revulsion?" I cried. "Revulsion's therapeutic?"

"I don't think you were as put off as you believe."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because you talked to the Sharer. You addressed him directly, not once but several times. Many visitants never get that far during their first session, Mr. Lorca."

"Talked to him?" I said dubiously. "Maybe. Before I found out what he was."

"Ah. Before you found out what he was." In her heavy green jacket and swishy pantaloons the tiny woman turned about and departed the well of the sitting room.

I stared bemusedly after her for a long time.

Three nights after my first "session," the night of my conversation with Wardress Kefa, I entered the Sharer's chamber again. Everything was as it had been, except that the dome's shutters were open and moonlight coated the mosaic work on the floor. The Sharer awaited me in the same recumbent, unmoving posture, and inside its cage the redwinged blackbird set one of its perches to rocking back and forth.

Perversely, I had decided not to talk to the Sharer this time—but I did approach the stove-bed and lean over him. *Hello*, I thought, and the word very nearly came out. I straddled the Sharer and studied him in the stained moonlight. He looked just as my sense of touch had led me to conclude previously . . . like a skull, oddly flattened and beveled, with the body of a man. But despite the chemical embers glowing beneath his dais the Sharer's body had no warmth, and to know him more fully I resumed tracing a finger over his alien parts.

I discovered that at every conceivable pressure point a tiny scar existed, or the tip of an implanted electrode, and that miniature canals into which wires had been sunk veined his inner arms and legs. Just beneath his sternum a concave disc about eight centimeters across, containing neither instruments nor any other surface features, had been set into the Sharer's chest like a stainless-steel brooch. It seemed to hum under the pressure of my finger as I drew my nail silently around the disc's circumference. What was it for? What did it mean? Again, I almost spoke.

I rolled toward the wall and lay stretched out beside the unmoving Sharer. Maybe he *couldn't* move. On my last visit he had moved his dimly phosphorescent head for me, of course, but that only feebly, and maybe his immobility was the result of some

cybergamic dysfunction. I had to find out. My resolve not to speak deserted me, and I propped myself up on my elbow.

"Sharer . . . Sharer, can you move?"

The head turned toward me slightly, signaling . . . well, what?

"Can you get off this platform? Try. Get off this dais under your own power."

To my surprise the Sharer nudged a quilt to the floor and in a moment stood facing me. Moonlight glinted from the photosensitive units serving the creature as eyes and gave his bent, elongated body the appearance of a piece of Inhodlef Era statuary, primitive work from the extrakomm world of Glaparcus.

"Good," I praised the Sharer; "very good. Can you tell me what you're supposed to share with me? I'm not sure we have as much in common as our Wardress seems to think."

The Sharer extended both arms toward me and opened his tightly closed fists. In the cups of his palms he held two items I hadn't discovered during my tactile examination of him. I accepted these from the Sharer. One was a small metal disc, the other a thin metal cylinder. Looking them over, I found that the disc reminded me of the larger, mirrorlike bowl set in the alien's chest, while the cylinder seemed to be a kind of penlight.

Absently, I pulled my thumb over the head of the penlight; a ridged metal sheath followed the motion of my thumb, uncovering a point of ghostly red light stretching away into the cylinder seemingly deeper than the penlight itself. I pointed this instrument at the wall, at our bedding, at the Sharer himself—but it emitted no beam. When I turned the penlight on my wrist, the results were predictably similar: not even a faint red shadow appeared along the edge of my arm. Nothing. The cylinder's light existed internally, a beam continuously transmitted and retransmitted between the penlight's two poles. Pulling back the sheath on the instrument's head had in no way interrupted the operation of its self-regenerating circuit.

I stared wonderingly into the hollow of redness, then looked up. "Sharer what's this thing for?"

The Sharer reached out and took from my other hand the disc I had so far ignored. Then he placed this small circle of metal in the smooth declivity of the larger disc in his chest, where it apparently adhered—for I could no longer see it. That done, the Sharer stood distressingly immobile, even more like a statue than he had seemed a moment before, one arm

THE HOUSE OF COMPASSIONATE SHARERS

frozen across his body and his hand stilled at the edge of the sunken plate in which the smaller disc had just adhered. He looked dead and self-commemorating.

"Lord!" I exclaimed. "What've you done, Sharer? Turned yourself off? That's right, isn't it?"

The Sharer neither answered nor moved.

Suddenly I felt sickeningly weary, opiate-weary, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to stay on the dais with this puzzle-piece being from an anonymous sun standing over me like a dark angel from my racial subconscious. I thought briefly of manhandling the Sharer across the room, but didn't have the will to touch this catatonically rigid being, this sculpture of metal and bone, and so dismissed the idea. Nor was it likely that Wardress Kefa would help me, even if I tried to summon her with murderous poundings and cries—a bitterly amusing prospect. Wellaway, another night propped against the chamber's far wall, keeping sleep at bay...

Is this what you wanted me to experience, Rumer? The frustration of trying to piece together my own "therapy"? I looked up through one of the dome's unstained polygons in lethargic search of the constellation Auriga. Then I realized that I wouldn't recognize it even if it happened to lie within my line of sight. Ah, Rumer, Rumer...

"You're certainly a pretty one," I told the Sharer. Then I pointed the penlight at his chest, drew back the sheath on its head, and spoke a single onomatopoeic word: "*Bang*."

Instantly a beam of light sang between the instrument in my hand and the plate in the Sharer's chest. The beam died at once (I had registered only its shattering brightness, not its color), but the disc continued to glow with a residual illumination.

The Sharer dropped his frozen arm and assumed a posture more limber, more suggestive of life. He looked... expectant.

I could only stare. Then I turned the penlight over in my hands, pointed it again at the Sharer, and waited for another coursing of light. To no purpose. The instrument still burned internally, but it wouldn't relume the alien's inset disc, which, in any case, continued to glow dimly. Things were all at once interesting again. I gestured with the penlight.

"You've rejoined the living, haven't

you?"

The Sharer acknowledged this with a slight turn of the head.

"Forgive me, Sharer, but I don't want to spend another night sitting on the floor. If you can move again, how about over there?" I pointed at the opposite wall. "I don't want you hovering over me."

Oddly, he obeyed. But he did so oddly, without turning around. He cruised backward as if on invisible coasters—his legs moving a little, yes, but not enough to propel him so smoothly, so quickly, across the chamber. Once against the far wall, the Sharer settled into the motionless but expectant posture he had assumed after his "activation" by the penlight. I could see that he still had some degree of control over his own movements, for his long fingers curled and uncurled and his skull nodded eerily in the halo of moonlight pocketing him. Even so, I realized that he had truly moved only at my voice command and my simultaneous gesturing with the penlight. And what did *that* mean?

... Well, that the Sharer had relinquished control of his body to the man-machine Dorian Lorca, retaining for himself just those meaningless reflexes and stirrings that convince the manipulated of their own autonomy. It was an awesome prostitution, even if Wardress Kefa would have frowned to hear me say so. Momentarily I rejoiced in it, for it seemed to free me from the demands of an artificial eroticism, from the need to figure through what was expected of me. The Sharer would obey my simplest wrist-turning, my briefest word; all I had to do was *use* the control he had literally handed to me.

This virtually unlimited power, I thought then, was a therapy whose value Rumer would understand only too well. This was a harsh assessment, but, penlight in hand, I felt that I too was a kind of marionette...

Insofar as I could, I tried to come to grips with the physics of the Sharer's operation. First, the disc-within-a-disc on his chest apparently broke the connections ordinarily allowing him to exercise the senile powers that were still his. And, second, the penlight's beam restored and amplified these powers but delivered them into the hands of the speaker of imperatives who wielded the penlight. I recalled that in Earth's lunar probeship yards were crews of animatronic laborers programmed for fitting and welding. A single trained supervisor could direct

from fifteen to twenty receiver-equipped laborers with one penlight and a microphone—

"Sharer," I commanded, blanking out this reverie, pointing the penlight, "go there... No, no, not like that. Lift your feet. March for me... That's right, a *goosestep*."

While Wardress Kefa's third rule rattled in the back of my mind like a challenge, for the next several hours I toyed with the Sharer. After the marching I set him to calisthenics and interpretative dance, and he obeyed, moving more gracefully than I would have imagined possible. Here—then there—then back again. All he lacked was Beethoven's piano sonatas for an accompaniment.

At intervals I rested, but always the fascination of the penlight drew me back, almost against my will, and I once again played puppetmaster.

"Enough, Sharer, enough." The sky had a curdled quality suggestive of dawn. Catching sight of the cage overhead, I was taken by an irresistible impulse. I pointed the penlight at the cage and commanded, "Up, Sharer. Up, up, up."

The Sharer floated up from the floor and glided effortlessly toward the vault of the dome: a beautiful, aerial walk. Without benefit of hawsers or scaffolds or wings the Sharer levitated. Hovering over the stove-bed he had been made to surrender, hovering over everything in the room, he reached the cage and swung before it with his hands touching the scrolled ironwork on its little door. I dropped my own hands and watched him. So tightly was I gripping the penlight, however, that my knuckles must have resembled the caps of four tiny bleached skulls.

A great deal of time went by, the Sharer poised in the gelid air awaiting some word from me.

Morning began coming in the room's polygonal windows.

"Take the bird out," I ordered the Sharer, moving my penlight. "Take the bird out of the cage and kill it." This command, sadistically heartfelt, seemed to me a foolproof, indirect way of striking back at Rumer, Diderits, the Wardress, and the Third Rule of the House of Compassionate Sharers. More than anything, against all reason, I wanted the redwinged blackbird dead. And I wanted the Sharer to kill it.

Dawn made clear the cancerous encroachment of age in the Sharer's legs and hands, as well as the full horror of his cybergamically rigged death's-head. He

looked like he had been unjustly hanged. And when his hands went up to the cage, instead of opening its door the Sharer lifted the entire contraption off the hook fastening it to its tether and then accidentally lost his grip on the cage.

I watched the cage fall—land on its side—bounce—bounce again. The Sharer stared down with his bulging, silver-ringed eyes, his hands still spread wide to accommodate the fallen cage.

“Mr. Lorca.” Wardress Kefa was knocking at the door. “Mr. Lorca, what’s going on, please?”

I arose from the stove-bed, tossed my quilt aside, straightened my heavy robes. The Wardress knocked again. I looked at the Sharer swaying in the half-light like a sword or a pendulum, an instrument of severance. The night had gone faster than I liked.

Again, the purposeful knocking.

“Coming,” I barked.

In the dented cage there was a flutter of crimson, a stillness, and then another bit of melancholy flapping. I hurled my penlight across the room. When it struck the wall, the Sharer rocked back and forth for a moment without descending so much as a centimeter. The knocking continued.

“You have the key, Wardress. Open the door.”

She did, and stood on its threshold taking stock of the games we had played. Her eyes were bright but devoid of censure, and I swept past her wordlessly, burning with shame and bravado.

I slept that day—all that day—for the first time since leaving my own world. And I dreamed. I dreamed that I was connected to a mechanism pistoning away on the edge of the Haft Paykar diggings, siphoning deadly gases out of the shafts and perversely recirculating them through the pump with which I shared a symbiomechanic linkage. Amid a series of surreal turquoise sunsets and intermittent gusts of sand, this pistoning went on, and on, and on. When I awoke I lifted my hands to my face, intending to scar it with my nails. But a moment later, as I had known it would, the mirror in my chamber returned me a perfect, unperturbed Dorian Lorca....

“May I come in?”

“I’m the guest here, Wardress. So I suppose you may.”

She entered and, quickly intuiting my mood, walked to the other side of the chamber. “You slept, didn’t you? And you dreamed?”

I said nothing.

“You dreamed, didn’t you?”

“A nightmare, Wardress. A long and repetitious nightmare, notable only for being different from the ones I had on Diroste.”

“A start, though. You weren’t monitored during your sleep, after all, and even if your dream *was* a nightmare, Mr. Lorca, I believe you’ve managed to survive it. Good. All to the good.”

I went to the only window in the room, a hexagonal pane of dark blue through which it was impossible to see anything. “Did you get him down?”

“Yes. And restored the birdcage to its place.” Her tiny feet made pacing sounds on the hardwood. “The bird was unharmed.”

“Wardress, what’s all this about? Why have you paired me with... with this particular Sharer?” I turned around. “What’s the point?”

“You’re not estranged from your wife only, Mr. Lorca, You’re—”

“I know that. I’ve *known* that.”

“And I know that you know it. Give me a degree of credit. . . . You also know,” she resumed, “that you’re estranged from yourself, body and soul at variance—”

“Of course, damn it! And the argument between them’s been stamped into every pseudo-organ and circuit I can lay claim to!”

“Please, Mr. Lorca, I’m trying to explain. This interior ‘argument’ you’re so aware of . . . it’s really a metaphor for an attitude you involuntarily adopted after Dederits performed his operations. And a metaphor can be taken apart and explained.”

“Like a machine.”

“If you like.” She began pacing again. “To take inventory you have to surmount that which is to be inventoried. You go outside, Mr. Lorca, in order to come back in.” She halted and fixed me with a colorless, lopsided smile.

“All of that,” I began cautiously, “is clear to me. ‘Know thyself,’ saith Diderits and the ancient Greeks. . . . Well, if anything, my knowledge has *increased* my uneasiness about not only myself, but others—and not only others, but the very phenomena permitting us to spawn.” I had an image of crimson-gilled fish firing upcurrent in a roiling, untidy barrage. “What I know hasn’t cured anything, Wardress.”

“No. That’s why we’ve had you come here. To extend the limits of your knowledge and to involve you in relationships demanding a recognition of others

as well as self.”

“As with the Sharer I left hanging up in the air?”

“Yes. Distance is advisable at first, perhaps inevitable. You needn’t feel guilty. In a night or two you’ll be going back to him, and then we’ll just have to see.”

“Is this the only Sharer I’m going to be . . . working with?”

“I don’t know. It depends on the sort of progress you make.”

But for the Wardress Kefa, the Sharer in the crimson dome, and the noisy, midnight visitants I had never seen, there were times when I believed myself the only occupant of the House. The thought of such isolation, although not unwelcome, was an anchoritic fantasy: I knew that breathing in the chambers next to mine, going about the arcane business of the lives they had bartered away, were humanoid creatures difficult to imagine; harder still, once lodged in the mind, to put out of it. To what number and variety of beings had Wardress Kefa indentured her love . . . ?

I had no chance to ask this question. We heard an insistent clomping on the steps outside the House and then muffled voices in the antechamber.

“Who’s that?”

The Wardress put up her hand to silence me and opened the door to my room. “A moment,” she called. “I’ll be with you in a moment.” But her husky voice didn’t carry very well, and whoever had entered the House set about methodically knocking on doors and clomping from apartment to apartment, all the while bellowing the Wardress’s name. “I’d better go talk with them,” she told me apologetically.

“But who is it?”

“Someone voice-coded for entrance, Mr. Lorca. Nothing to worry about.” And she went into the corridor, giving me a scent of spruce needles and a vision of solidly hewn rafters before the door swung to.

But I got up and followed the Wardress. Outside I found her face to face with two imposing persons who looked exactly alike in spite of their being one a man and the other a woman. Their faces had the same lantern-jawed mournfulness, their eyes a hooded look under prominent brows. They wore filigreed pea jackets, ski leggings, and fur-lined caps bearing the interpenetrating-galaxies insignia of Glaktik Komm. I judged them to be in their late thirties, E-standard, but they both had the domi-

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neering, glad-handing air of high-ranking veterans in the bureaucratic establishment, people who appreciate their positions just to the extent that their positions can be exploited. I knew. I had once been an official of the same stamp.

The man, having been caught in mid-bellow, was now trying to laugh. "Ah, Wardress, Wardress."

"I didn't expect you this evening," she told the two of them.

"We were granted a proficiency leave for completing the Salous blueprint in advance of schedule," the woman explained, "and so caught a late 'rail from Manitou Port to take advantage of the leave. We hiked down in the dark." Along with her eyebrows she lifted a hand lantern for our inspection.

"We *took* a proficiency leave," the man said, "even if we *were* here last week. And we deserved it too." He went on to tell us that "Salous" dealt with reclaiming the remnants of aboriginal populations and pooling them for something called integrative therapy. "The Great Plains will soon be our bordello, Wardress. There, you see: you and the Orhas are in the same business... at least until we're assigned to stage-manage something more prosaic." He clapped his gloved hands together and looked at me. "You're new, aren't you? Who are you going to?"

"Pardon me," the Wardress interjected wearily. "Who do *you* want tonight?" The man looked at his partner with a mixture of curiosity and concern. "Cleva?"

"The mouthless one," Cleva responded at once. "Drugged, preferably."

"Come with me, Orhas," the Wardress directed. She led them first to her own apartment and then into the House's mid-interior, where the three of them disappeared from my sight. I could hear them climbing one of the sets of stairs.

Shortly thereafter the Wardress returned to my room.

"They're twins?"

"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Lorca. Actually they're clonemates: Cleva and Cleirach Orha, specialists in Holosyncretic Management. They do abstract computer planning involving indigenous and alien populations, which is why they know of the House at all and have an authorization to come here."

"Do they always appear here together? Go upstairs together?"

The Wardress's silence clearly meant yes.

"That's a bit kinky, isn't it?"

She gave me an angry look whose

implications immediately silenced me. I started to apologize, but she said: "The Orhas are the only visitants to the House who arrive together, Mr. Lorca. Since they share a common upbringing, the same genetic material, and identical biochemistries, it isn't surprising that their sexual preferences should coincide. In Manitou Port, I'm told, is a third clonemate who was permitted to marry, and her I've never seen either here or in Wolf Run Summit. It seems there's a *degree* of variety even among clonal siblings."

"Do these two come often?"

"You heard them in the House several days ago."

"They have frequent leaves then?"

"Last time was an overnighter. They returned to Manitou Port in the morning, Mr. Lorca. Just now they were trying to tell me that they intend to be here for a few days."

"For treatment," I said.

"You know better. You're baiting me, Mr. Lorca." She had taken her graying scalplock into her fingers, and was holding its fan of hair against her right cheek. In this posture, despite her preoccupation with the arrival of the Orhas, she looked very old and very innocent.

"Who is the 'mouthless one', Wardress?"

"Goodnight, Mr. Lorca. I only returned to tell you goodnight." And with no other word she left.

It was the longest I had permitted myself to talk with her since our first afternoon in the House, the longest I had been in her presence since our claustrophobic 'rail ride from Manitou Port. Even the Orhas, bundled to the gills, as vulgar as sleek bullfrogs, hadn't struck me as altogether insufferable.

Wearing neither coat nor cap, I took a walk through the glens below the House, touching each wind-shaken tree as I came to it and trying to conjure out of the darkness a viable memory of Rumer's smile....

"Sex as weapon," I told my Sharer, who sat propped on the stove-bed amid ten or twelve quilts of scarlet and off-scarlet. "As prince consort to the Governor of Diroste, that was the only weapon I had access to.... Rumer employed me as an emissary, Sharer, an espionage agent, a protocol officer, whatever state business required. I received visiting representatives of Glaktik Komm, mediated disputes in the Port Iranani business

community, and went on biannual inspection tours of the Fetneh and Furak District mines. I did a little of everything, Sharer."

As I paced, the Sharer observed me with a macabre, but somehow not unsettling, penetration. The hollow of his chest was exposed, and, as I passed him, an occasional metallic wink caught the corner of my eye.

I told him the story of my involvement with a minor official in Port Iranani's department of immigration, a young woman whom I had never called by anything but her maternal surname, Humay. There had been others besides this woman, but Humay's story was the one I chose to tell. Why? Because alone among my ostensible "lovers," Humay I had never lain with. I had never chosen to.

Instead, to her intense bewilderment, I gave Humay ceremonial pendants, bracelets, ear-pieces, brooches, necklaces, and die-cut cameos of gold on silver, all from the collection of Rumer Montieth, Governor of Diroste—anything, in short, distinctive enough to be recognizable to my wife at a glance. Then, at those state functions requiring Rumer's attendance upon a visiting dignitary, I arranged for Humay to be present; sometimes I accompanied her myself, sometimes I found her an escort among the unbonded young men assigned to me as aides. Always I insured that Rumer should see Humay, if not in a reception line then in the promenade of the formal recessional. Afterwards I asked Humay, who never seemed to have even a naïve insight into the purposes of my game, to hand back whatever piece of jewelry I had given her for ornament, and she did so. Then I returned the jewelry to Rumer's sandalwood box before my wife could verify what her eyes had earlier that evening tried to tell her. Everything I did was designed to create a false impression of my relationship with Humay, and I wanted my dishonesty in the matter to be conspicuous.

Finally, dismissing Humay for good, I gave her a cameo of Rumer's that had been crafted in the Furak District. I learned later that she had flung this cameo at an aide of mine who entered the offices of her department on a matter having nothing to do with her. She created a disturbance, several times raising my name. Ultimately (in two days' time), she was disciplined by a transfer to the frontier outpost of Yagme, the administrative center of the Furak

District, and I never saw her again.

"Later, Sharer, when I dreamed of Humay, I saw her as a woman with mother-of-pearl flesh and ruby eyes. In my dreams she *became* the pieces of jewelry with which I'd tried to incite my wife's sexual jealousy—blunting it even as I incited it."

The Sharer regarded me with hard but sympathetic eyes.

Why? I asked him. Why had I dreamed of Humay as if she were an expensive clockwork mechanism, gilded, beset with gemstones, invulnerably enameled? And why had I so fiercely desired Rumer's jealousy?

The Sharer's silence invited confession.

After the Haft Paykar Incident (I went on, pacing), after Diderits had fitted me with a total prosthesis, my nightmares often centered on the young woman who'd been exiled to Yagme. Although in Port Iranani I hadn't once touched Humay in an erotic way, in my monitored nightmares I regularly descended into either a charnel catacomb or a half-fallen quarry—it was impossible to know which—and there forced myself, without success, on the bejeweled automaton she had become. In every instance Humay waited for me underground; in every instance she turned me back with coruscating laughter. Its echoes always drove me upward to the light, and in the midst of nightmare I realized that I wanted Humay far less than I did residency in the secret, subterranean places she had made her own. The klieg lights that invariably directed my descent always followed me back out, too, so that Humay was always left kilometers below exulting in the dark....

My Sharer got up and took a turn around the room, a single quilt draped over his shoulders and clutched loosely together at his chest. This was the first time since I had been coming to him that he had moved so far of his own volition, and I sat down to watch. Did he understand me at all? I had spoken to him as if his understanding were presupposed, a certainty—but beyond a hopeful *feeling* that my words meant something to him I'd had no evidence at all, not even a testimonial from Wardress Kefa. All of the Sharer's "reactions" were really nothing but projections of my own ambiguous hopes.

When he at last returned to me, he extended both hideously canaled arms and opened his fists. In them, the disc and the penlight. It was an offering, a

compassionate, selfless offering, and for a moment I stared at his open hands in perplexity. What did they want of me, this Sharer, Wardress Kefa, the people who had sent me here? How was I supposed to buy either their forbearance or my freedom? By choosing power over impotency? By manipulation?... But these were altogether different questions, and I hesitated.

The Sharer then placed the small disc in the larger one beneath his sternum. Then, as before, a thousand esoteric connections severed, he froze. In the hand still extended toward me, the penlight glittered faintly and threatened to slip from his insensible grasp. I took it carefully from the Sharer's fingers, pulled back the sheath on its head, and gazed into its red-lit hollow. I released the sheath and pointed the penlight at the disc in his chest.

If I pulled the sheath back again, he would become little more than a fully integrated, *external* prosthesis—as much at my disposal as the hands holding the penlight.

"No," I said. "Not this time." And I flipped the penlight across the chamber, out of the way of temptation. Then, using my fingernails, I pried the small disc out of its electromagnetic moorings above the Sharer's heart.

He was restored to himself.

As was I to myself. As was I.

A day later, early in the afternoon, I ran into the Orhas in the House's mid-interior. They were coming unaccompanied out of a lofty, seemingly sideways-canted door as I stood peering upward from the access corridor. Man and woman together, mirror images ratcheting down a Moebius strip of stairs, the Orhas held my attention until it was too late for me to slip away unseen.

"The new visitant," Cleirach Orha informed his sister when he reached the bottom step. "We've seen you before."

"Briefly," I agreed. "The night you arrived from Manitou Port for your proficiency leave."

"What a good memory you have," Cleva Orha said. "We also saw you the day *you* arrived from Manitou Port. You and the Wardress were just setting out from Wolf Run Summit together. Cleirach and I were beneath the ski lodge, watching."

"You wore no coat," her clonemate said in explanation of their interest.

They both stared at me curiously. Neither was I wearing a coat in the well of

the House of Compassionate Sharers—even though the temperature inside hovered only a few degrees above freezing and we could see our breaths before us like the ghosts of ghosts.... I was a queer one, wasn't I? My silence made them nervous and brazen.

"No coat," Cleva Orha repeated, "and the day cold enough to fur your spittle. 'Look at that one,' Cleirach told me; 'thinks he's a polar bear.' We laughed about that, studling. We laughed heartily."

I nodded, nothing more. A coppery taste of bile, such as I hadn't experienced for several days, flooded my mouth, and I wanted to escape the Orhas' warty good humor. They were intelligent people, otherwise they would never have been cloned, but face to face with their flawed skins and their loud, insinuating sexuality I began to feel my newfound stores of tolerance overbalancing like a tower of blocks. It was a bitter test, this meeting below the stairs, and one I was on the edge of failing.

"We seem to be the only ones in the House this month," the woman volunteered. "Last month the Wardress was gone, the Sharers had a holiday, and Cleirach and I had to content ourselves with incestuous buggery in Manitou Port."

"Cleva!" the man protested, laughing.

"It's true." She turned to me. "It's true, studling. And that little she-goat—Kefa, I mean—won't even tell us why the Closed sign was out for so long. Delights in mystery, that one."

"That's right," Cleirach went on. "She's an exasperating woman. She begrudges you your privileges. You have to tread lightly on her patience. Sometimes you'd like to take *her* into a chamber and find out what makes her tick. A bit of exploratory surgery, hey-la!" Saying this, he showed me his trilling tongue.

"She's a maso-ascetic, Brother."

"I don't know. There are many mansions in this House, Cleva, several of which she's refused to let us enter. Why?" He raised his eyebrows suggestively, as Cleva had done the night she lifted her hand-lantern for our notice. The expressions were the same.

Cleva Orha appealed to me as a disinterested third party: "What do you think, studling? Is Wardress Scalplock at bed and at bone with one of her Sharers? Or does she lie by herself, maso-ascetically, under a hide of untanned elk hair? What do you think?"

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"I haven't really thought about it." Containing my anger, I tried to leave. "Excuse me, Orha-clones."

"Wait, wait, wait," the woman said mincingly, half-humorously. "You know our names and a telling bit of our background. That puts you up, studling. We won't have that. You can't go without giving us a name."

Resenting the necessity, I told them my name.

"From where?" Cleirach Orha asked.

"Colony World GK-11. We call it Diroste."

Brother and sister exchanged a glance of sudden enlightenment, after which Cleva raised her thin eyebrows and spoke in a mocking rhythm: "Ah ha, the mystery solved. Out and back our Wardress went and therefore closed her House."

"Welcome, Mr. Lorca. Welcome."

"We're going up to Wolf Run for an after-bout of toddies and P-nol. What about you? Would you like to go? The climb wouldn't be anything to a warm-blooded studling like you. Look, Cleirach. Biceps unbundled and his sinuses still clear."

In spite of the compliment I declined.

"Who have *you* been with?" Cleirach Orha wanted to know. He bent forward conspiratorially. "We've been with a native of an extrakomm world called Trope. That's the local name. Anyhow, there's not another such being inside of a hundred light-years, Mr. Lorca."

"It's the face that intrigues us," Cleva Orha explained, saving me from an immediate reply to her brother's question. And then she reached out, touched my arm, and ran a finger down my arm to my hand. "Look. Not even a goose bump. Cleirach, you and I are suffering the shems and trivs, and our earnest Mr. Lorca's standing here bare-boned."

Brother was annoyed by this analysis. There was something he wanted to know, and Cleva's non sequiturs weren't advancing his case. Seeing that he was going to ask me again, I rummaged about for an answer that was neither informative nor tactless.

Cleva Orha, meanwhile, was peering intently at her fingertips. Then she looked at my arm, again at her fingers, and a second time at my arm. Finally she locked eyes with me and studied my face as if for some clue to the source of my reticence.

Ah, I thought numbly, she's recognized me for what I am. . . .

"Mr. Lorca can't tell you who he's been with, Cleirach," Cleva Orha told her clonemate, "because he's not a visitant to

the House at all and he doesn't choose to violate the confidences of those who are."

Dumbfounded, I said nothing.

Cleva put her hand on her brother's back and guided him past me into the House's antechamber. Over her shoulder she bid me good afternoon in a toneless voice. Then the Orha-clones very deliberately let themselves out the front door and began the long climb to Wolf Run Summit.

What had happened? It took me a moment to figure it out. Cleva Orha had recognized me as a human-machine and from this recognition drawn a logical but mistaken inference: she believed me, like the "mouthless one" from Trope, a slave of the House. . . .

During my next tryst with my Sharer I spoke for an hour, two hours, maybe more, of Rumer's infuriating patience, her dignity, her serene ardor. I had moved her—maneuvered her—to the expression of these qualities by my own hollow commitment to Humay and the others before Humay who had engaged me only physically. Under my wife's attentions, however, I preened sullenly, demanding more than Rumer—than any woman in Rumer's position—had it in her power to give. My needs, I wanted her to know, my needs were as urgent and as real as Diroste's.

And at the end of one of these vague encounters Rumer seemed both to concede the legitimacy of my demands and to decry their intemperance by removing a warm pendant from her throat and placing it like an accusation in my palm.

"A week later," I told the Sharer, "was the inspection tour of the diggings at Haft Paykar."

These things spoken, I did something I had never done before in the Wardress's House: I went to sleep under the hand of my Sharer. My dreams were dreams rather than nightmares, and clarified ones at that, shot through with light and accompanied from afar by a peaceful funneling of sand. The images that came to me were haloed arms and legs orchestrated within a series of shifting yellow, yellow-orange, and subtly-red discs. The purr of running sand behind these movements conferred upon them the benediction of mortality, and that, I felt, was good.

I awoke in a blast of icy air and found myself alone. The door to the Sharer's apartment was standing open on the shaft

of the stairwell, and I heard faint, angry voices coming across the emptiness between. Disoriented, I lay on my stove-bed staring toward the door, a square of shadow feeding its chill into the room.

"*Dorian!*" a husky voice called. "*Dorian!*"

Wardress Kefa's voice, diluted by distance and fear. A door opened, and her voice hailed me again, this time with more clarity. Then the door slammed shut, and every sound in the House took on a smothered quality, as if mumbled through cold, semiporous wood.

I got up, dragging my bedding with me, and reached the narrow porch on the stairwell with a clear head. Thin starlight filtered through the unshuttered windows in the ceiling. Nevertheless, looking from stairway to stairway to stairway inside the House, I had no idea behind which door the Wardress now must be.

Because there existed no connecting stairs among the staggered landings of the House, my only option was to go down. I took the steps two at a time, very nearly plunging.

At the bottom I found my Sharer with both hands clenched about the outer stair rail. He was trembling. In fact, his chest and arms were quivering so violently that he seemed about to shake himself apart. I put my hands on his shoulders and tightened my grip until the tremors wracking him threatened to wrack my systems, too. Who would come apart first?

"Go upstairs," I told the Sharer. "Get the hell upstairs."

I heard the Wardress call my name again. Although by now she had squeezed some of the fear out of her voice, her summons was still distance-muffled and impossible to pinpoint.

The Sharer either couldn't or wouldn't obey me. I coaxed him, cursed him, goaded him, tried to turn him around so that he was heading back up the steps. Nothing availed. The Wardress, summoning me, had inadvertently called the Sharer out as my proxy, and he now had no intention of giving back to me the role he'd just usurped. The beautifully faired planes of his skull turned toward me, bringing with them the stainless-steel rings of his eyes. These were the only parts of his body that didn't tremble, but they were helpless to countermand the agues shaking him. As inhuman and unmoving as they were, the Sharer's features still managed to convey stark, unpitiable entreaty. . . .

I sank to my knees, felt about the



insides of the Sharer's legs, and took the penlight and the disc from the two pocketlike incisions tailored to these instruments. Then I stood and used them.

"Find Wardress Kefa for me, Sharer," I commanded, gesturing with the penlight at the windows overhead. "Find her."

And the Sharer floated up from the steps through the mid-interior of the House. In the crepuscular starlight, rocking a bit, he seemed to pass through a knot of curving stairs into an open space where he was all at once brightly visible.

"Point to the door," I said, jabbing the penlight uncertainly at several different landings around the well. "Show me the one."

My words echoed, and the Sharer, legs dangling, inscribed a slow half-circle in the air. Then he pointed toward one of the nearly hidden doorways.

I stalked across the well, found a likely-seeming set of stairs, and climbed them with no notion at all of what was expected of me.

Wardress Kefa didn't call out again, but I heard the same faint, somewhat slurred voices that I'd heard upon waking and knew that they belonged to the Orhas. A burst of muted female laughter, twice repeated, convinced me of this, and I hesitated on the landing.

"All right," I told my Sharer quietly, turning him around with a turn of the wrist, "go on home."

Dropping through the torus of a lower set of stairs, he found the porch in front of our chamber and settled upon it like a clumsily-handled puppet. And why not? I was a clumsy puppetmaster. Because there seemed to be nothing else I could do, I slid the penlight into a pocket of my dressing gown and knocked on the Orhas' door.

"Come in," Cleva Orha said. "By all means, Sharer Lorca, come in."

I entered and found myself in a room whose surfaces were all burnished as if with bee's wax. The timbers shone. Whereas in the other chambers I had seen nearly all the joists and rafters were rough-hewn, here they were smooth and splinterless. The scent of sandalwood pervaded the air, and opposite the door was a carven screen blocking my view of the chamber's stove-bed. A tall wooden lamp illuminated the furnishings and the three people arrayed around the lamp's border of light like iconic statues.

"Welcome," Cleirach Orha said. "Your invitation was from the Wardress, however, not us." He wore only a pair of silk pantaloons drawn together at the waist with a cord, and his right forearm was under Wardress Kefa's chin, restraining her movement without quite cutting off her wind.

His disheveled clonemate, in a dressing gown very much like mine, sat

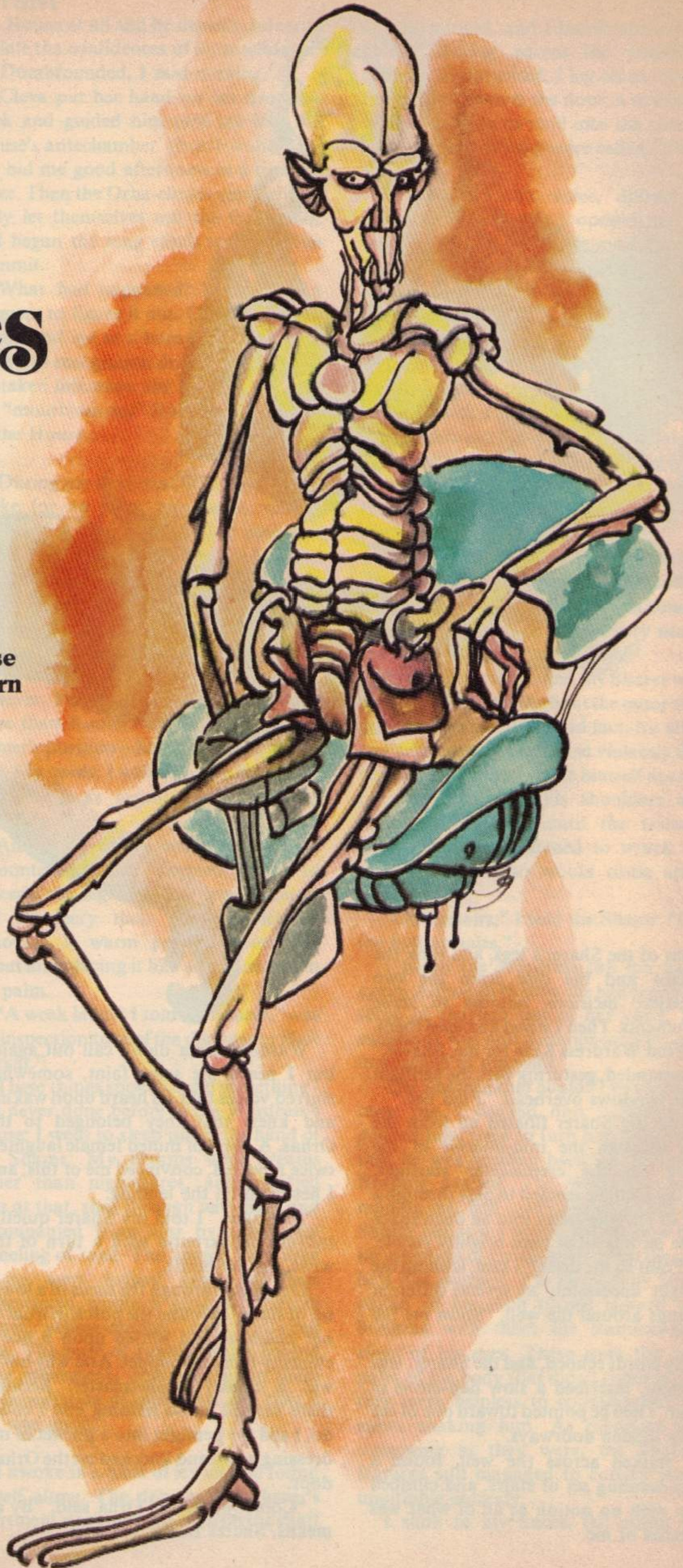
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3

Vignettes

by
Larry Niven

In which the rulers of the universe
tell a few tales in the Draco Tavern



1 Cruel and Unusual

Chirpsithra do not vary among themselves. They stand eleven feet tall and weigh one hundred and twenty pounds. Their skins are salmon pink, with exoskeletal plates over vital areas. They look alike even to me, and I've known more chirpsithra than most astronauts. I'd have thought that all humans would look alike to them.

But a chirpsithra astronaut recognized me across two hundred yards of the landing field at Mount Forel Spaceport. She called with the volume on her translator turned high. "Rick Schumann! Why have you closed the Draco Tavern?"

I'd closed the place a month ago, for lack of customers. Police didn't want chirpsithra wandering their streets, for fear of riots, and my human customers had stopped coming because the Draco was a chirpsithra place. A month ago I'd thought I would never want to see a chirpsithra again. Twenty-two years of knowing the fragile-looking aliens hadn't prepared me for three days of watching television.

But the bad taste had died, and my days had turned dull, and my skill at the Lottl speech was growing rusty. I veered toward the alien, and called ahead of me in Lottl: "This is a temporary measure, until the death of Ktashisnif may grow small in many memories."

We met on the wide, flat expanse of the blast pit. "Come, join me in my ship," said the chirpsithra. "My meals-maker has a program for whiskey. What is this

matter of Ktashisnif? I thought that was over and done with."

She had programmed her ship's kitchen for whiskey. I was bemused. The chirpsithra claim to have ruled the galaxy for untold generations. If they extended such a courtesy to every thinking organism they knew of, they'd need... how many programs? Hundred of millions?

Of course it wasn't very good whiskey. And the air in the cabin was cold. And the walls and floor and ceiling were covered with green goo. And... what the hell. The alien brought me a dry pillow to ward my ass from the slimy green air-plant, and I drank bad whiskey and felt pretty good.

"What is this matter of Ktashisnif?" she asked me. "A decision was rendered. Sentence was executed. What more need be done?"

"A lot of very vocal people think it was the wrong decision," I told her. "They also think the United Nations shouldn't have turned the kidnappers over to the chirpsithra."

"How could they not? The crime was committed against a chirpsithra, Diplomat-by-Choice Ktashisnif. Three humans named Shrenk and one named Jackson did menace Ktashisnif here at Mount Forel Spaceport, did show her missile-firing weapons and did threaten to punch holes in her if she did not come with them. The humans did take her by airplane to New York City, where they concealed her while demanding money of the Port Authority for her return. None

of this was denied by their lawyer nor by the criminals themselves."

