STORIES OF IMAGINATION

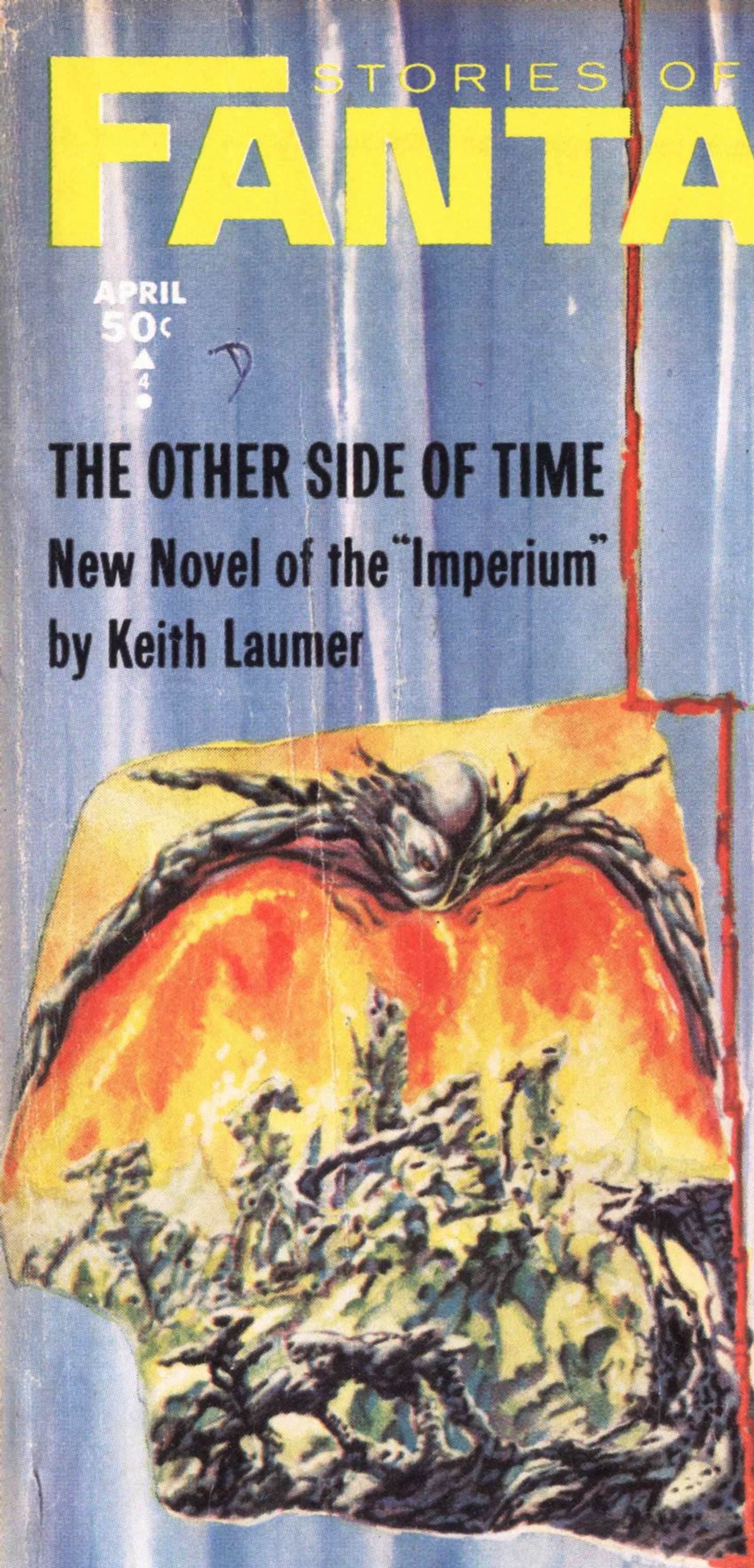
FANTASTIC

APRIL
50¢

THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME

New Novel of the "Imperium"

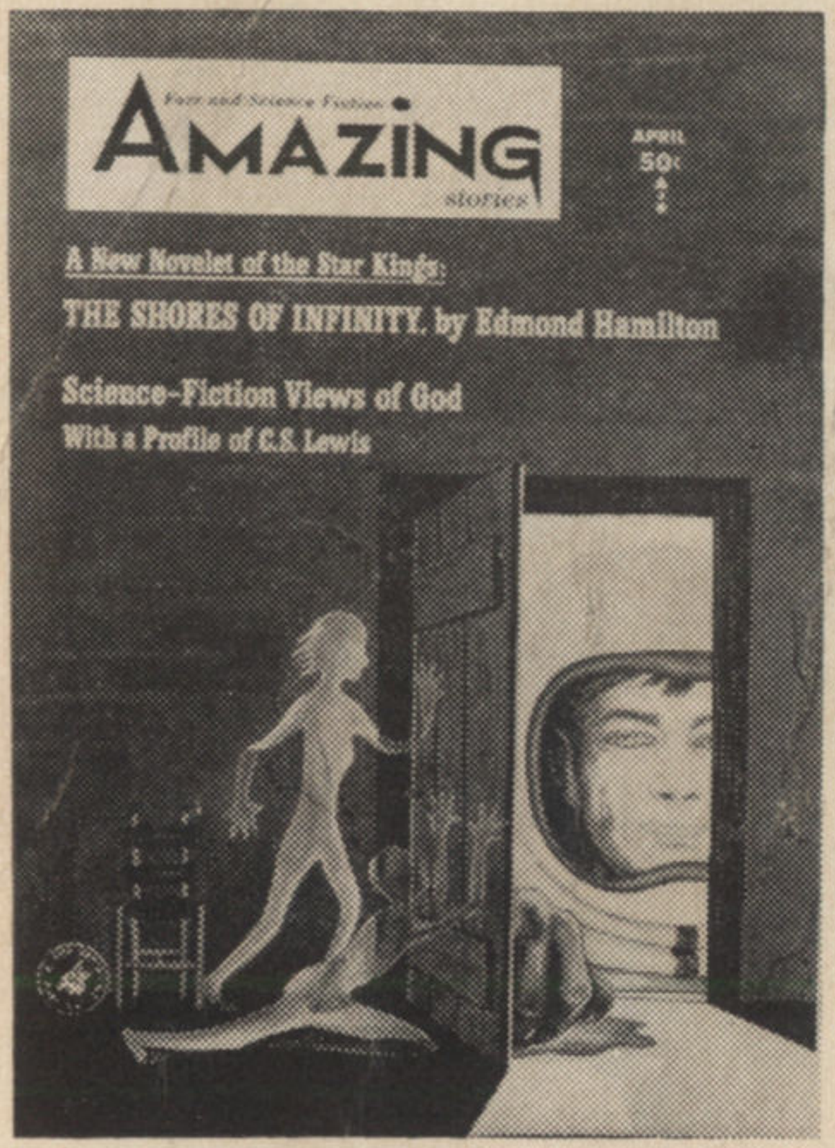
by Keith Laumer



GRAY MORROW

in April AMAZING

FROM ACROSS THE INTER-GALACTIC DEEPS



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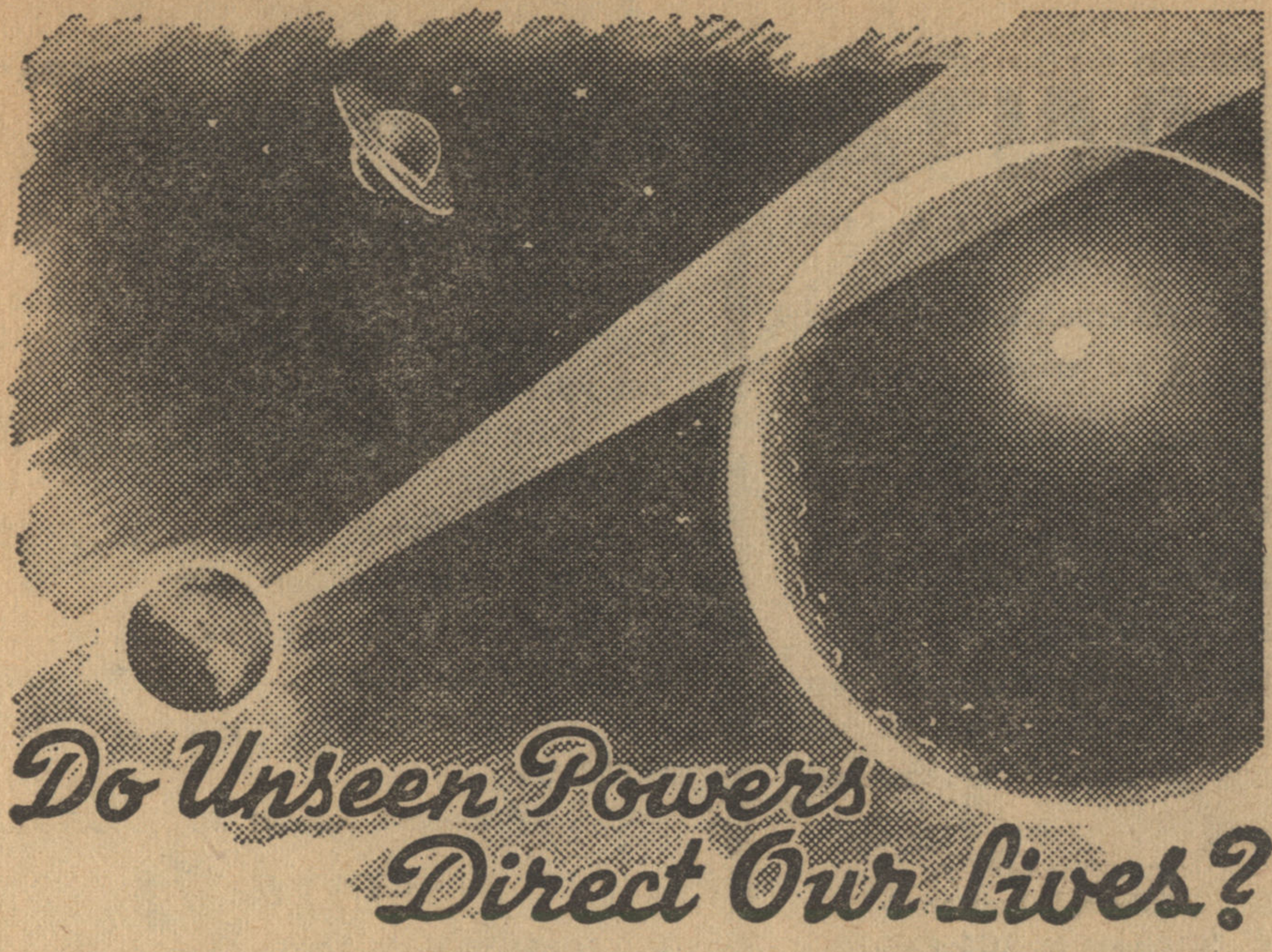

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THOSE of you who have read such books by Charles Fort as *Lo!* or *Wild Talents*—compendiums of mysterious happenings and attributes allegedly unexplainable by science—would not want to miss this news item which would have found its way at once into Fort's voluminous files: In the village of Hemel Hempstead, England, not long ago, there was a rain of straw. Suddenly, small bundles and individual bits of straw, some a foot long, came swirling overhead and cascading down into an open-air swimming pool. The fall lasted 45 minutes. One theory linked the rain of straw with the fact that a whirlwind a few days previously had torn through a town 80 miles away, and had sucked up and carried away several bales of straw. What all this proves, deponent sayeth not; unless one may conclude either that what goes up must come down, or that when it rains, it straws.

* * *

Keith Laumer, whose new novel decorates this issue (see page 32), dropped into our offices the other day to exchange greetings. Laumer told us that he and sf writer Rosel Brown are nearly finished a 200,000-word novel on which they have been collaborating for some time. From Keith's verbal summary of the plot, it sounded as if this would be the cosmic, galactic, universal novel to end all novels. Rumor hath it Laumer may soon stop working for Uncle Sam's armed forces and be a full-time writer. Brave man!

* * *

For sf bibliophiles, good news: the M.I.T. Science Fiction Society has put on punched cards all relevant data about every story, poem and article published between January, 1951, and December, 1964, in the major US sf magazines. Mimeographed stencils of this information, in the form of author and title indices, are available now. This first edition complements the Day index, which runs from 1926 through 1950. The index can be ordered from MIT SF Society, Room 50-020, 77 Mass. Ave., Cambridge, Mass. Price is $2.00.

Bright Eyes

By HARLAN ELLISON

Illustration DENNIS SMITH

On his unlikely he journeyed to a meeting-place determined absurdly long ago, for a reason he knew not, to a destiny unwanted.

FEET without toes. Softly-padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. Since before places had names. A dark place, a shadowed place, only a blot against the eternally nightened skies. No stars chip-ice twittered insanely against that night; for in truth the night was mad enough.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day . . .

He knew about almost everything.

The worms. The moles. The trunks of dead trees. The whites of eggs. Music. And random sounds. The sound fish make in the deep. The flares of the sun. The scratch of unbleached cloth against flesh. The hounds that roamed the tundra. The way those who have hair see it go pale and stiff with age. Clocks and what they do. Ice cream. Wax seals on parchment dedications. Grass and leaves. Metal and wood. Up and down. Here and most of there. Bright Eyes knew it all.