"I remember." The week following the kidnapping had been hairy enough. Nobody knew the chirpsithra well enough to be quite sure what they might do to Earth in reprisal. "I don't think the first chirpsithra landing itself made bigger news," I said.

"That seems unreasonable. I think humans may lack a sense of proportion."

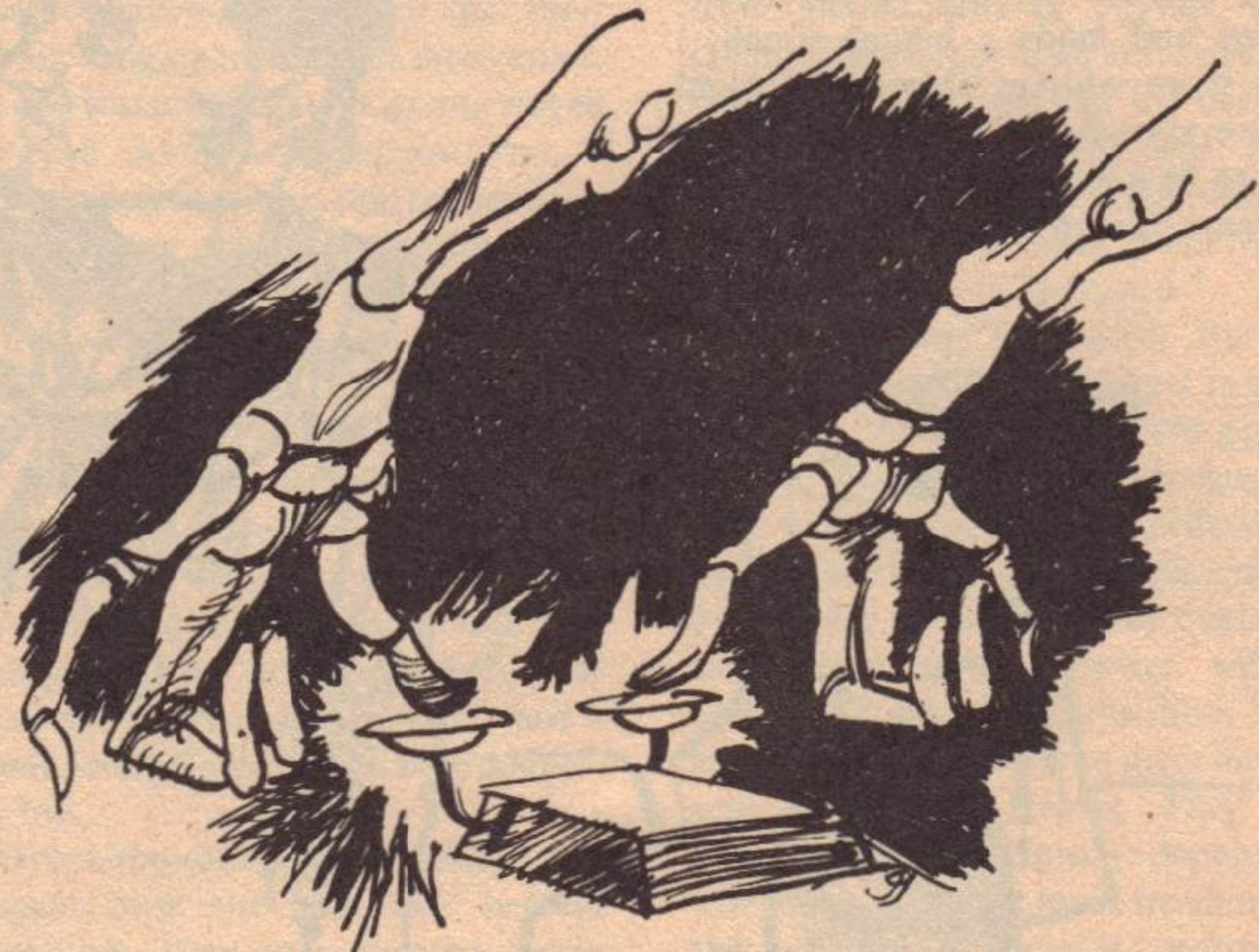
"Could be. We wondered if you'd pay off the ransom."

"In honor, we could not. Nor could we have allowed the United Nations to pay that price, if such had been possible, which it was not. Where would the United Nations find a million svith in chirpsithra trade markers?" The alien caressed two metal contacts with the long thumb of each hand. Sparks leapt, and she made a hissing sound. "Ssss... We wander from the subject. What quarrel could any sentient being have with our decision? It is not denied that Diplomat-by-Choice Ktashisnif died in the hands of the—," she used the human word, "kidnappers."

"No."

"Three days in agony, then death, a direct result of the actions of Jackson and the three Shrenks. They sought to hide in the swarming humanity of New York City. Ktashisnif was allergic to human beings, and the kidnappers had no allergy serum for her. These things are true."

"True enough. But our courts wouldn't have charged them with murder by slow torture." In fact, a good lawyer might have gotten them off by arguing



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that a chirpsithtra wasn't human before the law. I didn't say so. I said, "Jackson and the Shrenk brothers probably didn't know about chirpsithtra allergies."

"There are no accidents during the commission of a crime. Be reasonable. Next you will say that one who kills the wrong victim during an attempt at murder may claim that the death was an accident, that she should be set free to try again."

"I am reasonable. All I want is for all of this to blow over so that I can open the Draco Tavern again." I sipped at the whiskey. "But there's no point in that until I can get some customers again. I wish you'd let the bastards plead guilty to a lesser sentence. For that matter, I wish you hadn't invited reporters in to witness the executions."

She was disturbed now. "But such was your right, by ancient custom! Rick Schumann, are you not reassured to know that we did not inflict more pain on the criminals than they inflicted on Ktashisnif?"

For three days the world had watched while chirpsithtra executioners smothered four men slowly to death. In some nations it had even been televised. "It was terrible publicity. Don't you see, we don't do things like that. We've got laws against cruel and unusual punishment."

"How do you deal with cruel and unusual crimes?"

I shrugged.

"Cruel and unusual crimes require cruel and unusual punishment. You humans lack a sense of proportion, Rick Schumann. Drink more whiskey?"

She brushed her thumbs across the contacts and made a hissing sound. I drank more whiskey. Maybe it would improve my sense of proportion. It was going to be a long time before I opened the Draco Tavern again.

2

The Subject is Closed

We get astronauts in the Draco Tavern. We get workers from Mount Forel Spaceport, and some administrators, and some newsmen. We get chirpsithtra; I keep sparkers to get them drunk and chairs to fit their tall, spindly frames. Once in a while we get other aliens.

But we don't get many priests.

So I noticed him when he came in. He was young and round and harmless looking. His expression was a model of its kind: open, willing to be friendly, not nervous, but very alert. He stared a bit at two bulbous aliens in space suits who had come in with a chirpsithtra guide.

I watched him invite himself to join a trio of chirpsithtra. They seemed willing to have him. They like human company. He even had the foresight to snag one of the high chairs I spread around, high enough to bring a human face to chirpsithtra level.

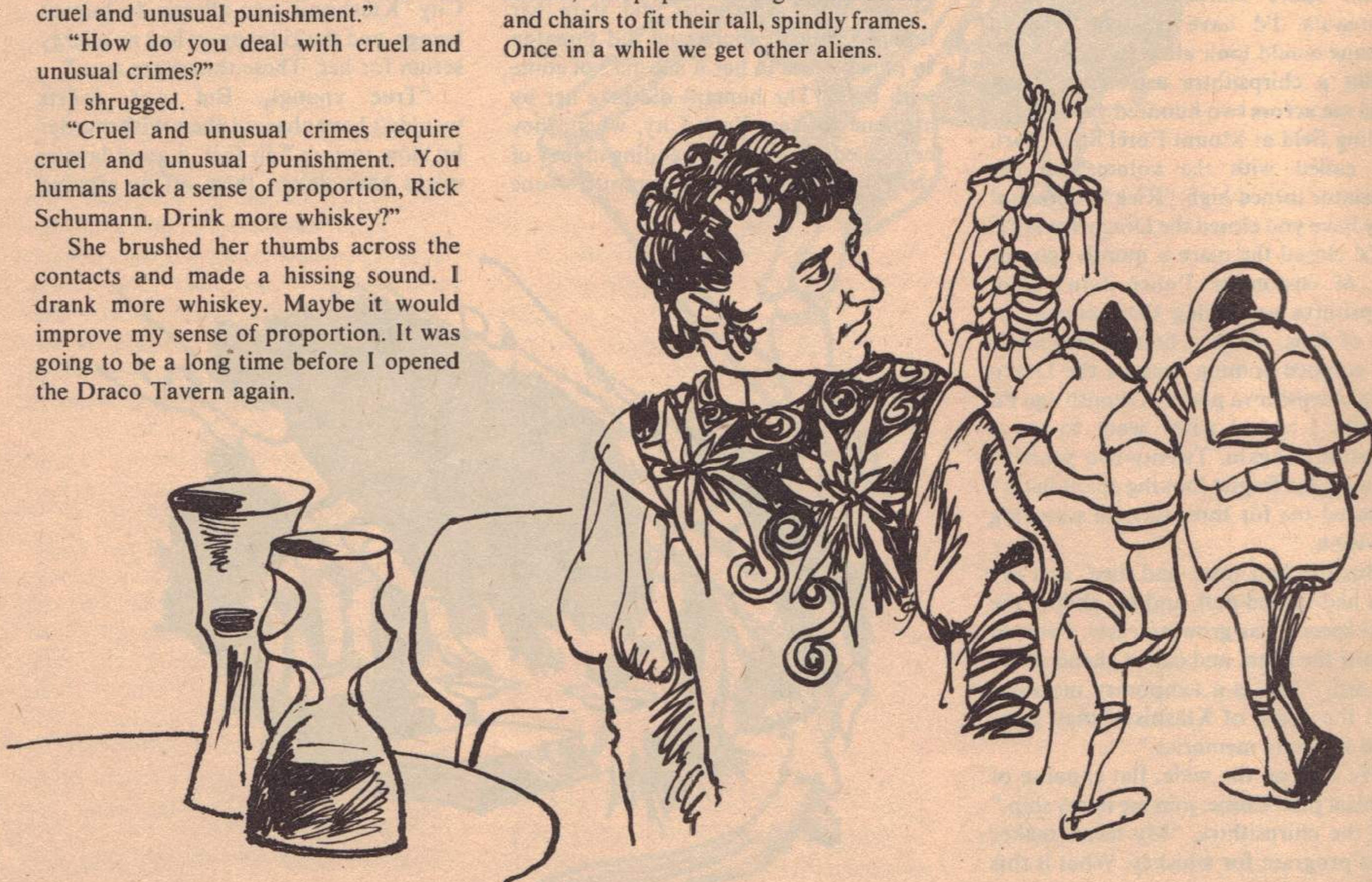
Someone must have briefed him, I decided. He'd know better than to do anything gauche. So I forgot him for a while.

An hour later he was at the bar, alone. He ordered a beer and waited until I'd brought it. He said, "You're Rick Schumann, aren't you? The owner?"

"That's right. And you?"

"Father David Hopkins." He hesitated, then blurted, "Do you trust the chirpsithtra?" He had trouble with the word.

I said, "Depends on what you mean. They don't steal the salt shakers. And



they've got half a dozen reasons for not wanting to conquer the Earth."

He waved that aside. Larger things occupied his mind. "Do you believe the stories they tell? That they rule the galaxy? That they're aeons old?"

"I've never decided. At least they tell entertaining stories. At most... You didn't call a chirpsithtra a liar, did you?"

"No, of course not." He drank deeply of his beer. I was turning away when he said, "They said they know all about life after death."

"Ye Gods. I've been talking to chirpsithtra for twenty years, but that's a new one. Who raised the subject?"

"Oh, one of them asked me about the, uh, uniform. It just came up naturally." When I didn't say anything, he added, "Most religious leaders seem to be just ignoring the chirpsithtra. And the other intelligent beings too. I want to *know*. Do they have souls?"

"Do they?"

"He didn't say."

"She," I told him. "All chirpsithtra are female."

He nodded, not as if he cared much. "I started to tell her about my order. But when I started talking about Jesus, and about salvation, she told me rather firmly that the chirpsithtra know all they want to know on the subject of life after death."

"So then you asked—"

"No, sir, I did not. I came over here to decide whether I'm afraid to ask."

I gave him points for that. "And are you?" When he didn't answer I said, "It's like this. I can stop her at any time you like. I know how to apologize gracefully."

Only one of the three spoke English, though the others listened as if they understood it.

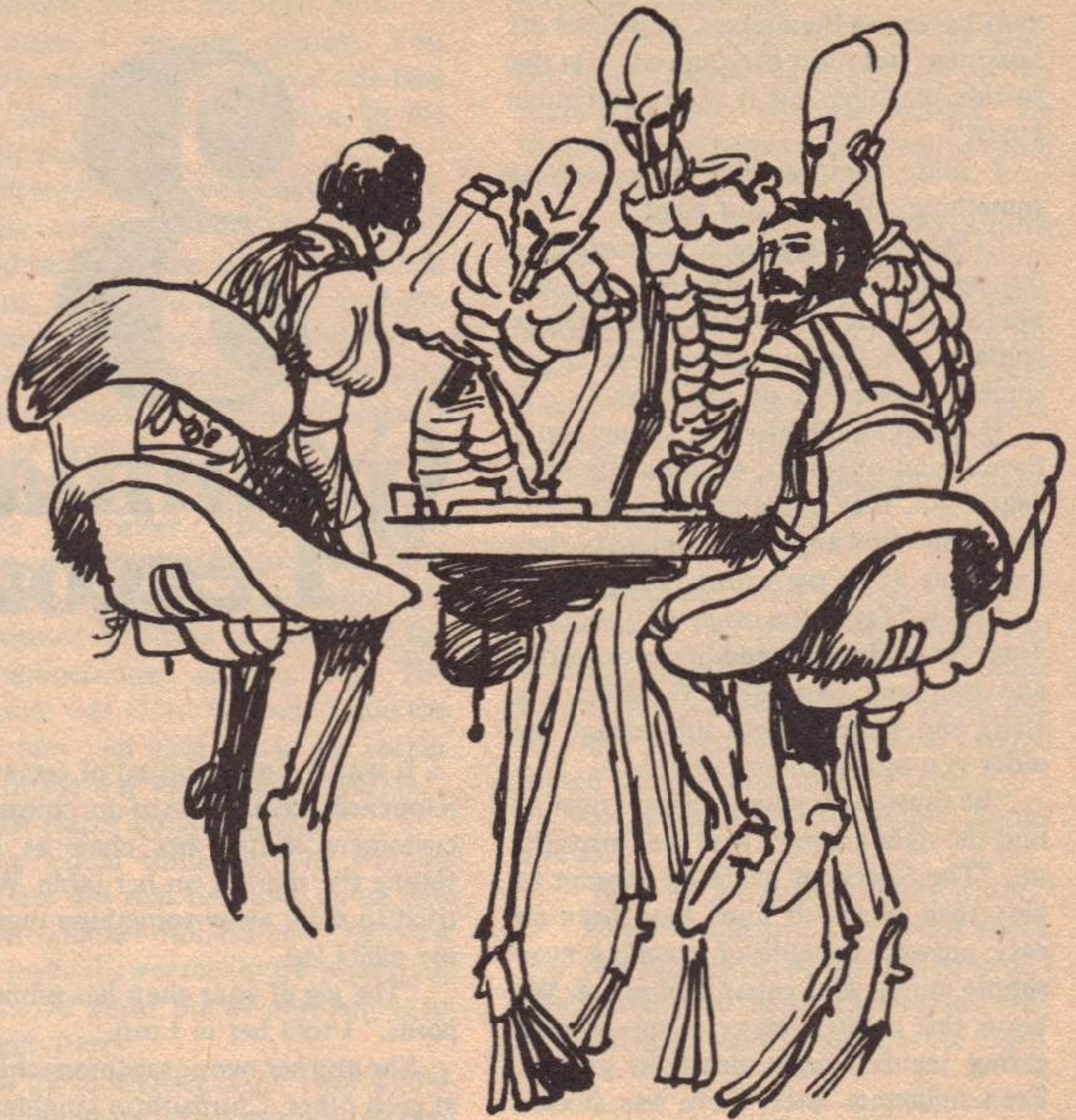
"I don't know," she said.

That was clearly the answer Hopkins wanted. "I must have misunderstood," he said, and he started to slip down from his high chair.

"I told you that we know as much as we want to know on the subject," said the alien. "Once there were those who knew more. They tried to teach us. Now we try to discourage religious experiments."

Hopkins slid back into his chair. "What were they? Chirpsithtra saints?"

"No. The Sheegupt were carbon-water-oxygen life, like you and me, but they developed around the hot F-type suns in the galactic core. When our own empire had expanded near enough to the core, they came to us as missionaries. We



rejected their pantheistic religion. They went away angry. It was some thousands of years before we met again.

"By then our settled regions were in contact, and had even interpenetrated to some extent. Why not? We could not use the same planets. We learned that their erstwhile religion had broken into variant sects and was now stagnant, giving way to what you would call agnosticism. I believe the implication is that the agnostic does not know the nature of God, and does not believe you do either?"

I looked at Hopkins, who said, "Close enough."

"We established a trade in knowledge and in other things. Their skill at educational toys exceeded ours. Some of our foods were dietetic to them; they had taste but could not be metabolized. We mixed well. If my tale seems sketchy or superficial, it is because I never learned it in great detail. Some details were deliberately lost.

"Over a thousand years of contact, the Sheegupt took the next step beyond agnosticism. They experimented. Some of their research was no different from

your own psychological research, though of course they reached different conclusions. Some involved advanced philosophies: attempts to extrapolate God from his artwork, so to speak. There were attempts to extrapolate other universes from altered laws of physics, and to contact the extrapolated universes. There were attempts to contact the dead. The Sheegupt kept us informed of the progress of their work. They were born missionaries, even when their religion was temporarily in abeyance."

Hopkins was fascinated. He would hardly be shocked at attempts to investigate God. After all, it's an old game.

"We heard, from the Sheegupt outpost worlds, that the scientifically advanced worlds in the galactic core had made some kind of breakthrough. Then we started losing contact with the Sheegupt," said the chirpsithtra. "Trade ships found no shuttles to meet them. We sent investigating teams. They found Sheegupt worlds entirely depopulated. The inhabitants had made machinery for the purpose of suicide, generally a combination of electrocution terminals

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and conveyor belts. Some Sheegupt had used knives on themselves, or walked off buildings, but most had queued up at the suicide machines, as if in no particular hurry."

I said, "Sounds like they learned something, all right. But what?"

"Their latest approach, according to our records, was to extrapolate rational models of a life after death, then attempt contact. But they may have gone on to something else. We do not know."

Hopkins shook his head. "They could have found out there wasn't a life after death. No, they couldn't, could they? If they didn't find anything, it might be they were only using the wrong model."

I said, "Try it the other way around. There is a Heaven, and it's wonderful, and everyone goes there. Or there is a Hell, and it gets more unpleasant the older you are when you die."

"Be cautious in your guesses. You may find the right answer," said the chirpsithtra. "The Sheegupt made no attempt to hide their secret. It must have been an easy answer, capable of reaching even simple minds, and capable of proof. We know this because many of our investigating teams sought death in groups. Even millennia later, there was suicide among those who probed through old records, expecting no more than a fascinating puzzle in ancient history. The records were finally destroyed."

After I closed up for the night, I found Hopkins waiting for me outside.

"I've decided you were right," he said earnestly. "They must have found out there's a Heaven and it's easy to get in. That's the only thing that could make that many people *want* to be dead. Isn't it?"

But I saw that he was wringing his hands without knowing it. He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure of anything.

I told him, "I think you tried to preach at the chirpsithtra. I don't doubt you were polite about it, but that's what I think happened. And they closed the subject on you."

He thought it over, then nodded jerkily. "I guess they made their point. What would I know about chirpsithtra souls?"

"Yeah. But they spin a good yarn, don't they?"

3

Grammar Lesson

It was the most casual of remarks. It happened because one of my chirpsithtra customers shifted her chair as I was setting the sparker on her table. When I tried to walk away something tugged at my pants leg.

"The leg of your chair has pinned my pants," I told her in Lottl.

She and her two companions chattered at each other. Chirpsithtra laughter. She moved the chair. I walked away, somewhat miffed, wondering what had made her laugh at me.



She stopped me when next I had occasion to pass her table. "Your pardon for my rudeness. You used intrinsic 'your' and 'my', instead of extrinsic. As if your pants are part of you and my chair a part of me. I was taken by surprise."

"I've been studying Lottl for almost thirty years," I answered, "but I don't claim I've mastered it yet. After all, it is an alien language. There are peculiar variations even between human languages."

"We have noticed. 'Pravda' means 'official truth'. 'Pueblo' means 'village, considered as a population'. And all of your languages seem to use one possessive for all purposes. My arm, my husband, my mother," she said, using the intrinsic "my" for her arm, the "my" of property for her husband, and the "my" of relationship for her mother.

"I always get those mixed up," I admitted. "Why, for instance, the possessive for your husband? Never mind," I said hastily, before she could get angry. There was some big secret about the chirpsithtra males. You learned not to ask. "I don't see the difference as being that important."

"It was important once," she said. "There is a tale we teach every immature chirpsithtra..."

By human standards, and by the chirpsithtra standards of the time, it was a mighty empire. Today the chirpsithtra rule the habitable worlds of every red dwarf star in the galaxy—or so they claim. Then, their empire was a short segment of one curving arm of the galactic whirlpool. But it had never been larger.

The chirpsithtra homeworld had circled a red dwarf sun. Such stars are as numerous as all other stars put together. The chirpsithtra worlds numbered in the tens of thousands, yet they were not enough. The empire expanded outward and inward. Finally—it was inevitable—it met another empire.

"The knowledge that thinking beings come in many shapes, this knowledge was new to us," said my customer. Her face was immobile, built like a voodoo mask scaled down. No hope of reading expression there. But she spoke depreciatingly. "The ilawn were short and broad, with lumpy gray skins. Their hands were clumsy, their noses long and mobile and dexterous. We found them unpleasantly homely. Perhaps they thought the same of us."

So there was war from the start, a war in which six worlds and many fleets of

spacecraft died before ever the ilawn and the chirpsithtra tried to talk to each other.

Communication was the work of computer programmers of both species. The diplomats got into it later. The problem was simple and basic.

The ilawn wanted to keep expanding. The chirpsithtra were in the way.

Both species had evolved for red dwarf sunlight. They used worlds of about one terrestrial mass, a little colder, with oxygen atmospheres.

"A war of extermination seemed likely," said the chirpsithtra. She brushed her thumbs along the contacts of the sparker, once and again. Her speech slowed, became more precise. "We made offers, of course. A vacant region to be established between the two empires; each could expand along the opposite border. This would have favored the ilawn, as they were nearer the star-crowded galactic core. They would not agree. When they were sure that we would not vacate *their* worlds..." She used the intrinsic possessive, and paused to be sure I'd seen the point. "They broke off communication. They resumed their attacks.

"It became our task to learn more of the ilawn. It was difficult. We could hardly send disguised spies!" Her companions chattered at that. She said, "We learned ilawn physiology from captured warriors. We learned depressing things. The ilawn bred faster than we did; their empire included thrice the volume of ours. Beyond that the prisoners would not give information. We did our best to make them comfortable, in the hope that some day there would be a prisoner exchange. That was how we learned the ilawn secret.

"Rick Schumann, do you know that we evolved on a one-face world?"

"I don't know the term," I said.

"And you have spoken Lottl for thirty years!" Her companions chattered. "But you will appreciate that the worlds we need huddle close to their small, cool suns. Else they would not be warm enough to hold liquid water. So close are they that tidal forces generally stop their rotation, so that they always turn one face to the sun, as your moon faces Earth."

"I'd think that all the water would freeze across the night side. The air too."

"No, there is circulation. Hot winds rise on the day side and blow to the night side, and cool, and sink, and the cold winds blow across the surface back to the day side. On the surface a hurricane

blows always toward the noon pole."

"I think I get the picture. You wouldn't need a compass on a one-face world. The wind always points in the same direction."

"Half true. There are local variations. But there are couplet worlds too. Around a red dwarf sun the planetary system tends to cluster close. Often enough, world-sized bodies orbit one another. For tidal reasons they face each other; they do not face the sun. Five percent of habitable worlds are found in couplets."

"The ilawn came from one of those?"

"You are alert. Yes. Our ilawn prisoners were most uncomfortable until we shut their air conditioning almost off. They wanted darkness to sleep, and the same temperatures all the time. The conclusion was clear. We found that the worlds they had attacked in the earlier stages of the war were couplet worlds."

"That seems simple enough."

"One would think so. The couplet worlds are not that desirable to us. We find their weather dull, insipid. There is a way to make the weather more interesting on a couplet world, but we were willing to give them freely.

"But the ilawn fought on. They would not communicate. We could not tolerate their attacks on our ships and on our other worlds." She took another jolt of current. "Ssss... We needed a way to bring them to the conference arena."

"What did you do?"

"We began a program of evacuating couplet worlds wherever the ilawn ships came near."

I leaned back in my chair: a high chair, built to bring my face to the height of a chirpsithtra face. "I must be confused. That sounds like total surrender."

"A language problem," she said. "I have said that the planetary system clusters close around a red dwarf star. There are usually asteroids of assorted sizes. Do your scientists know of the results of a cubic mile of asteroid being dropped into a planetary ocean?"

I'd read an article on the subject once. "They think it could cause another ice age."

"Yes. Megatons of water evaporated, falling elsewhere. Storms of a force foreign to your quiet world. Glaciers in unstable configurations, causing more weather. The effects last for a thousand years. We did this to every couplet world we could locate. The ilawn took some two dozen worlds from us, and tried to live on them. Then they took steps to arrange

a further conference."

"You were lucky," I said. By the odds, the ilawn should have evolved on the more common one-face worlds. Or should they? The couplets sounded more hospitable to life.

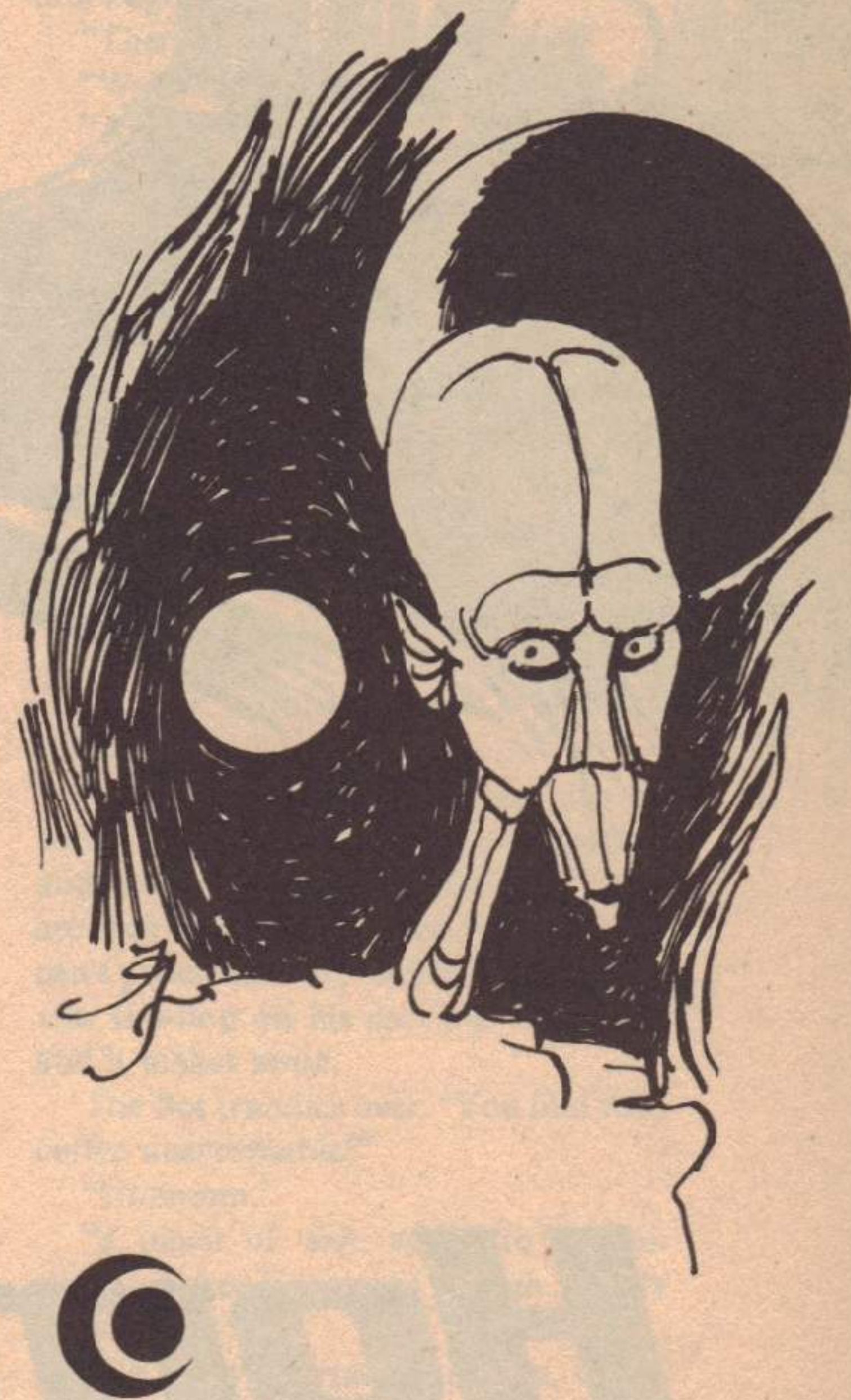
"We were lucky," the chirpsithtra agreed, "that time. We were lucky in our language. Suppose we had used the same word for *my* head, *my* credit cards, *my* sister? Chirpsithtra might have been unable to evacuate their homes, as a human may die defending his home—," she used the intrinsic possessive, "*—his* home from a burglar."

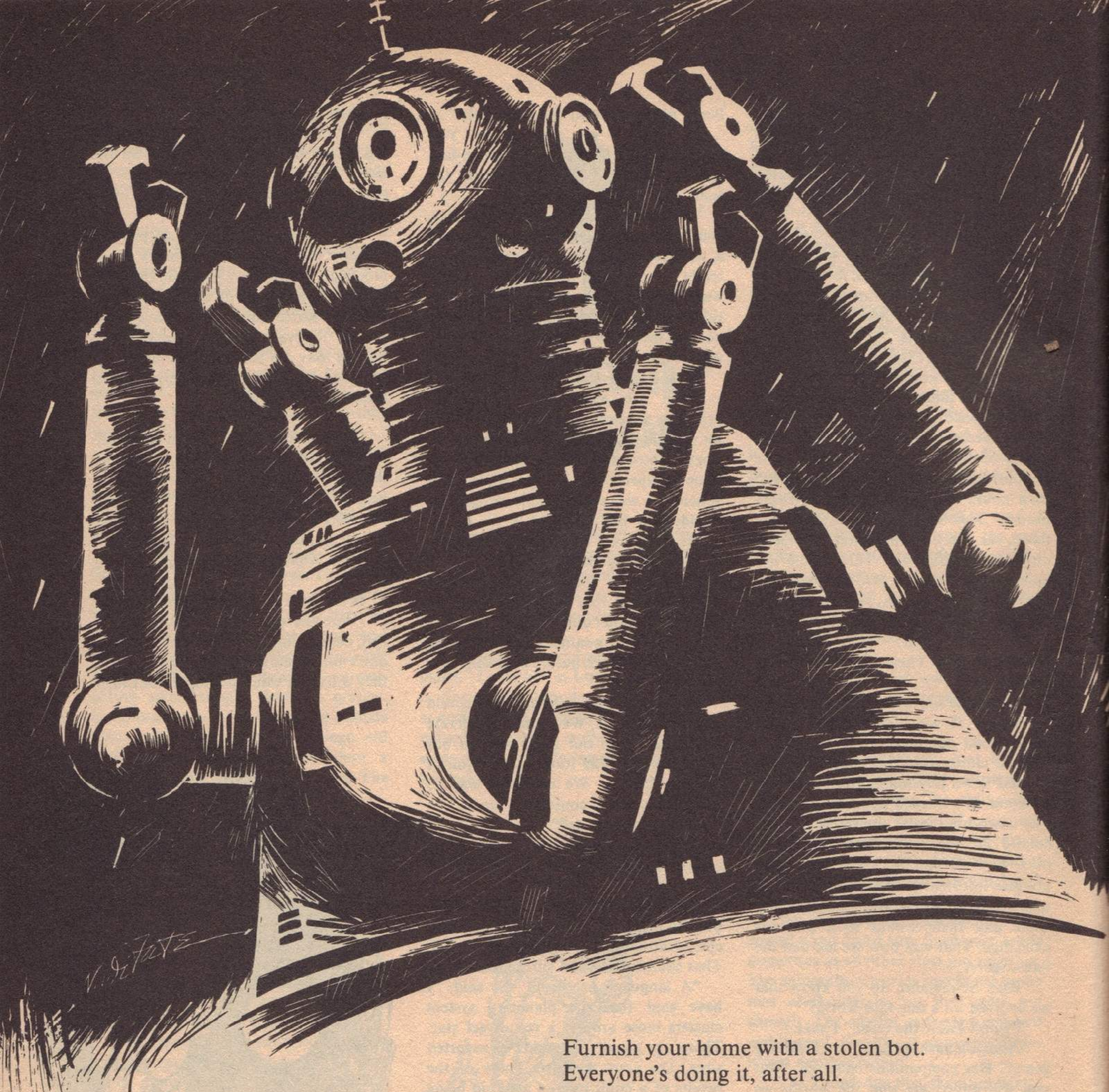
Closing time. Half a dozen chirpsithtra wobbled out, drunk on current and looking unstable by reason of their height. The last few humans waved and left. As I moved to lock the door I found myself smiling all across my face.

Now what was I so flippin' happy about?

It took me an hour to figure it out.

I like the chirpsithtra. I trust them. But, considering the power they control, I don't mind finding another reason why they will never want to conquer the Earth.





Furnish your home with a stolen bot.
Everyone's doing it, after all.

Vincent DiFate

by Greg Benford

Homemaker

He simply takes one. It is that easy. He finds an Ajax model 34 standing unattended, walks up to it, gives the keying-in code, and says, "Come. Follow me."

"at what pace?" the robot says.

"Mine, of course," Gerald replies.

He has learned, through an engineer friend, about Ajax 34's deficiency. Any member of that model will key over to a new voice-directive, without checking its Mandates. The manufacturer is correcting this quirk as quickly as possible, of course, but it will take time.

The robot whirs along behind him. They go unnoticed in traffic. By the time Gerald gets it home he steps with a new, bouncy verve. The chilled air inside his apartment, usually rather stale and flat, seems crisp. He hurries to the 3D and calls Rebecca.

"I got it."

"No!" But she can see it's so.

"It was easy, dead easy. Just the way Morris said."

"What's your name, little bot?"

The robot squats mutely.

"Bot?" Gerald asks.

"Slang for robot. You ask him."

"What is your name, Ajax 34?"

"that does not lie. within my. decision matrix."

"Well, I'll name you..."

"Bot," Rebecca puts in. "Bot. It fits."

"You mean," Gerald remarks, "like that dog of yours, named Dog."

"Of course. It fits."

At first Gerald renders the Bot functional at simple tasks: sweeping with a broom, taking out the garbage, washing windows. The arms articulate well. Early on the Bot seems, for Gerald's tastes, overly concerned—indeed, obsessed—with its germanium transistors and their well being.

"should i be. receiving. conflicting logexes?"

"How do I know?"

"there are nonlinear. aspects."

"You feeling okay?"

"i am confocal. today."

"Do you think your ex-owners can trace you?"

"i calculate low probability."

"Great!" Gerald claps his hands in the echoing volume of his apartment. "We're going to have a lot of fun with you."

"task mandate?"

"What?"

"i require. task mandate."

"Oh. Yes. You can cook, I guess."

"i am. programmable."

"How well?"

"no referent scale. available."

"Oh. Well, get on into the kitchen."

"mandate?"

"Try some Heat 'n Serve Pigs-In-A-Blanket."

Gerald is lying on his flexcushion watching *The Iliad and the Ecstasy* when the doorbell chimes. He opens the door. Rebecca sweeps in, her balloon sleeves flapping, her eyebrows arched. "Guess."

"I never can."

"I've snatched one myself."

"No." But she has: behind her rolls an orange box sprouting plexarms. An Ajax 42.

"How?"

"Indifference."

"Nonsense."

"Wait." She holds his attention with a needle-fine fingernail which lands delicately on his shoulder. "I pretended I wasn't interested in 42 here at all. I just looked in shop windows and ignored 42 when it came by. That put it off guard."

"Morris specifically said—"

"Who cares? I think these poor things are *programmed* to be suspicious. So I worked my way over to it and whispered the key-in and..."

He runs his fingers through her Stephens Carmin hair. It crackles. "You're great," Gerald says roughly.

"i am unmandated."

Gerald frowns. "Can't you help 42?"

"it is also. unmandated."

"Hey. Rebecca."

She unplugs from her helmet, where she was watching a simulated bullfight—no actual killing was allowed, of course, but you forgot all about that while it was on—and scowls at him.

"They need a job."

"Fix my car."

"They've done that."

"you experience. difficulty. over this."

"Shut up." Gerald gazes around, gets up, walks from room to room. The Bot hums along behind him. Its arms move energetically, making a rasping whisper.

"Trouble is, there's just not much to do in this place."

Rebecca does not hear him; she is back under the helmet. Gerald knocks over an ashtray, making a silent powdery splash on the off-white carpet—he and Rebecca had been smoking again, illegally. 42 rolls over to suck away the blotch.

The trouble is, his apartment is too simply decorated. Gerald studies it. His

primary embellishment of the anonymous plaster walls is a print of Jakopii's famous *Toward A Unified Philosophy of Ice Cream*. He rather likes it, but one print isn't enough, not by a long shot. And there are fly specks on the print, right in the middle of the creamy woman's thigh. There are, of course, some droll touches of his own here and there. In the bathroom (an important place in an apartment, intimate but seen by nearly every guest) hangs a fake mantelpiece with an impressive flintlock rifle mounted over it. And there are some amusing towels. But not enough, no.

"I think I'll augment them."

"Ummmm?" Rebecca murmurs from under the helmet.

"I'll buy them some memorex cubes."

"Why?"

"We'll have them learn interior decoration. That way I won't have to hire anybody."

"They're just *machines*, Gerald."

He drops his spoon on the table. With a rattle it spatters Flecko on the ceramic tabletop.

"But all I said, Gerald, was that it's theft."

"I know. I know you said that. I just don't agree."

"There's no reason to get mad."

"Well look, Marv did it."

"An Ajax 12. A simple model."

"But he didn't even get a fine."

"That was before more of us did it."

"Only a few more."

"Well, Betty has one."

"She does?" He is genuinely surprised.

"Hermann, too."

He remembers Hermann, a fellow with funny tapered sideburns who invariably wore a maroon ascot whenever there was the slightest reason. What the hell was a guy like that doing, stealing an Ajax?

"In fact, I probably know at least five others—"

"Okay," he says, grimacing into his coffee cup, where he can see his smoothed and warped amber reflection. "If there are that many of us, then they for sure can't prosecute." He smiles. This seems a nice flip-flop on his previous argument, and it makes sense.

The Bot trundles over. "You find your coffee unacceptable?"

"Ummmm."

"a pinch of. salt. added to instant. coffee. makes it taste. as though. freshly ground."

"Go away," Gerald murmurs, think-

HOMEMAKER

ing about the cops.

Gerald arrives home early. Rebecca, by prearrangement, is off work today and has used her key. She waves from under the helmet. "I got the last of the memorex cubes," he reports. "Our little friends can finish their redecoration course."

"Good. Good," she calls.

"I also brought us a little wisdom." He displays a dark bottle of Concannon '96. Rebecca is enmeshed in her helmet show. He walks into the kitchen and finds a corkscrew. It goes in smoothly enough, biting the waxy cork, but as he twists the top the corkscrew begins a high-pitched, irritating squeal against the glass neck.