And that was the reason his padding, acoustically-sussurating footsteps hissed high in the dark, beamed, silent corridors of the place. And why he would now, forever at last, make that long journey.

The giant rat, whose name was Thomas, lay curled, fetid, sleeping, near the great wooden gate; and as Bright Eyes approached, it stirred. Then, like a

mastiff, it lifted its bullet-shaped head, and the bright crimson eyes flickered artful awareness. The massive head stiffened on the neckless neck, and it shambled to its feet. The wire tail swished across hand-inset cobblestones, making scratching sounds in the silent night.

"It's time," Bright Eyes murmured. "Here, Thomas." The great grey creature jogged to him, nuzzling Bright Eyes' leg. It sniffed at the net filled with old skulls, and its whiskers twitched like cilia for a moment.

Bright Eyes swung the great wooden gate open with difficulty, dislodging caked dirt and cold-hardened clots of stray matter. The heavy metal ring clanged as he dropped it against the portal. Then Bright Eyes swung to the back of the rat, and without reins or prompting, the rat whose name was Thomas, paced steadily through the opening, leaving behind the only home Bright Eyes had ever known, which he would never see again. There was mist on the land.

STRANGE and terrible portents had caused Bright Eyes to leave the place. Unwilling to believe what they implied, at first, Bright Eyes pursued the gentle patterns of his days—like all the other days he had ever known, alone. But finally, when the blood-red and grey colors washed in unholy mixture down the skies, he knew what had happened, and that it was his obligation to return to a place he had never seen, had only heard about from others, centuries before, and do what had to be done. The others were long-since dead: had been dead since before Christ took Barabbas' place on the cross. The place to which Bright Eyes must return had not even been known, had not even existed, when the others left the world. Yet it was Bright Eyes place, by default, and his obligation to all the others who had passed before. Since he was the last of his kind, a race that had no name, and had dwelled in the castle-place for millennia, he only dimly understood what was demanded of him. Yet this he knew: the call had been made, the portents cast into the night to be seen by him; and he must go.

It was a journey whose length even Bright Eyes could not surmise. The mist seemed to cover the world in a soft shroud that promised little good luck on this mission.

And, inexplicably, to Bright Eyes, there was a crushing sadness in him. A sadness he did not fathom, could not plumb, dared not examine. His glowing sight pierced through the mist, as steadily and stately, Thomas moved toward Bright Eyes' final

destination. And it would remain unknown, till he reached it.

OUT of the mist the giant rat swung jauntily. They had passed among softly-rounded hills with water that dripped from above. Then the shoulders had become black rock, and gleaming pinpoints of diamond brillance had shone in the rock, and Bright Eyes had realized they were in caves. But had they come from the land, inside . . . or had they come from some resting-land deep in the bowels of the Earth, into these less hidden caverns; and would they continue to another outside?

Far ahead, a dim light pulsed and glowed, and Bright Eyes spurred Thomas forward. The dim light grew more bold, more orange and yellow and menacing with sudden soft roars of bubbling thunder. And as they rounded the passage, the floor of the cave was gone, and in their path lay a boiling scar in the stone. A lava-pit torn up out of the solid stone, hissing and bubbling fiercely with demonic abandon. The light burned at Bright Eyes, and the heat was gagging. The sour stench of sulphur bit at his senses, and he made to turn aside.

The giant rat suddenly bolted in panic, arching back, more like caterpillar than rodent, and Bright Eyes was tossed to the floor of the cave, his net of skulls rolling away from him. Thomas chittered in fear, and took steps away, then paused and returned to his master. Bright Eyes rose and patted the terrified beast several times. Thomas fell into quivering silence.

Bright Eyes retrieved the skulls. All but one, that had rolled across the stone floor and disappeared with a vagrant hiss into the flame-pit. The giant rat sniffed at the walls, first one, then the other, and settled against the far one. Bright Eyes contemplated the gash in the stone floor. It stretched completely across, and as far as he could tell, forward. Thomas chittered.

Bright Eyes looked away from the flames, into the fear-streaked eyes of the beast. "Well, Thomas?" he asked. The rat's snout twitched, and it hunkered closer to the wall. It looked up at Bright Eyes imploringly. Bright Eyes came to the rat, crouched down, stroked its neat, tight fur. Bright Eyes brushed the wall. It was not hot. It was cool.

The rat knew.

Bright Eyes rose, walked back along the passage. He found the parallel corridor half a mile back in the direction they had come. Without turning, he knew Thomas had silently followed, and leading the way, he moved down the parallel corridor, in coolness.

Even the Earth could not keep Bright Eyes from what had to be done.

They followed the corridor for a very long time, till the rock walls leaned inward, and the littered floor tilted toward the stalactite-spiked ceiling. Bright Eyes dismounted, and walked beside the giant rat. There were strange, soft murmurings beneath them. Thomas chittered every time the Earth rattled. Further on, the passage puckered narrower and narrower . . . and Bright Eyes was forced to bend, then stoop, then crawl. Thomas slithered belly-tight behind him, more frightened to be left behind than to struggle forward.

A whisper of chill, clean air passed them.

They moved ahead, only the glow of Bright Eyes marking a passage.

Abruptly, the cave mouth opened onto darkness, and cold, and the world Bright Eyes had never seen, the world his dim ancestors had left, millennia before.

No one could ever set down what that first sight meant to Bright Eyes. But . . .

. . . the chill he felt, was not child of the night wind.

THE countryside was a murmuring silence. The sky was so black, not even the stars seemed at home. Frightened, lonely and alienated from the universe they populated, the silver specks drifted down the night like chalk-dust. And through the strangeness, Bright Eyes rode Thomas, neither seeing nor caring. Behind him a village passed over the horizon line, and he never knew he had been through it.

No shouts of halt were hurled on the wind. No one came to darkened windows to see Bright Eyes pass through. He was approaching there and gone, all in an instant of time that may have been forever and may have been never. He was a wraith on the mist-bottomed silence. And Thomas, moved stately through valley and village, only paced, nothing more. From now on, it was Bright Eyes problem.

Far out on the plains, the wind opened up suddenly. It spun down out of the northwest and drove at Bright Eyes' back. And on the trembling coolness, the alien sounds of wild dogs came snapping across the emptiness. Bright Eyes looked up, and Thomas' neck-hair bristled with fear. Bright Eyes stroked a round, palpitating ear and the great rat came under control.

Then, almost without sound that was tied to them—for the sound of dogs came from a distance, from far away—the insane beasts were upon them. A slavering band of crimson-eyed mongrels, some still wearing dog col-

lars and clinking tags, hair grown shaggy and matted with filth. Noses with large nostrils, as though they had had to learn to forage the land all at once, rather than from birth. These were the dogs of the people, driven out onto the wind, to live or die or eat each other as best they could.

The first few leaped from ten feet away, high and flat in trajectories that brought them down on Thomas' back, almost into Bright Eyes lap, their yellow teeth scraping and clattering like dice on cement, lunacy bubbling out of them as froth and stench and spastic claw-scrabblings. Thomas reared and Bright Eyes slid off without losing balance, using the bag of skulls as a mace to ward off the first of the vicious assaults. One great Dobermann had its teeth set for a strike into Thomas' belly, but the great rat —with incredible ferocity and skill—snapped its head down in a scythelike movement, and rent the grey-brown beast from jowl to chest, and it fell away, bleeding, moaning piteously.

And the rest of the pack materialized from the darkness. Dozens of them, circling warily now that one of their number lay in a trembling-wet garbage heap of its own innards.

Bright Eyes whistled Thomas to him with a soft sound. They stood together, facing the horde, and Bright Eyes called up a talent his race had not been forced to use in uncounted centuries.

The great white eyes glowed, deep and bubbling as cauldrons of lava, and a hollow moaning came from a place deep in Bright Eyes throat. A sound of torment, a sound of fear, an evocation of Gods that were dust before the Earth began to gather moisture to itself in the senseless cosmos, before the Moon had cooled, before the patterns of magnetism had settled the planets of the Solar System in their sockets.

Out of that sound, the basic fiber of emotion, like some great machine phasing toward top-point efficiency, Bright Eyes drew himself tight and unleashed the blast of pure power at the dogs.

BURIED deep in his mind, the key to pure fear as a weapon was depressed, and in a blinding fan of sweeping brilliance, the emotion washed out toward the horde, a comber of undiluted, unbuffered terror. For the first time in centuries, that immense power was unleashed. Bright Eyes *thought* them terrified, and the air stank with fear.

The dogs, bulge-eyed and hysterical, fled in a wave of yipping, trembling, tuck-tailed quivering.

As if the night could no longer contain the immensity of it, the shimmering sound of terror bulged and grew, seeking release

in perhaps another dimension, some higher threshold of audibility, and finding none—it wisped away in darkness and was gone.

Bright Eyes stood trembling uncontrollably, every fiber of his body spasming. His pineal gland throbbed. An intracranial tumor —whose presence in a human brain would have meant death—absolutely imperative for Bright Eyes' coordinated thought processes, which had swollen to five times its size as he concentrated, till his left temple had bulged with the pressing growth of it . . . now shrank, subsided, sucked itself back down into the grey brain matter, the gliomas itself. And slowly, as the banked fires of his eyes softened once more, Bright Eyes came back to full possession of himself.

"It has been a very long time since that was needed," he said gently, and dwelt for a moment on the powers his race had possessed, powers long-since gone to forgetfulness.

Now that it was over, the giant rat settled to the ground, licking at its fur, at a slash in the flesh where one of the mad things had ripped and found meat.

Bright Eyes went to him. "They are the saddest creatures of all. They are alone." Thomas continued licking at his wounds.

DAYS later, but closer to their final destination, they came to the edge of a great river. At one time it had been a swiftly-moving stream, whipping itself high in a pounding torrent filled with colors and sounds; but now it flushed itself to the sea wearily, riding low in its own tide-trough, and hampered by the log-jam. The log-jam was made of corpses.

Bodies, hideously bloated and maggot-white puffed out of human shapes, lay across one another, from the near shore to the opposite bank. Thousands of bodies, uncountable thousands, twisted and piled and washed together till it would have been possible to cross the river on the top layer of naked men's faces, bleached women's backs, twisted children's hands crinkled as if left too long in water. For they had been.

As far upstream as Bright Eyes could see, and as far downstream as the bend of the banks permitted, it was the same. No movement, save the very seldom jiggle of a corpse as the water passed through. For they were packed so deep, and so tight, that in truth only water at its most sluggish could wanly press through. Yet the water gurgled and twittered among them, stealing slowly downstream—caressing rotting flesh in obscene parody: water, cleansing stepping stones; polishing and smoothing and drenching them senselessly

as it marks its passage only by what is left behind.

That was the ultimate horror of this river of dead: that the tide —no matter how held-back now —continued unheeding as it had since the world was born. For the world went on. And did not care.

Bright Eyes stood silently. At the bottom of the short slope that ended with shoreline, bodies were strewn in a jackstraw tumble. He breathed very deeply, fighting for air, and the shivering started again. As it grew more pronounced, there was movement in the dry-moist river bed. Bodies abruptly began to move. They trembled as though roiling in a stream growing turbulent. Then, one by one, they re-arranged themselves. All up and down the length of the river, the bodies shifted and moved and lifted without aid from their original positions, and far off, where their movement to neatness could not be seen, there came the roar of damed-up water breaking free, surging forward, freed from its restraining walls of once-human flesh.

As Bright Eyes trembled, power surging through his slight frame, his eyes seeming to wax and wane with currents of electricity, the river of corpses freed itself from its log-jam, and was open once more.

The water poured in a great frothing wave down and down the corpse-bordered trough of the river. It broke out of a box-canyon to Bright Eyes left, like a wild creature penned too long and at last set free on the wind. It came bubbling, boiling, threshing forward, passed the spot where he stood, and hurled itself away around the bend in the shoreline.

As Bright Eyes felt the trembling pass, the river rose, and rose, and gently now, rose. Covering the ghastly residue of humanity that now lay submerged beneath the mud-blackened waters.

The eyes of the trembling creature, the eyes of the giant rat, the eyes of the uncaring day were blessedly relieved of the sight of decay and death.

Emotions washed quickly, one after another, down his features; washed as quickly as the river had concealed its sad wealth; colors of sadness, imprinted in a manner no human being could ever have conceived, for the face that supported these emotions was of a race that had vanished before man had walked the Earth.

Then Bright Eyes turned, and with the rat, walked upstream. Toward the morning.

WHEN the bleeding birds went over, the sun darkened. Great irregular, hard-edged clouds of them, all species, all wingspreads—but silent. Passing across the broad, grey brow

of the sky, heading absolutely nowhere, they turned off the sun. It was suddenly chill as a crypt. Heading East. Not toward warmth, or instinct, or destination . . . just anywhere, nowhere. Until they wearied, expired, dropped. Not manna, garbage. Live garbage that fell in hundredclots from the beat-winged flights.

Many dropped, fluttering idly as if too weary to fight the air-currents any longer. As though what tiny instinctual brain-substance they had possessed, was now baked, turned to jelly, squashed by an unnameable force into an ichorous juice that ran out through their eyes. As though they no longer cared to live, much less to continue this senseless flight East to nowhere . . . and they bled.