"Let me, sir," the Bot says, appearing in the kitchen. Gerald surrenders the bottle, smiling stiffly so that a thin line of teeth show, and glad that Rebecca is not there after all.

While the Bot and 42 shove the furniture and wall manifolds around, Gerald and Rebecca play bridge. Gerald finds a program available through the Yellow Faxes which provides a simulated bridge team. The sim works well, analyzing the level of their game accurately and matching—but not exceeding—them. Gerald improves more rapidly than Rebecca. He has a certain expansive feeling whenever the sim program is forced to pause, recalibrate for Gerald, and then stutter out its next play. It hesitates for a full twenty seconds when it first realizes Gerald has learned to count all fifty-two cards and employ this in his play. Before resuming play the faxscreen flashes that it must charge more for this level of tactics. Rebecca, who has only now begun to keep track of who has which trumps, bites her lavender lip. Gerald ignores the Bot and 42, who are chuffing solemnly as they maneuver, and concentrates on the fax display. He enjoys keeping track of tricks; calculating a finesse; inventing elaborate ruses to fool the sim. But Rebecca loses interest. She returns to the helmet to catch the weekly *Situational Sexuality*, which is today beginning Case History MCXVII. Gerald plays on, paying a bit more for the fax to handle three hands, and works steadily through several rubbers, reacting quickly to whatever the sim does, moving smoothly, snapping the cards down.

They make love while the robots wait in a corner of the newly-arranged bedroom. The Bot and 42 stand impassive,

their locomotion meshes inactivated. The air in the room seems thick and layered, despite the steady breath puffing from the air conduits. He and Rebecca intertwine rhythmically, as though each is struggling with some difficulty to push the other up a common steep hillside.

They study the new living room.

"Mmmmm," Rebecca says noncommittally.

"Like the concept," Gerald pronounces. "Like the whole thing. Yeah. That alcove, though—," pointing "—looks like something a clerk-typist would think up."

"Ummmm."

"Rebecca, they've studied *all* the memorex. These are good designs."

"A lot of learning can be a little thing."

"You heard that somewhere," he says accusingly.

"Mmmmmmmmm," she admits.

One afternoon, when Gerald comes early to the apartment, he finds them attempting some new task by interlocking their perceptual centers. The Bot has backed up to 42 and unhinged his rear module, for easier access. 42 has flipped up the lid of its input center and the Bot presses against it. Gerald frowns. Since he did not, of course, get an owner's manual with the Bot, he can't diagnose what the trouble might be. 42 whirs. The Bot makes a crunching noise. Why are they doing this, coupled together in—of all places—a closet? And with their perceiving lobes active, but no link to the outside sensors, Gerald wonders, what are they receiving? It is a puzzle.

"Christ."

"What now?" Rebecca says absently.

"This fax is about Betty."

"You mean *Betty*?"

"They're pressing charges."

"For—?"

"Sure, what else?"

"Well, I said it was theft, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

"Now, don't go all Bogart on me."

"Uh huh."

"Can she get off with a fine, do you suppose?"

"Probably not. A lot depends on this court ruling coming up soon."

"You mean the man who had three of them?"

"Yeah, haven't you been keeping up? He's fighting it."

"But he's *guilty*."

"Scan the fax. Remember that lower court opinion about, about automaton

volition, they called it?"

"No. You know I can't—"

"You should, Rebecca, you—"

"It's *jargon*, Gerald."

"Listen."

"Oh—okay."

"This fellow—the one who's banging on the door of the high courts now—he's disputing that ruling from three years ago. The one that said the bots aren't, well, alive."

"Oh *yes*. He says the Ajaxes want to stay with him."

"Yeah, what garbage. Real garbage. He takes a chance, he pays the price, is the way I see it." He stands up, kicks 42 lightly in its side as it purrs past, smiles.

"Well, I'd rather we didn't get caught."

He sucks in his stomach and shrugs elaborately. "No telling." He is feeling very good, but he doesn't tell Rebecca that.

The Bot squeaks slightly as it rolls in from the kitchen. "your Roast 'n Boast. is ready," it says. Gerald nods and grins, the skin around his eyes crinkling with inner warmth.

Gerald buys a billiard table, using the money he saved by having the machines do his redecoration, and spends long hours around it. He enjoys sighting down the long stick, tapping the ball just right with the blue-chalked tip to vector it into the predicted pocket. It is a linear exercise of exact momenta and angles, a Euclidean world, though of course he does not think of it in those terms. The balls move in their own universe, intersecting with a classical click.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Rebecca says to the Bot.

"you just did."

"Oh." Her contact lenses seek out the ceramic gleam of its sensors. "I, I liked the mayonnaise curry sauce."

The Bot says nothing.

"What I mean is, do you want to stay with us?"

"i must."

"Oh."

While the Bot and 42 are putting together his exercise machine, Gerald paces the vinyl-layered living room. "It needs something," he says at last, decisively.

"What?"

"The walls."

"Have the bots repaint."

"Right. Right."

He spends some time aligning his

thoughts in the billiards room and then approaches the Bot. "What color do you think is best?"

"i would. say an amber. tending toward. yellow."

"Uh. Really?"

"with elements of. green. restful to the human eye."

"Doesn't 42 have any opinion about this?"

"no."

His thighs clench, relax, clench again as he rides the exercise machine. He has to get into better physical shape. All this apartment living is bad for a man. Softens him up. He has to be pretty quick if they're going to keep a step ahead of the cops, he thinks, grimacing with some satisfaction. He puffs and pants heavily and the acoustically sophisticated walls recommended by the Bot and gummed into place by 42 absorb the sound utterly, hushing the room.

When he finishes and walks out, mulling over a calculation of term insurance in his head, Rebecca is watching *Quips and Barbs* on the helmet. Gerald finds the Bot and 42 carefully applying yellow paint to a corner of the living room.

"What's that?" he says sharply, pointing at a round green mark amid the yellow.

"the black hole. which is thought to be the energy. source. for Cygnus A."

"Cygnus who?"

"a prominent double. radio source. the three emission. regions are connected by a. supersonically. relativistic. flow originating. above the poles of. the black. hole."

"What's it doing on my wall?"

"it is a preferred. design. scheme. implications of the infinite—"

"Okay. We'll see how it works out. What's the funny thick line through the green?"

"the accretion disk. infalling matter in orbit. around the black hole. its thermal radiation drives. the relativistic wind. which—"

"Yeah, yeah, okay. Boy, the things they teach you." He goes back to the exercise machine to work on his pectoral muscles. They've been getting goddamn lardy.

He is eating a Carbohyde Flash with some relish when the doorbell sounds. Probably Betty, with another story about her prissy lawyer. Just to be safe he peers through the corridor viewer. The hallway

is awash in enameled light. He gets a glimpse of a thin man in a brown overcoat and then a wedge of slick plastic looms up, blossoming from the man's hand upward, toward the viewer. It is an identity card. Metro Police. Officer Axford.

"What do you want?" Gerald says tightly. He senses the Bot come rolling up. He gestures the Bot away with frantic hand-signals.

"Moom meh in. Royee ah scerge warrant," Gerald hears through the double-paneled, deadbolted door.

"I, well—"

"Or we'll *kick it in*," comes more clearly.

When Gerald opens the heavy door Axford and a short, wiry man brush by him as though he were a butler, muttering a legal formula required by the courts for cases like this, slurring the words so he can't make them out. They dash into the kitchen where 42 is lathering a coffee pot. The wiry man calls, "Here's one box all right," and Axford swerves for the bedrooms. The wiry one stays with 42 and begins to recite a set piece about rights, but Gerald follows Axford.

"*What? What?*" Rebecca calls shrilly from the bedroom, but already Axford is coming out, heading down the hallway. He jerks open the bathroom door. The Bot is struggling with the rifle mounted over the fake mantelpiece, trying to pull it down.

"Stop," Gerald says, not sure who he means.

"but it must. go off," says the Bot.

"It's a fake rifle!" Gerald cries.

Axford has drawn a pistol, but it does not go off either.

The Bot becomes still. "We nailed you good on this one," Axford says happily, holstering his pistol.

"How did you find us?" Rebecca wrings out the words.

"Targets of opportunity. We have our sources," Axford murmurs mysteriously.

"*allegro*. you have the. charges."

"Sure. Theft—"

"a needful. display." The Bot produces two triangular embossed licenses.

At first Axford won't believe the triangles are authentic, but a careful check of their acute angles reveals the proper validation. The licenses prove conclusive ownership of 42 and the Bot by Rebecca and Gerald, respectively. Gerald gapes at this but says nothing, even when Axford and the other man apologize and help fit the rifle back into its moorings.

Soon they have backed out the front door, still apologizing and explaining what a rare event an error like this is, in these days of improved surveillance and sensors, and then they are gone. Gerald finds the Bot adjusting a receptor which was damaged in the scuffle.

"Where'd those licenses come from?"

"i manufactured. them. clearly they would. be needed."

The next day, as he waits for 42 to warm up some Bite-a-lots, Gerald notices the Cygnus A design again. The accretion disk is different now. It seems to have tilted to a new angle. This disturbs him but he does not mention the matter.

Gerald walks into the bedroom. The Bot is there, and an Ajax 38, a square metallic-gray case with seven arms. "Hey," he says, trying to think.

"i have snatched. a 38," the Bot declares.

"How can you...?" Gerald begins, but stops, not wanting to look ridiculous. "Well, you've got a pretty heavy work load around here. I'm sure you can use the help." He pats the Bot affectionately.

He says to Rebecca later, "Imagine that! Stealing his own bot." He shakes his head. "Helluva inventive little guy."

"Ummm. Hummm."

The newcomer, 38, is doing some FryUps. Rebecca is tuned in on *Western-civ Adventures*. Gerald flexes in his exercise machine, because you never know if the cops are going to come back.

The Bot and 42 have tilted the accretion disk (now brown, with fringes of green where synchrotron radiation is suspected), to agree with the newest observations of long-baseline radio interferometry. The occasional noise from *Western-civ Adventures* does not disturb them. They paint with flourishes, splashing on the yellows in great swooping swipes. The Bot twirls his brush adroitly click click, adding fuzzy red patches for the high-density gas clouds ringing the disk. Blending them in gracefully, smoothly, whirring whirring, with the deep yellow of space. Dotting in stars as sharp, brittle, purple dots. 42 purrs beside him.

Gerald is alone with his exercises. He clenches arms, thighs, pectorals. Thinks of that bastard Axford. Pumps the gyrating wheels, tugs the bars, his limbs articulating well. Clickclick. Clickclick.



Vincent DiFate



STRIX

by Raylyn Moore

What kind of myths will the humanoids have?

Because Caulie was making her journey out of season, she found the oxroad little better than a river of thick, early-spring mud, which in places flowed so smoothly together again in the wake of the cart that the jolting, creaking wheels left no trail.

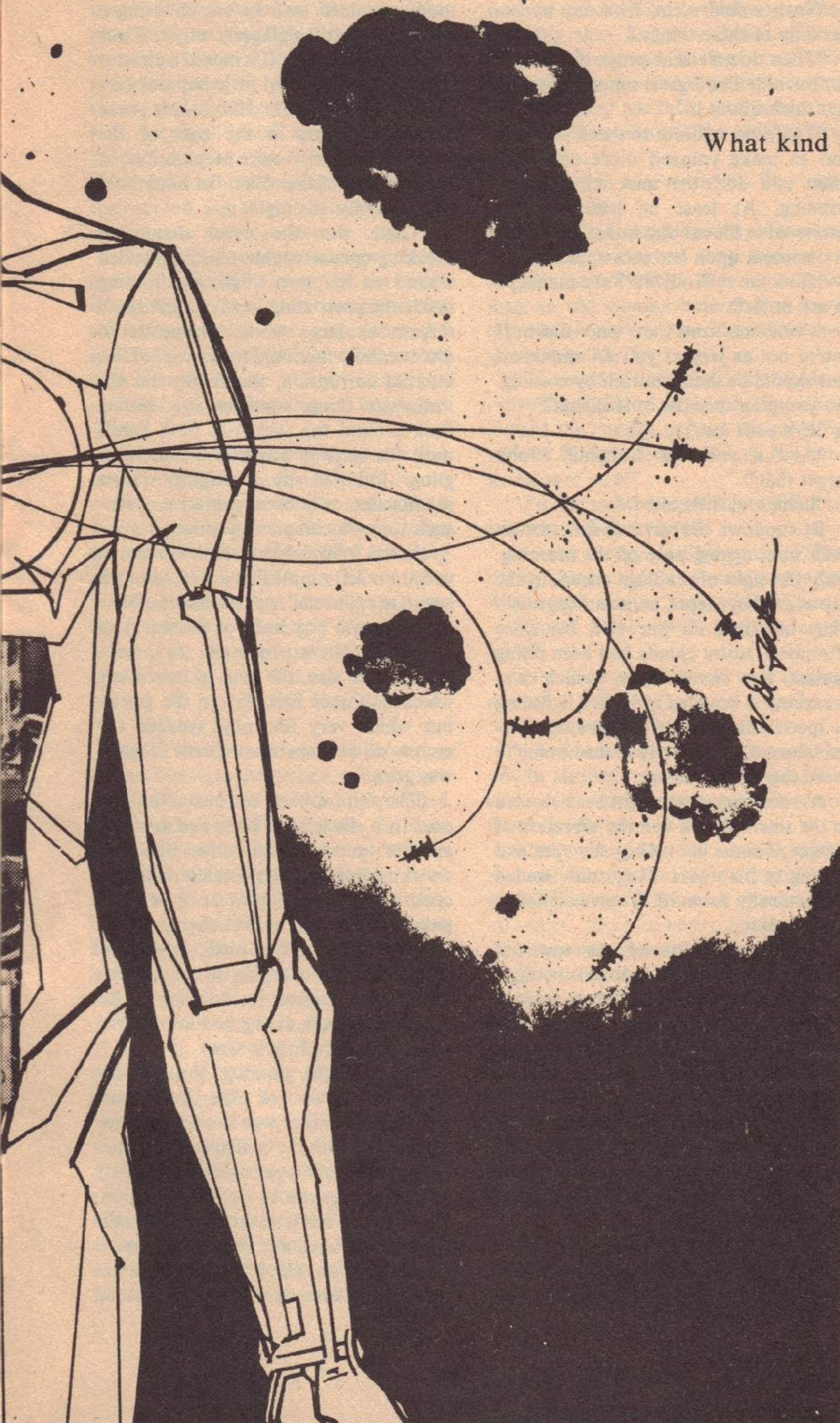
Often it was necessary for her to jump down from the narrow driver's perch and, by pulling at the front or shoving at the rear, urge the conveyance onward. For it was unrealistic to expect Mago, mired to his knees and rather small for a goat anyway, to alone move the whole load of her household possessions piled in the dray.

She was dressed for this kind of work in boots impervious to damp which reached up her calves; however, her skirt proved an inconvenience. The hem of the homespun garment was dragged with muck, which had dried and been added to and then dried again over and over in the six days she had been on the road.

Fortunately she met practically no one. And with the few she did meet she had so far managed (or so she hoped) to divert attention from herself and her plight by asking distances and directions.

Of the burly young man who early that morning had come splashing toward her on the piebald stallion she had inquired, "How far to Hollyhill?"

He reined in abruptly, the horse startled and dancing in the mud at having come so suddenly upon the woman and the goat-cart toiling around a corner in the forest, where there was little view ahead. "A half-day's ride for one mounted like me, on a real animal, probably twice that for one so encumbered as yourself. Have you no man to help you?"



STRIX

He smiled.

"I am a widow." Because she was long accustomed to the procedure, she was able to wait with something like patience as his gaze traveled with a vague curiosity over her body, but then stumbled and slid away stricken as it came at last to grips with her face, which she kept partially hidden by a large bonnet.

"Well, keep to the road," he advised unhelpfully, as if she had any choice. And he scolded her, "But only a fool or a fleeing criminal would travel before the ground dries." He smiled again.

"Then you are a fellow fool or criminal, for you are on the road yourself," she could not resist pointing out.

Caulie saw in his hard, slightly bulging eyes the expected glint of anger at her insolence—this even though he kept smiling—but it was also plain he was eager to calm his horse and be on his way, a woman marked as she was being unsettling to him. His mount reared and wheeled once more, this time coming down hard on its front feet in a way that, either by design or accident, splashed mud over her clothing at an even higher level than it had been splashed before. Then he was gone.

But now the veiled lemon sun began to offer a thin drift of warmth, and in a closed basket under the household goods Topo woke and began to send out her signals of agony. Fearful, elongated squalls rippled up and down the scale.

The song of pain still filled the air when they met the man afoot around noon. Caulie had less luck with him since he got his question in first. "Why would a lone woman be moving house in this weather?" He was dressed in a ragged, once-white smock, with an equally filthy, dark, heavy traveling cape thrown over his broad shoulders. The cape covered the left breast of the smock so that Caulie could not see if an emblem were embroidered or stamped there.

"I am seeking peace," she answered him truthfully.

Topo took the man's attention then, so he did not pursue this perilous subject of peace. "What's that frightful racket? Have you a demon imprisoned?" His smile contradicted the insistent inquisitiveness in his eyes.

"It's only my cat in heat." So that he could see she was not lying, Caulie pulled the wicker hamper from under the load in the cart and restrained Topo tenderly as she tried to leap to freedom. Topo's gray pelt showed a bald spot on her back as

happened sometimes when she came into season, and her rheumy eyes stared half blindly.

"She looks too old to be in such condition," the man said with authority, offering another smile.

It had been Caulie's failing that she could never completely control her anger under their prying attacks. "But you agree she *is* in heat? You heard her."

"So it would seem, from my understanding of these things."

"Then doesn't that prove that she is *not* too old? The logic is simple enough if you think about it."

"You'd do well not to speak so much and to make yourself more amenable when you do," the man advised her, grinning. At least he had been so interested in the cat that he had neglected to comment upon her own appearance.

"How far to Hollyhill?" she managed to ask at last.

"I've come from there since dawn. If you're not as lazy as you are impudent you should be there yourself by evening. Do you plan to settle in Hollyhill?"

"If it suits me."

"And if you suit Hollyhill? Don't forget that."

"I think of little else."

By sundown the cart had slowed even from its dragging pace of the morning. Only the sight of a village ahead, in the cup of a valley, kept Caulie moving at all. They had met no one else, for since afternoon, storm clouds had been piling against the western sky, which was occasionally branded by forked lightning in spectacular designs. Apparently anyone abroad had already rushed home to avoid the certain deluge.

An ordinary goat might have reacted to the smell of rain and the vibration of distant thunder by rolling his eyes and jerking in his traces. Mago only waded mechanically forward. Topo had fallen silent at last.

On the outskirts of the town of Hollyhill was an abandoned cottage, scarcely more than a hovel, its garden overgrown. The woman with the cart paused uncertainly on the road in front of this place, and after some consideration seemed about to move on. But at that moment the first stabbing drops of the evening storm smashed through the bare branches of the linden which in the coming green season would shelter the cottage door.

At this signal the caravan turned instead into the dooryard, paved with small, sharp rocks which kept it free of

the surrounding mud, and the woman began quickly unloading the cart and passing the bundles and pieces of small furniture through the sagging front door into the room beyond.

When the job was finished and they were inside, the storm increased to full strength, but the roof seemed sound. Caulie secured the door by feeling in the dark, and released Topo, who gave one more sustained wail before choosing a corner and settling gingerly into it. "Poor Topo," said Caulie. "It is indeed a disaster to have no mate, and little hope of ever finding one again." Her words were almost inaudible in the roar of the storm. After a few more preparations in the darkness of the room, the household was ready for the night.

(There was the usual dream of breaking open a troublesome half-healed wound on her own thigh, and finding inside the protruding head of a live small serpent or large worm. Desperate to discover how she could free herself of this internal corruption, she finally did the instinctive thing, squeezed the swollen flesh around the sore with both hands until the serpent was forced out, wriggling, followed by a slightly larger salamander, whose appearance was—each time—a complete surprise.)

(It was followed by a similar dream in which her left nipple first ached and then began to emit small springs, pieces of wire filament, and tiny bolts of the works of electronic units reduced to near-microscopic size, the kind of machinery which had once literally run the world, but which very few now recalled the secrets of, perhaps no one now Degnan was gone.)

(The third dream was also a familiar one. In it she left her body and assumed another, yet was the same. She flew shrieking through the stormless night, her cries not unlike Topo's at their most painful. The whole moon lit her way back to the village of her birth, where she sought Degnan sleeping in his father's laboratory, Degnan in the glory of his young manhood, as she had known him when they were first lovers.)

The sunlight pouring through the dusty windows of the no-longer-abandoned cottage was not lemon now, but golden, with the brilliance that comes after rain. Caulie woke when Topo lightly whiskered her neck, demanding food. Through the week of the journey Caulie herself had fasted and offered only spare rations to Topo, who in her condition was not much interested in food. Mago stood

silent and unmoving against the wall.

Caulie rose from the floor, where she had slept under a coarse blanket, and found among the luggage the bag of meal, which she shared out for herself and the cat, dampening Topo's portion with a little water from a flask she had carried on their journey.

She had expected after the ordeal to feel too tired to begin another day, but now there was much to be done if she were going to stay. Before noon she had swept out the cottage and washed the windows, bringing the water this time from a well she found in the garden. She had arranged her own possessions around the two small rooms (leaving Degnan's notebooks and texts hidden in their crates), and stripped her body of the clothing she must launder.

She bathed in water heated on the iron stove and poured into a tin tub she found in the shed attached to the cottage. It was all far better than any experience she could have imagined having upon her arrival in Hollyhill. Topo sat calmly, painstakingly washing herself beside the stove.

Later, looking among the weeds and brambles in the garden, Caulie found early greens which could be cooked and eaten. She was surprised at this, since the garden seemed to have been formerly planted only to flowers and other inedibles, as she would have expected it to be. Neither was there any arrangement for cooking in the cottage, but the stove could be adapted to that as it had been to heating the water, and Caulie had her own cooking pots.

While she was outdoors in plain sight, on her trips into the garden, a few people passed on the road. But they only smiled and nodded from their safe distance, none of them challenging her right to be where she was. She had also discovered that there was an occupied house a stone's throw away through a screen of willows. From that direction came the occasional barking of dogs, the shouts of children. She was alone and yet not alone.

(The second night her dreams were all of Degnan, of lying in his arms and responding explosively to his flesh. He was in her and she in him, the way it had been in her waking world once.)

On the morning of the second day, rising this time from clean linen spread over the cot in the small bedroom, Caulie dared to begin to hope. She sang that morning as she turned over a few rows of the damp garden soil with her shovel,

having decided it was not too early to plant some of the vegetable seeds she had brought along (not so many as she would have liked; there had been little time to choose what to take and what to leave).

When she had been at this work for about an hour, a shadow fell silently across the turned earth.

Before she looked up, Caulie had noted that the shadow's shape suggested a woman dressed like herself, in a free-swinging skirt and mud boots. For a moment she regretted having been so rash as to come out without the bonnet that de-emphasized her face. And in fact her face was the subject of the visitor's first comment.

"Ugh! You are marked." The newcomer smiled.

"Yes," Caulie admitted. "I am marked by age. It has taken sixty winters to acquire these wrinkles. Have you never seen an old woman before? But no, I suppose not, we're so rare these days. Are you a neighbor?"

The visitor, whose round fair face was topped by a plump yellow braid, nodded toward the cottage beyond the greening willows. "I am Jennet Prace. Are you living here now?"

"I'd like to live here. Can you think of any reason I shouldn't?"

Jennet shrugged. She smiled. "The family who owned this place is gone now. A man and woman and two little ones."

"Gone? Then they'll perhaps come back?"

"No. They wore out and were thrown away."

"I see. I am sorry."

"There are many vacant houses like this in Hollyhill and other villages, it is said, because so many families are wearing out." Jennet smiled.

Finding herself poised on the tip of the moment, Caulie decided on impulse to risk a discussion of this most important of all topics. "Do you know, Jennet Prace, what causes people to wear out?"

"I know the scientist of Hollyhill thinks it may be evil spirits, some kind of bad magic."

"But that's utter nonsense. All bodies wear out, even the kind made to last many hundreds of years. And it's only reasonable to suppose that bodies which began their span of years together may begin to cease to function at approximately the same time."

But Jennet's attention had already traveled to something else. "If you are an old one, do you dream?"

"Yes, oh yes."

"What is it like, to dream?"

But memory came now to trigger her innate sense of caution. "When I've told my dreams to others in the past, sometimes they have been misunderstood. So I can tell you only that dreams may be pleasant or unpleasant, but choosing which is beyond the dreamer's power."

Jennet Prace smiled and asked yet another question. "Why haven't you tethered your goat in the garden to graze?"

There was no way to avoid the sudden sense of shock. For this meant she had been watched more closely than she had suspected, evidently from the very moment she arrived. "The goat is not a real animal. Mago is an artifact."

Jennet was interested. "Who made it?"

"My husband. We needed a power unit to bear loads and pull the wagon. Mago can also do other wonderful and useful things."

"Where is he, your husband?"

"He died two months ago."

"He wore out?"

"No, died. Of an illness for which we had no cure."

"He was old like you?"

"Ah, even older. Although we did not seem old to each other."

"Is your cat, too, an artifact?"

Caulie laughed as Topo rubbed energetically around her ankles. "No, she is very much an animal." Then she added, "Like me."

When Jennet remained silent, staring uneasily as she continued to smile, Caulie quickly added, "If we are to be neighbors, let us try to understand each other. I can't pretend not to be different from you. But differences needn't cause trouble between us."

"You aren't just different from me. You're different from all of us in Hollyhill."

Caulie sighed. "I was afraid I would be. But that is still no reason, is it, that we can't all exist companionably together?"

Again Jennet didn't answer, only smiled. Finally she announced in a sly, bragging tone, "Lots of us also have real animals. When they are kept together, male and female, at certain times more animals come. The new ones too are real animals, not artifacts. When the animals are punctured, blood spills out of them, sometimes a lot of blood."

Caulie shuddered. "Yes, I know."

After that first visit, Jennet came often into the garden when Caulie was working. Though the newcomer to Hollyhill always tried to draw the conversation

into talk of climate and growing things, to relatively safe subjects, Jennet seemed equally determined to discover more and more about her neighbor. Sometimes Jennet brought her children, a boy and a girl, both yellow-haired like their mother, and both about half their mothers height. Though they stared frankly at Caulie's face, they said nothing. The mother did all the talking. "Where are your children?" she demanded of Caulie.

"It has been my great sorrow that none of my children grew to maturity."

Jennet's smile turned puzzled. "My children don't grow at all. They are always the same."

"I know. Perhaps you should take comfort in the fact that you will always have them with you, just as they are."

"Unless some evil causes them to wear out," said Jennet glumly.

Caulie didn't bother to argue any more. "Let's hope that doesn't happen," she said.

On still another day, Jennet brought along her friends. Prudy, Joyceen, Wilda.

Wilda was black-haired and very beautiful. Prudy and Joyceen looked something alike, with glossy brown hair and ivory complexions. All three stared in horrified fascination at Caulie's uncovered face. For she had decided now, as long as she was going to live in the village of Hollyhill, to abandon the concealing bonnet altogether, to make no more pretenses whatever happened.

Wilda, who was very knowing in her manner, recovered first. She smiled. "How ugly you are. Jennet says you are one of the old ones."

"That's true in two ways: because I have aged instead of remaining the same, as you do, and because I'm one of the old *kind* of people. Actually, though, speaking in another way, you are all far older than I, for your individual existence has endured much longer than my own."

Wilda smiled and absently curled a tendril of black hair around one of her slender fingers. "Why do you tell us this?"

"Because it's time we talked with each other truthfully. Because where I lived before I came here I was also the only one of my kind, after the death of my husband. And my differences led to much misunderstanding. I'm hoping to avoid it here by being thoroughly honest, so you'll know what to expect of me and we won't surprise and annoy one another. Do you know that long ago, before the wars and the sicknesses which followed them, everyone was like me? Then all people became marked, if they had the fortune to

live a long time. No one thought anything of it because there *were* no people like you."

Jennet and her friends murmured uneasily at this (though they continued to smile). Wilda shrugged, perhaps in disbelief.

Again Caulie felt her own stubborn determination rising, a determination to keep on with it, to get through to them somehow. "But then, because of the pandemics and radiation and so on, many of those who were able to grow old never got to, for they were too vulnerable. They died instead. That's why it was necessary to have more durable people like yourselves, to carry on civilization when the others like me were weakened and thinned out."

It was too much after all for them to hear at once, Caulie decided. Their curiosity was an artificially implanted habit of mind. They had no real interest except in the most superficial matters. But Wilda narrowed her luminous green eyes and tilted her head and declared, "Yes, I've heard something of this before. We're in charge of everything now, because we were put in charge. All knowledge is safe now, with us."

"Ah, not so," Caulie argued quickly, wondering how long she could keep the discussion open. "Somehow, in all the centuries that have passed, the plan has gone off the rails. For one thing, you can't replace yourselves. Through an oversight, that wasn't provided for. Another human error seems responsible for the tapes getting mixed up so that all the accumulated information has become jumbled. Folklore and technical data are somehow mingled and there's no one to set things straight. At least that's the only explanation I can think of for what's been happening to me and others."

Caulie held her tongue now, and waited. Her four visitors exchanged opaque glances before looking again at Caulie with a vague suggestion of hostility behind their fixed smiles. They would ask no more of her, at least not this time, and she was prepared for their silence. She was not prepared, however, for the way they turned their backs as if on signal after a few minutes and began walking quickly away.

"Wait," Caulie urged them. "All that doesn't matter nearly so much as our being friends. I'll show you the new shoots coming up in my garden from the seeds I've planted."

It was Wilda who turned back to explain. "We're going now to find the

scientist. He travels everywhere and hears all that's important. If these things are true that you have said, he will tell us."

So she had miscalculated again. The way she had chosen to try to gain their confidence had been another wrong direction. She sighed, and went on working in the garden. She wondered how long she would have.

It took them three days.

During that time Jennet did not visit her in the garden as before, though the garden was more beautiful than ever, with the oncoming spring. No one spoke to her from the road, though she felt eyes watching her each time she went out, especially from behind the line of willows, bright now with new leafage.

And when they did all come back, in the middle of the night after the third day, the scientist was with them. In his ragged smock and cape, he looked the same as when she had met him on the road on her way to Hollyhill. He smiled as warmly as the rest of them, and spoke in a loud voice. "Madam, we know you are inside the cottage which does not belong to you. You can't fool us any longer. In my recent travels I visited a town where an old woman was sentenced to be destroyed, which is only fair since it was believed she had destroyed her own husband. He was eaten from within by something or someone. There are some who contend it's not possible for a woman to enter a man's body and consume him from within, but I know differently. And if she has done this to him, who was one of her own, mightn't she also be responsible for the wearing out of some of the families in Hollyhill?"

While the scientist spoke to her from the front dooryard, Caulie had slipped out the rear of the cottage, carrying the silent Topo in her basket, with Mago at her side. This time she wouldn't have the chance to take along her other possessions.

Mounted on Mago, she could look down, once he was airborne, on the scene of the crowd waiting for her to emerge from the house and face them. The emblem on the scientist's breast pocket was clear enough now, the familiar configuration of three intersecting elliptical orbits, each in a different plane. She saw it when he threw back his ragged cloak so as to free his arms for action.

But it was Jennet who picked up the first stone.



BOOKS

Robert Silverberg

SCIENCE FICTION OF THE 30's, edited by Damon Knight. Bobbs-Merrill Company, 468 pp., \$12.50.

The standard history of magazine science fiction in America goes something like this: Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926 and for the next decade or so SF was written largely by amateurs who had wildly inventive ideas and expressed them in flat, gray prose. Then John Campbell took charge of *Astounding Stories*, abolished the klutzy old writers, and fostered a new crew (Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon & Co.) whose ideas were just as fertile but whose style was more graceful. And about 1950 Horace Gold and Anthony Boucher carried Campbell's ideals to a still higher level of literary accomplishment. It makes a neat saga, and, like most sagas, there's a core of literary truth in it; but a revisionist approach has lately become necessary, at least for me. The classics of the Campbell era have begun looking a bit gray and clumsy, as though they might have fit much more easily into the magazines of 1932 than I would have believed a decade ago. And the SF of the 30's is starting to look a lot better than it seemed on my first run-through of the back-issue magazines.

Two reasons present themselves. The great stories of the 1939-43 Golden Age are fading because they weren't all that different from what had gone before; they were generally better, but not a whole quantum jump better, in the way that *Left Hand of Darkness* is a literary quantum jump beyond *Second Stage Lensman*. As for the SF of the 1930s, a lot of it was genuinely dreadful stuff—cf. Joe William Skidmore—and the preponderant awfulness of it tended to obscure the stories that were of enduring value. But we have lately had two anthologies devoted to rescuing the treasures of that era. In 1974 came Isaac Asimov's splendid *Before the Golden Age* (Doubleday), and now Damon Knight offers another showcase of the best of the primitive SF.

Asimov's jumbo volume included not only many pages of charming autobiographical ramblings but also some two dozen stories, many of them of novella length. Since he included most of the

best-remembered stories of the decade ("Sidewise in Time," "Colossus," "Old Faithful," "He Who Shrank," etc., stories whose titles alone resonate in the memories of the long-time reader) it would seem that Asimov had pretty well skimmed the period—but, amazingly, Knight's book provides eighteen more, without duplication, and they are just as good. Creaky, of course, and simplistic, and scientifically hopeless now that we have become as clever as we are today about things like relativity and stellar mechanics; but yet they still work. Consider the very first paragraph of the first story ("Out Around Rigel," by Robert H. Wilson), those of you who, like me, used to believe that nobody who wrote SF in the 1930s understood the elements of English prose:

"The sun had dropped behind the Grimaldi plateau, although for a day twilight would linger over the Oceanus Procellarum. The sky was a hazy blue, and out over the deeper tinted waves the full Earth swung. All the long half-month it had hung there above the horizon, its light dimmed by the sunshine, growing from a thin crescent to its full disk three times as broad as that of the sun at setting. Now in the dusk it was a great silver lamp hanging over Nardos the Beautiful, the City Built on the Water. The light glimmered over the tall white towers, over the white ten-mile-long adamantine bridge running from Nardos to the shore, and lit up the beach where we were standing, with a brightness that seemed almost that of day."

The story that summons such sleek language is an absurdity about rivals in love who go buzzing off to Rigel in a pioneering faster-than-light vehicle and *Have It Out*; but the essential thing to consider is not the crudity of the plot (far-out superscience corrupted by romantic 19th-century fictional conventions) but the vigor and vitality of the writing. This man, this pioneer, knew what he was doing, and did it well. As did most of the other authors salvaged by Knight; pay particular attention to Raymond Z. Gallun's "Davey Jones' Ambassador," Harry Bates's "Alas, All Thinking!" and Howard W. Graham's "The Other."

Knight supplies, in place of Asimov's reminiscences, a few concise introductory essays and a lot of marvelous original magazine illustrations. The jacket is stunning—but why are we told the name of the owner of the cover painting, and the name of the man who photographed it for this edition, but not the name of the artist who painted it? (Howard V. Brown, slighted posthumously as he was so often during his career.) If you can afford only one of these historical anthologies, I think Asimov's is the one to buy, both for its encyclopedic scope and its personal

commentary; but the Knight book is a respectable accomplishment also. Together, these hefty volumes form a worthy monument to the ancestral figures.

THE LIGHT FANTASTIC: The Great Short Fiction of Alfred Bester, Volume I. Putnam, 254 pp., \$7.95.

Alfred Bester is one of those great unsung modern writers who remain unsung largely because they have toiled in the science-fiction ghetto, unnoticed by that legion of the literate that knows *a priori* that SF has nothing of interest to offer. Now in his sixties, a professional writer for some forty years, Bester is of course cherished by SF devotees, but even they haven't managed to keep his dazzling, ferociously inventive books in print for long; as for outsiders, dimly aware only of Heinlein, Bradbury, Asimov, and Clarke, he doesn't exist at all. Too bad. He is a virtuoso of prose, a remarkable stylist and an even more remarkable constructor of plots, whose work shines with amazing energy and gives great delight. His two classic novels, *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*, are in print once more and should be investigated by anyone curious about SF's ability to entertain the alert and sophisticated reader. And now we have the first of two volumes of Bester's shorter work. High time.

The novelty here is the long story, "Hell is Forever," an early work unobtainable since 1942—a baroque tale of jaded sophisticates toying with satanic amusements, very much a young man's story, made up of secondhand bits of Wilde and Huysmans and Shaw and who-all else, but significant for the way its style anticipates the pyrotechnical Besterialian gusto of a decade later. It's also a lively and amusing story, suffering only in comparison with its successors, and the vision of Satan that it manifests is an irresistible fantasy: a wheezing, bespectacled clerk, desperately punching keys on a cosmic adding machine.

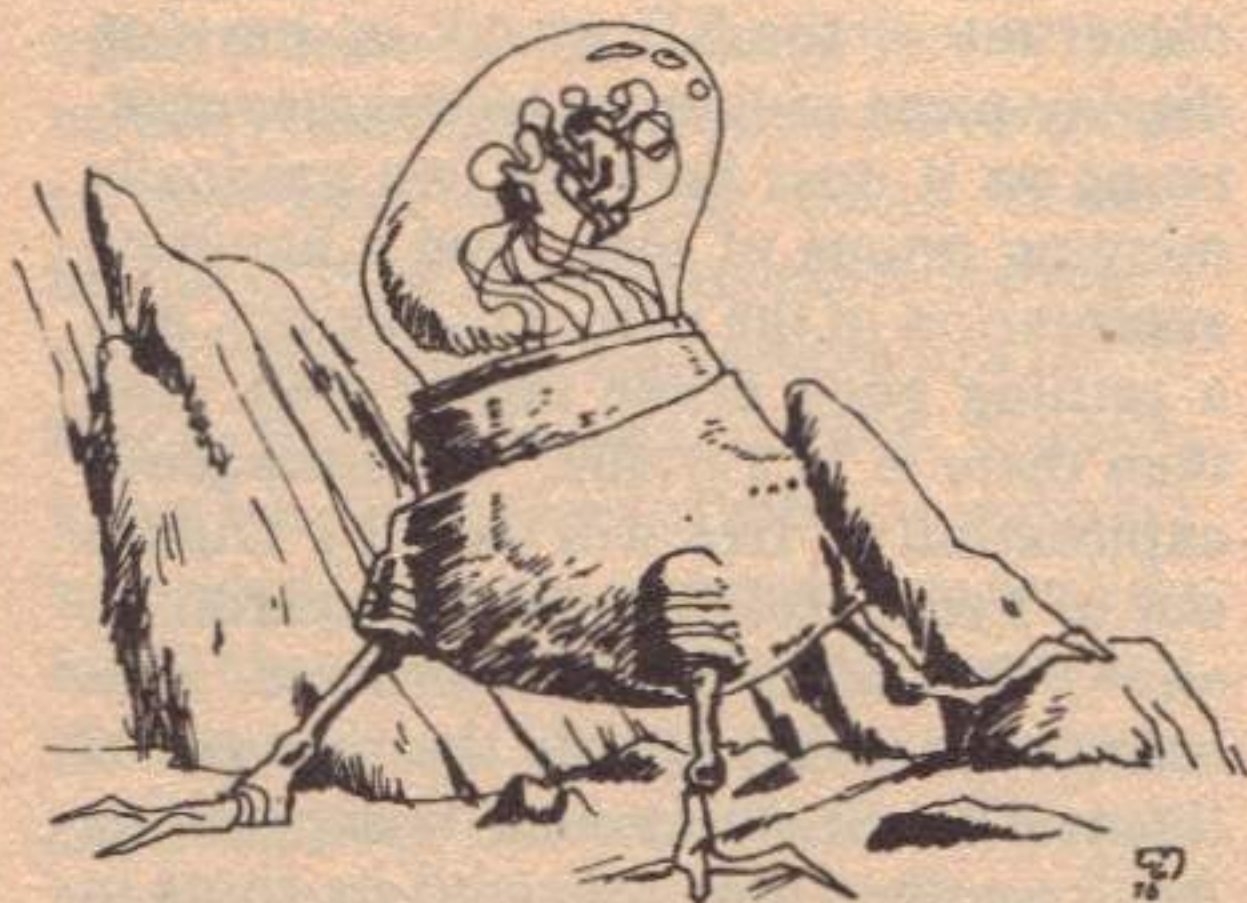
Six short stories published between 1953 and 1974 are included also. Two are mere amiable fillers; but we also have the chilling "Fondly Fahrenheit," which I think may be the finest short story ever to come out of the SF world—a startling display-piece of literary technique, oscillating as it does between two gradually merging points of view, and a haunting exploration of the nature of identity, and a rattling good crime tale as well. And then there is "5,271,009," an outrageous exploration of free will as if by Dumas out of Freud, told in jaunty macaronics, and "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed," which spoofs the time-travel theme without mercy, and "Disappearing Act," another time tale with its roots in

the grim conformist 1950s, and Bester's own comments on how all these stories came to be written—oh, a feast, a veritable feast. No better introduction to the pleasures of science fiction could be imagined. Bester is a writer's writer, glorying in technique for technique's sake, bringing off impossible effects for the sheer fun of it; but he's also a marvelous juicy storyteller, a *reader's* writer, who does SF for grown-ups and does it splendidly.