A rain of bird's blood, sick and discolored. It misted down, beading Bright Eyes, and the stiff rat fur, and the trees, and the still, silent, dark land.

Only the dead, flat no-sound of millions of wings metronomically beating, beating, beating . . .

Bright Eyes shuddered, turned his face from the sight above, and finding himself unable to look, yet unable to end the horror as he had the mad dogs or the water of corpses, sought surcease in his own personal vision.

And this, which had driven him forth, was his vision:

Sleeping, deep in that place where he had lived so long, Bright Eyes had felt the subtle altering of tempo in the air around him. It was nothing as obvious as machinery beginning to whirr, trembling the walls around him; nor as complex as a shift in dimensional orientation. It was, rather, a soft sliding in the molecules of everything except Bright Eyes. For an instant everything went just slightly out of synch, a little fuzzy, and Bright Eyes came awake sharply. The *thing* that had occurred, was something his race had preset aeons before. It was triggered to activate itself—whatever "itself" was—after certain events had *possibly* happened.

The fact that this shifting had occured, made Bright Eyes grow cold and wary. He had expected to die without its ever having come. But now, this was the time, and it *had* happened, and he waited for the next phase.

It came quickly. The vision.

The air before him grew even more indistinct, more roiled, like a pool of quicksilver smoke tumbling in and in on itself. And from that cloudiness the image of the last of the Castellans took shape. (Was it image, or reality, or thought within his head? He did not really know, for Bright Eyes was merely the last of his kind, no specially-trained adept, and much of what his race had

been, and knew, was lost to him, beyond him.)

The Castellan was a fifth-degree adept, and surely the last remaining one of Bright Eyes race to—go. He wore the purple and blue of royalty, from a House Bright Eyes did not recognize, but the cut of the robe was shorter than styles Bright Eyes recalled as having been current —then. And the Castellan's cowl was up, revealing a face that was bleak with sorrow and even a hint of cruelty. Such was not present, of course, for the Castellans merely performed their duties, but Bright Eyes was certain *this* adept had been against the decision to—go. Yet he had been chosen to bring the message to Bright Eyes.

HE stood, booted and silent, in the soft-washed blue and white lightness of Bright Eyes sleeping chamber. Bright Eyes was given time to come to full wakefulness, and then the Castellan spoke.

"What you see has been gone for ten centuries. I am the last, save you. They have set me the task, and this twist of my being, of telling you what you must do. If the proper portents trigger my twist to appear before you—pray it never happens—then you must go to the city of the ones with hair, the ones who come after us, the ones who inherit the Earth, the men. Go to their city, with a bag of skulls of our race. You will know what to do with them.

"Know this, Bright Eyes: we go voluntarily. Some of us—and I am one of them—more reluctantly than most. It is a decision that seems only proper. Those who come after us, Men, will have their chance for the stars. This was the only gift of birth we could offer. No other gift can have meaning between us. They must have our chance, so we have gone to the place where you now lie. By the time I appear to you—if ever I do —we will be gone. This is the way of it, a sad and an inescapable way. You will be the last. And now I will show you a thing."

The Castellan raised his hands before his face, and as though they were growing transparent, they glowed with an inner fire. The Visioning power. The Castellan's face suffused with flames as it conjured up the proper vision for Bright Eyes.

It appeared out of lines of blossoming crimson force, in the very air beside the Castellan. A vision of terror and destruction. Flames man-made and devastating, incredible in their hell-fire. Like some great arachnid of pure force, the demon flames of the destruction swept and washed across the vision, and when it faded, Bright Eyes lay shaken by what he had seen.

"If this that I have showed you ever comes to pass, then my twist will appear to you. And if you ever hear me as you hear me now, then go, with the bag of skulls of our people. And do not doubt your feelings.

"For if I appear to you, it will all have been in vain, and those of us who were less pure in our motivations, will have been proved right."

Shimmering substance, coalescing nothingness, air that trembled and twittered in reforming, and the Castellan was gone. Bright Eyes rose, and gathered the skulls from the crypt. Then:

Feet without toes. Softly-padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. He walked through night, out of the place.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day . . .

THE bleeding birds were long-since gone. Bright Eyes moved through the days, and onward. At one point he passed through a sector of trembling mountains, that heaved up great slabs of rock and hurled them away like epileptics ridding themselves of clothes. The ground trembled and burst and screamed and the very Earth went insane to tunes of destruction it had never written.

There was a plain of dead grass, sere and wasted with great heaps of dessicated insects heaped here, there. They had flocked together to the last resting-place, and the plain of dead grass was poor tapestry indeed to hold imprisoned pigments of their dead flesh, the acrid and bittersweet pervasive odor of formic acid that lingered like hot breath of a mad giant across the silent windless emptiness. Yet, how faint, a sound of weeping. . . ?

Finally, Bright Eyes came to the city.

Thomas would not enter. The twisted rope-pillars of smoke that still climbed relentlessly to the dark sky; the terrible sounds of steel cracking and masonry falling into empty streets; the charnel house odor. Thomas would not go in.

But Bright Eyes was compelled to enter. Into that last debacle of all. From where it had begun.

The dead were everywhere, sighing soundlessly with milk-white eyes at a tomorrow that had never come. And each fallen one soundlessly spoke the question of why. Bright Eyes walked with the burden of chaos pulsing in him. This. This is what it had come to.

For this, his race had gone away. That the ones with hair,

the men they had been called, they had called themselves, could stride the Earth. How cheap they had left it all. How cheap, how thin, how sordid. This was the last of it, the last of the race of men. Dust and dead.

Down a street, woman pleading out of death for mercy.

Through what had been a park, old men humped crazily in rigorous failure to escape.

Past a structure, building front ripped away as if fingernails had shorn it clean. Children's arms, pocked and burned, dangling. Tiny hands.

To another place. Not like the place from which Bright Eyes had come, but the place to which he had journeyed. No special marker, just . . . a place. Sufficient.

And then it was, that Bright Eyes sank to his knees, crying. Tears that had not been seen since before Man had come from caves, tears that Bright Eyes had never known. Infinite sadness. Cried for the ghosts of the creatures with hair, cried for Men. For Man. Each Man. The Man who had done away with himself so absurdly, so completely. Bright Eyes, on his knees, sorrowing for the ones who had lived here, and were gone, leaving him to the night, and the silence, and eternity. A melody never to be heard again.

He placed the skulls. Down in the soft white ash. Unresponsive, dying Earth, receiving its burden testament.

Bright Eyes, last of a race that had condemned itself to extinction, had condemned *him* to living in darkness forever, and had had only the saving wistful knowledge that the race coming after, would live in the world. But now, gone, all of them, taking the world with them, leaving instead—no fair exchange—charnel house.

And Bright Eyes; alone

Not only *their* race had been destroyed, in vain, but *his*, centuries turned to mud and diamonds in their markerless graves, had passed in futility. It had all, all of it, been for nothing.

So Bright Eyes—never Man—was the last man on Earth. Keeper of a silent graveyard; echoless tomb monument to the foolishness, the absurdity, of nobility.

THE END

The Purpose of Merlin

By COLIN R. FRY

To Cai, the creature was a monster to be killed. To Merlin, who traveled invisible seas it was something more . . . much more.

"LIONS, is it?" said Cai, putting his left thumbknuckle against his lips. "Lions on an island in the middle of the sea?"

His leatherclad feet scrunched in the sand and pebbles of the sea shore as he stared out across the cold Atlantic at the misty grey shape in the midst of the angry waves, and the man beside him, dressed simply in drab woollens and leathern leggings with a brown cloak gathered about his shoulders, pointed in answer.

"Mona," he said. "That is the place."

Each man was bearded; Cai with the black hairs of the Roman born, the villager with a wild red Celtic tangle.

"You have lost men out there?"

"There were five in the boat," the villager said. "By God's bones, I would I had been with them. But no; that day I stayed ashore. The men in the second boat took fright when the storm broke; when they came to their senses they were drifting in the black cliff's lee. Quickly they began to paddle and soon they were rounding the cliff in search of their comrades, for they knew that in such a storm no boat could have safely reached the shore. It seemed too much to hope that they were alive; the fear uppermost in the men's minds was that their friends and kin were at the bottom of the sea." His face clouded: his eyes hid for a moment behind their lids. "My brother was in that boat."

"I'm sorry," Cai said, not knowing anything else to say, looking at the blank hurt on the villager's chapped visage.

"Sorry?" the man flashed. "What have you to be sorry for, Roman?"

"I was attempting to offer sympathy."

"Well . . ." the man's huge chest heaved in a sigh. "Kindly meant, no doubt. But it won't bring him back."

"Their fate was seen, then?"

"Seen?" said the villager. "They saw, all right. Rounding the cliff-foot, they heard before they saw. They heard a big, deep, growling roar. The way Owain tells it makes the blood shudder inside your body. Ugh! They looked, and saw this monstrous animal on the little bit of beach at the cliff-bottom. They saw the boat broken on a jagged ridge of rock a yard or two from the beach. They saw one of the men floating on his back, dead, in the water. They saw a couple more cowering at the cliff's foot. And they saw this creature that seemed to have come out of a cave. It was tearing the insides out of one of the men."

"It was like a lion?" Cai said.

"Well . . ." the man scratched his unwashed head. "I've never seen a lion and I know none of them had, either; it was a monster and they said it was a lion, because it's probably the only monster's name they know. It might have been a griffin, I suppose; although that would have turned them all to stone, looking at it, wouldn't it?"

Cai said, "That is a property of griffins."

"Anyway, lion or griffin or whatever, it made a rush for them when they tried to help one of the men on the little beach. They broke a fishing spear in it, and it killed another of the men anyway; and they didn't have room in their boat for a sixth, or that's what they say; but I say they panicked, by God's blood! I say they cared only for their own skins!"

Cai said, pacifyingly, "It must have been a dreadful experience."

"Dreadful?" the villager spat. "All they could think of doing was to shiver and run for their lives! That's not the way real men behave. That's not how I, Ewan the Red, would carry on in such circumstances! I'm only a fisherman and you're a captain of Arthur's horse, but by the Man on the Cross, I'm coming over there with you to see what stuff this creature's made of. I'm bringing that monster's skin back to nail on the door of my hut, that's what I'm doing!"

"I'll be glad of your help," said Cai. And if we come through this adventure alive and victorious, I'll ask you to think about joining our band. It's a good life and a worthwhile one with Arthur."

Ewan the Red shook his rusty mane. "This is my life and my home," he said. "I've just got one quarrel, with that beast out there. Let me kill it and I'll be happy. That's all I ask."

"We'll see," said Cai. "Better

come and talk with my men."

He turned inland, the evening sun glinting on the dented, scratched breastplate he wore under a cloak that had once been a proud, bright red, but which now was a dull, patched scarlet, worn and travel-stained. Cai's bearing was that of a Roman noble, for such he was, though born in Britain; his nose aquiline, his back straight, his hands horny through sword-wielding and shield-bearing over many years. As he strode beside the villager, the short-sword swung in its stained sheath at his hip and the sun flashed blazing gold from the boss in the center of the round shield slung on a thick leather thong across his back.

You could look at Cai's face for a thousand years and never know the thoughts that hid behind it.

He would not have been in this part of the world at all if it had not been for his quarrel with bear-tempered Bedwyr over the girl in Glyndwr's fortress. But they had split forces and gone their separate ways, fuming at each other, and Cai found himself here on the wild sea's shore, the representative of Arthur's authority on a cold coast inhabited only by fisherfolk.

Some of the women were attractive. He promised himself, "When I come back, if I come back this time," as he always did at the start of each new quest.

THE old man in the dark hut said to Cai: "There's a man there. Palug."

"Palug? Palug?" Ewan growled. "I know that name. I know the man. Yes, he is there. The old man is right."

"I am right," the old man nodded, grinning with toothless gums. "I remember he went there —how many years ago?"

"Palug always lived on Mona," Ewan said.

"Not always," the old man said.

"Always," Ewan said.

"Not always! I am old and dirty and you feed me on pap, but I know! I know! Palug has not always lived on Mona!"

Ewan squatted back on his hams in the rush-strewn dark.

"Oh, have it your own way, old one," he grunted. The old man mumbled incoherently. Cai intervened.

"Tell me, father," he said. "When did Palug go out to the grey rock?"

"You believe me," the old man said. "Red Ewan does not. He does not remember the time when Palug went out there, so he thinks there was no such time. But I know. I remember. There are more things in the world than Red Ewan will ever see with his eyes or hear with his ears or clasp with his hands."

"Oh, tell him your tale if you must," Ewan said. He turned up his eyes and tapped his head sig-

nificantly, but the old man took no heed of that.

"Palug was young when I was young," he said. "He must be as old as I. We fished and hunted together, we did, and we chased the young maidens." He cackled suddenly with the lecherous glee of impotent old age. "But I had the laugh on him, though. I had the laugh on him." He coughed wetly. "He was the one for stories, he was the one for songs. He was the one for spinning the girls a yarn. Oh, he told them a thing or two and he led them a dance! Always his eyes were fixed on the far-off things, and his head borne high in the clouds. He had a fine reward for his dreaming and storytelling—stuck out there all his life on the old grey rock, with his wits gone and his hair wild and the teeth in his head falling out, as they must be by now!" He chuckled selfishly. "I lived the life of the good on the shore."