BIOFUTURES: SCIENCE FICTION STORIES ABOUT BIOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS, edited by Pamela Sargent. Vintage Books, 344 pp., \$1.95.

This is the second Pamela Sargent anthology—the first was last year's successful *WOMEN OF WONDER*—and with just these two books she has established a place for herself in the front rank of the science fiction anthologists. Her choices are intelligent ones, appropriate to her themes and yet with a certain quality of surprise about them (as in the use of a piece of Disch's 334 in this volume of biological SF); her books also are distinguished by long, cogent prefatory essays and brief, equally perceptive introductions to each story, plus biographical and bibliographical appendices, that make them something rather more than assortments of good stories. She is systematically tackling the great themes of SF not only as editor but as critic, and the results are impressive.

Biofutures offers Poul Anderson's familiar and classic "Call Me Joe," Frederik Pohl's ditto and ditto "Day Million," Ursula Le Guin's "Nine Lives," and an array of lesser known but not negligible works by James Gunn, Leonard Tushnet, Kate Wilhelm, R.A. Lafferty, James Blish, Thomas N. Scortia, and the aforementioned Disch. In a badly edited theme anthology, the stories tend to cancel one another out by repetition of concept; in a well done theme anthology, the stories tend to be mutually enhancing, each casting new light on the ideas and development of the others. This is a collection of the latter sort. A fine fat two bucks' worth here.



THE MEDIA SCENE

By CHARLES N. BROWN

Accurate information on forthcoming motion picture and television science fiction productions is difficult to obtain because of the chaotic nature of the industry. Facts released by studios tend to change without notice; public relations releases tend to treat preliminary agreements as final contracts; much "inside" information is spread by word of mouth and tends to become distorted; and the majority of announced projects may be dropped or postponed at any point before final release. There are cases of movies being completed but never released to the public.

Briefly, motion picture sales usually begin with an option of a property—a book, story, one page idea, etc. It runs for a year and can be renewable or nonrenewable. The payment for the option is normally 10% of the final price, so the entire contract is negotiated at this time. The production company then hires someone to write a treatment (story line) or screenplay (script) which is then "shopped" around for financing, stars, etc., and is eventually altered to become the shooting script. Some properties are bought outright by the major studios, but most are optioned to independent producers who then try and interest the major studios in them or get financing to do it themselves. Many SF novels have been optioned a half dozen times to different producers without actually being produced.

The following information has been collected and checked (as much as possible) by various people. Special thanks should go to Kay Anderson, Marjorie Franklin, and Frank Robinson who furnished most of the information used in *LOCUS*, the primary source for this column.

The *Star Trek* movie seems to have finally gotten off the ground. After many false starts, rejected treatments and scripts, and generally contradictory information, Paramount has announced that Phil Kaufman has been signed as director, Gene Roddenberry (creator of *Star Trek*) as producer, and Jerry Isenberg as executive producer. British writers Alan Scott and Chris Bryant will do the original screenplay. Casting has not been officially announced, but it is generally understood that barring contract problems, star demands, etc., the

original *Star Trek* cast will be used.

Planet Stories lives again in *The Star Wars*, a galactic empire/raygun epic originally subtitled "The Adventures of Luke Starkiller" (it seems to have been changed to "Luke Skywalker" somewhere along the line). The film is written and directed by George Lucas (*American Graffiti*, *THX 1138*), produced by Gary Kurtz, and to be released by 20th Century-Fox. Principal photography is done, and special effects are now being filmed. The film stars Mark Hamill as Luke, Sir Alec Guinness as the Good Guy, Peter Cushing as the Bad Guy, and Carrie Fisher as the Princess Who Needs Rescuing.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind is a science fiction/flying saucer movie with echoes of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The three "encounters" referred to in the title are those with saucers (1) in the air, (2) on the ground, and (3) riding in an alien spaceship. The movie is supposed to prepare us for the real first contact with aliens. The special effects by Douglas Trumbull are being kept carefully under wraps. Steve Spielberg is the writer and director, Michael and Julia Phillips are the producers. Principal photography was shot in Mobile, Alabama. Columbia has had the budget go from 2½ million to 11 million dollars!

The Man From Atlantis will be a new NBC-TV show, possibly next fall. They've ordered a two-hour pilot plus six episodes. The hero breathes water and cannot stay out of it for more than 16 hours. It's a James Bond type adventure series. Herb Solow and Bob Justman are the producers and Lee Katzin is director. The pilot script is by Mayo Simon. The cast includes Patrick Duffy, Dean Santoro, Belinda Montgomery, and Art Lund.

Paramount and Universal will cooperate in a remake of *When Worlds Collide*. Anthony Burgess is doing the screenplay and John Frankenheimer is directing. The George Pal original is considered a classic of SF filmmaking.

An animated version of *The Hobbit*, sponsored by the Xerox Corporation, is scheduled to appear on NBC next fall. The script is by Romeo Muller and the animation is said to be "based on the style of Arthur Rackham." On the other hand, the announced animated version of *The Lord of the Rings* has been shelved.

The film version of Roger Zelazny's *Damnation Alley* will star Jan Michael Vincent and George Peppard. The 20th Century-Fox movie has Joe Zeitman as producer.

Alfred Bester's two classic SF novels, *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* have been optioned again. Bester may write the script for *Stars* himself.

A FAN'S NOTES

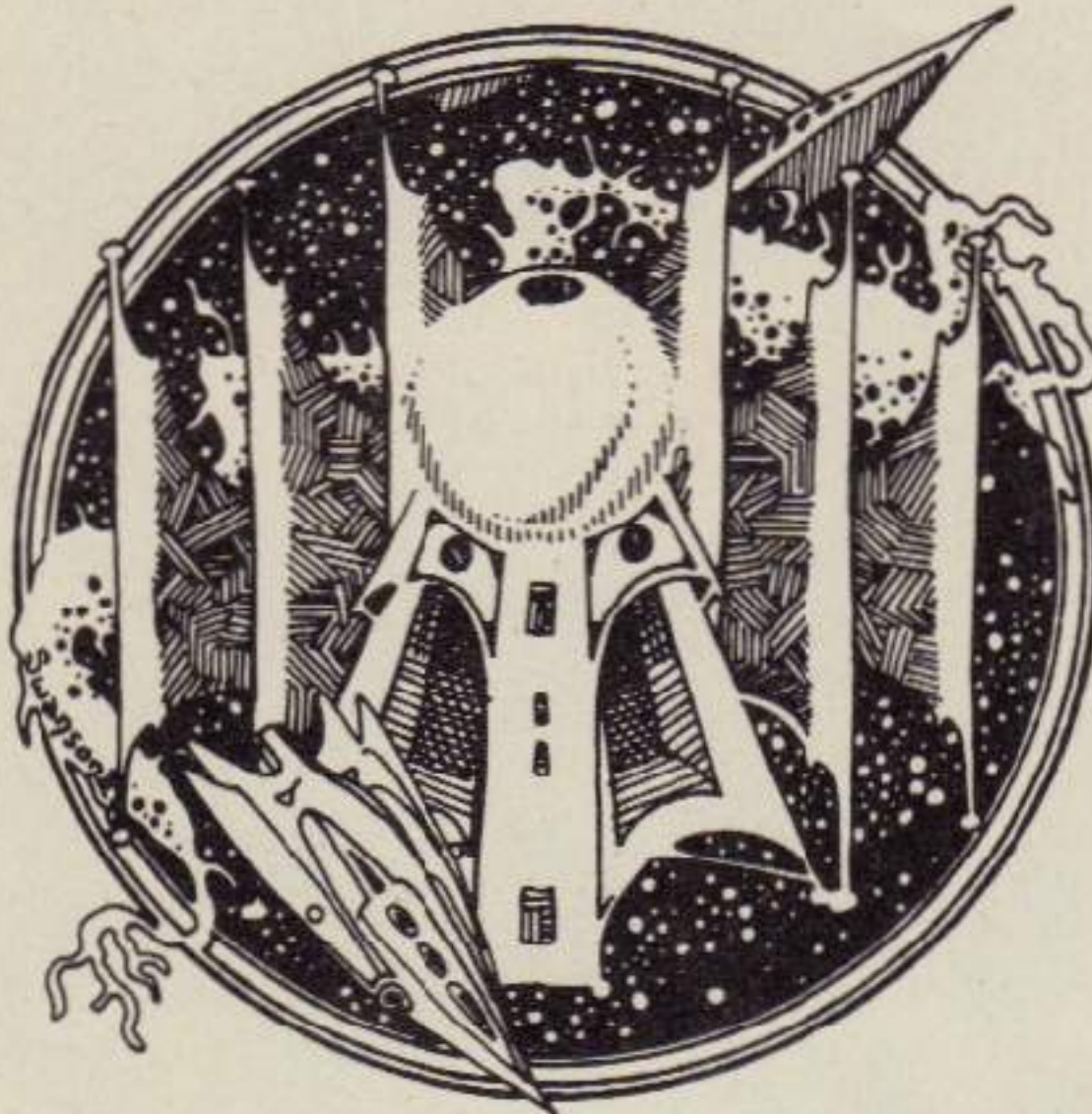
Ginjer Buchanan

I can well remember when I first entered fandom, planning out with my friends a fannish version of the liturgical calendar built around the schedule of science fiction convention weekends. The major "feast" was Worldcon, occurring yearly over Labor Day. There were a few other "fixed" holidays (Lunacon, the New York City regional, always held at Easter; Disclave, on Memorial Day weekend; and Westercon, which coincided with Fourth of July.) The balance of the year was comprised of a small table of "moveable feasts", smaller conventions, generally held around the same time each year. (Marcon, Midwestcon and Octocon, all in Ohio in March, June and October respectively; Boskone, in



February or March; Philcon, which a noted pro once explained to me as "the afterbirth of the Worldcon" in November, and Balticon also sometime in February or March. And, of course, the largest regular overseas SF Con, Eastercon, held the same weekend as Lunacon. It worked out to about one regional convention a month and some fans, with the time and money, could and did actually manage to attend each one.

That was eight or so years ago. I'm sitting here now, going over a copy of the SF Convention Register, which is a kind of realization of my imaginary liturgical calendar. It lists for the convention "year" of 1976-1977 (from Worldcon to Worldcon) something on the order of 40 regionals, at various places around the country ranging from the south rim of the Grand Canyon (Leprecon 3) to Vancouver B.C. (Westercon 30) to Louisville, Kentucky (Rivercon III). On many given weekends, a person could have the

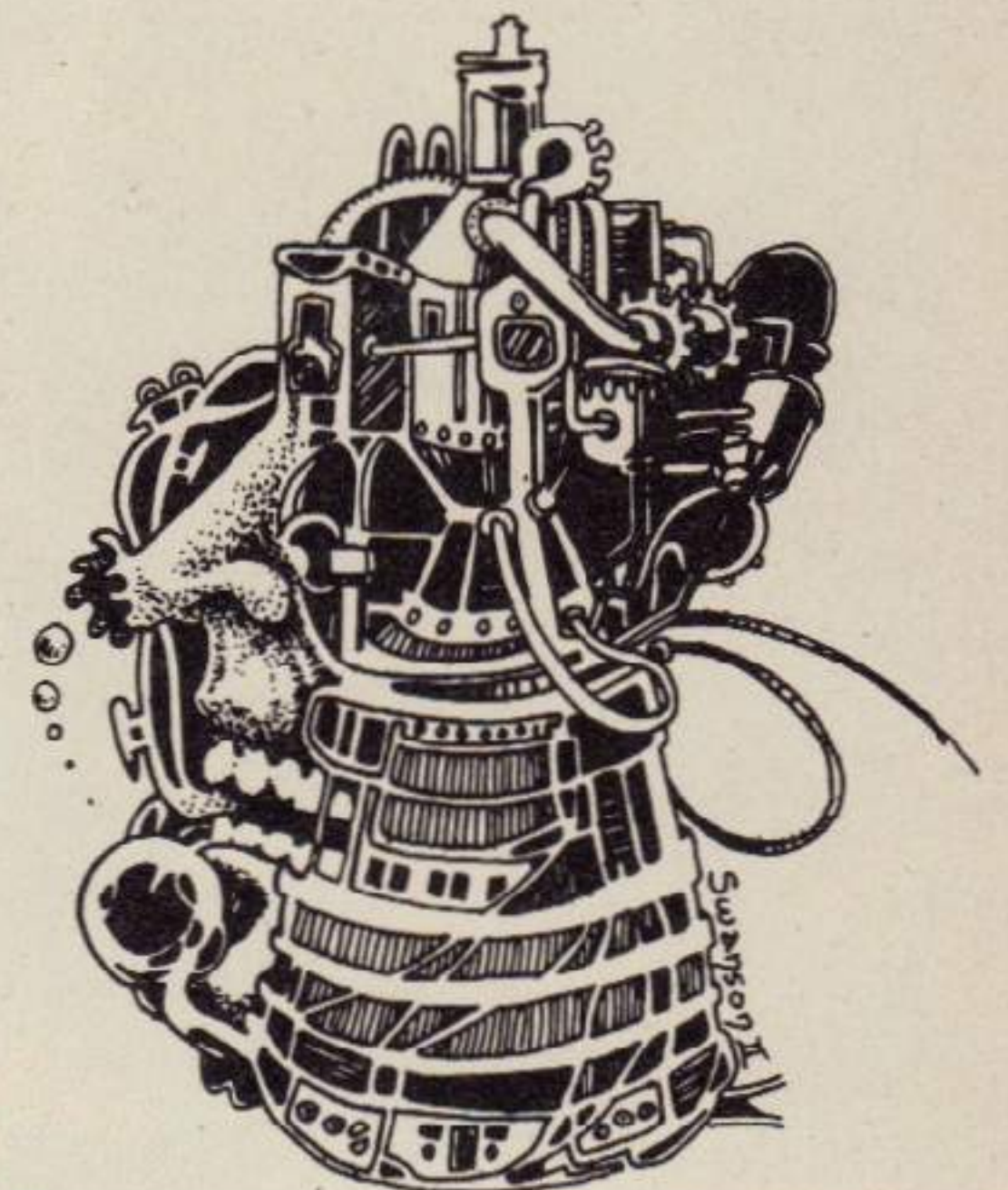


choice, depending on willingness to travel, of as many as *six* conventions (this happened last October). Next month, for another instance, on the weekend of April 8-10, Lunacon will be held in NYC, Balticon will be held in Baltimore, and Minnecon will be held in Minneapolis.

Accounting for this proliferation is a matter of speculation. For one thing, I think there has definitely been an increased interest in SF these past few years. Many more fan groups have coalesced in cities of all sizes, and have opted for holding their own local conventions rather than travel to the "big" regionals. Thus, we have Pghlange (Pittsburgh, Pa.), Windycon (Chicago),



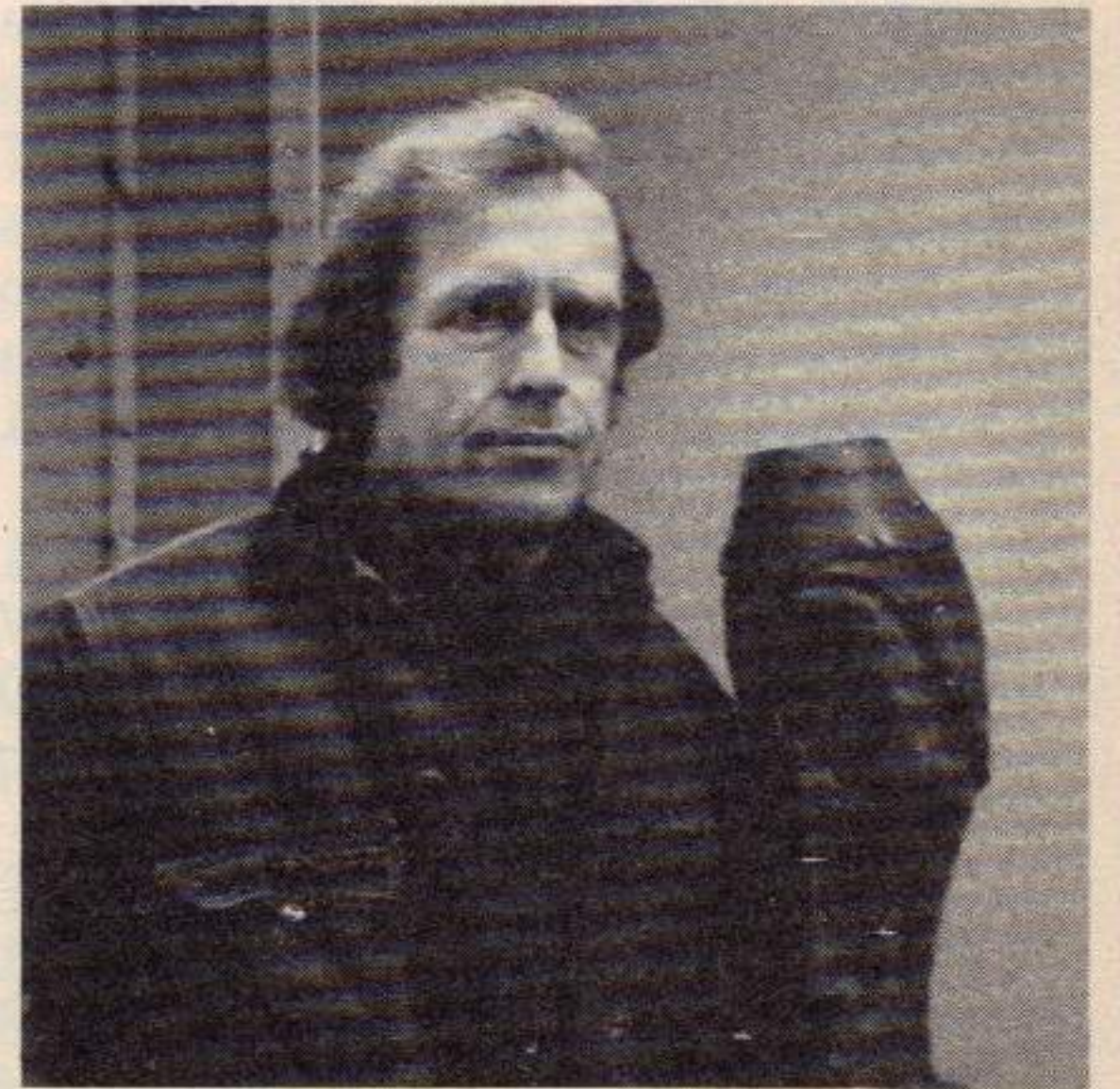
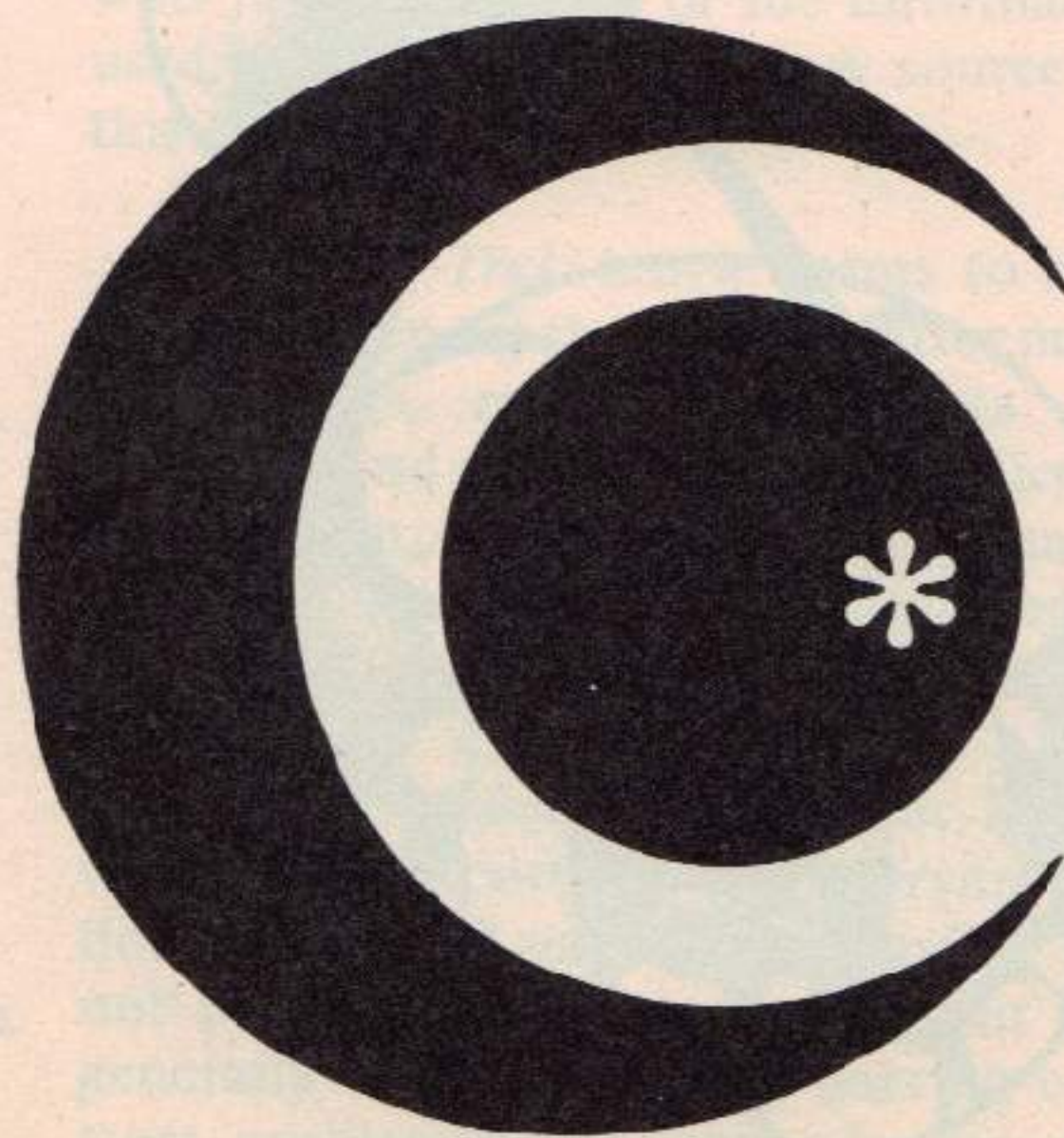
Milehicon (Denver), Bubonicon (Albuquerque), Autoclave (Detroit), etc., etc. For another, bidding for the Worldcon has become more spirited, of late, particularly in the Midwest and West. Usually, if a fan club is interested in hosting the Worldcon in their city, they will begin some years in advance to hold regionals, which will hopefully give them enough experience and reputation to win the bid. Afterwards, however, these regionals become self-perpetuating, Disclave and Boskone became regular events more or less in this way. Minnecon, which has become one of the most popular regionals, was originally held to promote the Minneapolis in '73 bid. The bid folded, but the convention remained. (The Minneapolis people still wear their buttons, though they're working on a 90-year lead for 2073.) Balticon, which was for some time a rather dull little regional, with a steadily diminishing attendance, has in the past 2-3 years grown to be an interesting and exciting convention. Reason: a new group of fans in the area are bidding for the 1980 Worldcon.



So it goes and grows. If you live anywhere, chances are excellent that sometime during the year, there will be a science fiction convention in *your* neighborhood. For exact details, I'd recommend either of the two main SF newszines (*Locus*, published by Dena and Charlie Brown, 34 Ridgewood Lane, Oakland CA 94611, 60¢ a copy or 15/\$6.00; or *Karass*, published by Linda E. Bushyeager, 1614 Evans Ave., Prospect Park, Pa 19076, 3/\$1.00) or the aforementioned SF Convention Register (Erwin R. Strauss, 9909 Good Luck Road #T2, Lanham, Md. 20801, 25¢ and a self-addressed stamped envelope). Be seeing you!

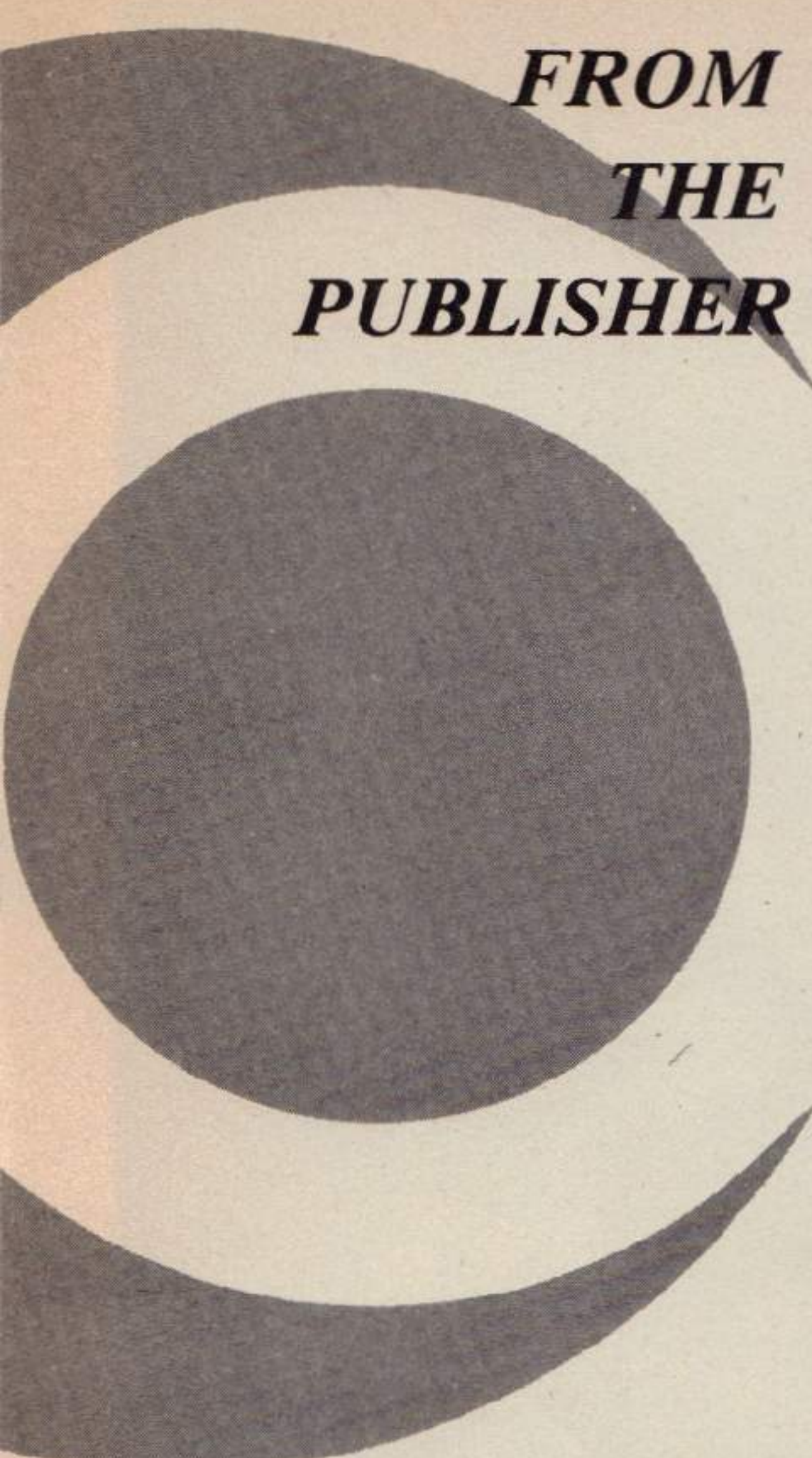


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PAUL LEHR, illustrator and sculptor, was born in 1930, graduated Wittenberg University (B.F.A.) in 1951 and attended Pratt Institute 1953-56. His cover paintings have graced hundreds of science fiction paperbacks over the last twenty years, including such famous books as the Orbit anthologies and the series of John Boyd novels, including **THE LAST STARSHIP FROM EARTH**. His paintings have appeared in **TIME**, **LIFE**, **ARGOSY**, **FORTUNE**, and many other magazines. Many private collectors in the U.S., Canada and Europe include works by Lehr and he is represented in the collection of the National Air & Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



**FROM
THE
PUBLISHER**

Several years ago, I found myself facing what appeared to me to be the insurmountable challenge of putting together a science fiction line of paperback books. At the time, I was editor-in-chief of a major paperback publisher, and, having sensed the groundswell of interest in this literary genre, determined to get into the act.

The major obstacle I found was my own lack of knowledge about the field, no appreciable liking for it, and my relative ineptitude in an area that very much requires editorial specialists, who not only know science fiction, but literally love "it" and the people who write it.

There is no question that science fiction has been around for many years, but until recently, it has appealed to a limited audience of highly sophisticated fans, or so I thought. Now it has undergone a considerable metamorphosis and the possibilities of the field seem limitless. Everywhere there is a proliferation of science fiction expanding its hold on paperback books and movies and making its way into the realm of television. Bionics, mechanical men and men that disappear are dominating the new TV shows and avid fans are refusing to let Star Trek die, content to watch reruns over and over again.

Clearly, what was required was a crash course in science fiction, a great deal of help and a little bit of motivation. The help came from a few of those rare but talented editorial people, who over the years have contributed so much to the growth of science fiction literature. They not only helped me to shape a creditable science fiction book list, but were instrumental in teaching me the basics about this new (to me) and marvelously innovative category of literature. Through them, I began to meet and to get to know and publish some of the truly great talents in the field—writers such as Ben Bova, Harlan Ellison, Gordie Dickson, Isaac Asimov, Robert Silverberg, Barry Malzberg, E.E. "Doc" Smith, Larry Niven and many more.

Through them I soon discovered a rather unique aspect of science fiction writers and their host of fans who (you should pardon the expression) read science fiction religiously. Collectively they form a close knit, fraternal-like organization that stretches from coast to coast and transcends international borders. They have only one purpose—to share, to communicate and to perpetuate the world of science fiction—their common bond being only their infinite love of science fiction.

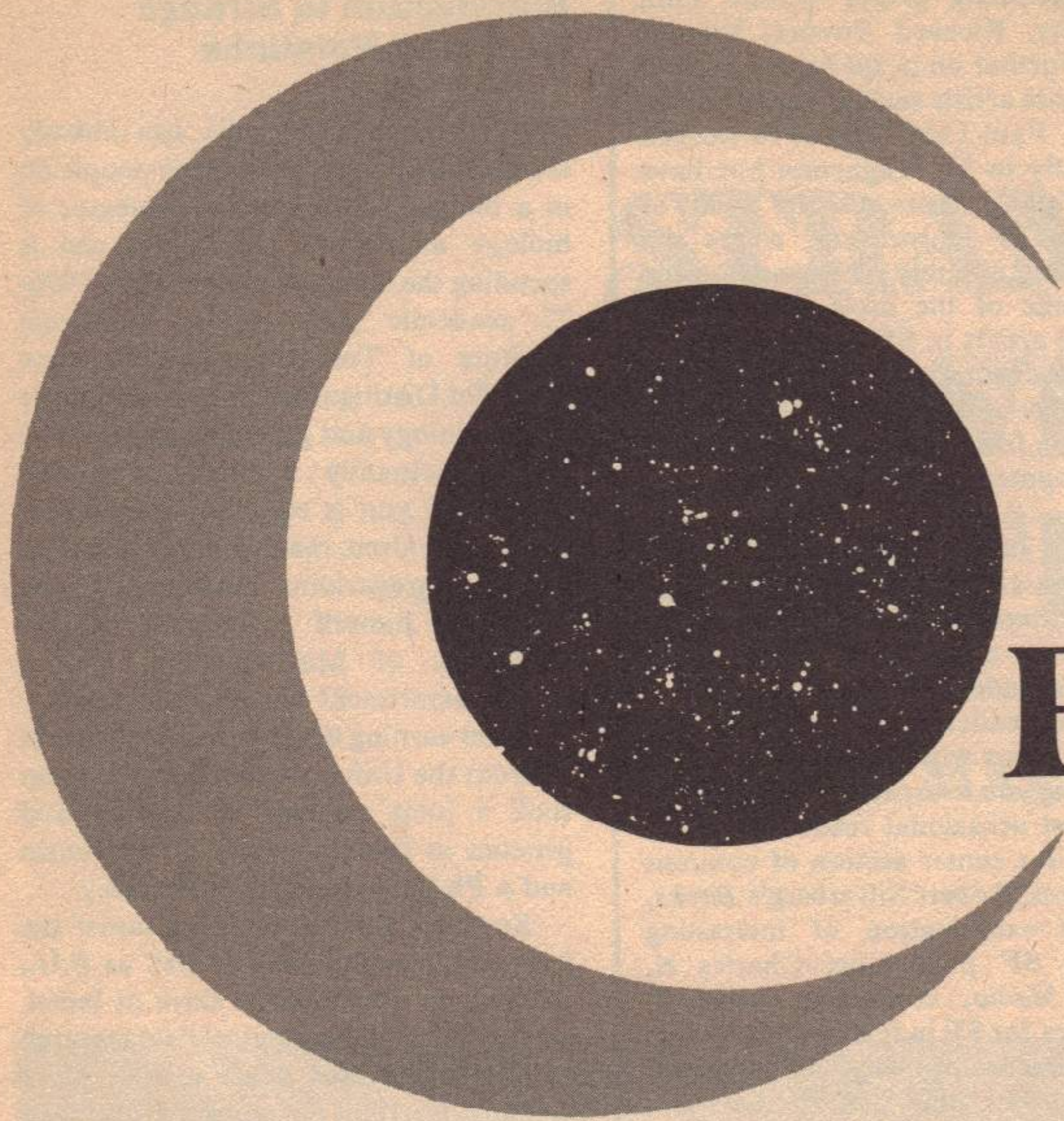
Indeed, science fiction tends to be more than just a passing literary adventure. To those who have been caught up in its spellbinding magic, it becomes a rather intense involvement. COSMOS in large measure has been conceived because of it, and is intended, not only for the committed and devoted science fiction reader, but also for the many people on the fringe, who have had but a casual acquaintance with science fiction.

The trend with respect to science fiction is unmistakable. Because of this trend, we are convinced that the time is right for a new and exciting magazine that will stretch the field of science fiction even more. Edited by David Hartwell, one of the bright young editors in the field, COSMOS will combine the talents of the very best established writers and new talents to present engrossing feature stories and articles.

Just as importantly, COSMOS will establish a new format size for science fiction magazines, larger than the digest size of existing magazines. This size will enable us to present a quality of illustration, incorporating color reproduction that is unprecedented and unparalleled in the field.

For all of you, whether you are a dyed in the wool science fiction fan or a casual observer, welcome to COSMOS. I hope you enjoy it.

Norman Goldfind



Editorial

Cosmos is an attempt to extend and renew the great tradition of innovation in science fiction. Since the beginnings of self-consciousness in the science fiction field which are symbolized by Hugo Gernsback's editorial in the first issue of *Amazing*, editors have had to point to writers to explain what they mean by SF. Gernsback, of course, explained that scientifiction was that kind of story written by Poe, Verne and Wells (all honorable men—but Verne, who admired Poe, felt Poe had too much fantasy in his fiction for it to be called scientific and, later, argued with Wells saying that Wells invented things rather than extrapolated from strictly known facts). But we know what Hugo was pointing toward in his definition of SF and so did his readers and those young men and women who became his writers, including those who wrote at the same time for fantasy pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* and those who wrote mostly for Gernsback's followers such as *Astounding*. Those were the days of the pioneers: Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, E.E. Smith, Ph.D, John W. Campbell, Jr., H.P. Lovecraft and a host of others in the

magazines, Zamiatin, Huxley, Orwell, Capek, Stapledon, John Taine and more in books.

SF was (and is) a worldwide phenomenon and the community of readers spans the globe. From *The Starmaker* to *The Stars My Destination* to *Star Trek*, SF has offered intellectual excitement, stylistic energy and a refusal to be typecast and bounded by definitions. SF arises phoenix-like, through the agency of its writers young and old, out of all the crazy-quilt traditions built up and knocked down every few years for the last hundred or so, always new and different.

Cosmos is new and different, a new magazine (though we are aware of the honorable heritage of the name—in 1953-4, a short lived ancestor named *Cosmos* published a selection of stories by Poul Anderson, Gordon R. Dickson, Philip K. Dick, A. Bertram Chandler, Jack Vance, B. Traven (!), Algis Budrys, among others) and we intend to publish the new SF. We are proud of our size and the way we look.

We have gone out of our way to get some of the best artists in SF to illustrate our stories and have designed our

magazine to present the best professional work and the best fan art—in our center section—in a unified format. Jack Gaughan, Hugo-winning SF artist and our art director, is excited about the possibilities of our large format and intends to use our large size to present effective, striking illustrative material and attractive designs for our stories and features.

Most of all, we are proud of our contents. You are going to read the best when you read *Cosmos*: from the features in the center of the magazine which focus on the SF community to the stimulating and readable science articles to the fiction itself.

We mentioned names a few moments ago when we were talking about where SF came from. The names you see in *Cosmos* constitute our definition of SF, where it is now and where it is going. With every story in every issue, we redefine not only our editorial policy but the nature of SF. Just as we believe that SF is not like anything else, is unique and creative, so we believe *Cosmos* is unlike any other SF magazine. We have embarked on a quest for the best new stories by those writers, new or established, who continue to advance our ideas of the possibilities of

the future, of the possibilities of literature.

We have spoken to a number of the great editors of SF in the planning stages of *Cosmos*—Ben Bova and Damon Knight, Terry Carr and Judy Lynn del Rey, Jim Baen and Bob Silverberg and more—and they all agreed that we are in an immensely fertile and creative explosion in SF in the 1970s, with everyone who edits in the SF and fantasy field receiving more good material on submission than they can publish or that their editorial policy can incorporate.

So the challenge has not been merely to obtain good material—our initial experience has been that a wealth of stories and offers of help materialized immediately upon our initial announcement of plans to produce *Cosmos*. The challenge has been and will continue to be to select and encourage a variety of the most diverse approaches to good SF. We are looking for good fictions that will please you, the reader, in all the ways that SF can. We offer excitement.

And we solicit your opinions, your ideas, your stories. We will publish a letter column in the center section whenever we receive sufficient correspondence of general interest. We also draw your attention to our desire for submissions of fan art. Send some samples of your black and white artwork (with return envelope and postage if you want them back) and you might be published in *Cosmos*. We are aware of our predecessors in large format in recent years and have not hesitated to borrow successful ideas from them. But perhaps our most daring and expensive innovation is in our use of interior color both to extend the possibilities of interior illustration and to broaden the appeal and visual excitement of *Cosmos*.

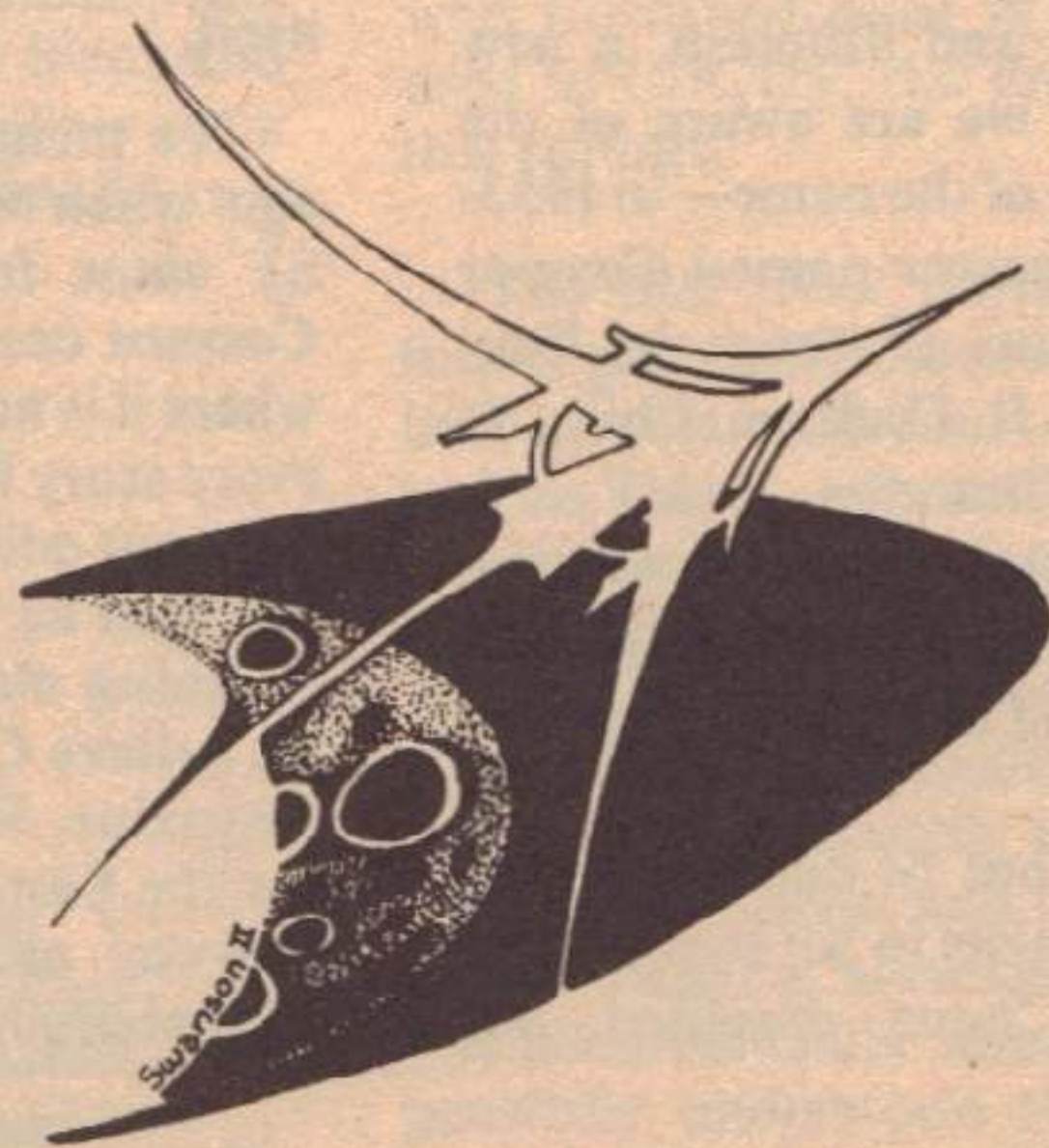
The artists who choose to work in the SF field not only illustrate but also create visual environments which stimulate science fictional speculations. In every issue, we will feature one of the important artists in our centerfold with a full color

work. Upcoming artists include John Schoenherr, Richard Powers, Vincent DiFate. Further on in the future, we will feature more artists such as our feature in this issue, Paul Lehr, who have worked infrequently in SF magazines but have devoted many years to the field of paperback SF illustration, where the artist's name is rarely mentioned on the book. Some of the most creative and influential artists in SF in the last thirty years have devoted most of their careers to the paperback medium and deserve recognition for important influence on the development of SF art and illustration.

Because of our large format, broad distribution and placement on the newsstands, *Cosmos* expects to appeal to and reach out for an audience broader than the regular reader of SF magazines and to draw new readers into the field. To provide a focus within the magazine for introducing you to aspects of SF unfamiliar to most occasional readers, we have designed our center section of columns and features: Robert Silverberg's *Books*, a regular examination of interesting events in SF publishing; Charles N. Brown's *Media*, containing news of possibilities for SF in film and television, radio and recordings; Ginjer Buchanan's *A Fan's Notes*, referring to the inner circles of science fiction's fannish society with a light touch; our aforementioned art centerpiece; and a variety of the delightful artwork by the artists who grace the pages of the thousands of fan publications devoted to SF. The center of *Cosmos* is a magazine within a magazine, with its own particular excitements.

For encouragement, ideas, support, we express our thanks to all the people who helped us to succeed with our first issue and beyond: most especially to our colleagues Jim Baen, Ben Bova, Ed Ferman and Ted White, who are responsible for most of what is lively and innovative in SF today.

Welcome to *Cosmos*.



Lynn Margulis: biographical sketch Introduction to *Strange Ancestral Relations*

Only 38, Lynn Margulis has already accomplished more than many people do in a lifetime. An associate professor of biology at Boston University, she is spending the second semester of the 1976-77 academic year at the California Institute of Technology as Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Scholar—jointly in the biology and geology departments.

Internationally admired as a cell biologist, Lynn is equally popular with her four children, ranging in age from 7 to 17, her gregarious husband, T. N. Margulis, himself a chemist at the University of Massachusetts, and a motley assortment of personal friends.

After earning her B.A. in liberal arts at 19 from the University of Chicago, Lynn took a joint master's in zoology and genetics at the University of Wisconsin and a Ph.D. in genetics at Berkeley.

So far in her still budding career she has taught at Brandeis as well as B.U., worked on a communal farm in Israel, carried out anthropological field research in Mexico, trained Peace Corps volunteers for teaching positions in Columbia, developed science curricula for elementary education, participated in the African Primary Science Workshop in Ghana, and is currently a member of the Exobiology Panel of the National Academy of Sciences—a committee charged with (among other things) aiding in the interpretation of the biology experiments on the Viking Mars landers. Lynn is always on the go—giving papers at professional meetings, lecturing to university groups, making films, participating in talk shows, leading students on ecological field trips. More often than not, she manages to take one or more of her kids along for the sights.

Almost single-handedly, this astonishing young woman has resurrected symbiosis as a legitimate field of study. Since publishing *Origin of Eukaryotic Cells* (Yale University Press, 1970) her views on the evolution of cells have been gaining momentum among skeptical colleagues in her own disciplinary bailiwick and in the scientific establishment at large. With guileless enthusiasm, she continues to germinate her ideas in cross-cultural fields. A regular contributor to the scientific press, she also writes for such offbeat periodicals as Stewart Brand's *Co-Evolution Quarterly* and, of course, *Cosmos*.

—J.R.W.

STRANGE ANCESTRAL RELATIONS

By LYNN MARGULIS

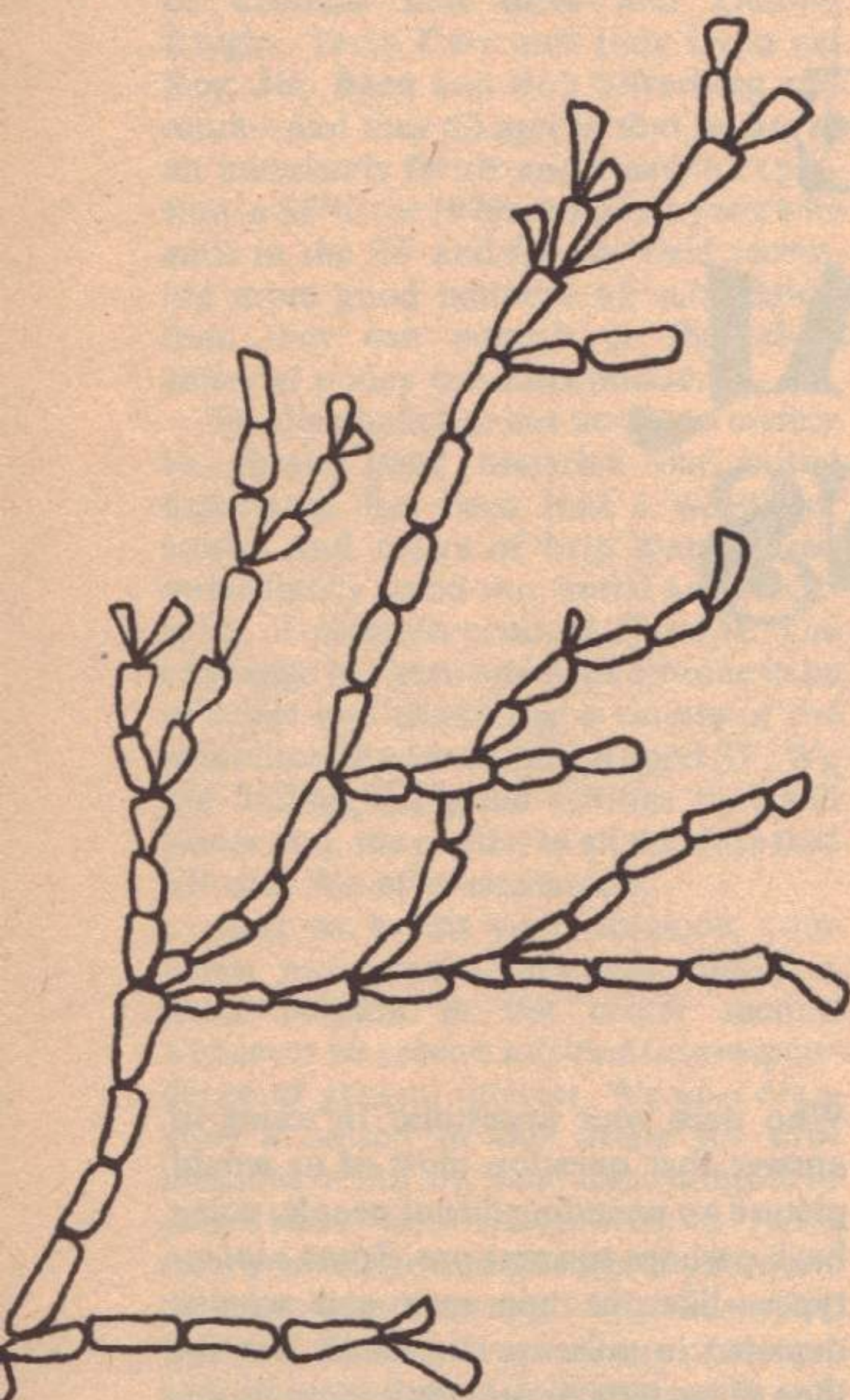


Reindeer moss

Who were your ancestors? In trying to answer that question most of us would picture an unending line of people, going back perhaps to some pre-*Homo sapiens* types—like the ape men and women depicted in museum dioramas. But the idea of bacteria or other microorganisms would never come to mind.

What kind of ancestry does a lichen have? Like ourselves, lichens are living organisms. You see them growing on rocks, tree trunks, bare ground. Unlike ourselves, they can reproduce from a little piece of parent. The option of one parent giving rise to offspring is very common in nature. It is an insurance policy for survival—a chance to leave descendants even when there is no mate. Lichens flourish in almost any climate, from lush steamy tropics to frozen arctic wastes. What makes them so adaptable is a most interesting phenomenon.

A great revelation of 19th century botany was the discovery that lichens have two very different kinds of ancestors. They are not single entities but amalgamations of two dissimilar organisms: an alga (member of the group that includes seaweeds, kelps, diatoms, and other photosynthesizers) and a fungus (from the group that includes molds, mushrooms, and yeasts). Together they form an integrated unit, capable of living and growing under conditions neither one could survive in alone.



Branching lichen

How do these two different forms of life manage to perpetuate as an integrated unit? Simply by sticking close together. The piece of parent lichen that breaks away and takes root elsewhere must contain both algal and fungal parts. Traveling through the air in an intertwined package, these cells from each great ancestor land together, ready to form a new lichen.

Lichens are probably the best known example of symbiosis. The term symbiosis implies an interdependent, mutually beneficial, permanent association between two members of different species. People living in a village or bees in a hive are not examples of symbioses, since the organisms that make up each of those social units are of the *same* species.

Evidence of many different kinds of symbioses abounds in nature. Some are fairly obvious: the little sucker fish clinging to sharks and other hosts by their suction-cup mouths; the plover that picks its food from the teeth and hide of the Nile crocodile; the vertebrate clown fish living among the poisonous tentacles of its invertebrate sea anemone host. Some are far from obvious: the reef-building corals that rely on their algal symbionts for nourishment; cows, elephants, and other ruminants that harbor grass-digesting bacteria in their stomachs; the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the root nodules of leguminous plants.

For a very long time biologists did not take the study of symbiosis very seriously, relegating it to the realm of interesting folklore. Nowadays, however, symbiosis is a more accepted field of research and its literature has become quite *au courant*. What finally brought this long neglected subject into the biological mainstream?

For one thing, the more organisms investigated, the more apparent it became that in nature symbiotic associations are the rule rather than the exception. Even when the reason for an association is not known, the evidence can be very persuasive. All sorts of scientific analyses point to the unassailable conclusion that various parts of plants and animals—organs as well as structures—really derive from unrelated ancestors.

The female giant squid is a case in point. During the reproductive season one of her glands turns red. For years marine biologists have used this red color to identify fertile female squid. But on closer examination, the gland turned out to be a pocket of animal tissue in which bright red bacteria are growing. The red pigment is not made by the squid at all

but by its symbiotic microorganisms. The reason for the association is quite unknown, but it seems that hormonal changes in the squid somehow induce or trigger pigment changes in the symbiotic bacteria. This conclusion is based on the fact that bacteria taken from the squid and grown on plates in the laboratory never make the bright red color, nor does the squid ever display the color off season.

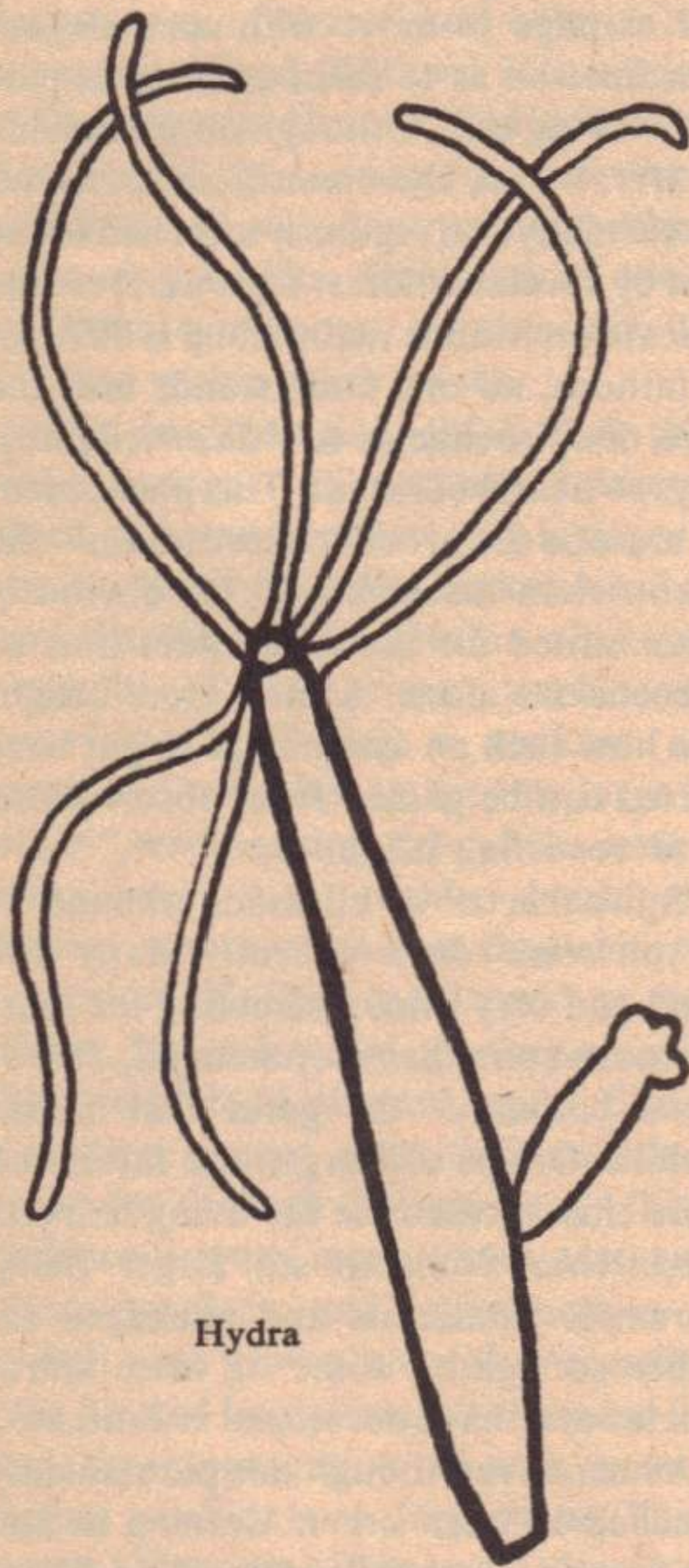
There are other salient reasons for the recent resurgence of interest in symbiosis: growing awareness of the great lengths to which certain hosts will go to retain their symbionts—and the elaborate mechanisms that have developed for keeping once unrelated partners together; the realization that all plant cells—and probably all animal cells—have a multiple ancestry; the revelation that symbiotic associations do not necessarily take millions of years to form—and that they have not stopped forming. The odds are great that new symbiotic associations among partners of very different ancestry have successfully formed many times in the past and are still doing so.

What are some of the more interesting of these associations? How closely associated do the partners get? Are the associations inherited? What keeps partners together? Do they ever separate? Let us examine some specific kinds of associations and then consider what the implications are for plant and animal cells in general.

The first set of examples involves photosynthetic symbionts. We all know that plants can convert sunlight into usable chemical energy. What a feat! Sharing this ability with plants are algae and a few bacteria. The continued existence of all animals—including ourselves—ultimately depends on such plant producers. Even if we eat nothing but steaks and spareribs, the cattle and hogs from which the meat comes have to be fed on grass and grain. While this kind of interdependence has always made for close relations between animals and plants, some organisms have carried the relationship to extremes.

A certain kind of protozoa found in the mud of North Sea tidal flats roll their bodies into tubes through which light can pass. Photosynthetic bacteria living in the tube use the light to grow and multiply. The protozoan harvests the bacteria. Culturing and nurturing, slowly tapping its captive food stocks, the protozoan host is assured of a continual supply of nutrients.

Hydras—those relatives of the corals and the Portuguese Man-of-War famous for their waving tentacles—do one better. Instead of culturing their food supply, they simply eat free living photosynthetic green algae. Eat, but not digest. By some unknown mechanism, the ingested algae manage to avoid the hydra's digestive juices, migrating safely toward the animal's outermost surfaces, where the light is stronger. If there is enough sunlight, they start photosynthesizing merrily. By sharing in the algal bounty, the hydra host can withstand long periods of starvation. In the absence of sunlight, the algae aren't much help. Hydras deprived of their algal symbionts for



Hydra

some reason—very strong light, for example, causes them to regurgitate their algae—simply reacquire a new batch by the same process. The hydra algae have become so well adapted to living inside their hosts that they are unable to survive more than about a day on the outside.

Hydras generally reproduce by budding. During this process, algal cells simply enter the bud. When the “daugh-

ter” hydras are released from the parent body, they are full of algae. Occasionally, perhaps due to crowding or the coming of summer, hydras “go sexy.” A single individual produces eggs and sperm (which usually ripen at different times). Some individuals produce only eggs or only sperm. When the egg is fertilized by the sperm, the new offspring have their regular complement of algae. How did the symbionts manage to get there? Some of us think that at least some algae tenaciously stick to the surface of the unfertilized egg. Then, when the hydroid mouth develops, the algae are immediately eaten. True to form, they are not digested and migrate toward the light, resuming their accustomed position and role inside the little host animals. Whether algae are also carried by the sperm is not yet known, but researchers are looking into it.

Coral reefs are made of the skeletons of tiny animals called corals, which are related to the green hydras and are found throughout our tropical waters. These oases in the nutrient-poor desert of the open ocean would never have formed without the photosynthetic activities of the yellow-brown algae living inside the coral's body. Corals certainly derive a good part of their food supply from their symbionts. In exchange, the algae probably get shelter and some mineral nutrients from their coral hosts.

Mollusks—the group of animals to which squid, clams, oysters, snails, octopuses, and the like belong—have evolved many clever strategies for retaining their photosynthetic partners. Take the shells of the giant clams (so popular as decoration in Polynesian restaurants). Their size is due to the symbiotic algae harbored by the host clam. This mollusk has a unique way of life. It buries into the mud, keeping its large shell open. Its tissues have been modified to form a myriad of little lenses that actually focus the sunlight on the symbiotic algae that live within these tissues. Sunlight increases the algae's photosynthetic productivity. The nutrients they manufacture feed not only the algae but also the host, enabling it to grow to giant proportions.

Other mollusks use different techniques to hold on to their productive photosynthetic symbionts. Several types of young sea slugs, for example, suck out the contents of certain long, skinny, green seaweeds. They don't bother harboring the entire photosynthetic organism in their bodies, as many of their relatives do.

They only borrow its chloroplasts—the tiny photosynthetic factories inside green algal and plant cells. Like the hydra, the sea slug eats but does not digest the chloroplasts, which migrate to the inner folds of the host's digestive tract. Immune to the digestive processes for long periods of time, these chloroplasts continue to function, converting light into food, nurturing themselves as well as the sea slug. The mouths of some of these slugs seem to be closed or at least rudimentary relative to other slugs that normally feed themselves. At dusk and dawn they come out to take advantage of the diffuse sunlight their symbionts require. Since they can move out of the shadows with great ease, the slugs are much more successful than the seaweeds with whom they compete for the available light.

Here then is a new symbiotic variation. With sea slugs (and at least three different unrelated kinds are known from the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and Hawaii) the symbiosis is between the animal and just the crucial part of the algal cells—not the algae themselves.

Off the Channel Islands and along the coast of Brittany one can find a common bloom on the beach that looks like green seaweed. There is no obvious reason to suspect it is anything else. It comes up on the beach and remains there, even with the ebb and flow. The cover of green slimy material can easily be seen between the tides, particularly in the drainage ditches flowing from the land to the sea. It has one peculiar attribute. If you stamp your foot on a clump of this green mass, your footprint turns white (or at least beach colored). Then, if the spot remains undisturbed, you can see your footprint slowly turn green again. If you looked closely, you would see that the green “seaweed” is really clusters of tiny worms, a few millimeters long. Under the microscope you would discover that the bodies of these flat worms are packed with hundreds of minute algae living between the cells throughout the worm's body. The worm, *Convoluta roscoffensis* (named for the Roscoff marine station in northern France) is actively photosynthesizing in its natural habitat like a plant—that is, it takes in carbon dioxide from the air and converts it to sugars in light-sensitive reactions. Functionally then, the worm is a seaweed. It lives on light. But it is probably better attuned than ordinary seaweeds to the strong wave action along these northern coasts. When heavy winds sweep down and massive waves form, the worms can use

their muscles to burrow quickly into the sand for protection. In fact, this is exactly what happens when you stamp your foot on the beach.

Careful study of this symbiotic association has shown that the algae are extremely well adapted to the body of the worm. When swimming freely in sea water, these algae are flagellated, that is, they have little whiplike tails. Inside the body of the worm, the tails are lost, but the algae's ability to grow new tails is retained. When the worm eggs hatch they seem to be algal free. Suspended in sea water, the eggs attract the algae. With their regrown flagella, they swim toward the eggs and enter the bodies of the young developing worms. Thus, in some stages, (at least when the worms are just developing from the eggs) the two partners are separated. Whether the algae ever reproduce outside the worm is not known. Certainly the algae grow and reproduce inside. It is likely that when a worm dies, its algae are released into the water, grow flagella, and actively swim around until they are attracted to worm eggs.

The stages involved in the closer and closer relations between a host and its photosynthetic symbionts are somewhat analogous to the stages in the historical relationship between men and agriculture. It is thought that in the earliest days of this relationship, people simply gathered edible bits of food in their environment—grasses, leaves, berries, nuts, inner bark, and so on. In the course of extensive food gathering activities, people dropped some of the seeds they were carrying home. Eventually the wild plants grew up near the sites of human habitation, and people started culturing them—dropping the seeds on purpose instead of by accident. Some of the edible plants cultured today are still basically wild; even if we stopped planting them, they would still survive in nature. Dandelions and asparagus, for example. However, the vast majority of our food plants have been genetically altered during the thousands of years of their association with man. Cultivated varieties of corn, wheat, rye, barley would never make it through their life cycles without man's active intervention at several points. The highly cultivated ear of corn we have today would simply fall from its stalk and rot on the ground. Since the seeds can't get out of the husks, they could never be distributed by the wind. Without man's intervention, all corn would become extinct in one genera-

tion.

If we were to carry the analogy a little further, the next step in the association between man and the plants he eats should not be too hard to imagine. Like the hydra and sea slug, we too might someday not digest the plants we eat. They would remain in our bodies, synthesizing away, providing us with a ready source of nourishment. Of course, our skins would have to become somewhat more translucent, to provide the ingested plants with sufficient sunlight, but that kind of adaptation is not without precedent.

Although we have not pushed our association with plants that far ourselves, we have seen how symbioses between motile and photosynthetic organisms have advanced from simple interdependent relationships. The idea of becoming so intimate with your food supply that it is eventually drawn right into your body is conceivable. The ability to both move and produce food is a good trick, arrived at many times in different life forms. But can you imagine an organism unable to move at all, forming a partnership with motile members of a different species? We have recently found several examples of motility symbiosis: nonmoving organisms being pushed around by highly active moving forms. Here are some dramatic cases from the microbiological literature.

There are at least three different types of moving symbiotic complexes. The first is a swimming microscopic form of life that looks like a mulberry. Although it lives in the murky muds at the bottom of lakes, it uses light to manufacture its food. It is photosynthetic but of a primitive type—one that does not lead to oxygen as a waste product. In fact, this type of photosynthesizer is damaged by oxygen. The organism stays under a thin layer of mud—thin enough to avoid oxygen but not so thin that it cuts off the light from the sun. When the "seeds" of the "mulberry" are forced apart, you can see they are little photosynthetic cells. The movement of the "mulberry" is due to a much larger (although still microscopic) organism with a bacterial flagellum. In other words, the photosynthesizers are along for the ride on the back of a larger swimming bacterial host.

Perhaps more dramatic is the case of *Mixotricha paradoxa*, an organism named for its paradoxical form. Very large for a single cell—about half a millimeter—it is propelled through the fluid in which it lives by very strange

looking moving hairs. When *Mixotricha* was first discovered, the hairs were thought to be abnormally large and weirdly moving flagella. On closer inspection, however, it turned out that they are really highly active little oxygen-intolerant bacteria called spirochaetes. About half a million such motile spirochaetes are associated with each *Mixotricha*. They seem to grow and divide on the surface of the host, so that daughter cells (asexual offspring) can at any time acquire their complement of spirochaetes to help them move around.

Detailed studies of the structures of these moving hairs leaves no doubt that they are spirochaetes—whole bacterial cells in their own right. Clinging to *Mixotricha*, perhaps for dear life, they still manage to move with such elegant coordination as to seem an integral part of the living cell. Although on the outside of *Mixotricha*, these motile spirochaetes are carefully and regularly attached to the host by special holdfast regions. How the delicate relation is maintained is difficult to fathom; no one understands how the ratio of spirochaetes to *Mixotricha* host stays so nearly constant. This phenomenon must be the product of evolution—the mixotrichan assemblage is obviously better suited for life than either host or spirochaetes alone. A little more insight into how such an assemblage might have started can be gained from observations of *Mixotricha's* neighbors.

Spirochaetes of all kinds abound in *Mixotricha's* environment. Many are small and very thin, resembling the most infamous spirochaete of them all, *Treponoma pallidum*—the germ that causes syphilis. Others are larger and fatter and more closely resemble the living hairs on *Mixotricha*. Some are still larger. Being extremely numerous and packaged together so tightly, some of these spirochaetes may have developed coordinated movement even though not permanently attached to each other. Coming in and out among larger cells resembling *Mixotricha*, foraging for food and whatever, they could easily have attached themselves to and detached themselves from whatever other larger protozoa were around. So it seems likely that *Mixotricha's* special hairs, the little oars that row the proportionately larger host through the fluid, started as independent spirochaetes, nosing about the surfaces of *Mixotricha's* ancestors, in time becoming anchored to their host, and eventually developing the intimate and regular contact we see today.

What is *Mixotricha*? Oddly enough, it is itself a symbiont, one of the hundreds of types of wood-digesting protozoa that live in a special portion of the intestines of wood-eating insects: termites and wood-roaches. These insects eat wood, but by no means do they digest it. Digestion of wood is a rather difficult feat, and there is no evidence that any animal has ever developed the complex chemical battery of tools required to do it.

All wood-eating insects are dependent on the special microbes they so carefully culture in their digestive systems. *Mixotricha* is one of the protozoa cultured by a termite—an extremely primitive example from Australia called *Mastotermes darwinensis*. Rumor has it that this insect is so enterprising, it can live on billiard balls (wooden ones, of course) and water as its sole source of food. Without *Mixotricha* and its many protozoan and bacterial colleagues of the termite hindgut there would be no *M. darwinensis* or any other wood-eating insects. Deprived of their busy little symbionts, termites die of starvation within a few weeks.

Some entomologists think that the social structure of termite colonies evolved as a consequence of this dependence on wood-digesting organisms. To assure that the next generation will have its supply of the proper symbionts, termite "workers" feed a package of regurgitated microbes to the tiny larvae. "Soldier" termites that defend the insect colony have such highly developed defensive mouth parts that they cannot eat wood at all. They too depend on the workers for microbial packages and edible products of digested wood. Since the soldiers cannot open their mouths, they are fed through their rear ends. The interdependence of insect castes—larvae, soldiers, workers, and reproductives—may well have grown out of the necessity for the kind of intimate contact needed to assure the perpetuation of such wood-digesting symbionts as *Mixotricha*. This argument becomes all the more plausible when one realizes that the poor microbes react violently to oxygen. In fact, most are killed by it. In just a few minutes after exposure to pure oxygen or air, these lively forms of protozoa and bacteria (including spirochaetes) slow down, stop moving, and die.

By this time you may be wondering about your own cells. Do they also have different kinds of ancestors?

Early in the history of microscopic studies observers noted that certain little bodies in animal egg and tissue cells

stained just like those of certain bacteria and were even seen to divide. In 1927, Ivan Wallin, an American biologist teaching in the medical school of the University of Colorado, published a book called *Symbioticism and the Origin of Species*. In it he claimed that mitochondria—the little bodies inside of cells—looked like bacteria, acted like bacteria, and indeed once were bacteria; that is, their ancestors were free living organisms. Pointing to many examples comparable to those we have been talking about, he suggested that symbiotic relationships form the basis of many, if not all, new species. His fatal flaw was, early on, to claim that he had succeeded in growing the mitochondria of animal cells in the laboratory, outside their host cells. He certainly never grew mitochondria, nor has anyone since then. He was probably growing "weed" bacteria, random organisms in the air. We now have some insight into the difficulties of the task and why simple foodstuffs could never supply the required growth factors to animal mitochondria.

Because Wallin overstated his case he was ignored, even ridiculed, by the biological establishment. With the hindsight of half a century, though, we recognize that he did have deep insight into the symbiotic aspects of evolution. Certainly there would be no termites, no cows, no corals—to name a few—if these animals had not formed symbiotic associations. Many (if not most) contemporary biologists think Wallin was correct. They now know that the chemistry and behavior of mitochondria present in the cells of all animals and green plants are rather similar. They recognize that mitochondria contain many (although not all) of the required chemical components (including genes) for a free living existence. Even though Wallin was sloppy and made a number of rather large mistakes, most of us are ready to concede that he correctly interpreted the bacterial ancestry of animal and plant cells.

As for those green photosynthetic packages in plant cells—the chloroplasts—their behavior is so similar in so many respects to some blue-green algae, that almost everyone agrees they too were once independent organisms, living freely outside the bodies of the cells of which they are now an integral part. Even the very first descriptions of chloroplasts in the 19th century contained references to their resemblance to free living blue-green algae. In the 1880s, the two independent discoverers of

chloroplasts themselves suggested that chloroplasts of plant cells derive from blue-green algae.

By now it is generally accepted that plant and animal cells are the products of symbiosis. Some of us biologists (admittedly not many) would go even further. Protruding from nearly all animal and some plant cells are tiny hairs called cilia or flagella (the major difference between them is that cilia are shorter than flagella). They perform such functions, for example, as powering sperm towards an egg and brushing particles of debris out of the lungs and throat.

The substructure of cilia and flagella is remarkably intricate and specific. In cross section both show a nine-fold symmetry. The sperm tails of moss plants, of men, of bulls—indeed most animals—and even the sperm that fertilize the vile-smelling "fruits" (actually fleshy cones) of the *Ginkgo* (or Maiden-hair) trees have the same precisely detailed structure. Is it conceivable that these little hairs also originated as free living motile bacterial-like organisms?

If this hypothesis is correct, then we can say that animal cells have three different types of ancestors: the original host, mitochondria, and flagella—and that plant cells have four: original host, mitochondria, flagella, and chloroplast.

You may find it astounding to imagine yourself as a walking community of cells that evolved from symbiotic associations between members of dissimilar microbial populations. But then, in retrospect, the evolution of a civilization that produces a symphony orchestra, X-rated movies, and downtown traffic jams would be equally hard to imagine.

The lesson of evolution and symbiosis is not the originally naive and perverted social Darwinism of the 19th century that perceived "nature red in tooth and claw." Survival of the fittest does not apply solely to fierce competition, to dog-eat-dog combat with one winner emerging to carry on the species. We now realize that different species also survive by cooperation—forming intimate relationships, becoming interdependent, integrating their lives. Symbiotic association has an ancient and venerable history. There is no reason why it shouldn't have an equally long and spectacular future.



SHORT STORY



The King is dead! Long live...

THE LODESTAR

By CHERRY WILDER

Toward the year's end a Shaman crossed the wasteland to observe the new Pole Star. He traversed a flooded causeway patterned with oil slick and spent some time wiping the sludge from the canvas uppers of his boots. When he was out of sight of the wretched fishing camp where he had spent the autumn the Shaman began to run. He sped over the wasteland with an ugly, tireless gait, slowing to a jog when the net of yellow grass passed over a rubble field. His long, patched coat flapped open to the thigh; crystals of ice appeared on his beard where he sucked in cold air. His staff pecked at the ground.

Once he took shelter beside a ruined boiler-housing and ate some dried fish from his pouch. He sent out his spirit across the wasteland and found a few Stragglers, even more brutish than the folk he had left, running off, far to the west. Then he ran on for more than a day. His staff bit on a stone and a white scar appeared on its soft metal binding. The Shaman stopped and lifted his head: the Pole Star blazed in the north behind banks of low-lying gray clouds. In all the waste he was alone; there was not one other human creature within range of his furthest sending.

He pressed on north-east, feeling a steady rise in the gradient, the beginning of higher ground. Suddenly, in thick mist, the Shaman slackened his pace and strode cautiously to the edge of a precipice. He knelt on the curled lip of the metal chasm, hooked his geiger to his staff by its worn leather strap and extended it into the gulf below. The instrument told him that he had come to a hell-pit.

The Shaman stayed all night at his vantage point on the brink of the pit; odd sendings troubled him and he brought out a string of charms which he held one by one to his furrowed cheek. The gray morning brought just enough light for him to see more wasteland stretching beyond the pit and its rubble fields. He saw in the distance a hill, with trees planted on a low slope. Then with a great leap of the spirit, an assertion of his power, strong as music, he beheld the citadel. He pierced to the heart of the steel tower and encountered a human intelligence. Strange... one person... *a child!* Unblemished by comparison with the wild creatures who lived on the fringes of the waste. There *were* others... human Stragglers, living in the plantations that surrounded the citadel. A resettlement area. But inside the tower this bright light... The Shaman saw that the charm

he had been using was a fir-tree, carved in silver and decorated with specks of colored enamel.

Inside the citadel Marchval the Major-domo says to the young Prince:

"The Festival of Christmas!"

"Oh yes!" Hanno cries. "Let us have Christmas!" No sooner said than done. Marchval sweeps a hand across the panels and the air is filled with bell music. The chamber is hung with festoons of colored light that imitate evergreens: holly, thick with red berries, ivy, mistletoe, swags of pine, but it is all part of Marchval's repertoire. Three screens are alight: a parade, a nativity, children decorating a tree. Hanno recognizes his three holiday companions, two boys and a girl, who played with him at Fasching and on Peace Day.

"We should have a tree," says Hanno. Marchval builds him one, tall and shadowy, between the doors.

"No... a real tree!" says the Prince impatiently, stabbing a button on the console.

The sheathing parts over a window space and the Prince kneels up on his bed. He sees bleak daylight, the plantation, the round, metal huts.

"Marchval... do They know Christmas?" Marchval sighs and shakes his wise head.

"Perhaps. They're superstitious."

"How many...?" asks the Prince.

"One hundred and four."

"That's an increase."

"Stragglers are being recruited every day," Marchval points out.

"There should be snow..." says Prince Hanno dreamily.

"Of course," Marchval reaches for the console.

"Wait!" exclaims the Prince. "Would it cause discomfort out there?"

"By no means," says Marchval. "The dwellings are comfortably heated. You can make a clothing issue."

"See to it!" orders the Prince. The snow is already falling lightly.

After some time Hanno turns reluctantly from the window to the warmth and color of his three screens. The children are decorating the tree; they never seem to have it completed, there is always another bauble, another string of tinsel or popcorn.

"Your playmates..." suggests Marchval.

"No!" says Hanno sharply. The children are well-made and friendly but he cannot take too much of them. He will not discuss the matter with Marchval. It

is an environmental problem, part of his birthright; he is too much alone.

"When will my uncle come back?" he asks.

"The Regent may turn at any time," says Marchval stiffly. The Prince understands the euphemism; he tries, like Marchval, not to mention the fact that the ship is overdue.

"I'll look at the decorations!" he bounces up cheerfully. "I want *trees*, Marchval, real trees!"

Hanno runs to the door, past Marchval's untrimmed tree, projected in black-and-green light. It is shadowy but solid; a tall shaggy man in ragged clothes. The boy skids along the gallery, takes the stairs two at a time, and launches himself expertly on to the wide metal banister where the ramp begins. Marchval has been busy at the console; there are decorations everywhere. The servants are bustling about in the hall; they all acknowledge the Prince, even those who cannot speak. Hanno leaps on to a little, rumbling, black food carrier, one of his favorites, and they wheel in crazy circles right up to the checkpoint in the main doors.

Zillah, the housekeeper, bursts out of her kitchen: "Now then, Master Hanno!"

Hanno whispers to the carrier and they hurtle away with Zillah in pursuit, through chains of light, iridescent streamers. Zillah has a good turn of speed, in spite of her matronly build. She engulfs Hanno in a billowing embrace and they roll on the carpet, laughing. When the young Prince laughs everyone laughs. Marchval crosses an upper gallery on his way to the schoolroom; there is a burst of carol singing from the speakers. Before the eyes of Hanno and Zillah the square gray fittings acquire garlands of evergreen.

"Star of wisdom, star of light..."

There is a sudden loud clang, twice repeated. Hanno stiffens with exhilaration and alarm: it sounds as if someone had knocked at the main doors. Not his uncle surely, for the Regent would take the underground ramp in the usual way. But what else is out there besides the trees and the falling snow? What plantation worker, what Straggler, could find a way to the main doors? All the bustle inside the hall is dying down.

The sound is not repeated. The guard Magog peers through the viewer and his assistant Bendetto brings up the scene on a monitor. They shake their heads. Hanno looks up, instinctively, to Marchval, who watches overhead, then he runs to the viewer and scans eagerly. Nothing.