Ewan snorted. "Self-righteous old curmudgeon."

Cai said: "But when did he go to the rock, and why?"

The old man muttered, "He would adventure first and ask questions after. I'll grant you he speared many fish that way. But you can't live your life like that."

"I'm sure you made the right choices," Cai said carefully, picking his words.

"I was right!" said the old one. "I was right not to go!"

"Of course you were," said Cai.

"It was the night the spirits came," said the old one.

Ewan the Red grunted angrily, and the old man rounded on him.

"Grunt and snort, grunt and snort to your heart's content, you evil-living man! I know what I say, and I say the spirits came!"

Ewan shook his head at the noble visitor and tugged his beard with both big hands. "I've heard some of this before," he said.

"I'm not one of your tale-tellers," said the old man. "It was a dark night and a foul night and a night of storm and rain. I've never seen such lightning or heard such thunder as there was the night they came. We thought it was the end of the world."

Ewan shrugged.

The old man said, "But no-one died, except the old witch who was frightened to death out gathering bats' wings for her brew."

"Oh stuff," snorted Ewan, and he snorted some other things as well.

"I am not talking to you," snapped the old man, "I am talking to your guest, so kindly have good manners and be still.

"Palug would go out to see it, you know. In the morning, after the storm, he would go out and stare across the water. He saw the thing by the rock. It was a sort of boat, but its sides shone and the water around it steamed like the rivers of Hell."

Cai gripped the hilt of his sword.

"I, I was fool enough to stand there watching with him, and I felt the spell too. But I ran before it could get a grip on me. Him, the fool, mad Palug, he had to go out into the water to see better, he said, and it got a hold on his weak, foolish mind."

"A spell," murmured Cai. Some words of Merlin's came into his head: "They have spells too, the folk I seek, spells as strong as mine and twice as dangerous."

"It was not from the boat it came," whispered the old man. His eyes were glazing as he recalled the experience of so many years before. "The boat was sinking in a seething cauldron of steam. The spell came from the thing that left the boat."

"The thing . . . ?"

"It was a tawny thing."

The rushlight ruddied the old man's pockmarks and suffused his eyes with a blood-red glow.

"We both felt its call," he whispered. His lips quivered. "It was —terrible. Loneliness—fear—and hunger . . ."

The flameglow flickered on the arthritic swellings on his hands.

"It nearly caught me, but I recognized its evil," he whimpered. "Evil: evil: evil! I ran! And as I ran, Palug waded out—and I dared not look its way." He stared into the dark and shivered as if he saw the tawny thing again. "They told me, later, that Palug was seen swimming out into the sea. No man has ever swum that far, since or before! And it's a fact he's been seen on the rock, once or twice. But not for many years now. Many years."

Cai felt the darkness clasp him like a shroud. He lit another rushlight to dispel the shades, but only succeeded in giving more shadows life.

Ewan said, from his dark corner, "We'll know the answer soon."

"Tomorrow," Cai said.

The old man said, "It's more than a monster. Beware."

WIND was whipping the salt spray into Cai's mouth and eyes as the dozen men heaving at the oars pulled the boat, biggest on that stretch of the coast, through the choppy grey waves.

He stood in the bows with his bow at the ready, while Red Ewan held the tiller in his grim iron grip.

Finally the shore swung close to the boat's sides, the anchors dropped down fore and aft and the men of Arthur's company jumped splashing into the shallows and waded after Ewan and Cai up onto dry land.

This was the low-lying side of the island, a naked place, with few trees decorating the rocky terrain. Such grass as grew there

was yellow and shrivelled. It seemed that this inhospitable island could hardly nourish a starving rabbit, let alone a monster like the lion-thing.

"Keep together," ordered Cai. "It will not show itself for our convenience, but its own. When it leaps upon us, we must be ready to fight as we have never fought in our lives. A man obeys the rules of battle, but an animal knows no human law."

The wind chapped their faces and hands; it sang in their sword-blades and made weird music on the strings of their finely strung bows. They saw no motion as they moved slowly, warily, across the yellow-green grass and looked behind the stunted, twisted trees; they heard no unexpected sound, no sound but their own footsteps and their own breathing and the long soft roar of the sea.

At length one of the men called out and pointed to a place on the rocky hillside that mounted steeply before them.

"An opening!" he cried. "There is an opening there!"

Sure enough, a black split yawned between two upright crags of black-grey rock. Cai and Ewan together led the way towards it.

But as they reached the lip of the opening there was a sound. Ewan's blade was at the ready: he spun round, dropping almost to one knee as he glared up at the shape on the high rock. Leaning over as if from the parapet of a castle wall, there stood a man.

The man made no human sound: he spoke no words, he made no gesture of greeting or dismissal. He simply leaned and looked.

Cai stood alert, erect, his face a mask, his hand tense on the hilt of his short, sharp sword. Gradually his fingers relaxed, and he slowly loosened the bow slung across his back. He eased an arrow from the leather pouch hung behind his left shoulderblade.

The man still said nothing. The wind blew and the sea roared.

"Who are you?" shouted Ewan the Red. "What do you want? What do you know of the monster that lives here?"

The man leaned further forward and his lips parted. He slowly stretched out a hand. They saw his fingers were emaciated as he pointed at the intruders and his dry lips formed the single word: "Men."

Then he disappeared behind the rock.

Ewan looked at Cai in consternation. "Is it Palug?" he said. "Or is it one of the men from the boat? Where's he gone?"

Cai said, "I think he's coming down, behind the rock. Look." And sure enough, the man appeared before them, stepping out from behind the upright crag. He was stark naked.

His hair, they saw, was white, but he had very little beard and his fingernails seemed not to be any unmanageable length. (The thought crossed Cai's mind: Perhaps he bites them.) His arms and legs were thin and his chest narrow. But from his eyes there shone a kind of glad confidence, and his mouth shaped a smile as he raised a scarred and leathery hand in greeting.

Ewan said bluntly: "Who are you?"

The man frowned. The wind played with his long white hair, tossing it about this way and that as he stood in silence, thinking. At length he said: "My—name?"

"Yes, man!" Ewan shouted. "Your name! Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Palug," he said. Somehow they had known he would.

"How long have you been here?" Ewan said. Cai stood and watched his face.

Shrugging his bony shoulders and spreading his thin arms wingshape, the old man who said his name was Palug murmured vaguely, "Suns—and moons."

Ewan sighed and turned to Cai. "We'll get no sense out of him," he said disgustedly. "His wits have left him long ago."

"But how has he lived?" Cai said. "The years he must have been here, with no crops growing nor fruit on the trees that I can see . . . Maybe he has speared fish, but with what? It's incredible that he should have survived so long." He spoke to the strange man, carefully and slowly, spacing his words well apart and pronouncing them as clearly as he could. "We know there is a creature here," he said. "It killed our friends—men who came in a boat to the beach by the cliff on the night of the storm."

"Storm!" the man said, and his face changed expression subtly to something that was not horror, not fear, nor yet wonder, but a remembering emotion not far removed from all three. "Storm—thunder — lightning — flash — rain—storm."

Ewan snorted. "He's an idiot," he said. "His mind has gone to join the fish in the sea!"

Cai said, "I think it is so long since he saw or spoke to a man that he has forgotten the use of words. But gradually they are coming back to him." He smiled and held out his hand. "I am a friend," he said.

The man smiled back, and Cai noticed with an odd, inexplicable shock that he had all his teeth, with no gaps or discolorations. He was smiling a wide white smile.

"Friend: come from shore?" he said. "Shore—" he pointed. Then he pointed to the ground. "Island," he said, separating the syllables with a hesitating gap.

He clapped one hand to the crag beside which the men stood. "Rock," he said, rolling the R. He pointed at Cai and said, "You," then at himself and cried with a kind of childish pleasure, "Me!"

Cai smiled at him sadly and pointed in his turn. He pointed at the old man and said, "Palug," then at himself and said, "Cai." He extended both hands, clasped Palug's wrist and forearm Roman-fashion and said, "Greetings, Palug."

The old man answered him: "Greetings . . . Cai."

He stared at Cai and gradually the smile drained from his face. He screwed up his eyes and shook his head from side to side in an odd manner. He clasped both hands to his head and suddenly went rigid for a full minute.

"Is it a fit?" asked one of the men. Cai made no answer.

The old man expelled his breath in a shuddering gasp and dropped his arms to his sides. He gestured to the black gap in the rock.

"Come with me," he said.

His voice had taken on a new quality and there seemed to be more intelligence in his eyes. Cai reflected on this as he led the way into the island's dark, cold belly.

PALUG, striding easily beside Cai, said out of the darkness: "My humble home, lords."

They entered, under an arch of scarce-visible rock, a grotto lit by sunlight that entered in a long, dusty shaft from a crevice in the roof. Water trickled and roared at the far side of the grotto's damp, cool floor. And on the far side of the cavern was a shape that seemed to move while remaining in one place.

It was the shadowy bulk of an animal, its nature indistinct, that drew deep, regular breaths as if it was asleep. They heard the inward and outward rush of air through its nostrils.

"What is that?" muttered Ewan the Red as they came to a halt, some glancing fearfully over their shoulders to look for the crack of light that told them the whereabouts of the entrance to the tunnel. But they had turned many bends, and the crack of light had disappeared.

Palug whispered very softly: "That is my cat. Do not move nearer, or he will wake. I do not think you would like it if he did."

The darkness clung to their backs like intangible black glue.

Cai said: "Is this the thing that killed our friends?"

"Your friends?" He could not see Palug; the old man stood in a shadow. "He means no harm. I see to his wants. We understand each other."

Across the cave, the creature stirred. At a sign from Cai, the well-trained band of men began to move in single file around the

wall until they formed a semi-circle of executioners, their bows drawn taut, arrows nocked against expectant strings. Old lithe Palug gazed from one to the other in dismay as the shapes moved through the shadows.

"Stand back, old man," grunted Red Ewan as he hefted his two-handed axe. "This is no work for old ones. There will be blood spilt here."

The big creature's body moved and seemed to quiver behind the shaft of sunlight.

Cai bit his bottom lip and ran a tough-skinned forefinger along the sharp-honed blade of his javelin.

The creature's breathing became irregular; its shoulders heaved and its head, which had been cradled on its paws, moved and began to rise.

Across the cavern, a warrior's foot touched a stone with a scratching clunk. Unbalanced, the man jerked an arm up to steady himself: and grunted in sudden pain as his elbow struck the rough, damp wall of rock behind him. The shock jolted the nerves and muscles all down his arm: his fingers loosened their grip on the arrow nocked in his bowstring: with a twang the string sang out and the arrow flew faster than eyes could follow in that dim place, whistling over the creature's head and splashing far off into the underground bay.

Behind Cai's back the condensation trickled and dripped steadily like a slowly ticking clock.

The creature across the cavern opened its eyes.

It looked at the warrior who had loosed his bow and heaved its forequarters up. Cai thought it moved slowly—and yet, and yet—

Bowstrings were drawn so taut they almost sang in pain.

Breath issued between clenched teeth.

The creature cast its concentrated stare upon the trembling man.

The man screamed.

It seemed the creature had not moved: and yet there was blood dripping from the warrior's hands. Cai caught himself thinking: It is appropriate; those were the hands he used to string and loose the arrow—

Then he shook his head in disbelief at his own mind's treachery. This was no mortal creature, but a thing of hell! Not yet had another arrow been loosed against it, while a man wept with pain and nursed wet red hands! He began to mutter the Our Father to himself. Then he shouted: "Loose arrows!"

Not a man of them moved. He looked to his right and saw the huge bulk of Red Ewan immobile in the grey, damp dark.

"Ewan!" Cai cried. "Are you with me?"

The big man turned his heavy, shaggy visage towards him with an expression unreadable in that dusky place.

"Aye," his voice echoed in the booming cavern, though in a hesitant, almost reluctant manner, "I am your man, Roman. I will do your bidding."

THEY strode forward together, Cai suddenly dropping to one knee and flinging his javelin, Ewan running forward with his axe. The javelin struck the beast in a hammy forelimb: it opened its gaping mouth in silent pain. Cai's head almost burst.

"For God and Our Lady!" he shouted, and it seemed to work. Two warriors loosed arrows at the creature's flanks, but it quivered and moved almost imperceptibly, and they missed.

Then all the cavern came alive, and arrows flew this way and that in the cold wet air, whining and echoing, glancing off rocky walls. The old man ran forward and Cai shouted: "NO! Get back!" but he took no heed . . .

And all was still again, with a half-dozen corpses and moaning bodies aheap and atumble about the floor, and the others cowering back into crevices in the rock. The old man was burying his head in the creature's unkempt mane.

"My pretty, my beauty, my only," he moaned, "are you hurt?"

The "cat" turned its great head and pushed its broad soft muzzle against the man's naked flanks. It seemed to lick him with something like canine affection. Doubt assailed Cai: was this indeed the beast of which he had been told?

The moans and mutilations in the cave convinced him.