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No one. The approaches and the forecourt are empty. Nothing is out there but the trees, powdered with snow.

"Bloody atmospherics!" growls Magog. "You see, Highness?"

"It did sound like someone... knocking," says the Prince.

"Don't you worry," puts in Bendetto. "Wouldn't get one of those woodsmen within fifty meters of the doors."

Prince Hanno sighs and goes off with Zillah to investigate the rich Christmas odor issuing from the kitchen gallery. He hears the music soar again as he tries the fresh Pfeffernusse.

"You should let them keep!" complains Zillah. Hanno has sighed for her too, in the past. The cook whose intricate skills are wasted on so few; she uses only a corner of the vast gleaming room. Now she is up to her elbows in extra work; cauldrons of nutrient for the plantation workers. Christmas cookies, yes, she assures Hanno they'll get cookies, and dried fruit from the south, why not? There are cases in the stores, going begging...

The boy asks suddenly: "Zillah... what did They find to eat, out there?"

Zillah shakes her head. "Hamsters and blast-wheat. What else lives in the wasteland?"

"Zillah, did they *tell* you...?"

She gives him a deep stare. "I don't have contact, Master Hanno, you know that. I'm your food-handler."

"But their tests are clear!"

"Mostly. But there was an old girl last week..."

"Tell me!"

"She made the geigers jump out of their cases. Red-hot!"

"What happened to her?"

"Oh she was treated in the lead-hut. She had a wristwatch fished out of a hell-pit."

"Will she die?"

"Doubt it." Zillah twirls her switches. "Here... take this bag of nuts. There's Marchval bleeping for you."

"Merry Christmas, Zillah!"

"What's that to me?" she grins. "Nothing but another bank of recipes."

"It's an *ancient* festival!" cries Hanno. "You know that. Birth of the God-King! Saturnalia! Winter rites! Gift-Days of the Goddess!"

"Tree-Queening!" chimes Zillah unexpectedly. "So *they* say..."

"Can I take the service tube?"

"This once."

Hanno sails up in the tube, looking down at the rainbow forest of decorations

in the hall.

The Shaman had come down from his perch about noon, skirting the hell-pit on his way to the citadel. The sky was overcast; he caught a whisper of sound and looked to the south. What now? The drone grew very loud but the Shaman stood his ground, feeling vulnerable as any man. The black airship, squat, almost wingless, roared past overhead. Low, too low and gasping. He could see the marking underneath; it was not precisely a ship of war. His spirit leapt out ahead of the vessel as it veered to the north, away from the citadel. He felt the impact of the crash; a shriek of vicarious pain and terror was forced out of him. Men, unblemished men, not Stragglers. Dying in the crash, some dead already. He brushed aside a thread of annoyance for his change of course and set off at a steady gallop across the wasteland toward the thinning column of black smoke.

The ship had buried itself, nose down, in a rubble field, then split like a black pod. Panting, the Shaman approached the smouldering wreckage with his geiger held aloft like a lantern on a dark night. The smoke column rose from the buried nose-section; he climbed up on the tail fin and saw two men dead in their chairs. A robot, humanoid, lay dismembered in the aisle, horribly lifelike. Two other men were not yet dead and the Shaman moved swiftly down to them.

The first one he came to was young; he was badly crushed and bleeding. The Shaman pressed a hand hard on his forehead and spoke in a loud, firm voice, exhorting the spirit to go forth without fear. The young man broke off his painful mumbling, gave the Shaman one fierce look, and died. The Shaman moved to the last survivor, whom he judged to have a little more life in him.

The man was old but well-nurtured, a thing the Shaman had not seen in years. He was one of the unblemished, who had not been contaminated nor lived in the waste. His smooth, sallow face and well-kept gray hair contrasted with the head of the Shaman, massive and unkempt, with the beard flowing over his bony chest.

"Straggler...?" the man was peremptory.

"No!" said the Shaman. He caught and held the man's wavering gaze. The Shaman's eyes were blue; they burned like sapphires in his grimed face and subdued the dying man.

"Priest?"

The Shaman nodded.

The man identified himself with

desperate haste; his breath rasped.

"Regent Carvannle. You must take word..."

"You serve the Child," said the Shaman. "The Child in the tower."

"Yes!" the Regent raised himself then sank back. "Have you been aboard an airship? There is a black box..."

"Flight record," said the Shaman. "Tell me where." Carvannle choked and his voice became faint. As he explained the position of the black box he made wide inaccurate gestures with his left hand as if his failing strength were concentrated in it. He clawed up a gold seal that hung round his neck and made the Shaman unfasten the clasp. He held up his fingers before the Shaman's face, trying to indicate a heavy ring.

"Safe-conduct beam," he whispered. "Marchval... Majordomo..."

The Regent's color had altered. The Shaman caught the wavering hand and laid it down. Presently he slid off the ring. The Regent Carvannle had died exhaling a single word:

"Hanno..."

The Shaman understood: that was the name of the Child, and here was his device. An heraldic beast, a lion, on the seal and on the electronic signet ring that would give safe-conduct. The Shaman feared the ring a little; it was of anodized metal, set in a thick, luminous, blue plastic.

He was impatient with his situation, with the hideous tang of death inside the crashed ship and the mechanical toys of these unblemished men. He went forward quickly and retrieved the black box. The pilot, fused and twisted, was another robot. The Shaman climbed back the way he had come; he stood in the wasteland beside the hulk of the ship and turned his attention again, like a powerful beam, toward the citadel. He dealt three ringing blows upon the ship's black hull with his staff, then set out at a steady pace across the rubble field.

The Prince stares at Marchval across the work table. "Lost contact?"

Marchval's firmly-molded dark face, set in lines of perpetual middle-age, betrays to Hanno at least, an unusual anxiety.

"From 12.45 hours."

"And the delay? Why did they stay so long in the south?"

"Political dalliance," admits Marchval. "Socializing. Maintenance."

"Did you speak to my uncle?"

Marchval shakes his head. "Routine messages, logged in flight from 11.00

hours."

"Marchval! We must go out! The ship is down in the wasteland!"

A terrible rigidity invades Marchval's features. "Highness..." he whispers. "You know I dare not!"

From the console, turned down low, there comes a murmur of sound. Massed choirs of Christians, from their remote heyday, are singing:

*"Bless all the dear children
In thy tender care..."*

"Marchval," pleads Hanno. "I will be safe. Send Magog with one of the personnel carriers."

"We are geared to conservation," insists Marchval. "No one from this unit may go into the waste. If the ship has foundered..."

"Then my uncle is dead?" asks Hanno. "With his aides... all gone... Hector, Maul and old Fellin?"

"We must assume so," agrees Marchval. "Four men. This is a disaster for the House of Maldin and a catastrophe for the race."

"You must inform my Aunt Eulalie, the Southern Regent," says Hanno. "They have ships. They can search."

"Child, what have I taught you of politics?" Marchval raps the table uneasily with his ring. "There is a delicate balance to be maintained among the towers."

For a moment Hanno is overcome by grief and longing. The bright frescoes and hangings of the schoolroom, the maps, the instruments, the screens can bring him no comfort. The tower is a sterile promontory; he would swap it cheerfully for the presence of his Aunt Eulalie or his one horribly cosseted female cousin. He would upset the balance, unroof the tower itself, for five minutes companionship. He feels Marchval's eyes upon him as he veers round the room; sees, reflected in mirror panels, the stumbling, pale boy, Prince Hanno.

"Maintain the balance then." He wipes his eyes with his sleeve. "We are totally self-sufficient. Aren't we?"

"Of course, Highness."

"Cancel the Festival." Hanno catches sight of a Weihnachtsman distributing gifts. "No... no, don't cancel it." He crouches, vague and disturbed, watching the screen.

Marchval moves silently about the room switching off the teaching aids, sliding the panels shut over the geographic screen, with its silvery tracing of Old Europe superimposed upon the hammered, shrunken outlines of the wasteland...

"The woodsmen..." Hanno says tentatively. "They might know something."

"Contact is limited," replies Marchval.

"They are under our protection." Hanno is almost sly. "My subjects..."

"These are Stragglers," says Marchval, "barely on the way to rehabilitation."

"Men and women." It is no more than a whisper.

Hanno stretches out, sullen and red-eyed, on the schoolroom couch. Marchval, cosseting his Prince, brings an icy glass of chocolate milk from the service tube.

"I expect it has a sedative," says Hanno gruffly.

"You need one," responds Marchval. Hanno drains the glass.

"Believe me, Highness..." Marchval looms and contracts before the boy's eyes. "These are sterile, savage creatures. *You* are unblemished. Son of Queen Grazia and Count Per de Carvannle. Heir of the Ages. Prince of the House of Maldin. Keeper of all Wisdom. I beg to advise..."

But the Prince has already fallen asleep.

Marchval checks a chronometer: 15.00 hours. He draws back the sheathing a little so that a wintry light descends upon the sleeping child. Marchval goes quickly to the control room, functioning on his usual high level. Elsewhere the pulse of the tower slows down, fractionally; the servants move into that limbo they inhabit while their Prince is asleep.

The Shaman was on the fringe of the plantation before night fell. He pressed on, admiring the trees—pine, spruce and fir—forced up, he guessed, by some growth-magic from the tower. His own powers were strengthened; he easily anticipated and counted a band of fifteen forest workers bagging cones on the hillside. They stood together, for protection, when he emerged from the trees and called in the harsh polyglot tongue of the wasteland:

"Straggler? Keep off till we count you!"

The Shaman gestured with his staff and walked on until they could see him more clearly. The signs of rehabilitation were apparent: clothes, shoes, an absence of malnutrition. The foreman cried out:

"Hold! Who are you?"

The Shaman spread his arms wide and held his ground, allowing them to inspect him. It was enough. The foreman, Fritz, and the others circled closer, taking in the

newcomer's height, his magical accoutrements, his geiger. A woman ran off eagerly to the settlement to spread the word that a Shaman had come.

The Shaman followed his usual practice of demanding nothing, although he perceived that the community had plenty to give. He was scarcely troubled by requests for healing. He strolled on, concealing his deep interest in the organization of the plantation and in the tower itself, gleaming through the aisles of dark trees.

"You serve a Prince," he said to Fritz. The foreman was sturdy and knowing, with bright, brown eyes; only his bowed legs and patchy baldness marked him for a reclaimed Straggler. He trembled at the Shaman's words and looked from side to side.

"It's true then?" he muttered. "We see nothing but them bloody orderlies."

"They treat you well?"

"Fine!" Fritz grinned and spat on the ground. "No complaints. We're saved persons. But who loves a carrier... or a Frank for that matter? Give a man the creeps..."

The Shaman had spied out a suitable place for his business but before he could examine it hands tugged at his coat. When he turned, the knot of suppliants parted, leaving an old woman lying on the snow.

"Latest recruit," grunted Fritz. "Getting over a bit of a Burn... you know... but her head is far from right." The woman was bent, withered, impossibly old; her skin was like tree bark. The warm overall hung on her shrunken body like a tent. Who could unravel the lines of such a face?

The Shaman's eyes blazed; his spirit was shaken within him. He strode forward and made a series of angular, dancing movements, brandishing his staff. The old creature responded with a high-pitched whistling cry. The Shaman knelt in the snow, pressing his charms to the rutted forehead; a stream of incantations poured from his lips.

He raised the old woman from the ground; she seemed to stand a little taller and her face was calm. She said in a loud cracked voice:

"A live one! Your Shaman come for the Tree-Queening!"

"Yes," said the Shaman. "Mind your wits." He gestured to a couple of women who supported her on either side.

"This place attracts all spirits!" he announced. "This was Elli, a Wise Woman. See to her."

The name, which he had given away so

THE LODESTAR

callously, had been one to conjure within the wasteland.

"Old Elli?" whispered Fritz. "That old carrion? That is Elli the Wise Woman?"

"The same."

The Shaman accepted a few bites of food, offered on a tin plate. Fritz, nudged on all sides by others who did not dare address the Shaman, put another question.

"She spoke of Tree-Queening. Should we celebrate? They gave us extra rations."

"She's right." The Shaman stared down at the ring of dark faces. "Your Prince, in the tower, makes the Festival!"

Ignoring the waves of excitement given off by the crowd, the Shaman consulted with Fritz, then set off alone. He headed for a clearing, a long oval of untrodden snow, with three tall fir trees towards the northern end. Fritz urged the woodsmen to keep their distance; darkness was falling and some already carried pine torches. They went straggling back to the huts and listened. Presently they heard the beat of the Shaman's drum; half a dozen bolder spirits stole out again and came to the edge of the clearing to attend the summoning.

The Prince wakes up with a loud cry of certainty:

"A man!"

It is morning; he is back in his bedroom. He half remembers Marchval carrying him along the gallery from the schoolroom. His sleep has given him no respite from the painful knowledge of his uncle's death but there was one vivid dream, cold as pine needles...

"Marchval! There is a man out in the snow!"

"You have been dreaming, Hanno."

"Has there been... any word?"

"No." Marchval hands the Prince his robe.

There is music in the room already; Hanno sees his holiday suit laid out, blue and white. He does not need to look at the screens to know that Marchval's tree of light is projected in the hall, above a pile of gaily-wrapped gifts. Without knowing why, he puts a brave face on it, a show of eagerness; will he get the telescope, the jump pack, the son et lumière, the mice? Could he bear to go a few more rounds with his three little friends, who are no doubt waiting in the wings, dressed in their best, with gifts of their own to unwrap? The music swells:

*"O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum,
Wie treu sind deine blätter!"*

Hanno pulls on his beautiful new boots of scarlet leather; he is pierced with cold. He hears the drum beat again, sees the untrodden snow—a rending sound as the tree falls.

"The trees!" cries Hanno, "They will bring the trees!"

"Who will bring...?" Marchval catches the boy's arm in a velvet grip, infinitely controlled.

"The people!" Hanno is wild with excitement. "They mean to see me!"

He breaks free from Marchval and rushes down and down again. Marchval strides after him, protesting. Before they reach the hall the alarm bells begin to ring.

The nearest console is on a dais thrusting out into the hall, facing the main doors. Marchval races to it; Magog cries out:

"Woodsmen in the outer court!"

Marchval arouses monitors, even the largest on the north wall.

"You see?" says Hanno.

The Prince stands, alert and impatient, on the dais beside Marchval. They see a procession approaching the main doors of the tower; the plantation workers move in double file; ahead strides a tall man, bearded, his long coat hung about with tools and trinkets.

"We must activate the forecourt shields!" says Marchval.

"No!" says Hanno.

"Detail!" shouts Magog. "Detail, Officer Marchval! See what the big guy is carrying!"

Marchval scans for detail. The Prince speaks into that utter silence which is Marchval's equivalent to shock.

"The man is carrying a black box!"

The procession winds unhindered into the forecourt and comes to a halt.

"The box is urgently required..." murmurs Marchval.

"I know what it contains," says Prince Hanno. "Let them in!"

"Highness... they are unauthorized."

"I authorize them!" Hanno is controlled. "They come in peace."

Marchval, at breaking point, flicks another of his precious switches and an extraordinary sound steals into the vast confines of the hall: A ragged chorus of human voices. Marchval stares at the Prince who holds his gaze steadily. It is impossible to out-stare Marchval; his eyes are made of glass. There can be no true conflict between the Prince and his Majordomo, only a shifting of interest, a program alteration in their immutable

relationship. Marchval lowers his eyes.

"A brief audience," he says. "You will remain on the dais. Afterwards we screen that Sorcerer."

The Shaman knocks three times upon the main doors with his staff; Marchval swiftly clears all the servants, humanoids and carriers alike, to the perimeter. He sends the ultimate order to Magog and his hand falters. He has received the safe-conduct beam from Carvannle's ring; his judgment is in some sort vindicated. The doors swing open.

A blast of cold air invades the hall; the Shaman comes in like winter. The men and women from the plantation press in, wondering, behind their leader, and set down on his command the three fir trees resting upon rough hewn wooden supports.

"My trees!" The Prince claps his hands in delight and Marchval, frostily, works his magic: the trees are festooned with colored lights. There are gasps of admiration.

The Shaman stares at the young Prince: unblemished certainly, strong in spirit. He bends to his fate which has led him over the ruined earth safely for forty years; he came to observe the new Pole Star and he has discovered the Child. He follows his instinct:

"I serve Prince Hanno."

He beckons to a carrier, Marchval lets it go, and the Shaman sends his pledges. The black box, the gold seal, the ring that was his safe-conduct. The people, some kneeling, repeat his words.

"... serve Prince Hanno..."

The old woman, Elli, takes up again the chant for Tree-Queening.

Prince Hanno looks eagerly at the faces of the people; they look back at this rare child. The sight of so many human beings fills Hanno with great joy; he wants to laugh, weep, wave his hands. The men and women are doing all these things.

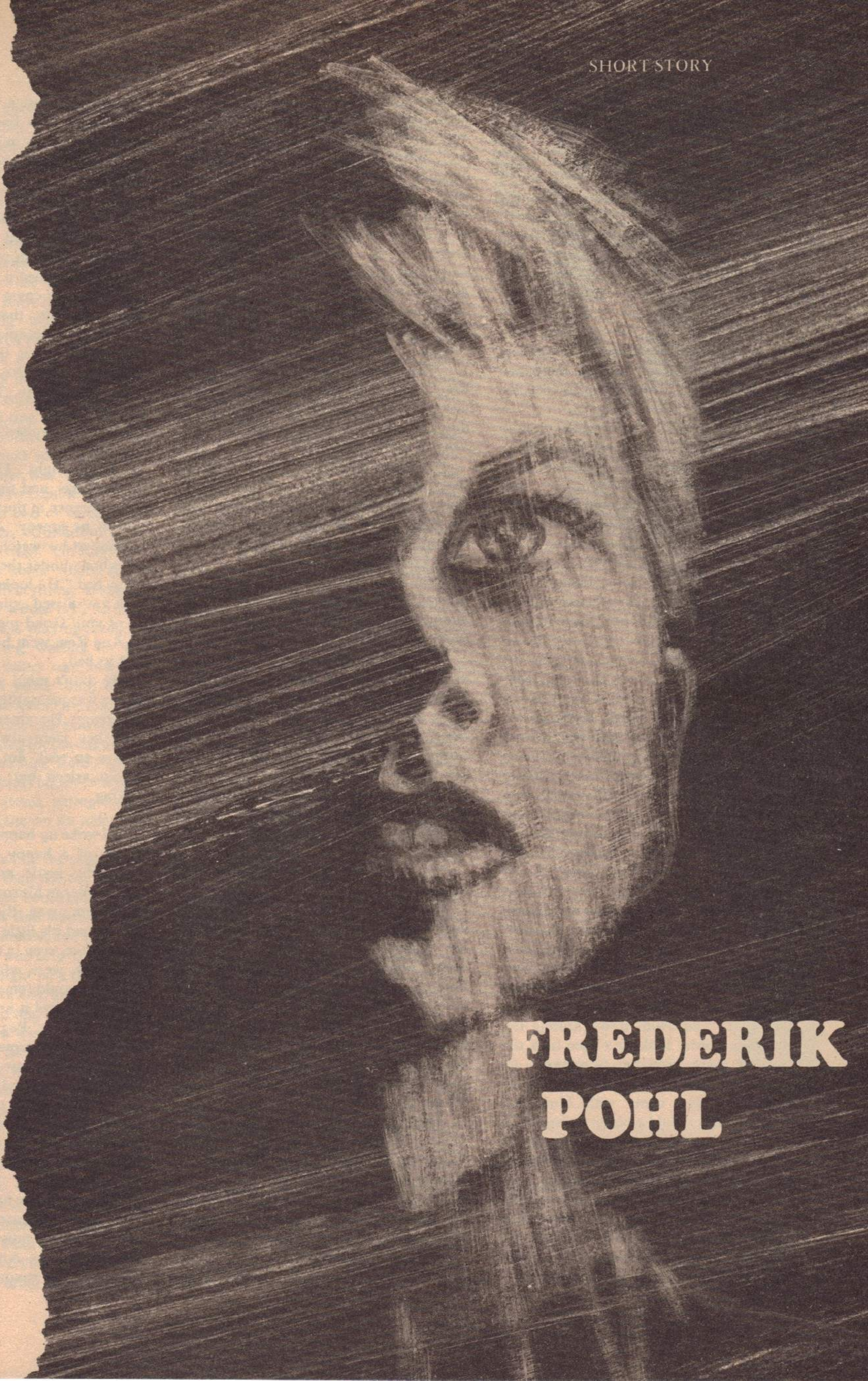
"Peace!" calls the Prince. And then in a moment of inspiration:

"Peace on Earth! Goodwill to all the people!"



REMEMBER

SHORT STORY



**FREDERIK
POHL**

REM THE REMEMBERER

Sometimes when Rem woke up in the morning he was crying. Not for long. Just for a minute, out of a dream he didn't like. When his mother, Peg, heard him, she came into his small, cheerful room and stood in the doorway, smiling at him until she was sure that he was altogether awake. She worried about him. He was ten years old, and she thought he was too old for that. She gave him his breakfast and sent him off to school on his bicycle. By then he was cheerful again.

In the afternoons he helped the grown-ups. When Peg was housecleaning, Rem mopped and brushed and helped prepare the food. When Burt, his father, was working at home on his analyses (Burt was something like a public accountant, in charge of the Southern New York Regional energy-budgets), Rem checked his figures on a pocket calculator. On Tuesdays and Fridays he went out in catamarans with his Uncle Marc to help harvest mussels from the Long Island Sound Nurseries. The mussels grew on long, knotted manila lines that hung from floats. Each day hundreds of cords had to be pulled up, and stripped of the grown mussels, and reseeded with tiny mussel larvae, and put back in the water. It was hard work. Rem was too small to handle pulling up the ropes, but he could strip and reseed, and pick up the mussels that fell in the bottom of the boat so the men wouldn't crush them with their feet, and generally be useful. It was tiring. But it felt good to be tired after three hours in the catamaran, and the water was always warm, even when the air coming down off Connecticut was blustery and cold. In all but the worst weather Marc would wink and nod toward the side, and Rem would skin out of his outer clothes and dive overboard and swim down among the dangling cords, looking to see how the mussels were growing. Sometimes he took an air-pack and his uncle or one of the other men came with him, and together they would go clear down to the bottom to look for stray oysters or crabs or even lobsters that had escaped from the pens out around Block Island.

Then he would go home and meet his father, bicycling back from the Sands Point railroad station. If the weather was nice they'd dig in the garden or toss a ball around. Then they would have dinner—

wherever they were having dinner that night; they rotated around from home to home most nights of the week, so that each family had the job of cooking and cleaning up only two or three times a week. One of the grown-ups usually helped the children with their homework after dinner. Rem liked it when it was his father's turn, particularly when the homework assignment was about ecology. He was always popping up with questions. "Don't hog the floor, son," his father would say. "Give the others a chance."

"It's always the same dumb questions, too," his cousin, Grace, complained. She was eight, still pretty much a brat. "Why don't we get sick from eating sewage? What a dumb question!"

His father laughed. "Well, it's not all that dumb. The thing is, we don't eat sewage. We just use it to grow things. All the New York City sewage goes into the settling ponds and then the algae tanks. Who knows what algae are?"

Rem knew the answer, of course, but he was polite enough to let one of the younger ones answer. Even Grace. "What they make bread out of," she said.

"That's one thing algae are used for, yes. But most of the algae are piped into Long Island Sound. The mussels live on it. So do the fish, but the mussels are the big crop. We grow three-quarters of the protein for the whole United States here, just on that algae. And, of course, on the waste heat from the power generators around Hell Gate. That warms up the Sound so the mussels grow all year 'round."

"And so do the potatoes," Grace crowed.

Rem's father said, "Yes, they do. That's a little different, though. They take the sludge from the algae tanks and spread it over the fields along the island. Did you know they used to be covered with houses? Well, we got rid of the houses, and we began growing the best potatoes in the world there, again. But we use some of the warm water piped underground to keep the soil warm, and we get two crops a year."

Then Rem asked another question, always the same one or one like it: "But," he persisted, "aren't those bad things, sewage and sludge and all?"

"People used to think so. Then we learned that some bad things are actually good things, in the wrong place."

"How did we learn?"

His father looked at his watch. "That

happened almost a hundred years ago. The people who lived then made some very good decisions."

Grace said indignantly, "They did *bad* things."

"In a way, but then they did better ones. We all know about the bad things. They drove around in cars that burned gasoline! They dumped sewage in the ocean, and ruined it for fifty years all up and down the coast. They used radioactive materials that poisoned places forever, just because they wanted more and more electric thises and automatic thats. But then they realized they were being too greedy. They learned—what did they learn?"

All the kids chanted, "Use it over! Put it back!"

"That's right. They learned not to waste things, and that decision made all the difference in the world. They decided not to be greedy. And now," he said, looking at his watch again, "it's time for everybody under the age of thirty-two to go to bed." He looked around the room with a surprised expression. "Why, that's all of you! Good night."

And Rem went back to his own room and to bed.

He didn't mind going to sleep. After all, he was pleasantly tired. He did mind the dreams. He remembered them clearly; and they were always the same, and always so real, not as though he were falling asleep but as though he were waking. . . .

He woke up happy, with the vanishing clouds of a happy dream in his mind. Then the rattle and rasp of the air conditioner in his room chased the last of the dream away. By the time he got up and turned his little light on—he always needed one, even in the summer, because the skies were almost always dingy dark—he could remember the dream, but he couldn't feel it any more.

His mother, Peg, worried about the way he always seemed to dream the same wishful dream, but when Rem realized that he just stopped telling her about it. He did ask her if he could please leave the air conditioner off, at least in the winter, so that he could wake up more slowly and enjoy the dream more. "I wish you could, honey," she said, "but you know Dr. Dallinger said you had to have something filter the air, because of your asthma. I'm sorry about the noise. Maybe we can get you a new one— Although I don't know how, with the payments on the cars and

the way the heat's going up. And you wouldn't believe what I spent in the supermarket yesterday, just for three little bags of groceries." Then she laughed and hugged him and said, "A noisy air-conditioner isn't so bad! What if you had to live in New York City?"

She was the one who drove him into school every day. His father had to leave an hour earlier, because of the traffic. School wasn't bad. Rem liked to learn, and he liked being with the other children. He even liked recess, at least in the winter, when the storm winds from Canada blew some of the sulfur-smelling smog away and the reek from the slow, iridescent waves of Long Island was not so strong. He didn't mind the cold. He did mind being kept inside so much of the time, when the air index was "Unsatisfactory" or "Dangerous to Health" or even, which had happened two or three times the previous summer, "Condition Red! No burning! No driving!" On days like that everybody was stuck wherever he happened to be. Everything stopped. Rem and his mother would take turns in the shower and then sit, playing cards, or talking, or just resting, waiting for the time to pass. If his father was lucky he would be doing the same thing in his office in the city. If he wasn't, he might be caught in the long unmoving snarl of cars on the freeways, waiting for permission to start again. That was how Rem's Uncle Marc had died, two years before, when he had another heart attack sitting at the wheel and got out of the car for help, and died there.

But then after a while the rain would come. It was worse than the dry heat at first, because the drops would come down as sticky black blobs that stained all the houses, dirtied the windows and killed the grass, where there was any grass. But after a while there might be a real storm, with luck even a hurricane, and then for a few days Long Island might look queerly green and fresh for a while.

What Rem liked best was the one or two evenings a week when his father got home before his bedtime. They would talk about grown-up things.

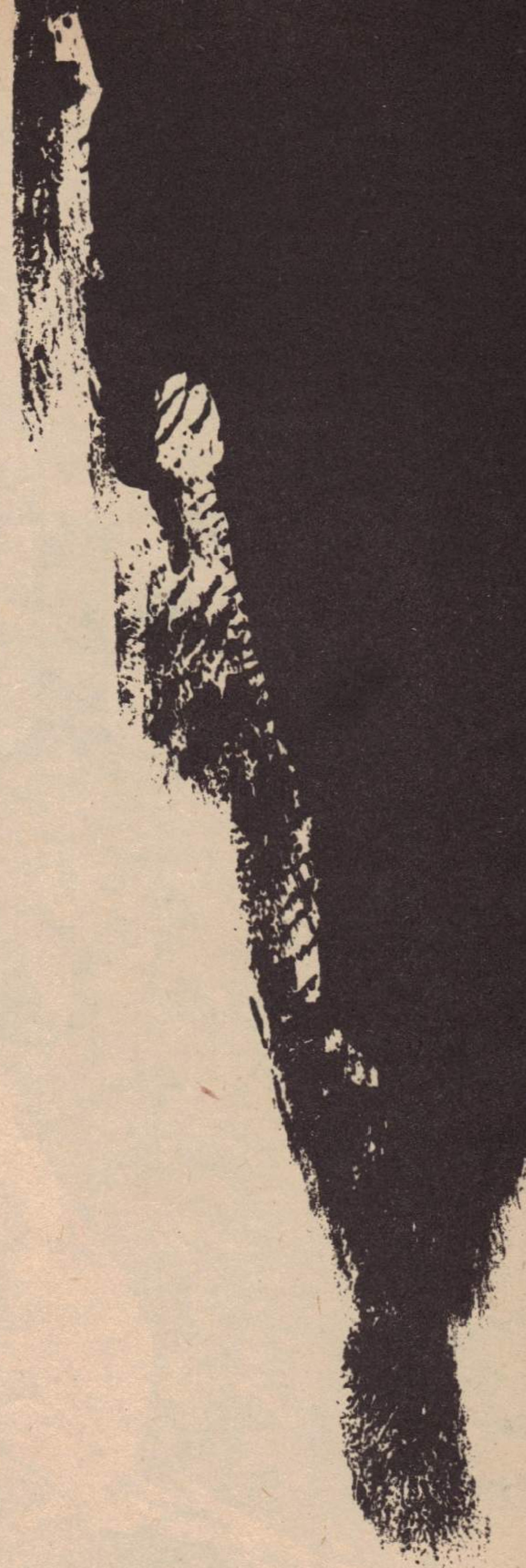
Rem's father, Burt, was very proud of him. He told his wife, "Rem's really interested in things—important things; I think he's going to be somebody the world will be glad to have when he grows up." One of the "important things" was why the Sound was dead and unhealthy. Another was why everybody drove their own cars instead of riding trains or buses,

or even working near where they lived. His father tried to answer them as well as he could. "Well, son," he said, "people *like* having their own cars. You'll see, when you grow up and get your own license. When you get behind the wheel you're on your own. You can shut out all the unpleasant things—"

"What things, Dad?"

Burt looked suddenly remorseful. "Oh, not things like *here*, Rem! You and your mother—well, I wouldn't change places with anybody in the world. But there are a lot of problems." Burt was a tax accountant for the New York State government. He shook his head. "We need so much," he said, "and it's hard to know where the money's going to come from. Let's see, what was the other question? Oh, about waste heat and sewage. Well, that's one of the problems, Rem. There's so much pollution, and it costs too much to get rid of it. I suppose that, of course, you could theoretically use the heat from the factories and power plants and so on to heat homes, or even to warm up some sort of farms—they'd have to be greenhouses, actually—so you could grow more things. But the capital cost, Rem, would be immense." He hesitated, trying to find the words to explain economics to a ten-year-old. "We just don't have the money. Maybe if we'd started a long time ago— But we didn't. You can't drive cars without freeways to drive them on do you see? I guess the government could have built piping systems and recirculation plants, but then where would the money have come from for the highways? We did the best we could. I think. We used up all the low-sulfur fuels first, and we kept on dumping sewage until it was too late to stop. And it got harder and harder to make the fertilizer to grow the food. I suppose," he said thoughtfully, "that if some people had made different decisions a century or so ago, the world would be quite a different place. Some ways, it would be pretty nice. But they didn't. And it's too late now." He smiled and squeezed Rem's shoulder. "Speaking of being late, it's about time for you to be off to bed."

So Rem would take his pills and drink his glass of soymilk and go off to sleep. He wasn't unhappy about that. He remembered the dream, and knew he would dream it again, and that was something to look forward to. It was so very pleasant, and so very real; he wasn't always sure which was the reality, and which was the dream.



Sometimes the past is a little too close for comfort... or is it the future?



FRITZ LEIBER

RIME ISLE

PART ONE

Leiber's great new novel, in which Fahrd and The Gray Mouser lead their band of sea pirates to the far northland at the behest of two beautiful women and find themselves in a strange war. Intrigue, action, and two very old gods—Rime Isle!



1950

1956

RIME ISLE

Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser supervised the mooring of *Seahawk* and *Flotsam* by bow and stern lines made fast round great wooden bollards, then sprang nimbly ashore, feeling unutterably weary, yet knowing that as captains they should not show it. They made their way to each other, embraced, then turned to face the crowd of Rime Isle men who had witnessed their dramatic arrival standing in a semicircle around the length of dock where their battered and salt-crusted ships were now moored.

Beyond the crowd stretched the houses of Salthaven port—small, stout and earth-hugging, as befitted this most northerly clime—in hues of weathered blue and green and a violet that was almost gray, except for the immediate neighborhood, which seemed rather squalid, where they were all angry reds and plague yellow.

Beyond Salthaven the low rolling land went off, gray-green with moss and heather, until it met the gray-white wall of a great glacier, and beyond that the old ice stretched until it met in turn the abrupt slopes of an active and erupting volcano, although the red glow of its lava and the black volume of its flamy smoke seemed to have diminished since they first glimpsed it from their ships.

The foremost of the crowd were all large, burly, quiet-faced men, booted, trousered, and smocked as fishers. Most of them bore quarterstaves, handling them as if they knew well how to use these formidable weapons. They curiously yet composedly eyed the twain and their ships, the Mouser's broad-beamed and somewhat lubberly trader *Flotsam* with its small Mingol crew and squad of disciplined (a wonder!) thieves, Fafhrd's trimmer galley *Seahawk* with its contingent of disciplined (if that can be imagined at all) berserkers. On the dock near the bollards where they'd made fast were Fafhrd's lieutenant Skor, the Mouser's—Pshawri—and two other crew members.

It was the quietness and composure of the crowd that puzzled and now began even to nettles the Mouser and Fafhrd. Here they'd sailed all this distance and survived almost unimaginable black hurricane-dangers during the past three



Freff

days to help save Rime Isle from a vast invasion of maddened and piratical Sea-Mingols bent on world-conquest, and there was no gladness to be seen anywhere, only stolidly appraising looks. There should be cheering and dancing and some northerly equivalent of maidens throwing flowers! True, the two steaming cauldrons of chowder borne on a shoulder-yoke by one of the fishermen seemed to betoken thoughtful welcome—but they hadn't yet been offered any!

The mouth-watering aroma of the fish-stew now reached the nostrils of the crewmen lining the sides of the two vessels in various attitudes of extreme weariness and dejection—for they were at least half as spent as their captains and had no urge to conceal it—and their eyes slowly brightened and their jaws began to work sympathetically. Behind them the sun-dancing snug harbor, so recently black-skied, was full of small ships riding at anchor, local fishing craft chiefly with the lovely lines of porpoises, but near at hand several that were clearly from afar, including a small trading galleon of the Eastern Lands and (wonder!) a Kleshite junk, and one or two modest yet unfamiliar craft that had the disquieting look of coming from seas beyond Nehwon's. (Just as there was a scatter of sailors from far-off ports in the crowd, peering here and there from between the tall Rime Islanders.)

And now the Rime Isler nearest the twain walked silently toward them, flanked a pace behind by two others. He stopped a bare yard away, but still did not speak. In fact, he still did not seem so much to be looking at them as past them at their ships and crews, while working out some abstruse reckoning in his head. All three men were quite as tall as Fafhrd and his berserkers.

Fafhrd and the Mouser retained their dignity with some difficulty. Never did to speak first when the other man was supposed to be your debtor.

Finally the other seemed to terminate his calculations and he spoke, using the Low Lankhese that is the trade jargon of the northern world.

"I am Groniger, harbor master of Salthaven. I estimate your ships will be a good week repairing and revictualing. We will feed and board your crew ashore in the traders' quarter." He gestured toward the squalid red-and-yellow buildings.

"Thank you," Fafhrd said gravely, while the Mouser echoed coolly, "Indeed, yes." Hardly an enthusiastic welcome,

but still one.

Groniger thrust out his hand, palm uppermost. "The charge," he said loudly, "will be five gold pieces for the galley, seven for the tub. Payment in advance."

Fafhrd's and the Mouser's jaws dropped. The latter could not contain his indignation, captain's dignity or no.

"But we're your sworn allies," he protested, "come here as promised, through perils manifold, to be your mercenaries and help save you from the locust-swarm invasion of the raptorial Sea-Mingols counseled and led by vilest Khahkht, the Wizard of Ice."

Groniger's eyebrows lifted. "What invasion?" he queried. "The Sea-Mingols are our friends. They buy our fish. They may be pirates to others, but never to Rime Isle ships. Khahkht is an old wives' tale, not to be credited by men of sense."

"Old wives' tale?" the Mouser exploded. "When we were but now three endless nights harried by Khahkht's monstrous galley and sank it at last on your very doorstep. His invasion came that close to success. Did you not observe the universal blackness and hell-wind when he conjured the sun out of heaven three days running?"

"We saw some dark clouds blowing up from the south," Groniger said, "under whose cover you approached Salthaven. They vanished when they touched Rime Isle—as all things superstitious are like to do. As for invasion, there were rumors of such an eruption some months back, but our council sifted 'em and found 'em idle gossip. Have any of you heard aught of a Sea-Mingol invasion since?" he asked loudly, looking from side to side at his fellow Rime Islers. They all shook their heads.

"So pay up!" he repeated, jogging his outthrust palm, while those behind him wagged their quarterstaves, firming their grips.

"Shameless ingratitude!" the Mouser rebuked, taking a moral tone as a leader of men. "What gods do you worship here on Rime Isle, to be so hardhearted?"

Groniger's answer rang out distinct and cool. "We worship no gods at all, but do our business in the world clearheadedly, no misty dreams. We leave such fancies to the so-called civilized people—decadent cultures of the hothouse south. Pay up, I say."

At that moment Fafhrd, whose height permitted him to see over the crowd, cried out, "Here are those coming who hired us, harbor master, and will give the lie to

your disclaimers."

The crowd parted respectfully to let through two slender trousered women with long knives at their belts in jeweled scabbards. The taller was clad all in blue, with like eyes, and fair hair. Her comrade was garmented in dark red, with green eyes and black hair that seemed to have gold wires braided in it. Skor and Pshawri, still stupid with fatigue, took note of them and it was impossible to mistake the message in the sea dogs' kindling eyes: Here were the northern angels come at last!

"The eminent councilwomen Afreyt and Cif," Groniger intoned. "We are honored by their presence."

They approached with queenly smiles and looks of amiable curiosity.

"Tell them, Lady Afreyt," said Fafhrd courteously to the one in blue, "how you commissioned me to bring Rime Isle twelve—" Suppressing the word "berserk," he smoothly made it, "—stout northern fighters of the fiercest temper."

"And I twelve... nimble and dexterous Lankhmar swords and slingers, sweet Lady Cif," the Mouser chimed in airily, avoiding the word "thief."

Afreyt and Cif looked at them blankly. Then their gazes became at once anxious and solicitous.

Afreyt commented, "They've been tempest-tossed, poor lads, and doubtless it has disordered their memories. Our little northern gales come as a surprise to southerners. They seem gentle. Use them well, Groniger." Looking intently at Fafhrd, she lifted her hand to adjust her hair and in lowering it hesitated a finger for a moment crosswise to her tightly shut long lips.

Cif added, "Doubtless privation has temporarily addled their wits. Their ships have seen hard use. But what a tale! I wonder who they are? Nourish them with hot soup—after they've paid, of course." And she winked at the Mouser a green dark-lashed eye on the side away from Groniger. Then the two ladies wandered on.

It is a testimony to the fundamental levelheadedness and growing self-control of the Mouser and Fafhrd (now having, as captains, to control others) that they did not expostulate at this astounding and barely-tempered rebuff, but actually each dug hand into his purse—though they did look after the two strolling females somewhat wonderingly. So they saw Skor and Pshawri, who had been dazedly following the two apparitions of

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northernly delight, now approach these houris with the clear intent of establishing some sort of polite amorous familiarity.