He was crouched on one knee by the curving rock wall, an overhang jutting above his head. He cast about him for some means of killing the monster. It seemed impossible to take it by surprise. Impossible, came the echo in his mind. And then Cai knew what he must do.

He leaned against the rock wall and relaxed, staring at the cone of light thrown by the shafting sunbeam, staring up until the point of light at the top of the shaft half-mesmerized him into vacuity. Then he knelt and began to creep forward from his position at the creature's rear, keeping his mind empty, letting his limbs move automatically on the course he had set for them. The dagger from his belt was gripped between his teeth, tasting hard and acrid; he dropped to his belly as he slithered forward. It seemed a mile between his nook and creature's broad tawny back, but he did not allow himself to think of it—or to think of anything. He thought he saw a movement of its flank; the

head shifted as if about to look round, and spurred by a fear he would not recognize Cai leapt forward, spat the dagger into his hand and reached out for the shaggy mane.

An ear-splitting roar of anger and anguish filled the cave and Cai's head reeled: He felt a fear so powerful it sickened him, but he overcame it and drove the dagger into the base of the creature's neck.

The old man was clambering over its jerking back to attack him: he felt a huge emanation of hate and the walls of the cave seemed to grow misty around him. Big limbs threshed, the world beneath Cai heaved and the sky/roof of the cave swung in a circle. Hard stone hit his knuckles and took some skin off smarting hands. A bare hand like a claw jabbed at his face and he swung up with his short, sharp sword: blood—pain—terror—a friend betrayed: his skull ached and his eyes were sore. In the crack at the top of the cave where the light shone down there seemed to be stars against a dark night sky. How long had he been down here? But the stars were moving! And he saw them blurred —covered by some transparent substance—

And the face of Merlin swam into his sight: the face toughened and aged with a life spent no man knew where, doing no man knew what, learning none guessed what mystic lore. Yet Merlin's grey head rose out of a suit of dark blue material that he had never seen, cut in a style he did not know; and from Merlin's mouth came words in a language Cai had never heard—

Water seeped into his mouth—

Some sort of creature touched him—

Cai hit out. The creature hit back. The world went dark and he saw and knew no more except a great loneliness until he awoke.

STARING down from a warm blue sky was the ruddy, hairy face of Ewan the Red.

"You live then, Roman," the big Celt said.

"I thought you had died," said Cai. His voice felt weak.

"Don't talk just yet," said another voice. It was an old voice but a strong voice—the voice of Merlin. Cai twisted and jerked around.

"Your clothes—" he said.

Merlin said, "What of them?"

He was dressed as normal, in the woollen and leather garb of Arthur's men, his legs bound in pliable leather leggings. He leaned on a briar staff. Behind him Arthur stood, hands on hips, his black hair blowing in the wind and his black beard blowing with it, his silver breastplate gleaming in the sun.

"Where—?" Cai began.

"Hush," Merlin said. "You're distraught. Let me give you a draught to make you sleep and make you well." He felt in his clothing but Cai shook his head.

He raised himself on one arm, lying half-upright on the blanket where they had lain him on the sea shore. Glancing round, he saw the island of Mona as grey and enigmatic as ever in the grey waste of the ocean.

"I'll have none of your potions," he said. "I'll live or die with my own strength. I'll borrow nothing from magic. I'll not be beholden to the powers that—that thing served."

"What mean you?" Merlin said, narrowing his eyes.

"Did the thing die?" asked Cai.

"Aye," grunted Ewan the Red. "You wounded it mortally and it dropped into the water. The only trouble was it took you with it—and old Palug, whom you also killed."

Cai shook his head in bewilderment.

"I hardly remember," he said. "I did not mean to kill the old man."

"Whether you meant to or not, you did it, Roman," growled Ewan. "And you killed his cat, too." He stared at him ferociously.

Arthur said, "We reached the village just as you had set sail for Mona. I made them give us boats, and by the time we had waited for the tide and rowed out over the water you had done your work." He smiled his bandit smile. "If any man could kill that monster, Cai would kill it. I knew that. But from what I had heard, and the face old Merlin made when he heard the creature described, I feared no mortal man could kill it. So I took the old wizard in the boat with me, for him to use his magic."

"Magic," Cai said. "I began to think only that would kill it."

"It came floating out of that underground channel and you face upwards in the water after it," said Arthur. "We thought you had died as well as that creature. Bones of Our Lady! I never saw such a thing!"

"It was not the size of it," Cai said. "It was the spells it wrought on men's minds. It had taken possession of Palug. It—I thought it would take possession of us all."

"Possession — possession!" Merlin blurted angrily. "As if you untutored savages could understand a symbiotic relationship! It's always take, take, take, or kill, kill, kill!"

"And you, Merlin," Cai said slowly, "you—you were in its mind, or it put you into my mind, I don't know which. But the clothes you wore—and the words you spoke—and there were stars behind your head, covered with transparent stuff—"

Arthur looked at Merlin in black triumph. "Come clean, you old devil-raiser!" "You knew it! You'd seen it before, or something damn like it!"

"He must have met it in Hell," Cai said.

Merlin turned his face away from them and looked out across the sea.

"You fools!" he said sadly. "No, not fools, for how could you know? But must you always fear and distrust the strange?" He was silent for a time. Then he said, above the roar of the breaking surf rolling along the shore, "I knew him. I knew him. I did not know we had come down so close together." They guessed he must mean some supernatural, occult rite or mystical experience, that "coming down."

"I have been at his side," Merlin said. "I have piloted craft with him across the invisible seas between the worlds." They knew he meant some magic thing by that.

"He must have been very weak," he said. "All these years, he must have lain there, dying, seeking to sustain some kind of life with the aid of the savage fisherman. Yet all the time he kept the savage alive, he made himself weaker. He could not raise the mind-power to reach beyond that rock in the middle of the sea." He sighed heavily. "After all our wanderings . . . His race live long, as a rule, given a good partner. But they are not like us. We can live on our own; they need the metabolism of another. Palug offered himself—it was good of him."

He turned to Cai. "And yet I cannot find it in my heart to blame you for his death. How could he have lived here? To you, anything that does not walk on two legs is either food or a monster to be killed. Well, perhaps it was best he should die."

They did not know what Merlin spoke of. But since opinion about him was evenly divided—half the world thought him a devil, the other half thought him mad—they took his comments and lamentings with a grain of salt. Cai knew he had done right. John knew his brother was avenged—though his head still rang with the fading emotions the monster had put into it.

Arthur knew his best man had proved himself again, and would fight more useful battles.

Merlin knew; and remembered; and was silent. There were other things and other people to be located before his self-imposed task in Britain was done. Cai might help him; Bedwyr might help him; Arthur might help him. Or any one of them might stop him, or try to, if they discovered his purpose.

He sighed, and the white breakers roared.

THE END

Col. Brion Bayard, Intelligence officer for the World of the Imperium, finds that friends as well as enemies can travel through the Net of alternate world-lines. Master story-teller Keith Laumer spins his own Web—of adventure, intrigue, science-fantasy—as he shuttles Bayard through Alternate Realities to . . .

THE OTHER

IT was one of those tranquil summer evenings when the sunset colors seemed to linger on in the sky even longer than June in Stockholm could explain; I stood by the French windows, looking out at pale rose and tawny gold and electric blue, feeling a sensation near the back of the neck that always before had meant trouble; big trouble, coming my way.

The phone jangled harsh sound through the room, and I beat the track record getting to it, grabbed the old fashioned Imperium-style brass-mounted instrument off the hall table, and waited a moment to be sure my voice wouldn't squeak before I said hello.

"Colonel Bayard?" the voice at the other end said. "The Friherr von Richthofen calling; one moment, please . . ."

Through the open archway to the dining room I could see the dark gleam of Barbro's red hair as she nodded at the bottle of wine Luc was showing her. Candlelight from the elaborate chandelier over her head shed a soft light on snowy linen, gleaming crystal, rare old porcelain, glittering silver; with Luc as our household major domo, every meal was an occasion; but my appetite had vanished. I didn't know why; Richthofen was an old and valued friend, as well as the head of Imperial Intelligence.

"Brion?" Richthofen's faintly-accented voice came from the bell-shaped ear-piece of the telephone. "I am glad to have found you at home."

"What's up, Manfred?"

"Ah . . ." he sounded mildly embarassed. "You have been at home all evening?"

A Novel by KEITH LAUMER

Part One of Three Parts

SIDE OF TIME

"We got in about an hour ago. Have you been trying to reach me?"

"Oh, no. But a small matter has arisen . . ." There was a pause. "I wonder, Brion, if you could find the time to drop down to Imperial Intelligence Headquarters?"

"Certainly. When?"

"Now; tonight . . ." the pause again. Something was bothering him—a strange occurence in itself. "I'm sorry to disturb you at home, Brion, but—"

"I'll be there in half an hour," I said. "Luc will be unhappy, but I guess he'll survive. Can you tell me what it's about?"

"I think not, Brion; the wires may not be secure. Please make my apologies to Barbro—and to Luc too."

Barbro had risen and come around the table. "Brion—what was the call—" She saw my face. "Is there trouble . . ?"

"Don't know, I'll be back as soon as I can. It must be important or Manfred wouldn't have called."

I WENT along the hall to my bedroom, changed into street clothes, took a trench coat and hat—the nights were cool in Stockholm—and went out into the front hall. Luc was there, holding a small apparatus of spring wire and leather.

"I won't be needing that, Luc," I said. "Just a routine trip down to HQ."

"Better take it, sir," Luc's sour face was holding its usual expression of grim disapproval—an expression I had learned masked an intense loyalty. I grinned at him, took the slug gun and its special quick-draw

holster, pulled back my right sleeve and clipped it in place, checked the action. With a flick of the wrist, the tiny slug-gun—the shape and color of a flattened, water-eroded stone—slapped into my palm. I tucked it back in place.

"Just to please you, Luc. I'll be back in an hour; maybe less."

I stepped out into the gleam of the big, square, thick-lensed carriage lights that shed a nostalgic yellow glow over the granite balustrade, went down the wide steps to the waiting car, slid in behind the thick, oak-rimmed wheel. The engine was already idling; I pulled along the gravelled drive, out past the poplars by the open iron gate, into the cobbled city street. Ahead, a car parked at the curb with headlights burning pulled out, took up a position in front of me. In the rear-view mirror I saw a second car ease around the corner, fall in behind me. Jeweled highlights glinted from the elaborate star-burst badge of Imperial Intelligence bolted to the massive grill. It seemed Manfred had sent along an escort to be sure I made it to headquarters.

It was a ten-minute drive through the wide, soft-lit streets of the old capital, superficially like the Stockholm of my native continuum; but here in the Zero-zero world of the Imperium, the center of the vast Net of alternate worlds opened up the M-C drive, the colors were somehow a little brighter, the evening breeze a little softer, the magic of living a little closer.

Following my escort, I crossed the Norrbro Bridge, did a hard right between red granite pillars into a short drive, swung through a set of massive wrought-iron gates with a wave to the Cherry-tunicked sentry as he presented arms, I pulled up before the broad doors of polished iron-bound oak and the brass plate that said KUNGLIGA SVENSKA SPIONAGE, and the car behind me braked with a squeal and doors slammed open. By the time I had slid from behind the wheel, the four men from the two cars had formed a casual half-circle around me. I recognized one of them—a Net operative who had chauffered me into a place called Blight-Insular Two, a few years back. He returned my nod with an efficient and carefully impersonal look.

"They're waiting for you in General Baron von Richthofen's suite, Colonel," he said. I grunted and went up the steps, with the curious feeling that my escort was behaving more like a squad of plain-clothes men making a dangerous pinch, than an honor guard.

MANFRED got to his feet when I came into the office. The look he gave me was an odd one—as though he weren't quite sure just how to put whatever it was he was about to say.

"Brion, I must ask for your indulgence," he said. "Please take a chair. Something of a . . . a troublesome nature has arisen." He looked at me with a worried expression. This wasn't the suave, perfectly poised von Richthofen I was used to seeing daily in the course of my duties as a colonel of Imperial Intelligence. I sat, noticing the careful placement of the four armed agents in the room, and the foursome who had walked me to the office, standing silently by.

"Go ahead, sir," I said, getting formal just to keep in the spirit of the thing. "I understand this is business. I assume you'll tell me what it's all about in time."

"I must ask you a number of questions, Brion," Rochthofen said unhappily. He sat down, the lines in his face suddenly showing his near-eighty years, ran a lean hand over smooth, iron-grey hair, then straightened himself abruptly, leaned back in the chair with the decisive air of a man who has decided something has to be done and it may as well be gotten over with.

"What was your wife's maiden name?" he rapped out.

"Lundane," I answered levelly. Whatever the game was, I'd play along. Manfred had known Barbro longer than I had; her father had served with Richthofen as an Imperial agent for thirty years.

"When did you meet her?"

"About five years ago—at the Royal Midsummer Ball, the night I arrived here."

"Who else was present that night?"

"You, Hermann Goering, Chief Captain Winter . . ." I named a dozen of the guests at that gay affair that had ended so tragically with an attack by raiders from the nightmare world known as B-I Two. "Winter was killed," I added. "By a hand grenade that was meant for me."

"What was your work—originally?"

"I was a diplomat—a United States diplomat until your lads kidnapped me and brought me here." The last was just a subtle reminder that whatever it was that required that my oldest friend in this other Stockholm question me as though I were a stranger, my presence here in the world of the Imperium had been all his idea in the first place. He noted the dig by clearing his throat and twiddling the papers before him for a moment before going on to the next question.

"What is your work here in Stockholm Zero-zero?"

"You gave me a nice job in Intelligence as a Net Surveillance officer—"

"What is the Net?"

"The continuum of alternate world lines; the matrix of simultaneous reality—"

"What is the Imperium?" he cut me off. It was one of those rapid-fire interrogations, designed to rattle the subject and make him forget his lines—not the friendliest kind of questioning a man could encounter.

"The over-government of the Zero-zero A-line in which the M-C generator was developed."

"What does M-C abbreviate?"

"Maxoni-Cocini—the boys that invented the thing, back in 1893—"

"How is the M-C effect employed?"

"It's the drive used to power the Net shuttles."

"Where are Net operations carried out?"

"All across the Net—except for the Blight, of course—"

"What is the Blight?"

"Every A-line within thousands of parameters of the Zero-Zero line is a hell-world of radiation or—"

"What produced the Blight?"

"The M-C effect, mis-handled. You lads here in the Zero-zero line were the only ones who controlled it—"

"What is the Zero-zero line?"

I waved a hand. "This universe we're sitting in right now; the alternate world where the M-C field—"

"Do you have a scar on your right foot?" I smiled—slightly—at the change-of-pace question.

"Uh-huh; where Chief Inspector Bale fired a round between my big toe—"

"Why were you brought here?"

"You needed me to impersonate a Dictator in a place called Blight-Insular Two—"

"Are there other viable A-lines within the Blight?"

I nodded. "Two; one is a war-blasted place with a Common History date of about 1910; the other is my native clime, called B-I Three—"

"You have a bullet scar on your right side?"

"Nope; the left. I also have—"

"What is a Common History date?"

"The date at which two different A-lines' histories diverge—"

"What was your first assignment as a Colonel of Intelligence?"

I ANSWERED the question—and a lot of other ones. For the next hour and a half he covered every facet of my private and public life, digging into those odd corners of casual incident that would be known only to me—and to himself. And all the while, eight armed men stood by.

My pretence of casual acceptance of the situation was wearing a little thin by the time he sighed, laid both hands on the table—I had the sudden, startled impression that he had just slipped a gun into a drawer out of my line of vision—and looked at me with a more normal expression.

"Brion, in the curious profession of which we are both members one encounters the necessity of performing many unpleasant duties. To call you here like this . . ." he nodded at the waiting gunhandlers, who quietly faded away . . . "Yes, under guard—to question you like a common suspect—has been one of the most unpleasant. Rest assured that it was necessary—and that the question has now been resolved to my complete satisfaction." He rose and extended a hand. I got up, feeling a little unsuppressed anger trying to bubble up under my collar; I took his hand, shook it once, and dropped it. My reluctance must have showed.

"Later, Brion—perhaps tomorrow—I can explain this farcical affair. For tonight, I ask you to accept my personal apologies for the inconvenience—the embarrassment I have been forced to cause you. It was in the interest of the Imperium."

I made polite but not enthusiastic noises, and left. Whatever it was that was afoot, I know Richthofen had a reason for what he had done—but that did not make me like it any better—or reduce my curiosity. I was damned if I'd ask any questions.

THERE was no one in sight as I went along to the elevator, rode down, stepped out into the white marble-paved corridor at the ground floor. Somewhere at the far end of the wide hallway feet were hurrying; a door banged with a curious air of finality. I stood, like an animal testing the air before venturing into dangerous new territory. An air of crisis seemed to hang over the silent building.

Then I found myself sniffing in earnest. There was smell of burning wood and asphalt, a hint of smoke. I turned toward the apparent source, walking rapidly but quietly, passed the wide foot of the formal staircase that led up to the reception hall one floor above—and halted, swung back; my eyes were on a dark smudge against the gleaming white tiles. I almost missed the second smudge—a good two yards from the first, and fainter. But the shape of both marks was clear enough: footprints. Six feet farther along the corridor was another faint stain—as though someone had stepped into hot tar, and was tracking it behind him.

The direction of the prints was along the corridor to the left. I looked along the dim-lit way; it all seemed as peaceful as a mortuary after hours—and had that same air of grim business accomplished and more to come.

I went along the hall, at the intersection paused, looking both ways. The odor seemed stronger—a smell like singed paint now. I followed the prints around the corner, twenty feet along the corridor there was a large burn scar against the floor with footprints around it—lots of prints. There was also a spatter of blood, and on the wall, the bloody print of a hand twice the size of mine—and under a sign that said SERVICE STAIR, there was a second handprint on the edge of a door—a handprint outlined in blistered, blackened paint. My wrist twitched—a reflex reminder of the slug gun Luc had insisted I bring along.

It was two steps to the door; I reached for the polished brass knob—and jerked my hand back. It was hot to the touch. With my handkerchief wrapped around my hand, I got the door open; narrow steps went down into shadows and the smell of smouldering wood. I started to reach for the wall switch, then thought better of it, closed the door silently behind me, started down.

At the bottom, I waited for a moment, listening, then gingerly poked my head out to look along the dark basement hall—and froze. Dim shadows danced on the wall opposite—shadows outlined in dull reddish light. I came out, went along to a right-angle turn, risked another look. Fifty feet from me, a glowing figure moved with erratic, jerky speed—a figure that shone in the gloom like a thick-limbed iron statue heated red hot. It darted a few feet, made movements too quick to follow, spun, bobbed across the narrow passage—and disappeared through an open door, like a paper cut-out jerked by a string.

My wrist twitched again, and this time the gun was in my hand—a smooth, comforting feeling, nestling against my palm. The odor of smoke was stronger now. I looked down, in the weak light from behind me made out blackened footprints against the wood-plank flooring. The thought occurred to me that I should go back the way I had come, give an alarm, and then carry on the following-up of my fiery figure with a few heavily-armed witnesses to assure me I wasn't seeing imaginary Angels of Vengeance; but it was just a thought. I was already moving along toward the door, not liking it very well but on the trail of something that wouldn't wait for the wiser counsels of prudence.

The odor was thick in the air

now: the hot-cloth smell of a press-'em-while-you-wait shop, mingled with the hot metallic tang of a foundry, and a little autumnal wood-smoke thrown in for balance. I came up to the door, smooth and silent, flattened myself against the wall, covered the last few inches like a caterpillar sneaking up on a tender young leaf, and risked a fast look inside. The glow from the phantom intruder threw strange reddish shadows on the walls of an unused storeroom, dusty, dark, scattered with odds and ends of litter that should have been swept up but hadn't. In the center of the room, the fiery man himself leaned over a sprawled body; a giant of a man, in a shapeless coverall suit. The fiery man's hands—strange, glowing hands in clumsy-looking gauntlets—plucked at his victim with more-than-human dexterity; then he straightened. I didn't take time to goggle at the spectacle of a three-hundred degree centigrade murderer; there was a chance that his victim wasn't dead yet—and if I hit him quick enough to capitalize on the tiny advantage of surprise. . . .

I forgot all about the slug gun; I went through the door at a run, launched myself at the figure from whom heat radiated like a tangible wall now—and saw it turn with unbelievable, split-second speed, throw up a hand—five glowing fingers outspread—take one darting step back—

Long, pink sparks crackled from the outflung hand, leaping toward me; like a diver hanging suspended in mid-air, I saw the harsh, electric glare, heard the pop! as the miniature lightnings closed with me . . .

Then a silent explosion turned the world to blinding white, hurling me into nothingness.

FOR a long time I lay, clinging to the dim and formless dream that was my refuge from the hazy memory of smouldering footprints, a deserted room, and a fantastic glowing man crouched over his victim. I groaned, groped for the dream again, found only hard, cold concrete against my face, a roiling nausea in the pit of my stomach, and a taste like copper pennies in my mouth. I groped, found the floor, pushed hard to get my face up out of the grit, blinked gummed eyes . . .

The room was dark, empty, silent, dusty, vacant as a robbed grave. I used an old tennis shoe someone had left in my mouth as a tongue, grated it across dry lips, made the kind of effort that won luckier souls the Congressional Medal, and sat up. There was a ringing in my head like the echo of the Liberty Bell just before it cracked.

I maneuvered to hands and

knees, and, taking it by easy stages, got to my feet. I sniffed; the burning odor was gone like the crease in four-dollar pants. And my quarry hadn't waited around to see whether I was all right; he—or it—had been gone for some time—and had taken the corpse with him.

The light in the room was too weak to show me any detail. I fumbled, got out a massive flint-and-steel Imperium-style lighter made three tries, got a smoky yellow flame, squinted to find the trail of blackened prints that would show me which way the fiery man had gone.

There weren't any.

I held the lighter closer to the subject, looking for the scars I had seen earlier. I went all the way to the door, then came back, cast about off-side among empty cardboard cartons and stacked floor-wax drums. There weren't any footprints—not even the old-fashioned kind; only mine. The dust was thick, undisturbed. There were no marks to show where the body had lain, not a trace of my wild charge across the room. Only the scrabble-marks I had made getting to my feet proved that I wasn't dreaming my own existence. I had heard of people who pinched themselves to see if they were dreaming; it had always seemed a little silly to me—you could dream a pinch as well as any other, more soothing sensation. But I solemnly took a fold of skin on the back of my hand, squeezed hard. I could barely feel it.

That didn't seem to prove anything one way or another. I made it to the door like a man walking to the undertaker's to save that last cab fare, went out into the hall. The lights were out; only a dim, phosphorescent glow seemed to emanate from the walls and floor. The sight of the wood planking gave me no comfort at all. The prints burned here had been dark, distinct, charred; now the dull-varnish finish gleamed at me, unmarked.

THE buzzing in my head had diminished to a faint hum like a trapped fly as I pushed through the door into the ground-floor hallway. The milk-glass globe shielding the light-bulb hanging from the high, mosaiced ceiling glared at me with an unhealthy, electric blue. A blackish haze seemed to hang in the still air of the silent corridor, lending a funereal tinge to the familiar vista of marble floor and varnished doors. Behind me, the door clicked shut with a shockingly loud, metallic clatter. I took a few breaths of the blackish air, failed to detect any hint of smoke—or any other odor that suggested that anything so earthy as a living creature had ever sullied the inorganic steril-

ity of the place. A glance at the door showed me what I had expected—smooth, dark-brown paint, unmarked by burning hand-prints.

I crossed the hall, pushed into an empty office. On the desk, a small clay pot sat on a blotter, filled with hard, baked-looking dirt. One dry leaf lay on the desk beside it. The desk clock said twelve-oh-five. I reached past it, picked up the phone, jiggled the hook. The silence at the other end was like a concrete wall. I jiggled some more, failed to evoke so much as a crackle of line-static. I left the room, tried the next office with the same result. The phones were as dead as my hopes of living to a ripe old age outside a padded cell.

I gave up the idea of calling home to tell Barbro how fine I felt, went back out in the hall.

My footsteps in the corridor had a loud, clattering quality. I made it to the front entrance, pushed out through the heavy door, stood on the top step looking down at my car, still sitting where I had left it. The two escort vehicles were gone. Beyond the car, I noticed that the guard shack at the gate was dark the street lamps seemed to be off too and the usual gay pattern of the lights of the city's towers was missing. But a power-failure wouldn't affect the carbide pole-lights. My glance went on to the sky; it was black, overcast. Even the stars were in on the black out.

I slid into the seat turned the switch, pressed the starter button on the floor. Nothing happened. I muttered an impolite suggestion, tried again. No action. The horn didn't work either, and twisting the light switch produced nothing but a dry *snick!*

I got out of the car, stood undecided for a moment, then started around the building for the garages in the rear. I slowed, halted before I got there: they were dark, the heavy doors closed and barred. I fetched another sigh, and for the first time noticed the dead, stale smell of the air. I walked back along the length of the drive, passed the guard post, unaccountable deserted, emerged onto the street. It stretched into shadows, silent and dark. Predictably, there were no cabs in sight. A few cars stood at the curb. I started off toward the bridge, noticed a dark shape halfway across it: a car, without lights, parked midway in the busy span. For some reason, the sight shocked me; a small, uneasy feeling began to supplant the irritated frustration that had been gathering strength somewhere down below my third shirt button. I walked along to the car, peered in through the rolled-up windows.

There was no one inside. I thought of pushing it to the side of the street, then considered the state of my constitution at the moment and went on.

THERE were more abandoned cars in Gustav Adolfstorg, all parked incongruously in midstream. One was a boxy open touring car. The ignition switch was on, and the light switch too. I went on, checked the next one I came to; the switches were on. It appeared that there had been an epidemic of automotive ignition trouble in the city tonight, as well as a break-down in the power plants—a coincidence that did nothing to improve my spirits.

I walked on across the square with its heroic equestrian statue, past the dark front of the Opera house, crossed Arsenalsgatan, turned up Tradgarsgatan, walked past shuttered shops, bleak in an eerie light like an eclipse. The city was absolutely still. No breeze stirred the lifeless air; no growl of auto engines disturbed the silence, no clatter of feet, no distant chatter of voices. My first, faint sense of uneasiness was rapidly developing into a full-scale cold sweat.