Afreyt struck Skor aside in no uncertain fashion, but only after leaning her face close enough to his head to hiss a word or two into his ear and grasp his wrist in a way that would have permitted her to slip a token or note into his palm. Cif treated Pshawri's advances likewise.

Groniger, pleased at the way the two captains were now dragging gold pieces from their purses, nevertheless admonished them, "And see to it that your crewmen offer no affront to our Salthaven women, nor stay one step beyond the bounds of the traders' quarter."

Paying up took the last of the Rime Isle gold that Cif had given them back at the Silver Eel in Lankhmar, while the Mouser had to piece out his seven with two Lankhmar rilks and a Sarheenmar doubloon.

Groniger's eyebrows rose as he scanned the take. "Rime Isle coinage! So you'd touched here before and knew our harbor rules and were only seeking to bargain? But what made you invent such an unbelievable story?"

Fafhrd shrugged and said shortly, "Not so. Had 'em off an Eastern trading galley in these waters," while the Mouser only laughed.

Nevertheless, a thought struck Groniger, and he looked after the two Rime Isle councilwomen speculatively as he said shortly, "Now you may feed your men."

The Mouser called toward *Flotsam*, "Ho, lads! Fetch your bowls, cups, and spoons. These most hostful Rime Islanders have provided a feast for you. Orderly now! Pshawri, attend me."

While Fafhrd commanded likewise, adding, "Forget not they're our friends. Do 'em all courtesies. A word with you, Skor." Never do to show resentment, though that "tub" still rankled with the Mouser, despite it being a very fair description of the broad-beamed, sweep-propelled *Flotsam*.

When the Mouser and Fafhrd had seen all their men eating and served a measure of grog to celebrate safe arrival, they turned to their somewhat doleful lieutenants, who with only a show of reluctance yielded up the notes they'd been slipped—as the twain had surmised—along with the words, "For your master!"

Unfolded, Afreyt's read, "Another faction controls the Rime Isle council, temporarily. You do not know me. At

dusk tomorrow seek me at the Hill of the Eight-Legged Horse," while Cif's message was, "Cold Khahkht has sown dissension in our council. We never met—play it that way. You'll find me tomorrow night at the Flame Den if you come alone."

"So she does not speak with the voice of Rime Isle after all," Fafhrd commented softly. "To what fiery female politicians have we joined our destinies?"

"Her gold was good," the Mouser answered gruffly. "And now we've two new riddles to solve."

"Flame Den and Eight-Legged Horse," Fafhrd echoed.

"Tub, he called her," the Mouser mused bitterly, his mind veering. "What godless literal-minded philosophers are we now supposed to succor in spite of themselves?"

"You're a godless man too," Fafhrd reminded him.

"Not so, there was once Mog," the Mouser protested with a touch of his old playful plaintiveness, referring to a youthful credulity, when he had briefly believed in the spider god to please a lover.

"Such questions can wait, along with the two riddles," Fafhrd decided. "Now let's curry favor with the atheist fishermen while we can."

And accompanied by the Mouser, he proceeded ceremoniously to offer Groniger white brandy fetched from *Flotsam* by old Ourph the renegade Mingol. The harbor master was prevailed upon to accept a drink, which he took in slow sips, and by way of talk of repair docks, watering, crew dormitories ashore, and the price of salt fish, the conversation became somewhat more general. With difficulty Fafhrd and the Mouser won license to venture outside the traders' quarter, but only by day, and not their men. Groniger refused a second drink.

Inside Its icy sphere, which would have cramped a taller being, Khahkht roused, muttering, "Rime Isle's new gods are treacherous—betray and rebetray—yet stronger than I guessed."

It began to study the dark map of the world of Nehwon depicted on the sphere's interior. Its attention moved to the northern tongue of the Outer Sea, where

a long peninsula of the Western Continent reached toward the Cold Waste, with Rime Isle midway between. Leaning its spidery face close to the tip of that peninsula, it made out on the northern side tiny specks in the dark blue waters.

"The armada of the Widdershins Sea-Mingols invests Sayend," It chuckled, referring to the easternmost city of the ancient Empire of Eevamareensee. "To work!"

It wove its thickly black-bristled hands incantingly above the gathered specks and droned, "Hearken to me, slaves of death. Hear my word and feel my breath. Every least instruction learn. First of all, Sayend must burn! Against Nehwon your horde be hurled, next Rime Isle and then the world." One spider-hand drifted sideways toward the small green island in ocean's midst. "Round Rime Isle let fishes swarm, provisioning my Mingol storm." The hand drifted back and the passes became swifter. "Blackness seize on Mingol mind, bend it 'gainst all humankind. Madness redden Mingol ire, out of cold come death by fire!"

It blew strongly as if on cold ashes and a tiny spot on the peninsula tip glowed dark red like an uncovered ember.

"By will of Khahkht these weirds be locked!" It grated, sealing the incantment.

The ships of the Widdershins Sea-Mingols rode at anchor in Sayend harbor, packed close together as fish in a barrel, and as silvery white. Their sails were furled. Their midships decks, abutting abeam, made a rude roadway from the precipitous shore to the flagship, where Edumir, their chief paramount, sat enthroned on the poop, quaffing the mushroom wine of Quarmall that fosters visions. Cold light from the full moon south in the wintry sky revealed the narrow horse-cage that was the forecastle of each ship and picked out the mad eyes and rawboned head of the ship's horse, a gaunt Steppe-stallion, thrust forward through the wide-set irregular bars and all confronting the east.

The taken town, its sea gate thrown wide, was dark. Before its walls and in its sea street its small scatter of defenders sprawled as they'd fallen, soaked in their own blood and scurried over by the looting Sea-Mingols, who did not, however, bother the chief doors behind which the remaining inhabitants had locked and barred themselves. They'd

already captured the five maidens ritual called for and dispatched them to the flagship, and now they sought oil of whale, porpoise, and scaly fish. Puzzlingly, they did not bring most of this treasure trove down to their ships, but wasted it, breaking the casks with axes and smashing the jars, gushing the precious stuff over doors and wooden walls and down the cobbled street.

The lofty poop of the great flagship was dark as the town in the pouring moonlight. Beside Edumir, his witch doctor stood above a brazier of tinder, holding aloft a flint and a horseshoe in either hand, his eyes wild as those of the ship-horses. Next to him crouched a wiry-thewed warrior naked to the waist, bearing the Mingol bow of melded horn that is Nehwon's most feared, and five long arrows winged with oily rags. While to the other side was an axman with five casks of the captured oil.

On the next level below, the five Sayend maidens cowered wide-eyed and silent, their pallor set off by their long dark braided hair, each in the close charge of two grim she-Mingols who flashed naked knives.

While on the main deck below that, there were ranked five young Mingol horsemen, chosen for this honor because of proven courage, each mounted on an iron-disciplined Steppe-mare, whose hoofs struck random low drum-notes from the hollow deck.

Edumir cast his wine cup into the sea and very deliberately turned his long-jawed, impassive face toward his witch doctor and nodded once. The latter brought down horseshoe and flint, clashing them just above the brazier, and then nurtured the sparks so engendered until the tinder was all aflame.

The bowman laid his five arrows across the brazier and then, as they came alight, plucked them out and sent them winging successively toward Sayend with such miraculous swiftness that the fifth was painting its narrow orange curve upon the midnight air before the first had struck.

They lodged each in wood and with a preternatural rapidity the oil-drenched town flared up like a single torch, and the muffled, despairing cries of its trapped inhabitants rose like those of Hell's prisoners.

Meanwhile the she-Mingols guarding her had slashed the garments from the first maiden, their knives moving like streaks of silver fire, and thrust her naked

toward the first horseman, who seized her by her dark braids and swung her across his saddle, clasping her slim, naked back to his leather-cuirassed chest. Simultaneously the axman struck in the head of the first cask and upended it above horse, rider, and maiden, drenching them all with gleaming oil. Then the rider twitched reins and dug in his spurs and set his mare galloping across the close-moored decks toward the flaming town. As the maiden became aware of the destination of the wild ride, she began to scream, and her screams rose higher and higher, accompanied by the rhythmic, growling shouts of the rider and the drumbeat of the mare's hoofs.

All these actions were repeated once, twice, thrice, quare—the third horse slipped sideways in the oil, stumbled, recovered—so that the fifth rider was away before the first had reached his goal. The mares had been schooled from colthood to face and o'erlap walls of flame. The riders had drunk deep of the same mushroom wine as Edumir. The maidens had their screams.

One by one they were briefly silhouetted against the red gateway, then joined with it. Five times the flame of Sayend rose higher still, redly illuminating the small bay and the packed ship and the staring Mingol faces and glazed Mingol eyes, and Sayend expired in one unending scream and shout of agony.

When it was done, Edumir rose up tall in his fur robes and cried in trumpet voice, "East away now. Over ocean. To Rime Isle!"

Next day the Mouser and Fafhrd got their ships pumped out, warped to the docks assigned them, and work began on them early. Their men, refreshed by a long night's sleep ashore, set to work at repairs after a little initial grumbling, the Mouser's thieves under the direction of his chief lieutenant Pshawri and small Mingol crew. Presently there was the muffled thud of mallets driving in tow, and the stench of tar, as the loosened seams of *Flotsam* were caulked from within, while from the deck of *Seahawk* came the brighter music of hammers and saws, as Fafhrd's vikings mended upper works damaged by the icy projectiles of Khakhht's frost monstreme. Others reaved new rigging where needed and replaced frayed stays.

The traders' quarter, where they'd been berthed, duplicated in small the

sailors' quarter of any Nehwon port, its three taverns, two brothels, several stores and shrines staffed and loosely administered by a small permanent population of ill-assorted foreigners, their unofficial mayor a close-mouthed, scared captain named Bomar, from the Eight Cities, and their chief banker a dour black Keshite. It was borne in on Fafhrd and the Mouser that one of these fisherfolks' chief concerns, and that of the traders too, was to keep Rime Isle a valuable secret from the rest of Nehwon. Or else they had caught the habit of impassivity from their fisher-hosts, who tolerated them, profited from them, and seldom omitted to enforce a bluff discipline. The foreign population had heard nothing of a Sea-Mingol eruption, either, or so they claimed.

The Rime Islanders seemed to live up to first impressions: a large-bodied, sober-clad, quiet, supremely practical and supremely confident people, without eccentricities or crotchets or even superstitions, who drank little and lived by the rule of "Mind your own business." They played chess a good deal in their spare time and practice with their quarter-staves, but otherwise they appeared to take little notice of each other and none at all of foreigners, though their eyes were not sleepy.

And today they had become even more inaccessible, ever since an early-sailing fishing boat had returned almost immediately to harbor with news that had sent the entire fleet of them hurrying out. And when the first of these came creaming back soon after noon with hold full of new-caught fish, swiftly salted them down (there was abundance of salt—the great eastern cliff, which no longer ran with hot volcanic waters), and put out to sea again, clapping on all sails, it became apparent that there must be a prodigious run of food fish just outside the harbor mouth—and the thrifty fishers determined to take full advantage of it. Even Groniger was seen to captain a boat out.

Individually busy with their supervising and various errands (since only they could go outside the traders' quarter), the Mouser and Fafhrd met each other by a stretch of seawall north of the docks and paused to exchange news and catch a breather.

"I've found the Flame Den," the former said. "At least I think I have. It's an inner room in the Salt Herring tavern. The Ilthmart owner admitted he some-

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times rents it out of a night—that is, if I interpreted his wink aright.”

Fafhrd nodded and said, “I just now walked to the north edge of town and asked a granddad if he ever heard of the Hill of the Eight-Legged Horse. He gave a damned unpleasant sort of laugh and pointed across the moor. The air was very clear (you’ve noticed the volcano’s ceased to smoke? I wonder that the Islers take so little note of it), and when I’d located the one heathered hill of many that was his finger’s target (about a league northwest), I made out what looked like a gallows atop it.”

The Mouser grunted feelingfully at that grim disclosure and rested his elbow on the seawall, surveying the ships left in the harbor, “foreigners” all. After a while he said softly, “There’s all manner of slightly strange things here in Salthaven, I trow. Things slightly off-key. That Ool Plerms sailing-dory now—saw you ever one with so low a prow at Ool Plerms? Or a cap so oddly-visored as that of the sailor we saw come off the Gnampf Nor cutter? Or that silver coin with an owl on it Groniger gave me in change for my doubloon? It’s as if Rime Isle were on the edge of other worlds with other ships and other men and other gods—a sort of rim. . . .”

Gazing out likewise, Fafhrd nodded slowly and started to speak when there came angry voices from the direction of the docks, followed by a full-throated bellow.

“That’s Skullik, I’ll be bound!” Fafhrd averred. “Got into what sort of idiot trouble, the gods know.” And without further word he raced off.

“Likely just broken bounds and got a drubbing,” the Mouser called out, trotting after. “Mikkidu got a touch of the quarterstaff this morn for trying to pick an Isler’s pouch—and serve him right! I could not have whacked him more shrewdly myself.”

That evening Fafhrd strode north from Salthaven toward Gallows Hill (it was an honest name), resolutely not looking back at the town. The sun, set in the far southwest short while ago, gave a soft violet tone to the clear sky and the pale knee-high heather through which he trod and even the black slopes of the volcano Darkfire where yesterday’s lava had cooled. A chill breeze, barely perceptible, came from the glacier ahead.

Nature was hushed. There was a feeling of immensity.

Gradually the cares of the day dropped away and his thoughts turned to the days of his youth, spent in similar clime—to Cold Corner with its tented slopes and great pines, its snow serpents and wolves, its witchwomen and ghosts. He remembered Nalgron his father and his mother Mor and even Mara, his first love. Nalgron had been an enemy of the gods, somewhat like these Rime Isle men (he was called the Legend Breaker) but more adventurous—he had been a great mountain climber, and in climbing one named White Fang had got his death. Fafhrd remembered an evening when his father had walked with him to the lip of Cold Canyon and named to him the stars as they winked on in a sky similarly violet.

A small sound close by, perhaps that of a lemming moving off through the heather, broke his reverie. He was already mounting the gentle slope of the hill he sought. After a moment he continued to the top, stepping softly and keeping his distance from the gibbet and the area that lay immediately beneath its beam. He had a feeling of something uncanny close at hand and he scanned around in the silence.

On the northern slope of the hill there was a thick grove of gorse more than man-high, or bower rather, since there was a narrow avenue leading in, a door of shadows. The feeling of an uncanny presence deepened and he mastered a shiver.

As his eyes came away from the gorse, he saw Afreyt standing just uphill and to one side of the grove and looking at him steadily without greeting. The darkening violet of the sky gave its tone to her blue garb. For some reason he did not call out to her and now she lifted her narrow hand crosswise to her lips, enjoining silence. Then she looked toward the grove.

Slowly emerging from the shadow door were three slender girls barely past childhood. They seemed to be leading and looking up at someone Fafhrd could not make out at first. He blinked twice, widening his eyes, and saw it was the figure of a tall, pale-bearded man wearing a wide-brimmed hat that shadowed his eyes, and either very old or else enfeebled by sickness, for he took halting steps and though his back was straight he rested his hands heavily on the shoulders of two of the girls.

And then Fafhrd felt an icy chill, for the suspicion came to him that this was

Nalgron, whose ghost he had not seen since he had left Cold Corner. And either the figure’s skin, beard and robe were alike strangely mottled, or else he was seeing the pale needle-clumps of the gorse through them.

But if it were a ghost, Nalgron’s or another’s, the girls showed no fear of it, rather a dutiful tenderness, and their shoulders bowed under its hands as they supported it along, as if its weight were real.

They slowly mounted the short distance to the hilltop, Afreyt silently following a few paces behind, until the figure stood directly beneath the end of the gallows’s beam.

There the old man or ghost seemed to gain strength (and perhaps greater substantiality too) for he took his hands from the girls’ shoulders and they retreated a little toward Afreyt, still looking up at him, and he lifted his face toward the sky, and Fafhrd saw that although he was a gaunt man at the end of middle age with strong and noble features not unlike Nalgron’s, he had thinner lips, their ends downturned like a knowing schoolmaster’s, and he wore a patch on his left eye.

He scanned around uncertainly, o’erpassing Fafhrd, who stood motionless and afraid, and then the old man turned north and lifted an arm in that direction and said in a hoarse voice that was like the sougling of the wind in thick branches, “The Widder-Mingol fleet comes on from the west. Two raiders harry ahead, make for Cold Harbor.” Then he rapidly turned back his head through what seemed an impossibly great angle, as though his neck were broken yet somehow still serviceable, so that he looked straight at Fafhrd with his single eye, and said, “You must destroy them!”

Then he seemed to lose interest, and weakness seized him again, or perhaps a sort of sensuous languor after task completed, for he stepped a little more swiftly as he returned toward the bower, and when the girls came in around him, his resting hands seemed to fondle their young necks lasciviously as well as take support from their slim shoulders until the shadow door, darker now, swallowed them.

Fafhrd was so struck with this circumstance, despite his fear, that when Afreyt now came stepping toward him saying in a low but businesslike voice, “Didst mark that? Cold Harbor is Rime Isle’s other town, but far smaller, easy

prey for even a single Mingol ship that takes it by surprise. It's on the north coast, a day's journey away, ice-locked save for these summer months. You must—" his interrupting reply was: "Think you the girls'll be safe with him?"

She broke off, then answered shortly, "As with any man. Or male ghost. Or god."

At that last word, Fafhrd looked at her sharply. She nodded and continued, "They'll feed him and give him drink and bed him down. Doubtless he'll play with their breasts a little and then sleep. He's an old god and far from home, I think, and wearies easily, which is perhaps a blessing. In any case, they serve Rime Isle too and must run risks."

Fafhrd considered that and then, clearing his throat, said, "Your pardon, Lady Afreyt, but your Rime Isle men, judging not only from Groniger but from others I've met, some of them councilmen, do not believe in any gods at all."

She frowned. "That's true enough. The old gods deserted Rime Isle long years ago and our folk have had to learn to fend for themselves in the cruel world—in this clime merciless. It's bred hardheadedness."

"Yet," Fafhrd said, recalling something, "my gray friend judged Rime Isle to be a sort of rim-spot, where one might meet all manner of strange ships and men and gods from very far places."

"That's true also," she said hurriedly. "And perhaps it's favored the same hardheadedness: how, where there are so many ghosts about, to take account only of what the hand can firmly grasp and can be weighed in scales. Money and fish. It's one way to go. But Cif and I have gone another—where phantoms throng, to learn to pick the useful and trustworthy ones from the flibbertigibbets and flimflammers—which is well for Rime Isle. For these two gods we've found—"

"Two gods?" Fafhrd questioned, raising his eyebrows. "Cif found one too? Or is another in the bower?"

"It's a long story," she said impatiently. "Much too long to tell now, when dire events press upon us thick and fast. We must be practical. Cold Harbor's in dismal peril and—"

"Again your pardon, Lady Afreyt," Fafhrd broke in, raising his voice a little. "But your mention of practicality reminds me of another matter upon which you and Cif appear to differ most sharply with your fellow councilmen. They know of no Mingol invasion, they say, and

certainly nothing of you and Cif hiring us to help repel it—and you've asked us in your notes to keep that secret. Now, I've brought you the twelve berserkers you wanted—"

"I know, I know," she said sharply, "and I'm pleased. But you were paid for that—and shall get further pay in Rime Isle gold as services are rendered. As for the council, the wizardries of Khahkht have lulled their suspicions—I doubt not that today's fish-run is his work, tempting their cupidity."

"And my comrade and I have suffered from his wizardries too, I trow," Fafhrd said. "Nevertheless, you told us at the Silver Eel in Lankmar that you spoke with the voice of Rime Isle, and now it appears that you speak only for Cif and yourself in a council of—what is it, twelve?"

"Did you expect your task to be all easy sailing?" she flared at him. "Art unacquainted with set backs and adverse gales in quests? Moreover, we *do* speak with the voice of Rime Isle, for Cif and I are the only councilpersons who have the old glory of Rime Isle at heart—and we are both full council members, I assure you, only-daughters inheriting house, farms, and council membership from fathers after (in Cif's case) sons died. We played together as children in these hills, she and I, reviving Rime Isle's greatness in our games. Or sometimes we'd be pirate queens and rape the Isle. But chiefly we'd imagine ourselves seizing power in the council, forcibly putting down all the other members—"

"So much violence in little girls?" Fafhrd couldn't help putting in. "I think of little girls as gathering flowers and weaving garlands whilst fancying themselves little wives and mothers—"

"—and put them all to the sword and cut their wives' throats!" Afreyt finished. "Oh, we gathered flowers too, sometimes."

Fafhrd chuckled, then his voice grew grave. "And so you've inherited full council membership—Groniger always mentions you with respect, though I think he has suspicions of something between us—and now you've somehow discovered a stray old god or two whom you think you can trust not to betray you, or delude you with senile ravings, and he's told you of a great two-pronged Mingol invasion of Rime Isle preparatory to world conquest, and on the strength of that you went to Lankmar and hired the Mouser and me to be your mercenary captains,

using your own fortunes for the purpose, I fancy—"

"Cif is the council treasurer," she assured him with a meaningful crook of her lips. "She's very good at figures and accounts—as I am with the pen and words, the council's secretary."

"And yet you trust this god," Fafhrd pressed on, "this old god who loves gallows and seems to draw strength from them. Myself, I'm very suspicious of all old men and gods. In my experience they're full of lechery and avarice—and have a long lifetime's experience of evil to draw on in their twisty machinations."

"Agreed," Afreyt said. "But when all's said and done, a god's a god. Whatever nasty itches his old heart may have, whatever wicked thoughts of death and doom, he must first be true to his god's nature: which is, to hear what we say and hold us to it, to speak truth to man about what's going on in distant places, and to prophesy honestly—though he may try to trick us with words if we don't listen to him very carefully."

"That does agree with my experience of the breed," Fafhrd admitted. "Tell me, why is this called the Hill of the Eight-Legged Horse?"

Without a blink at the change of subject, Afreyt replied, "Because it takes four men to carry a coffin or the laid-out corpse of one who's been hanged—or died any other way. Four men—eight legs. You might have guessed."

"And what is this god's name?"

Afreyt said: "Odin."

Fafhrd had the strangest feeling at the gong-beat sound of that simple name—as if he were on the verge of recalling memories of another lifetime. Also, it had something of the tone of the gibberish spoken by Karl Treuherz, that strange other-worlder who had briefly come into the lives of Fafhrd and the Mouser astride the neck of a two-headed sea serpent whilst they were in the midst of their great adventure-war with the sapient rats of Lankmar Below-Ground. Only a name—yet there was the feeling of walls between worlds disturbed.

At the same time he was looking into Afreyt's wide eyes and noting that the irises were violet, rather than blue as they had seemed in the yellow torchlight of the Eel—and then wondering how he could see any violet at all in anything when that tone had some time ago faded entirely from the sky, which was now full night except that the moon a day past full had just now lifted above the eastern high-

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land.

From beyond Afreyt a light voice called tranquilly, attuned to the night, "The god sleeps."

One of the girls was standing before the mouth of the bower, a slim white shape in the moonlight, clad only in simple frock that was hardly more than a shift and left one shoulder bare. Fafhrd marveled that she was not shivering in the chill night air. Her two companions were dimmer shapes behind her.

"Did he give any trouble, Mara?" Afreyt called. (Fafhrd felt a strange feeling at that name, too.)

"Nothing new," the girl responded.

Afreyt said, "Well, put on your boots and hooded cloak—May and Gale, you also—and follow me and the foreign gentleman, out of earshot, to Salthaven. You'll be able to visit the god at dawn, May, to bring him milk?"

"I will."

"Your children?" Fafhrd asked in a whisper.

Afreyt shook her head. "Cousins. Meanwhile," she said in a voice that was likewise low, but businesslike, "you and I will discuss your instant expedition with the berserks to Cold Harbor."

Fafhrd nodded, although his eyebrows rose a little. There was a fugitive movement in the air overhead and he found himself thinking of his and the Mouser's one-time loves, the invisible mountain-princesses Hirriwi and Keyaira, and of their night-riding brother, Prince Faroomfar.

The Gray Mouser saw his men fed and bedded down for the night in their dormitory ashore, not without some fatherly admonitions as to the desirability of prudent behavior in the home port of one's employers. He briefly discussed the morrow's work with Ourph and Pshawri. Then, with a final enigmatic scowl all around, he threw his cloak over his left shoulder, withdrew into the chilly evening, and strolled toward the Salt Herring.

Although he and Fafhrd had had a long refreshing sleep aboard the *Flotsam* (declining the shore quarters Groniger had offered them, though accepting for their men), it had been a long, exactly busy, and so presumably tiring day—yet now, somewhat to his surprise, he felt new life stirring in him. But this new life invading him did not concern itself with his and Fafhrd's many current problems

and sage plans for future contingencies, but rather with a sense of just how preposterous it was that for the past three moons he should have been solemnly playing at being a captain of men, fire-breathing disciplinarian, prodigious navigator, and the outlandishly heroic rest of it. He, a thief, captaining thieves, drilling them into sailorly and warlike skills that would be of no use to them whatever when they went back to their old professions—ridiculous! All because a small woman with golden glints in her dark hair and in her green eyes had set him an unheard-of task. Really, most droll.

Moonlight striking almost horizontally left the narrow street in shadow but revealed the cross-set beams above the Salt Herring's door. Where did they get so much wood on an island so far north? That question at least was answered for him when he pressed on inside. The tavern was built of the gray beams and planks of wrecked or dismantled ships—one wall still had a whaleback curve and he noted in another the borings and embedded shells of sea creatures.

A slow eyesweep around showed a half dozen oddly sorted mariners quietly drinking and two youngish Islers even more quietly playing chess with chunky stone pieces. He recalled having seen this morning with Groniger the one playing the black.

Without a word he marched toward the inner room, the low doorway to which was now half occupied by a brawny and warty old hag, sitting bowed over on a low stool, who looked the witch-mother of all unnatural giants and other monsters.

His Ilthmart host came up beside him, wiping his hands on the towel that was his apron and saying softly, "Flame Den's taken for tonight—a private party. You'd only be courting trouble with Mother Grum. What's your pleasure?"

The Mouser gave him a hard, silent look and marched on. Mother Grum glowered at him from under tangled brows. He glowered back. The Ilthmart shrugged.

Mother Grum moved back from her stool, bowing him into the inner room. He briefly turned his head, favoring the Ilthmart with a cold superior smile as he moved after her. One of the Islers, lifting a black rook to move it, swung his eyes sidewise to observe, though his head remained motionless and bent over the board as if in deepest thought.

The inner room had a small fire in it, at any rate, to provide movement to entertain the eye. The large hearth was in the center of the room, a stone slab set almost waist high. A great copper flue (the Mouser wondered what ship's bottom it had helped cover) came down to within a yard of it from out of the low ceiling, and into this flue the scant smoke twistingly flowed. Elsewhere in the room were a few small, scarred tables, chairs for them, and another doorway.

Sidewise together on the edge of the hearth sat two women who looked personable, but used by life. The Mouser had seen one of *them* earlier in the day (the late afternoon) and judged her a whore. Their somewhat provocative attire now, and the red stockings of one, were consonant with this theory.

The Mouser went to a table a quarter-way around the fire from them, cast his cape over one chair and sat down in another, which commanded both doorways. He knit his fingers together and studied the flames impassively.

Mother Grum returned to her stool in the doorway, presenting her back to all three of them.

One of the two whorish-looking women stared into the fire and from time to time fed it with driftwood that sang and sometimes tinged the flames with green and blue and with thorny black twigs that spat and crackled and burned hot orange. The other wove cat's cradles between the spread fingers of her out-held hands on a long loop of black twine. Now and then the Mouser looked aside from the fire at her severe angular creations.

Neither of the women took notice of the Mouser, but after a while the one feeding the fire stood up, brought a wine jar and two small tankards to his table, poured into one, and stood regarding him.

He took up the tankard, tasted a small mouthful, swallowed it, set down the tankard, and nodded curtly without looking at her.

She went back to her former occupation. Thereafter the Mouser took an occasional swallow of wine while studying and listening to the flames. What with their combination of crackling and singing, they were really quite vocal in that rather small, silent room—resembling an eager, rapid, youthful voice, by turns merry and malicious. Sometimes the Mouser could have sworn he heard words and phrases.

While in the flames, continually

renewed, he began to see faces, or rather one face which changed expression a good deal—a youthfully handsome face with very mobile lips, sometimes open and amiable, sometimes convulsed by hatreds and envies (the flames shone green a while), sometimes almost impossibly distorted, like a face seen through hot air above a very hot fire. Indeed once or twice he had the fancy that it was the face of an actual person sitting on the opposite side of the fire from him, sometimes half rising to regard him through the flames, sometimes crouching back. He was almost tempted to get up and walk around the fire to check on that, but not quite.

The strangest thing about the face was that it seemed familiar to the Mouser, though he could not place it. He gave up racking his brains over that and settled back, listening more closely to the flame-voice and trying to attune its fancied words to the movements of the flame-face's lip.

Mother Grum got up again and moved back, bowing. There entered without stooping a lady whose russet cloak was drawn across the lower half of her face, but the Mouser recognized the gold-shot green eyes and he stood up. Cif nodded to Mother Grum and the two harlots, walked to the Mouser's table, cast her cloak atop his, and sat down in the third chair. He poured for her, refilled his own tankard, and sat down also. They drank. She studied him for some time.

Then, "You've seen the face in the fire and heard its voice?" she asked.

His eyes widened and he nodded, watching her intently now.

"But have you guessed why it seems familiar?"

He shook his head rapidly, sitting forward, his expression a most curious and expectant frown.

"It resembles you," she said flatly.

His eyebrows went up and his jaw dropped, just a little. You know, that was true! It did remind him of himself—only when he was younger, quite a bit younger. Or as he saw himself in mirror these days only when in a most self-infatuated and vain mood, so that he saw himself as unmarked by age.

"But do you know why?" she asked him, herself intent now.

He shook his head.

She relaxed. "Neither do I," she said. "I thought you might know. I marked it when I first saw you in the Eel, but as to why—it is a mystery within mysteries,

beyond our present ken."

"I find Rime Isle a nest of mysteries," he said meaningfully, "not the least your disavowal of myself and Fafhrd."

She nodded, sat up straighter, and said, "So now I think it's high time I told you why Afreyt and I are so sure of a Mingol invasion of Rime Isle while the rest of the council disbelieves it altogether. Don't you?"

He nodded emphatically, smiling.

"Almost a year ago to the day," she said, "Afreyt and I were walking alone upon the moor north of town, as has been our habit since childhood. We were lamenting Rime Isle's lost glories and lost (or man-renounced) gods and wishing for their return, so that the Isle might have surer guidance and foreknowledge of perils. It was a day of changeable winds and weather, the end of spring, not quite yet summer, all the air alive, now bright, now gloomed-over, as clouds raced past the sun. We had just topped a gentle rise when we came upon the form of a youth sprawled on his back in the heather with eyes closed and head thrown back, looking as if he were dying or in the last stages of exhaustion—as though he had been cast ashore by the last great wave of some unimaginably great storm on high.

"He wore a simple tunic of homespun, very worn, and the plainest sandals, worn thin, with frayed thongs, and a very old belt dimly pricked out with monsters, yet from first sight I was almost certain that he was a god.

"I knew it in three ways. From his insubstantiality—though he was there to the touch, I could almost see the crushed heather through his pale flesh. From his supernal beauty—it was... the flame-face, though tranquil-featured, almost as if in death. And from the adoration I felt swelling in my heart.

"I also knew it from the way Afreyt acted, kneeling at once like myself beside him across from me—though there was something unnatural in her behavior, betokening an amazing development when we understood it aright, which we did not then. (More of that later.)

"You know how they say a god dies when his believers utterly fail him? Well, it was as if this one's last worshiper were dying in Nehwon. Or as if—this is closer to it—all his worshipers had died in his own proper world and he whirled out into the wild spaces between the worlds, to sink or swim, survive or perish according to the reception he got in whatever new world whereon chance cast him ashore. I

think it's within the power of gods to travel between the worlds, don't you?—both involuntarily and also by their own design. And who knows what unpredictable tempests they might encounter in dark mid-journey?

"But I was not wasting time in speculations on that day of miracles a year ago. No, I was chafing his wrists and chest, pressing my warm cheek against his cold one, prizing open his lips with my tongue (his jaw was slack) and with my open lips clamped upon his (and his nostrils clipped between my finger and thumb) sending my fresh, new-drawn breaths deep into his lungs, the meanwhile fervently praying to him in my mind, though I know they say the gods hear only our words, no thoughts. A stranger, happening upon us, might have judged us in the second or third act of lovemaking, I the more feverish seeking to rekindle his ardor.

"Meanwhile Afreyt (again here's that unnatural thing I mentioned) seemed to be as busy as I across from me—and yet somehow I was doing all the work. The explanation of that came somewhat later.

"My god showed signs of life. His eyelids quivered, I felt his chest stir, while his lips began to return my kisses.

"I uncapped my silver flask and dribbled brandy between his lips, alternating the drops with further kisses and words of comfort and endearment.

"At last he opened his eyes (brown shot with gold, like yours) and with my help raised up his head, meanwhile muttering words in a strange tongue. I answered in what languages I know, but he only frowned, shaking his head. That's how I knew he was not a Nehwon god—it's natural, don't you think, that a god, all-knowing in his own world, would be at a loss at first, plunged into another? He'd have to take it in.

"Finally he smiled and lifted his hand to my bosom, looking at me questioningly. I spoke my name. He nodded and shaped his lips, repeated it. Then he touched his own chest and spoke the name 'Loki.'"

At that word the Mouser knew feelings and thoughts similar to those of Fafhrd hearing "Odin"—of other lives and worlds, and of Karl Treuherz's tongue and his little Lankmarese-German, German-Lankmarese dictionary that he'd given Fafhrd. At the same moment, though for that moment only, he saw the fire-face so like his own in the flames, seeming to wink at him. He

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frowned wonderingly.

Cif continued, "Thereafter I fed him crumbs of meat from my script, which he accepted from my fingers, eating sparingly and sipping more brandy, the whiles I taught him words, pointing to this and that. That day Darkfire was smoking thick and showing flames, which interested him mightily when I named it. So I took flint and iron from my script and struck them together, naming 'fire'. He was delighted, seeming to gather strength from the sparks and smouldering straws and the very word. He'd stroke the little flames without seeming to take hurt. That frightened me.

"So passed the day—I utterly lost in him, unaware of all else, save what struck his fancy moment by moment. He was a wondrously apt scholar. I named objects both in our Rime tongue and Low Lankhmarese, thinking it'd be useful to him as he got his vision for lands beyond the Isle.

"Evening drew in. I helped the god to his feet. The wan light washing over him seemed to dissolve a little his pale flesh.

"I indicated Salthaven, that we should walk there. He assented eagerly (I think he was attracted by its evening smokes, being drawn to fire, his trumps) and we set out, he leaning on me lightly.

"And now the mystery of Afreyt was made clear. She would by no means go with us! And then I saw, though only very dimly, the figure *she* had been succoring, tending and teaching all day long, as I had Loki—the figure of a frail old man (god, rather), bearded and one-eyed, who'd been lying close alongside Loki at the first, and I empowered to see only the one and she the other!"

"A most marvelous circumstance indeed," the Mouser commented. "Perhaps like drew to like and so revealed itself. Say, did the other god by any chance resemble Fafhrd?—but for being one-eyed, of course."

She nodded eagerly. "An older Fafhrd, as 'twere his father. Afreyt marked it. Oh, you must know something of this mystery?"

The Mouser shook his head, "Just guessing," and asked, "What was *his* name—the older god's?"

She told him.

"Well, what happened next?"

"We parted company. I walked the god Loki to Salthaven, he leaning on my arm. He was still most delicate. It seems one worshiper is barely enough at best to keep a god alive and visible, no matter



how active his mind—for by now he was pointing out things to me (and indicating actions and states) and naming them in Rimic, Low Lankhmarese—and High as well!—before I named them, sure indication of his god's intellect.

"At the same time he was, despite his weakness, beginning to give me indica-

tions of a growing interest in me (I mean, my person) and I was fast losing all doubts as to how I'd be expected to entertain him when I got him home. Now, I was very happy to have got, hopefully, a new god for Rime Isle. And I must needs adore him, if only to keep him alive. But as for making him free of my bed, I had a



certain reluctance, no matter how ghostly-insubstantial his flesh turned out to be in closest contact (and if it stayed that way)!

"Oh, I suppose I'd have submitted if it had come to that; still, there's something about sleeping with a god—a great honor, to be sure, but (to name only one

thing) one surely couldn't expect faithfulness (if one wanted that)—certainly not from the whimsical, merry and mischievous god this Loki was showing himself to be! Besides, I wanted to be able to weigh clearheadedly the predictions and warnings for Rime Isle I hoped to get from him—not with a mind dreamy with

lovmaking and swayed by all the little fancies and fears that come with full infatuation.

"As things fell out, I never had to make the decision. Passing this tavern, he was attracted by a flickering red glow and slipped inside without attracting notice (he was still invisible to all but me). I

followed (that got me a look or two, I being a respectable councilwoman) and pressed on after him as he followed the pulsing fire-glow into this inner room, where a great bawdy party was going on and the hearth was ablaze. Before my eyes he melted into the flames and joined with them!

"The revelers were somewhat taken aback by my intrusion, but after looking them over with a smile I merely turned and went out, waving my hand at them and saying, "Enjoy!"—that was for Loki too. I'd guessed he'd got where he wanted to be."

And she waved now at the dancing flames, then turned back to the Mouser with a smile. He smiled back, shaking his head in wonder.

She continued, "So I went home, well content, but not before I'd reserved the Flame Den (as I then learned this place is called) for the following night.

"Next day I hired two harlots for the evening (so there'd be entertainment for Loki) and Mother Grum to be our doorwoman and ensure our privacy.

"That night went as I'd guessed it would. Loki had indeed taken up permanent residence in the fire here and after a while I was able to talk with him and get some answers to questions, though nothing of profit to Rime Isle as yet. I made arrangements with the Ilthmart for the Flame Den to be reserved one night each week, and like bargains with Hilsa and Rill to come on those nights and entertain the god and keep him happy. Hilsa, has the god been with you tonight?" she called to the woman feeding the fire, the one with red stockings.

"Twice," that one replied matter-of-factly in a husky voice. "Slipped from the fire invisibly and back again. He's content."

"Your pardon, Lady Cif," the Mouser interposed, "but how do these professional women find such close commerce with an invisible god to be? What's it like? I'm curious."

Cif looked toward them where they sat by the fire.

"Like having a mouse up your skirt," Hilsa replied with a short chuckle, swinging a red leg.

"Or a toad," her companion amended. "Although he dwells in the flames, his person is cold." Rill had laid aside her cat's cradle and joined her hands, fingers interweaving, to make shadow-faces on the wall, of prick-eared gigantic werewolves, great sea serpents, dragons, and long-nosed, long-chinned witches. "He likes these hobgoblins," she commented.

The Mouser nodded thoughtfully, watching them for a while, and then back to the fire.

Cif continued, "Soon the god, I could tell, was beginning to get the feel of Nehwon, fitting his mind to her, stretching it out to her farthest bounds, and his oracles became more to the point. Meantime Afreyt, with whom I conferred daily, was caring for old Odin out on the moor in much the same way (though using girls to comfort and appease him 'stead of full-grown women, he being an older god), eliciting prophecies of import.

"Loki it was who first warned us that the Mingols were on the move, mustering horse-ships against Rime Isle, mounting under Khahkht's urgings toward a grand climacteric of madness and rapine. Afreyt put independent question to Odin and he confirmed it—they were together in the tale at every point.

"When asked what we must do, they both advised—again independently—that we seek out two certain heroes in Lankhmar and have them bring their bands to the Isle's defense. They were most circumstantial, giving your names and haunts, saying you were their men, whether or not you knew it in this life, and they did not change their stories under repeated questioning. Tell me, Gray Mouser, have you not known god Loki before? Speak true."

"Upon my word, I haven't, Lady Cif," he averred, "and am no more able than you to explain the mystery of our resemblance. Though there is a certain weird familiarity about the name, and Odin's too, as if I'd heard them in dreams or nightmares. But however I rack my brains, it comes no clearer."