I cut across the corner of the Park, skirting the glass display cases crowded with a display of provincial handicrafts, hurried across a stretch of barren clay—

The wrongness of it penetrated my preoccupation: I looked back across the expanse of sterile earth, searching on across the garden—the oddly naked garden. There were the graveled paths, the tile-lined pools—their fountaining jets lifeless—the band shell, the green-painted benches, the steel lamp-posts with their attached refuse containers and neatly framed tram schedules. But not one blade of grass, not a tree or flowering shrub—no sign of the magnificent bed of prize rhododendron that had occupied a popular magazine's rotogravure section only a week earlier. I turned and started on, half-running now, the unease turning to an undefined dread that caught at my throat and surged in my stomach like foul water in a foundering galley's bilge.

I PUSHED through the iron gates of my house wheezing like a blown boiler from the run, stared at the blank, black windows, feeling the implacable air or abandonment, desolation,—of utter vacantness. I went on up the drive, taking in the bare stretch of dirt that had been verdant green only hours before. Where the poplars had stood, curious foot-wide pits showed black against the grey soil. Only a scatter of dead leaves was left to remind me that once trees had

stood here. The crunch of my feet on the gravel was loud; I stepped off onto the former lawn, felt my feet sink into the dry, crumbling earth. At the steps, I looked back; only my trail of footmarks showed that life had ever existed here—those, and a scatter of dead insects under the carriage lamps. The door opened; I pushed inside, stood savoring the funereal hush, my heart thudding painfully high in my chest.

"Barbro!" I called; my voice was a dry croak-a croak of cold fear. I ran along the unlighted hall, went up the stairs four at a time, slammed through the sitting-room door, on through into the bedroom, found only silence, an aching stillness in which the sounds of my passage seemed to echo with a shocked reproach. I stumbled out of the room, yelling for Luc, not really expecting an answer now, yelling to break the awful, ominous stillness, the fear of what I might find in the dark, dead rooms closing my throat like a clutching hand.

I searched room by room, went back and tried the closets, shouting, slamming doors wide, not fighting the panic that was welling up inside me, giving it vent in violent action.

But there was nothing. Every room was in perfect order, every piece of furniture in its accustomed place, every drape discretely drawn, every dish and book and garment undisturbed—but on the marble mantlepiece, the brass clock sat silent, its tick stilled; and in the pots where the broad-leaved plants had lent their touch of green, only the dead soil remained. I stood in the center of the dark library, staring out at the grim, metallic glow of the night sky, feeling the silence flow back in like a tangible thing, trying now to regain my control, to accept the truth: Barbro was gone—along with every other living thing in the Imperial capital.

CHAPTER II

I DIDN'T notice the sound at first; I was sitting in the empty drawing room, staring out past the edge of heavy brocaded drapes at the empty street, listening to the thud of my empty heart. . . .

Then it penetrated: a steady thumping, faint, far away—but a sound, in the silent city. I jumped up, made it to the door and was out on the steps before the idea of caution occurred to me. The thumping was clearer now; a rhythmic slap, like the feet of marching troops, coming closer—

I saw them then, a flicker of movement through the iron spears of the fence; I faded back inside, watched from the dark-

ness as they swung past, four abreast, big men in drab, shapeless coveralls. I tried to estimate their number; perhaps two hundred, some laden with heavy packs, some with rifle-like weapons, one or two being helped by their comrades. They'd seen action somewhere tonight.

The last of them passed, and I came out ran softly down the drive, and, keeping to the shelter of the buildings along the avenue, followed a hundred yards behind them.

The first, stunning blow was past now; leaving me with a curious sense of detachment; the detachment of the sole survivor. The troop ahead swung along Nybroviken, grim, high-shouldered marchers a head taller than my six feet, not singing, not talking—just marching, block after block, past empty cars, empty buildings, empty parks—and a dead cat, lying in the gutter. I paused, stared at the ruffled, pathetic clay, feeling a kinship against the looming stone facades.

They turned left into Uppsalavagen—and I realized then where they were headed: to the Net Terminus Building at Stallmastaregorden. I was watching from the shelter of a massive oak a hundred yards across the broad street as the end of the column turned in at the ornate gate, disappeared through the massive portal that had been smashed from its hinges. One man dropped off, took up a post at the entry. I crossed the street silently, followed the wide walk around to the side entrance, wasted a few seconds wishing for the keys in my safe back at the house, then headed for the back of the building, stumbling through denuded flower beds, following the line of the wall, barely visible in the blackish light—a light that seemed curiously to shine upward from the ground rather than impinge from the starless sky. A masonry wall barred my way; I jumped, caught the top edge, pulled myself over, dropped into the paved court behind the Terminal. Half a dozen boxy wheeled shuttles were parked here, of the special type used for work in some of the nearer A-lines—worlds with Common History dates only a few centuries in the past, where other Stockholms existed with streets in which a disguised delivery van could move unnoticed.

ONE of the vehicles was close to the wall; I climbed up on its hood, reached, tried to lift the wide, metal-framed double-hung window. It didn't budge. I went back down, fumbled in the dark under the dash, brought out the standard tool kit, found a hammer, scrambled back up, and as

gently as I could, smashed the glass from the frame. It made a hell of a racket; I stood listening, half-expecting to hear indignant voices calling questions; but the only sound was my own breathing, and a creak from the shuttle's springs as I shifted my weight.

The room I clambered into was a maintenance shop, lined with long work benches littered with disassembled shuttle components, its walls hung with tools and equipment. I went out through the door at the far end of the room, along the corridor to the big double doors leading into the garages. Faint sounds came from within. I eased the door open a foot, slipped inside, into the echoing stillness of the wide, high-vaulted depot. A double row of Net shuttles reared up in the gloom, heavy, ten-man machines, smaller three-man scouts, a pair of light new-model single-seaters at the far end of the line.

And beyond them, dwarfing them—a row of dark, blocky machines of strange design, massive and ugly as garbage scows illogically dumped here among the elegantly decorated vehicles of the Imperial TNL service. Dark figures moved around the strange machines forming up into groups beside each heavy transport, responding to gestures and an occasional grunted command. I walked along behind the parked shuttles, eased forward between two from which I had a clear view of the proceedings. The doors of the first of the five alien machines were open; as I watched, a suited man clambered in, followed by the next in line. The troops—whoever they were—were reembarking. They were clumsy, slope-shouldered heavyweights, covered from head to toe in baggy, dull grey suits with dark glass faceplates. One of the Imperial machines was impeding the smooth flow of the moving column; two of the intruders stepped to it, gripped it by its near side runner, and, with one heave, tipped it up, dumped it over on its side with a heavy slam and a tinkle of breaking glass. I felt myself edging farther back out of sight; the scout weighed a good two tons.

THE first shuttle was loaded now; the line of men shuffled along to the next, continued loading. Time was slipping past; in another ten minutes all the suited men would be aboard their machines, gone—back to whatever world-line they had come from. It was clear that these were invaders from the Net—a race of men, unknown to Imperial authorities, who possessed an M-C drive of their own. Men who were my only link with the

vanished inhabitants of desolated Stockholm Zero-zero. Waiting here wouldn't help; I had to follow them and learn what I could.

I took a bracing lungful of the stale Terminal air, stepped out of my hiding place, feeling as exposed as a rat between holes as I moved along the wall, putting distance between myself and the strangers. My objective was one of the two-man scouts; a fast, maneuverable machine with adequate armament and the latest in instrumentation. I reached it, got the door open with no more than a rattle of the latch that sent my stomach crowding up under my ribs; but there was no alarm.

Even inside there was enough of the eerie light to see my way by. I went forward to the control compartment, slid into the operator's seat, tried the main drive warm-up switch.

Nothing happened. I tried other controls, without response; the M-C drive was as dead as the cars abandoned in the city streets. I got up, went back to the entry, eased it open, stepped silently out. I could hear the invaders working away two hundred feet from me, shielded from view by the ranked shuttles. An idea was taking form—an idea I didn't like very well. The first thing it would require was that I get around to the opposite side of the Terminal. I turned . . .

He was standing ten feet away, just beyond the rear corner of the shuttle. At close range he looked seven feet tall, wide in proportion, with gloved hands the size of briefcases. He took a step toward me, and I backed away. He followed, almost leisurely. Two more steps and I would be clear of the shelter of the machine, exposed to the view of any of the others who might happen to glance my way. I stopped; the stranger kept on coming, one immense, stubby-fingered hand reaching for me.

My wrist twitched, and the slug gun was in my hand. I aimed for a point just below the center of the chest, and fired. At the muffled *slap!* of the gun, the monster-man jacknifed, went down backward with a slam like a horse falling in harness. I jumped past him, to the shelter of the next machine, crouched there, waiting. It seemed impossible that no one had heard the sound of the shot or the fall of the victim, but the sounds from the far end of the vast shed went on, uninterrupted. I let out a breath I just realized I had been holding, feeling my heart thumping in my chest like a trapped rabbit. With the gun still in my hand, I stepped out, went back to the man I had shot. He lay on his back, spread-eagled like a bear-skin rug—and about the same size. Through his shattered

face-plate, I saw a broad, coarse, dead-grey face, with porous skin, a wide, lipless mouth, half open now to show square, yellow teeth. Small eyes pale blue as a winter sky stared lifelessly under bushy yellow brows that grew in a continuous bar across the forehead. A greasy lock of dull blonde hair fell beside one hollow temple. It was the most apallingly hideous face I had ever seen. I backed off from it, turned and started off into the shadows.

THE last in line of the alien shuttles was my target. To get it, I had to cross an open space of perhaps fifty feet, concealed by nothing but the dimness of the light. I stepped out, started across the exposed stretch as silently as slick leather soles would let me. Every time one of them turned in my direction, I froze until he turned away. I had almost reached shelter when one of the officers tallying men turned to stare toward the other end of the huge shed; someone had missed the one I had shot. He called—a sudden hoarse cry like a bellow of mortal agony. The others paid no attention. The one who had called snapped an order, started off to investigate. I had perhaps half a minute before he found his missing crewman. I slipped into the shadow of the supply shuttle, worked my way quickly to the last in line, slid around the end; the coast was clear. I made it to the entry in three quick steps, swung myself up, and stepped inside the enemy machine.

There was a sickish animal odor here, a subtle alienness of proportion; I took in the control panels, the operator's chair, the view-screens, the chart table in a swift glance; all were recognizable—but in size and shape and detail they differed in a hundred ways from the familiar Imperial patterns—or from any normal scheme of convenience. I hitched myself into the high, wide, hard seat, stared at squares and circles of plastic glowing in clashing shades of brown and violet. Curious symbols embossed on metal strips labelled some of the baroquely curved levers which projected from the dull orhre panel. A pair of prominent foot pedals, set awkwardly wide apart showed signs of heavy wear.

I stared at the array, feeling the sweat begin to pop out on my forehead; I had only a few seconds to decide—and if my guess was wrong—

A simple knife switch set in the center of the panel drew my attention. There were scratches on the panel around it, and on the mud-colored plastic grip. It was as good a guess as any. I reached out tentatively—

Outside, a horrific shriek ripped through the silence; I

jerked, smashed my knee against a sharp corner of the panel. The pain brought a warm flood of instinctive anger and decision. I ground my teeth together, reached again, slammed the lever down.

At once, the lights dimmed; I heard the entry close with an echoing impact. Heavy vibration started up, rattling ill-fitting panel member. Indicator lights began to wink; curious lines danced on a pair of glowing pinkish screens. I felt a ghostly blow against the side of the hull; one of the boys wanted in, but he was a trifle too late. The screens had cleared to show me a view of black desolation under a starless sky—the familiar devastation of the Blight, the M-C field was operating; the stolen shuttle was carrying me out across the Net of alternate worlds and at terrific speed, to judge from the quicksilver flow of the scene outside as I flashed across the parallel realities of the A-lines. I had made my escape; the next order of business was to determine how to control the strange machine.

Half an hour's study of the panel sufficed to give me a general idea of the meanings of the major instruments. I was ready now to attempt to maneuver the stolen shuttle. I gripped the control level, tugged at it; it didn't move. I tried again, succeeded only in bending the metal arm. I stood, braced my feet, put my shoulders into it; with a sharp clang, the level broke off short. I sank back in the chair, tossed the broken handle to the floor. The controls were locked. The owners of the strange shuttle had taken precautions against any disgruntled potential deserter who might have an impulse to ride the machine to some idyllic world line of his own choice. Once launched, its course was predetermined. Guided by automatic instruments—and I was powerless to stop it.

CHAPTER III

THE hours passed while the shuttle rushed on; into the unexplored and uncharted depths of the Net. I sat, watching the fantastic flow of the scenes beyond the view screens—the weird phenomenon that Chief Captain Winter of the TNL Service had called A-entropy. At the speed at which I was travelling—far greater than anything ever managed by Imperial technicians—living creatures would not be detectable; a man would flash across the screen and be gone in a fraction of a microsecond. But the fixed features of the scene—the streets, the buildings, the stone and metal and wood—loomed around me. And as I watched, they changed. . .