"Well," she resumed after a pause, "the two gods kept up their urgings that we seek you out and so half a year ago Afreyt and I took ship for Lankhmar on Hlal—with what results you know."

"Tell me, Lady Cif," the Mouser interjected, rousing himself from his fire-peerings, "how did you and tall Afreyt get back to Rime Isle after Khahkht's wizardous blizzard snatched you out of the Silver Eel?"

"It transpired as swiftly as our journey there was long," she said. "One moment we were in his cold clutch, battered and blinded by wind-driven ice, our ears assaulted by a booming laughter. The next we had been taken in charge by two feminine flying creatures who whirled us at dizzying speed through darkness to a warm cave where they left us breathless. They said they were a mountain king's two daughters."

"Hirriwi and Keyaira, I'll be bound!" the Mouser exclaimed. "They must be on our side."

"Who are those?" Cif inquired.

"Mountain princesses Fafhrd and I have known in our day. Invisibles like our revered fire-dweller here." He nodded toward the flames. "Their father rules in lofty Stardock."

"I've heard of that peak and dread Oomforafor, its king, whom some say is with his son Faroomfar an ally of Khahkht. Daughters against father and brother—that would be natural. Well, Afreyt and I after we'd recovered our breath made our way to the cavern's mouth—and found ourselves looking down on Rime Isle and Salthaven from a point midway up Darkfire. With some little difficulty we made our way home across rock and glacier."

"The volcano," the Mouser mused. "Again Loki's link with fire." His attention had been drawn back to the hypnotic flames.

Cif nodded. "Thereafter Loki and Odin kept us informed of the Mingol's progress toward Rime Isle—and your own. Then four days ago Loki began a running account of your encounters with Khahkht's frost monstreme. He made it most vivid—sometimes you'd have sworn he was piloting one of the ships himself. I managed to reserve the Flame Den the succeeding nights (and have it now for the next three days and nights also), so we were able to follow the details of the long flight or long pursuit—which, truth to tell, became a bit monotonous."

"You should have been there," the Mouser murmured.

"Loki made me feel I was."

"Incidentally," the Mouser said casually, "I'd think you'd have rented the Flame Den every night once you'd got your god here."

"I'm not made of gold," she informed him without rancor. "Besides, Loki likes variety. The brawls that others hold here amuse him—were what attracted him in the first place. Furthermore, it would have made the council even more suspicious of my activities."

The Mouser nodded. "I thought I recognized a crony of Groniger's playing chess out there."

"Hush," she counseled him. "I must now consult the god." Her voice had grown a little singsong in the later stages of her narrative and it became more so as, without transition, she invoked, "And now, O Loki god, tell us about our enemies across the seas and in the realms of ice. Tell us of cruel, cold Khahkht, of

Edumir of the Widdershin Mingols and Gorov of the Sunwise. Hilsa and Rill, sing with me to the god." And her voice became a somnolent, two-toned, wordless chant in which the other women joined: Hilsa's husky voice, Rill's slightly shrill one, and a soft growling that after a bit the Mouser realized came from Mother Grum—all tuned to the fire and its flame-voice.

The Mouser lost himself in this strange medley of notes and all at once the crackling flame-voice, as if by some dream-magic, became fully articulate, murmuring rapidly in Low Lankhmarese with occasional words slipped in that were as hauntingly strange as the god's own name:

"Storm clouds thicken round Rime Isle. Nature brews her blackest bile. Monsters quicken, nightmares foal, niss and nicor, drow and troll." (Those last four nouns were all strange ones to the Mouser, specially the bell-toll sound of "troll.") "Sound alarms and strike the drum—in three days the Mingols come, Sunwise Mingols from the east, horse-head ship and human beast. Trick them all most cunningly—lead them to the spinning sea, to down-swirling dizzy bowl. Trust the whirlpool, 'ware the troll! Mingols to their deaths must go, down to weedy hell below, never draw an easy breath, suffer an unending death, everlasting pain and strife, everlasting death in life. Mingol madness ever burn! Never peace again return!"

And the flame-voice broke off in a flurry of explosive crackles that shattered the dream-magic and brought the Mouser to his feet with a great start, his sleepy mood all gone. He stared at the fire, walked rapidly around it, peered at it closely from the other side, then swiftly scanned the entire room. Nothing! He glared at Hilsa and Rill. They eyed him blandly and said in unison, "The god has spoken," but the sense of a presence was gone from the fire and the room as well, leaving behind not even a black hole into which it might have retired—unless perchance (it occurred to the Mouser) it had retired into *him*, accounting for the feeling of restless energy and flaming thought which now possessed him, while the litany of Mingol doom kept repeating itself over and over in his memory. "Can such things be?" he asked himself and answered himself with an instant and resounding "Yes!"

He paced back to Cif, who had risen likewise. "We have three days," she said.

"So it appears," he said, then, "Know you aught of trolls? What are they?"

"I was about to ask you that," she replied. "The word's as strange to me as it appears to be to you."

"Whirlpools, then," he queried, his thoughts racing. "Any of them about the isle? Any sailors' tales—?"

"Oh, yes—the Great Maelstrom off the isle's rock-fanged east coast with its treacherous swift currents and tricky tides, the Great Maelstrom from whence the island gets what wood it owns, after it's cast up on the Beach of Bleached Bones. It forms regularly each day. Our sailors know it well and avoid it like no other peril."

"Good! I must put to sea and seek it out and learn its every trick and how it comes and goes. I'll need a small sailing craft for that while *Flotsam's* laid up for repairs—there's a little time. Aye, and I'll need more money too—shore silver for my men."

"Wherefore to sea?" her breath catching, she asked. "Wherefore must you dash yourself at such a maw of danger?"—but in her widening eyes he thought he could see the dawning of the answer to that.

"Why, to put down your foes," he said ringingly. "Heard you not Loki's prophecy? We'll expedite it. We'll drown at least one branch of the Mingol's e'er ever they set foot on Rimeland! And if, with Odin's aid, Fafhrd and Afreyt can scupper the Widder-Mingols half as handily, our task is done!"

The triumphant look flared up in her eyes to match that in his own.

The waning moon rode high in the southwest and the brightest stars still shone, but in the east the sky had begun to pale with the dawn, as Fafhrd led his twelve berserks north out of Salthaven. Each was warmly clad against the ice ahead and bore longbow, quiver, extra arrow-pack, belted ax, and bag of provender. Skor brought up the rear, keen to enforce Fafhrd's rule of utter silence while they traversed the town, so that this breach of port regulations might go unnoticed. And for a wonder they had not been challenged. Perhaps the Rime-landers slept extra sound because so many of them had been up to all hours salting down the monster fish-catch, the last boatloads of which had come in after nightfall.

With the berserks tripped along the girls May and Mara in their soft boots and hooded cloaks, the former with a jar of fresh-drawn milk for the god Odin, the latter to be the expedition's guide across central Rime Isle to Cold Harbor, at Afreyt's insistence—"for she was born on

a Cold Harbor farm and knows the way—and can keep up with any man."

Fafhrd had nodded dubiously on hearing that. He had not liked accepting responsibility for a girl with his childhood sweetheart's name. Nor had he liked leaving the management of everything in Salthaven to the Mouser and the two women, now that there was so much to do, and besides all else the new task of investigating the Grand Maelstrom and spying out its ways, which would occupy the Mouser for a day at least, and which more befitted Fafhrd as the more experienced ship-conner. But the four of them had conferred together at midnight in *Flotsam's* cabin behind shrouded port-holes, pooling their knowledge and counsels and the two gods' prophecies, and it had been so decided.

The Mouser would take Ourph with him, for his ancient sea-wisdom, and Mikkidu, to discipline him, using a small fishing craft belonging to the women. Meanwhile, Pshawri would be left in sole charge of the repairs on *Flotsam* and *Sea Hawk* (subject to the advisements of the three remaining Mingols), trying to keep up the illusion that Fafhrd's berserks were still aboard the latter. Cif and Afreyt would take turns in standing by at the docks to head off inquiries by Groniger and deal with any other matters that might arise unexpectedly.

Well, it should work, Fafhrd told himself, the Rime Islers being such blunt, unsubtle types, hardy and simple. Certainly the Mouser had seemed confident enough—restless and driving, eyes flashing, humming a tune under his breath.

Onwinging dawn pinkened the low sky to the east as Fafhrd tramped ahead through the heather, lengthening his stride, an ear attuned to the low voices of the men behind and the lighter ones of the girls. A glance overshooulder told him they were keeping close order, with Mara and May immediately behind him.

As Gallow's Hill showed up to the left, he heard the men mark it with grim exclamations. A couple spat to ward off ill omen.

"Bear the god my greeting, May," he heard Mara say.

"If he wakes enough to attend to aught but drink his milk and sleep again," May replied as she branched off from the expedition and headed for the hill with her jar through the dissipating shadows of night.

Some of the men exclaimed gloomily at that, too, and Skor called for silence.

Mara said softly to Fafhrd, "We bear left here a little, so as to miss Darkfire's

icefall, which we skirt through the Isle's center until it joins the glacier of Mount Hellglow."

Fafhrd thought, what cheerful names they favor, and scanned ahead. Heather and gorse were becoming scantier and stretches of lichened, shaley rock beginning to show.

"What do they call this part of Rime Isle?" he asked her.

"The Deathlands," she answered.

More of the same, he thought. Well, at any rate the name fits the mad, death-bent Mingols and this gallows-favoring Odin god too.

The Mouser was tallest of the four short, wiry men waiting at the edge of the public dock. Pshawri close beside him looked resolute and attentive, though still somewhat pale. A neat bandage went across his forehead. Ourph and Mikkidu rather resembled two monkeys, the one wizened and wise, the other young and somewhat woebegone.

The salt cliff to the east barely hid the rising sun, which glittered along its crystalline summit and poured light on the farther half of the harbor and on the fishing fleet putting out to sea. The Mouser gazed speculatively after the small vessels—you'd have thought the Islanders would have been satisfied with yesterday's monster catch, but no, they seemed even more in a hurry today, as if they were fishing for all Nehwon or as if some impatient chant were beating in their heads, driving them on, such as was beating in the Mouser's now: *Mingols to their deaths must go, down to weedy hell below*—yes, to hell they must go indeed! and time was wasting and where was Cif?

That question was answered when a skiff came sculling quietly along very close to the dock, propelled by Mother Grum sitting in the stern and wagging a single oar from side to side like a fish's tail. When Cif stood up in the boat's midst her head was level with the dock. She caught hold of the hand the Mouser reached down and came up in two long steps.

"Few words," she said. "Mother Grum will scull you to *Sprite*," and she passed the Mouser a purse.

"Silver only," she said with a wrinkle of her nose as he made to glance into it.

He handed it to Pshawri. "Two pieces to each man at nightfall, if I'm not returned," he directed. "Keep them hard at work. 'Twere well *Flotsam* were seaworthy by noon tomorrow at latest. Go."

Pshawri saluted and made off.

The Mouser turned to the others. "Down into the skiff with you."

They obeyed, Ourph impassive-faced, Mikkidu with an apprehensive sidewise look at their grim boatwoman. Cif touched the Mouser's arm. He turned back.

She looked him evenly in the eye. "The maelstrom is dangerous," she said. "Here's what perhaps can quell it, if it should trap you. If needs must, hurl it into the pool's exact midst. Guard it well and keep it secret."

Surprised at the massiness of the small cubical object she pressed into his hand, he glanced down at it surreptitiously. "Gold?" he breathed, a little wonderingly. It was in the form of a skeleton cube, twelve short thick gold-gleaming edges conjoined squarely.

"Yes," she replied flatly. "Lives are more valuable."

"And there's some superstition—?"

"Yes," she cut him short.

He nodded, pouched it carefully, and without another word descended lightly into the skiff. Mother Grum worked her oar back and forth, sending them toward the one small fishing craft remaining in the harbor.

Cif watched after them as their skiff emerged into full sunlight. After a while she felt the same sunlight on her head and knew it was striking golden highlights from her dark hair. The Mouser never looked around. She did not really want him to. The skiff reached *Sprite* and the three men climbed nimbly aboard.

She could have sworn there'd been no one near, but next she heard the sound of a throat being cleared behind her. She waited a few moments, then turned around.

"Master Groniger," she greeted.

"Mistress Cif," he responded in equally mild tones. He did not look like a man who had been sneaking about.

"You send the strangers on a mission?" he remarked after a bit.

She shook her head slowly. "I rent them a ship, the lady Afreyt's and mine. Perhaps they go fishing." She shrugged. "Like any Isler, I turn a dollar when I can and fishing's not the only road to profit. Not captaining your craft today, master?"

He shook his head in turn. "A harbor chief first has the responsibilities of his office, mistress. The other stranger's not been seen yet today. Nor his men either—"

"So?" she asked when he'd paused a while.

"—though there's a great racket of work below deck in his sailing galley."

She nodded and turned to watch

Sprite making for the harbor mouth under sail and the skiff sculling off with its lone shaggy-haired, squat figure.

"A meeting of the council has been called for tonight," Groniger said as if in afterthought. She nodded without turning around. He added in explanation, casually, "An audit has been asked for, Lady Treasurer, of all gold coin and Rimic treasures in your keeping—the golden arrow of truth, the gold circles of unity, the gold cube of square-dealing..."

She nodded again, then lifted her hand to her mouth. He heard the sigh of a yawn. The sun was bright on her hair.

By midafternoon Fafhrd's band was high in the Deathlands, here a boulder-studded expanse of barren, dark rock between low glacial walls a bowshot off to the left, closer than that on the right—a sort of broad pass. The westering sun beat down hotly, but the breeze was chill. The blue sky seemed close.

First went the youngest of his berserks, unarmed, as point. (An unarmed man really scans for the foe and does not engage them.) Twoscore yards behind him went Mannimark as coverpoint and behind *him* the main party led by Fafhrd with Mara beside him, Skor still bringing up the rear.

A large white hare broke cover ahead and raced away past them the way they had come, taking fantastic bounds, seemingly terrified. Fafhrd waved in the men ahead and arranged two-thirds of his force in an ambush where the stony cover was good, putting Skor in charge of them with orders to hold that position and engage any enemy on sight with heavy arrow fire but on no account to charge. Then he rapidly led the rest by a circuitous and shielded route up onto the nearest glacier. Skullik, Mara, and three others were with them. Thus far the girl had lived up to Afreyt's claims for her, making no trouble.

As he cautiously led them out onto the ice, the silence of the heights was broken by the faint twang of bowstrings and by sharp cries from the direction of the ambush and ahead.

From his point of vantage Fafhrd could see his ambush and, almost a bowshot ahead of it in the pass, a party of some forty men, Mingols by their fur smocks and hats and curvy bows. The men of his ambush and some dozen of the Mingols were exchanging high-arching arrow fire. One of the Mingols was down and their leaders seemed in dispute. Fafhrd quickly strung his bow, ordering the four

men with him to do the same, and they sent off a volley of arrows from this flanking position. Another Mingol was hit—one of the disputants. A half dozen returned their fire, but Fafhrd's position had the advantage of height. The rest took cover. One danced up and down, as if in rage, but was dragged behind rocks by companions. After a bit the whole Mingol party, so far as Fafhrd could tell, began to move off the way they'd come, bearing their wounded with them.

"And now charge and destroy 'em?" Skullik ventured, grinning fiendishly. Mara looked eagerly.

"And show 'em we're but a dozen? I forgive you your youth," Fafhrd retorted, halting Skor's fire with a downward wave of his arm. "No, we'll escort 'em watchfully back to their ship, or Cold Harbor, or whatever. Best foe is one in flight," and he sent a runner to Skor to convey his plan, meanwhile thinking how the fur-clad Steppe-men seemed less furiously hell-bent on rapine than he'd anticipated. He must watch for Mingol ruses. He wondered what old god Odin (who'd said "destroy") would think of his decision. Perhaps Mara's eyes, fixed upon him with what looked very much like disappointment, provided an answer.

The Mouser sat on the decked prow of *Sprite*, his back to the mast, his feet resting on the root of the bowsprit, as they reapproached Rime Isle, running down on the island from the northeast. Some distance ahead should lie the spot where the maelstrom would form and now, with the tide ebbing, getting toward the time—if he'd calculated aright and could trust information got earlier from Cif and Ourph. Behind him in the stern the old Mingol managed tiller and triangular fore-and-aft mainsail handily while Mikkidu, closer, watched the single narrow jib.

The Mouser unstrapped the flap of the small deep pouch at his belt and gazed down at the compact, dully gold-gleaming "whirlpool-queller" (to give a name to the object Cif had given him) nested inside. Again it occurred to him how magnificently spendthrift (but also how bone-stupid) it was to make such a necessarily expendable object of gold. Well, you couldn't dictate prudence to superstition. Or perhaps you could.

"Mikkidu!" he called sharply.

"Yes, sir?" came the answer, immediate, dutiful, and a shade apprehensive.

"You noted the long coil of thin line hanging inside the hatch?—the sort of slender yet stout stuff you'd use to lower

loot to an accomplice outside a high window?—and trust your own weight to in a pinch?—the sort some stranglers use?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good. Fetch it me."

It proved to be as he'd described it and at least a hundred yards long, he judged. A sardonic smile quirked his lips as he knotted one end of it securely to the whirlpool-queller and the other end to a ringbolt in the deck, checked that the rest of the coil lay running free on the deck, and returned the queller to his pouch.

They'd been half a day sailing here. First a swift run to the east with wind abeam as soon as they'd got out of Salthaven harbor, leaving the Rimic fishing fleet very busy to the southwest, where the sea seemed to boil with fish, until they were well past the white salt headland. Then a long slow beat north into the wind, taking them gradually away from the Isle's dark craggy east coast, which, replacing the glittering salt, trended toward the west. Finally, now, a swift return, running before the wind, to that same coast where a shallow bay guarded by twin crags lured the unwary mariner. The sail sang and the small waves, advancing in ranked array, slapped the creaming prow. The sunlight was bright everywhere.

The Mouser stood up, closely scanning the sea immediately ahead for submerged rocks and signs of tides at work. The speed of *Sprite* seemed to increase beyond that given it by the wind, as though a current had gripped it. He noted an eddying ahead, sudden curves in the wave-topping lines of foam. Now was the time!—if time there was to be. He called to Ourph to be ready to go about.

Despite all these anticipations he was taken by surprise when (it seemed it must be) an unseen giant hand gripped *Sprite* from below, turned it instantly sideways and jerked it ahead in a curve, tilting it sharply inward. He saw Mikkidu standing in the air over the water a yard from the deck. As he involuntarily moved to join the dumbfounded thief, his left hand automatically seized the mast while his right, stretching out mightily, grabbed Mikkidu by the collar. The Mouser's muscles cracked but took the strain. He deposited Mikkidu on the deck, putting a foot on him to keep him there, then crouched into the wind that was rattling the sails, and managed to look around.

Where ranked waves had been moments before, *Sprite* at prodigious speed was circling a deepening saucer of spinning black water almost two hundred

yards across. Dimly past the wildly flapping mainsail the Mouser glimpsed Ourph clinging with both hands to the tiller. Looking again at the whirlpool, he saw that *Sprite* was appreciably closer to its deepening center, whence jagged rocks now protruded like a monster's blackened and broken fangs. Without pause he dug in his pouch for the queller and, trying to allow for wind and *Sprite*'s speed, hurled it at the watery pit's center. For a space it seemed to hang glinting golden-yellow in the sunlight, then fell true.

This time it was as if a hundred giant invisible hands had smote the whirlpool flat. *Sprite* seemed to hit a wall. There was a sudden welter of cross-chopping waves that generated so much foam that it piled up on the deck and one would have sworn the water was filled with soap.

The Mouser reassured himself that Ourph and Mikkidu were there and in an upright position so that, given time, they might recover. Next he ascertained that the sky and sea appeared to be in their proper places. Then he checked on the tiller and sails. His eye falling away from the bedraggled jib lit on the ringbolt in the prow. He reeled in the line attached to it (not very hopefully—surely it would have snagged or snapped in the chaos they'd just endured) but for a wonder it came out with the queller still tightly knotted to the end of it, more golden-bright than ever from the tumbling it had got in the rocks. As he pouched it and laced tight the soggy flap, he felt remarkably self-satisfied.

By now waves and wind had resumed something like their normal flow and Ourph and Mikkidu were stirring. The Mouser set them back at their duties (refusing to discuss at all the whirlpool's appearance and vanishment) and he cockily had them sail *Sprite* close inshore, where he noted a beach of jagged rocks with considerable gray timber amongst them, bones of dead ships.

Time for the Rime-men to pick up another load, he thought breezily. Have to tell Groniger. Or perhaps best wait for the next wrecks—Mingol ones!—which should provide a prodigious harvest.

Smiling, the Mouser set course for Salthaven, an easy sail now with the favoring wind. Under his breath he hummed, "Mingols to their deaths must go, down to weedy hell below." Aye, and their ships to rock-fanged doom.

Somewhere between cloud layers north of Rime Isle there floated miraculously the sphere of black ice that was Khakhht's home and most-times prison.

RIME ISLE

Snow falling steadily between the layers gave the black sphere a white cap. The falling snow also accumulated on and so whitely outlined the mighty wings, back, neck, and crest of the invisible being posed beside the sphere. This being must have been clutching the sphere in some fashion, for whenever it shook its head and shoulders to dislodge the snow, the sphere jogged in the thin air.

Three-quarters of the way down the sphere, a trapdoor had been flung open and from it Khahkht had thrust its head, shoulders, and one arm, like a peculiarly nasty god looking sidewise down and out of the floor of heaven.

The two beings conversed together.

Khahkht: Fretful monster! Why do you trouble my celestial privacy, rapping on my sphere? Soon I'll be sorry that I gave you wings.

Faroomfar: I'd as soon shift back to a flying invisible ray-fish. It had advantages.

Khahkht: For two black dogs, I'd...!

Faroomfar: Contain your ugly self, granddad. I've good reason to knock you up. The Mingols seem to lessen in their frenzy. Gonov of the Sunwise descending on Rime Isle has ordered his ships double-reef for a mere gale. While the Widder-raiders coming down across the Isle have turned back from a force less than a third their size. Have your incantments weakened?

Khahkht: Content you. I have been seeking to assess the two new gods who aid Rime Isle: how powerful, whence they come, their final purpose, and whether they may be suborned. My tentative conclusion: They're a treacherous pair, none too strong—rogue gods from a minor universe. We'd best ignore 'em.

The snow had regathered on the flier, a fine dust of it revealing even somewhat of his thin, cruel, patrician features. He shook it off.

Faroomfar: So, what to do?

Khahkht: I'll refire the Mingols where (and if) they flinch back, never you fear. Do you, meanwhile, evade your wicked sisters if you're able and work what devilish mischief you can on Fafhrd (it's he that's cowed the Widder-raiders, right?) and his band. Aim at the girl. To work!"

And he drew back into his black, snow-capped sphere and slammed the trapdoor, like a reverse jack-in-the-box. The falling snow was disturbed in a broad downward sweep as Faroomfar spread wings and began his decent from the heights.

Most commendably, Mother Grum was waiting in the skiff at the anchorage when Ourph and Mikkidu brought *Sprite* breezing in neatly to make fast to the buoy and furl sail under the Mouser's watchful, approving eye. He was still in a marvelously good mood of self-satisfaction and had even unbent to make a few benign remarks to Mikkidu (which puzzled the latter mightily) and discourse sagely by whimsical fits and starts with the wise, if somewhat taciturn, old Mingol.

Now sharing the skiff's mid thwart with Ourph, while Mikkidu huddled in the prow, the Mouser airily asked the hag as she sculled them in, "How went the day, Mother? Any word for me from your mistress?" When she answered him only with a grunt that might mean anything or nothing, he merely remarked with mild sententiousness, "Bless your loyal old bones," and let his attention wander idly about the harbor.

Night had fallen. The last of the fishing fleet had just come in, low in the water with another record-breaking catch. His attention fixed on the nearest pier, where a ship on the other side was unloading by torchlight and four Rimemen, going in single file, were bearing ashore what were undoubtedly the prizes of their monster (and monstrous) haul.

Yesterday the Rimelanders had impressed him as very solid and sober folk, but now more and more he was finding something oafish and loutish about them, especially these four as they went gallumphing along, smirking and gaping and with eyes starting out of their heads beneath their considerable burdens.

First went a bent-over, bearded fellow, bearing upon his back by its finny tail a great silver tunny as long-bodied as he and even thicker.

Next a rangy chap carrying by neck and tail, wound 'round and over his shoulders, the largest eel the Mouser had ever seen. Its bearer gave the impression that he was wrestling with it as he hobbled—it writhed ponderously, still alive. *Lucky it's not twined about his neck*, the Mouser thought.

The man after the eel-carrier had, by a wicked handhook through its shell, a giant green crab on his back, its ten legs working persistently in the air, its great claws opening and closing. And it was hard to tell which of the two's eyes goggled out the farthest, the shellfish's or the man's.

Finally a fisherman bearing over-shoulder by its bound-together tentacles

an octopus still turning rainbow colors in its death-spasms, its great sunken eyes filming above its monstrous beak.

Monsters bearing monsters, the Mouser epitomized with a happy chuckle. *Lord, what grotesques we mortals be!*

And now the dock should be coming up. The Mouser turned round in his seat to look that way and saw... not Cif, he decided regretfully after a moment... but at any rate (and a little to his initial surprise) Hilsa and Rill at the dock's edge, the latter bearing a torch that flamed most merrily, both of them smiling warm welcomes and looking truly most brave in their fresh paint and whore's finery, Hilsa in her red stockings, Rill in a bright yellow pair, both in short gaudy smocks cut low at the neck. Really they looked younger this way, or at least a little less shopworn, he thought as he leaped up and joined them on the dock. How nice of Loki to have sent his priestesses... well, not priestesses exactly, say temple maidens rather... no, not maidens exactly either, but professional ladies, nurses and playmates of the god... to welcome home the god's faithful servant.

But no sooner had he bowed to them in turn than they put aside their smiles and Hilsa said to him urgently in a low voice, "There's ill news, captain. Lady Cif's sent us to tell you that she and the Lady Afreyt have been impeached by the other council members. She's accused of using coined gold she had the keeping of and other Rimic treasures to fee you and the tall captain and your men. She expects you with your famed cleverness, she told me, to concoct some tale to counter all this."

The Mouser's smile hardly faltered. He was struck rather with how gaily Rill's torch flickered and flared as Hilsa's doleful words poured over him. When Rimic treasures were mentioned he touched his pouch where the queller reposed on its snipped-off length of cord. He had no doubt that it was one of them, yet somehow he was not troubled.

"Is that all?" he asked when Hilsa had done. "I thought at least you'd tell me the trolls had come, against whom the god has warned us. Lead on, my dears, to the council hall! Ourph and Mikkidu, attend us! Take courage, Mother Grum—" (he called down to the skiff) "—doubt not your mistress's safety."

To be concluded

crosslegged on a cushion and toyed with a wooden stiletto waxed as the beams of the chamber were waxed. Her eyes were too wide, too lustrous, as were her brother's, and I knew this was the result of too much placenol in combination with too much Wolf Run small-malt in combination with the Orhas' innate meanness. The woman was drugged, and drunk, and, in consequence of these things, malicious to a turn. Cleirach didn't appear quite so far gone as his sister, but all he had to do to strangle the Wardress, I understood, was raise the edge of his forearm into her trachea. I felt again the familiar sensation of being out of my element, gill-less in a sluice of stinging salt water. . . .

"Wardress Kefa—" I began.

"She's all right," Cleva Orha assured me. "Perfectly all right." She tilted her head so that she was gazing at me out of her right eye alone, and then barked a hoarse, deranged-sounding laugh.

"Let the Wardress go," I told her clonemate.

Amazingly, Cleirach Orha looked intimidated. "Mr. Lorca's an anproz," he reminded Cleva. "That little letter opener you're cleaning your nails with, it's not going to mean anything to him."

"Then let her go, Cleirach. Let her go."

Cleirach released the Wardress, who, massaging her throat with both hands, ran to the stove-bed. She halted beside the carven screen and beckoned me with a doll-like hand. "Mr. Lorca . . . Mr. Lorca, please . . . will you see to him first? I beg you."

"I'm going back to Wolf Run Summit," Cleirach informed his sister, and he slipped on a night jacket, gathered up his clothes, and left the room. Cleva Orha remained seated on her cushion, her head tilted back as if she were tasting a bitter potion from a heavy metal goblet.

Glancing doubtfully at her, I went to the Wardress. Then I stepped around the wooden divider to see her Sharer.

The Tropeman lying there was a slender creature, almost slight. There was a ridge of flesh where his mouth ought to be, and his eyes were an organic variety of crystal, uncanny and depthful stones. One of these brandy-colored stones had been dislodged in its socket by Cleva's "letter opener"; and although the Orhas had failed to pry the eye completely loose, the Tropeman's face was streaked with blood from their efforts. The streaks ran down into the bedding under his narrow, fragile head and gave him the look of an aborigine in war paint. Lacking external genitalia, his sexless body was spread-

eagled atop the quilts so that the burn marks on his legs and lower abdomen cried out for notice as plangently as did his face.

"Sweet light, sweet light," the Wardress chanted softly, over and over again, and I found her locked in my arms, hugging me tightly above her beloved, butchered ward, this Sharer from another star.

"He's not dead," Cleva Orha said from her cushion. "The rules . . . the rules say not to kill 'em, and we go by the rules, brother and I."

"What can I do, Wardress Kefa?" I whispered, holding her. "What do you want me to do?"

Slumped against me, the Wardress repeated her consoling chant and held me about the waist. So, fearful that this being with eyes like precious gems would bleed to death as we delayed, each of us undoubtedly ashamed of our delay, we delayed—and I held the Wardress, pressed her head to my chest, gave her a warmth I hadn't before believed in me. And she returned this warmth in undiluted measure.

Wardress Kefa, I realized, was herself a Compassionate Sharer; she was as much a Sharer as the bleeding Tropeman on the stove-bed or that obedient creature whose electrode-studded body and luminous death's-head had seemed to mock the efficient, mechanical deadness in myself—a deadness that, in turning away from Rumer, I had made a god of. In the face of this realization my disgust with the Orhas was transfigured into something very unlike disgust: a mode of perception, maybe; a means of adapting. An answer had been revealed to me, and, without its being either easy or uncomplicated, it was still, somehow, very simple: I, too, was a Compassionate Sharer. Monster, machine, anproz, the designation didn't matter any longer. Wherever I might go, I was forevermore a ward of this tiny woman's House—my fate, inescapable and sure.

The Wardress broke free of my embrace and knelt beside the Tropeman. She tore a piece of cloth from the bottom of her tunic. Wiping the blood from the Sharer's face, she said, "I heard him calling me while I was downstairs, Mr. Lorca. Encephalogoi. 'Brain words', you know. And I came up here as quickly as I could. Cleirach took me aside. All I could do was shout for you. Then, not even that."

Her hands touched the Sharer's burns, hovered over the wounded eye, moved

about with a knowledge the Wardress herself seemed unaware of.

"We couldn't get it all the way out," Cleva Orha laughed. "Wouldn't come. Cleirach tried and tried."

I found the cloned woman's pea jacket, leggings, and tunic. Then I took her by the elbow and led her down the stairs to her brother. She reviled me tenderly as we descended, but otherwise didn't protest.

"You," she predicted once we were down, ". . . you we'll never get."

She was right. It was a long time before I returned to the House of Compassionate Sharers, and, in any case, upon learning of their sadistic abuse of one of the wards of the House, the authorities in Manitou Port denied the Orhas any future access to it. A Sharer, after all, was an expensive commodity.

But I did return. After going back to Diroste and living with Rumer the remaining forty-two years of her life, I applied to the House as a novice. I am here now. In fact as well as in metaphor, I am today one of the Sharers.

My brain cells die, of course, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop utterly the depredations of time—but my body seems to be that of a middle-aged man and I still move inside it with ease. Visitants seek comfort from me, as once, against my will, I sought comfort here; and I try to give it to them . . . even to the ones who have only a muddled understanding of what a Sharer really is. My battles aren't really with these unhappy people; they're with the advance columns of my senility (I don't like to admit this) and the shock troops of my memory, which is still excessively good. . . .

Wardress Kefa has been dead seventeen years, Diderits twenty-three, and Rumer two. That's how I keep score now. Death has also carried off the gem-eyed Tropeman and the Sharer who drew the essential Dorian Lorca out of the prosthetic rind he had mistaken for himself.

I intend to be here a while longer yet. I have recently been given a chamber into which the light sifts with a painful white brilliance reminiscent of the sands of Diroste or the snows of Wolf Run Summit. This is all to the good. Either way, you see, I die at home. . . .



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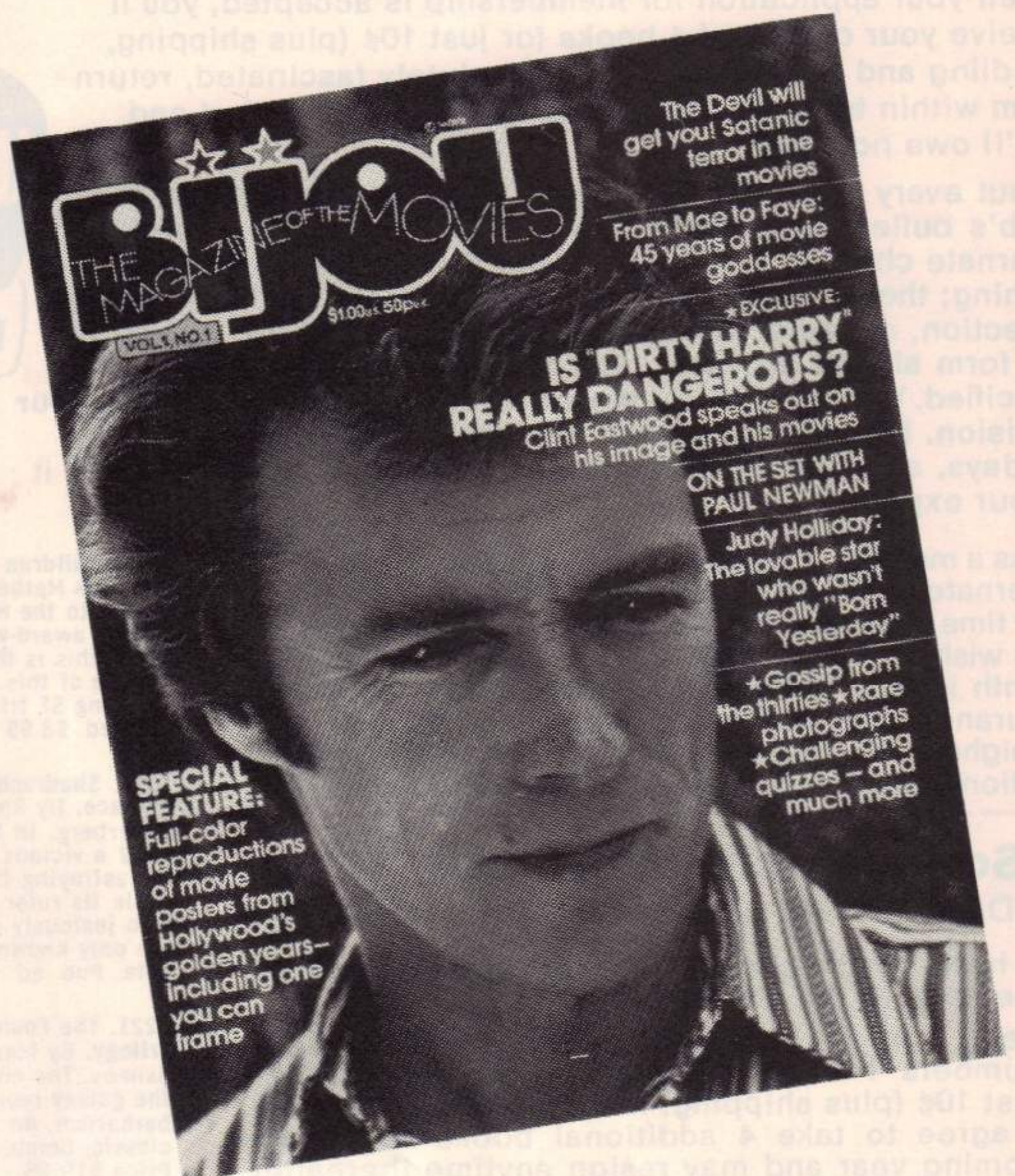
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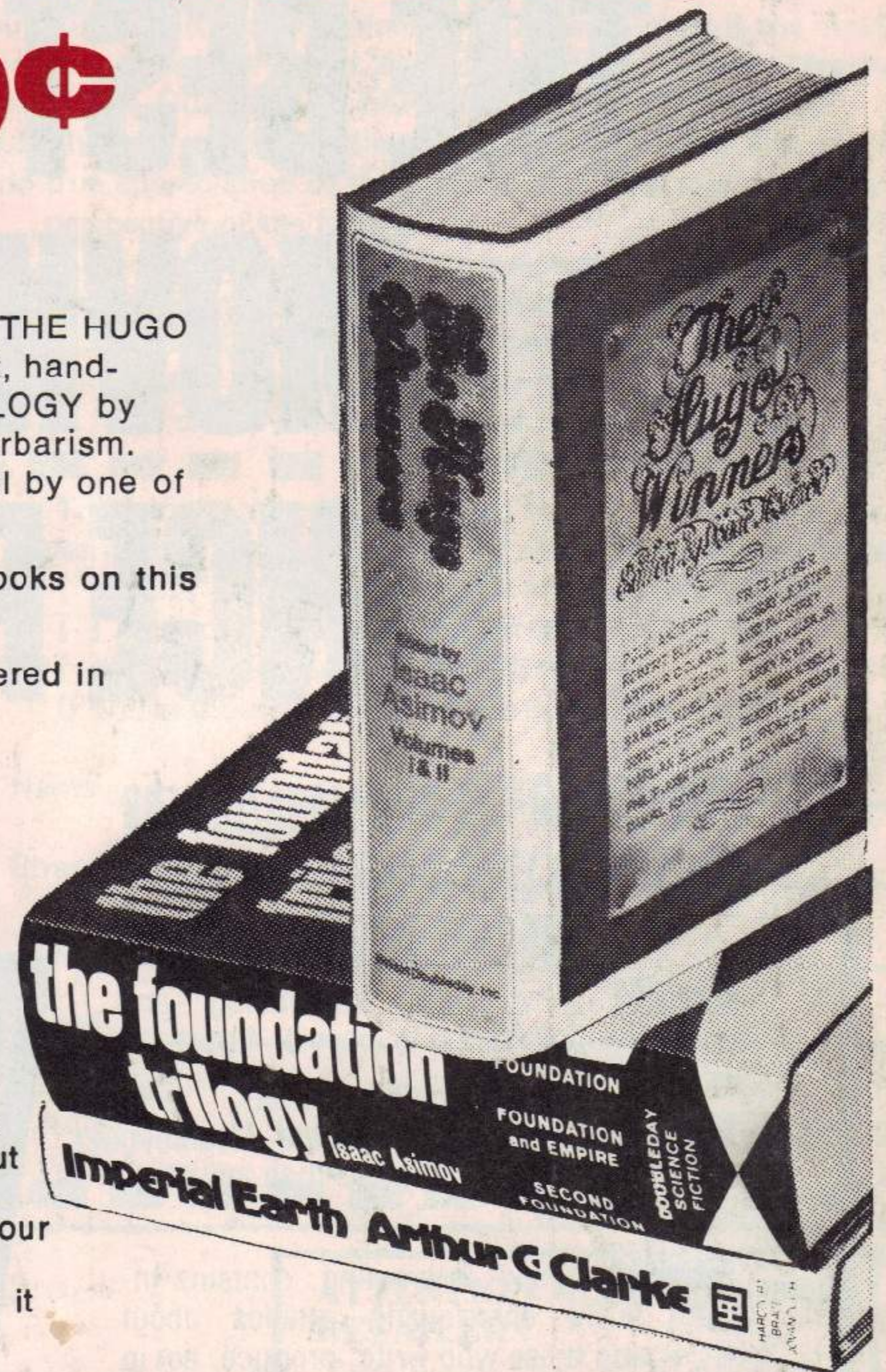
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