I saw the half-familiar struc-

tures seem to flow, to shrink or expand gradually, sprouting outre new elements; saw doorways widen, or dwindle and disappear; red granite blocks rippled and flowed, changed by degrees to grey, polished slabs. The nearly legible lettering on a nearby shop window writhed, reformed itself, the Roman capitals distorting into forms like Cyrillic letters, then changed again, and again, to become lines of meaningless symbols. I saw sheds and shaks appear, swell, crowding among the older structures, burgeon mightily into blank, forbidding piles that soared up out of sight. Balconies budded as window ledges, grew into great cantilevered terraces, then merged, shutting out the sky—and then they, in turn, drew back, and new facades stood revealed: grim, blackish ribbed columns, rearing up a thousand feet into the unchanging sky, linked by narrow bridges that shifted, twitching like nervous fingers, widening, spreading into a vast network that entangled the spires like a spider's web, then broke, faded back, leaving only a dark bar here and there to join the now ponderous, squat towers like chains linking captive monsters. All this in a frozen, eternal instant of time, as the stolen shuttle rushed blindly across the lines of alternate probability toward its unknown destination.

I sat, entranced, watching the universe evolve around me; then I found myself nodding, my eyes aching abominably. I realized suddenly that I hadn't eaten my dinner yet—nor slept—in how many hours? I got out of the chair, made a quick search of the compartment, found a coarse-woven cloak with a rank odor like attar of locker room blended with essence of stable. I was too weary to be choosy, though; I spread the cloth on the floor in the tiny space between the operator's seat and the power compartment, curled up on it, and let the overwhelming weariness sweep over me. . . .

. . . and awakened with a start. The steady drone of the drive had changed in tone, dropped to a deep thrumming. My watch said I'd been on the way a little less than three and a half hours—but brief as the trip had been, the ugly but fantastically efficient shuttle had raced across the Net into regions where the Imperial scouts had never penetrated. I scrambled up, got my eyes open far enough to make out the screens.

It was a scene from a drunk's delerium. Strange, crooked towers rose up from dark, empty canons where footpaths threaded over heaped refuse among crowded stalls, doorless arches, between high-wheeled carts laden with

meaningless shapes of wood and metal and leather. From carved stone lintels, cornices, pilasters, grotesque faces peered, goggled, grimaced like devils in an Aztec tomb. As I gaped, the growl of the drive sank to a mutter, died; the oddly shifting scene froze into the immobility of identity. I had arrived—somewhere.

But the street—if I could use that term for this crowded alley—was deserted, and the same odd, fungoid light I had seen in the empty streets of Stockholm glowed faintly from every surface under the dead, empty, opaque blackness of the sky above.

Then without warning a wave of nausea bent me double, retching. The shuttle seemed to rise under me, twist, spin. Forces seized me, stretched me out as thin as copper wire, threaded me through a red-hot eye of a needle, then slammed me into a compacted lump like a metal-baler cubing a junked car. I heard a whistling noise, and it was me, trying to get enough air into my lungs to let out a yell of agony—

And then the pressure was gone. I was sprawled on my back on a hard floor but still breathing, and in my usual shape, watching lights wink out on the panel. I felt the sharp, reassuring pain of an honest cut on my knee, saw a small dark patch of blood through a tear in the cloth. I got to my feet, and the screen caught my eye . . .

THE two-foot rectangle of the view-plate showed me a crowd packing the narrow street that had been deserted a moment ago; a mob of squat, hulking, long-armed creatures surging and milling in an intricate play of dark and light where vivid shafts of sunlight struck down from high above into deep shadow—

Then the screens blanked into darkness. I twisted controls but the glass stayed dark. Then behind me metal growled; I whirled, saw the entry hatch jump, swing open. The shuttle trembled, lurched—and a vast, wide shape stepped in through the opening—a fanged monstrosity with a bulging, bald head, a wide, thin-lipped, chinless face, huge, strangely elaborate ears, a massive, hulking body buckled into straps and hung with clanking bangles, incongruous against a shaggy pelt like a blonde gorilla. The muscles of my right wrist tensed, ready to slap the slug gun into my hand; but I relaxed, let my arms fall to my sides. I could kill this fellow—and the next one who stepped inside. But there was more at stake here than my own personal well-being. A moment before, I had seen the miracle of a deserted street transformed in the wink of an eye into a teeming market-

place packed with sunlight and movement. If these grotesque, golden-haired apes knew the secret of that enchantment—then maybe my own Stockholm could also come back from the dead—if I could find the secret.

"All right, big boy," I said aloud. "I'll come along peacefully."

The creature reached, clamped a hand like a power shovel on my shoulder, literally lifted me, hurled me at the door. I struck the jamb, bounced, fell out into an odor like dead meat and broccoli rotting together. A growl ran through the shaggy mob surrounding me; they jumped back, jabbering. I made it to my feet, slapping at the decayed rubbish clinging to my jacket, and my captor came up from behind, grabbed my arm as though he had decided to tear it off, sent me spinning ahead. I hooked a foot in a loop of melon rind, went down again, and something hit me across the back of the shoulders like a falling tree. I oofed, tried to get to hands and knees to make my white god speech, felt a kick that slammed me forward with my face ploughing into spongy, reeking garbage. I came up spitting in time to take a smashing blow full in the face, and saw bright constellations burst above me like a Fourth of July display, long ago in another world.

I was aware of my feet dragging, worked them to relieve the gouging of hard fingers under my arms; then I was stumbling, half dragged between two of the hairy men who shouldered their way through the press of babbling spectators that gave way reluctantly, their eyes like blue marbles staring at me as though I were a victim of a strange and terrible disease.

IT seemed like a long way that they hauled me, while I gradually adjusted my thinking to the reality of my captivity by creatures that awakened racial memories of ogres and giants and things that went bump in the night. But here they were, real as life and twice as smelly, scratching at hairy hides with fingers like bananas, showing great yellowish fighting fangs in grimaces of amazement and disgust, looming over me like angry goblins over a small boy. I stumbled along through the hubbub of raucous sound and eye-watering stench toward whatever fate trolls kept in store for hapless mortals who fell among them, trying not to look as bad as I felt, taking it all in and waiting for my chance to make my pitch.

We came out from the narrow way into a wider but not cleaner avenue lined with curious, multi-tiered stalls, where grey-maned merchants squatted, peering

down from their high perches, shouting their wares, tossing down purchases to customers, catching thick, square coins on the fly. There were heaped fruits, odd-shaped clay pots of all sizes capped and sealed with purplish tar, drab-colored mats of woven fibre, flimsy-looking contraptions of hammered sheet metal, harnesses, straps of leather with massive brass buckles, strings of brightly-polished brass and copper discs like old English horse brasses. And in this fantastic bazaar a horde of variegated near-humanity milled: a dozen races and colors of shaggy submen, half-men, ape-men; manlike giants with great bushes of bluish hair fringing bright red faces; incredibly tall, slim creatures, with sleek, black fur, curiously short legs and long, flat feet; wide squat individuals with round shoulders and long, drooping noses. Some wore great loops and strings of the polished brasses, others had only one or two baubles pinned to the leather straps that seemed to constitute their only clothing. And others, the more bedraggled members, with strap-worn shoulders and horny bare feet, had no brass at all. And over all, the great blue and green flies hovered, droning, like a living canopy.

I saw the crowd part to let a great, slow-moving beast push through, a thing as big as a small Indian elephant, and with the same ponderous tread; but the trunk was no more than an exaggerated pig's snout, and from below it, two great shovel tusks of yellow ivory thrust out from the underslung jaw above a drooping pink lower lip, looped with saliva and froth. Wide strips of inch-thick leather harnessed the beast to a heavy cart stacked with hooped barrels, and a shaggy driver atop the load slapped a vast braided whip across the massive back of his animal. Farther on, two of the short, burly man-things—they would weigh in at five hundred pounds apiece, I estimated—toiled in harness beside a mangy mastodon-like animal whose blunt tusks were capped with six-inch wooden knobs.

WE reached the end of the boulevard and after a short delay to kick a few determined spectators back, my bodyguard urged me roughly up a wide, garbage-littered flight of steep, uneven stone steps, on through a gaping, doorless opening where two low-browed louts in black straps and enamelled brasses rose from crouching positions to intercept us. I leaned on the wall and worked on getting my arms back into their sockets while the boys staged a surly reunion. Other members emerged from the hot, zoo-smelling gloom of

the rabbit-warren building, came over to wrinkle brows and grimace at me, prodding and poking with fingers like gun barrels. I backed away, flattened myself against the wall, for some unfortunate reason remembering a kitten that Gargantua had been very fond of until it broke. . . .

My guards pushed through, clamped onto my arms again in a proprietary way, hooted for gangway, dragged me into one of the arched openings off the irregularly-shaped entry hall. I tried to follow the turnings and twisting and dips and rises of the tunnel-like passage with some vague idea of finding my way back out later, but I soon lost track. It was almost pitch dark here; small, yellowish incandescent bulbs glowed at fifty-foot intervals, showing me a puddled floor, rough-hewn walls with many branching side-passages. After a couple of hundred yards, the hall widened into a gloomy 30-foot chamber. One of my keepers rooted in a heap of rubbish, produced a wide strap of thick blackish leather attached to the wall by a length of rope, buckled it around my right wrist, gave me a shove, then went and squatted by the wall. The other cop went off along a corridor that curved sharply up and out of sight. I kicked enough of the damp debris aside to make a place to sit and settled down for a wait. Sooner or later someone in authority would be wanting to interrogate me. For that, communication would have to be established—and as a Net-travelling race, I assumed my captors would have some linguistic capability. After that . . .

I remember stretching out full length on the filthy floor, having a brief thought that for slimy brick, it was amazingly comfortable; then a big, hard foot was kicking at me. I started to sit up, was hauled to my feet by the rope on my arm, marched along another dingy passage. My feet were almost too heavy to lift now, and my stomach felt like a raw wound. I tried to calculate how many hours it had been since I had eaten, but lost count; my brain was working sluggishly, like a clock dipped in syrup.

THE chamber we arrived at—somewhere high in the squat building, I thought; the walk had been mostly along upward slanting corridors—was domed, roughly circular, with niches set in the irregularly-surfaced walls. There was a terrible odor of dung and rotting hay; the room seemed more like a den in a zoo than an apartment in a human dwelling; I had an impulse to look around for the opening the bear would emerge from. There were heaps of greyish rags dumped in some of the niches;

then one of them moved, and I realized that it was a living creature—an incredibly aged, scruffy, specimen of my captors' race. The two escorting me urged me closer to the ancient; they had a subdued air now, as though in the presence of rank. In the poor light that filtered in from an arrangement of openings around the walls, I saw a hand like a grey leather-covered claw come up, rake fitfully at the thin, mothy-looking chest hair of the oldster. I made out his eyes then —dull blue, half-veiled by drooping upper lids, nested in the blood-red crescents of sagging lower lids. They stared at me fixedly, unblinking. Below, great tufts of grey hair sprouted from gaping half-inch nostrils; the mouth was puckered, toothless, as wide as a hip pocket. The rest of the face was a mass of doughy wrinkles, framed between long locks of uncombed white hair from which the incredible long-lobed ears poked, obscenely pink and naked. The chin hair, caked with foreign matter, hung down across the shrunken chest, against which bony, bald knees poked up like grey stones. I accidentally breathed, choked at a stench like a rotting whale, was roughly jerked back into position.

The patriarch made a hoarse, croaking noise. I waited, breathing through my mouth. One of my jailers shook me, barked something at me.

"Sorry, fellows," I croaked. "No kapoosh."

The bearded elder jumped as though he'd been poked with a hot iron, squalled something, spraying me in the process. He bounced up and down with surprising energy, still screeching, then stopped abruptly and thrust his face close to mine. One of my guards grabbed my neck with a hard hand, anticipating my reaction. I stared into the blue eyes —eyes as human as mine, set in this ghastly caricature of a face-saw the open pores as big as match heads, watched a trickle of saliva find its way from the loose mouth down into the beard . . .

He leaned back with a snuffle, waved an arm, made a speech. When he finished, a thin voice piped up from the left; I twisted, saw another mangy bear-skin rug shifting position. My owners propelled me in that direction, held me while the second oldster, even uglier than the first, looked me over. While he stared and drooled, my gaze wandered up to a higher niche. In the shadows, I could barely make out the propped bones of a skeleton, the empty eye sockets gazing down, the massive jaws grinning sardonically, a thick leather strap still circling the neck bones. Apparently promotion to the local Supreme Court was a life appointment.

A JERK at my arm brought me back to more immediate matters. The grandpa before me shrilled. I didn't answer. He curled his lips back, exposing toothless yellowish gums and a tongue like a pink sock full of sand, and screamed. That woke up a couple more wise men; there were answering hoots and squawks from several directions. My keepers dutifully guided me over to the next judge, an obese old fellow with a bloated sparsely-haired belly over which large black fleas hurried on erratic paths like bloodhounds looking for a lost trail. This one had one tooth left—a hooked, yellow-brown canine over an inch long. He showed it to me, made gobbling noises, then leaned out and took a swipe at me with an arm as long as a dock crane. My alert guardians pulled me back as I ducked, I was grateful; even this senile old reprobate packed enough wallop to smash my jaw and break my neck if he had connected.

At a querelous cry from a niche high up in a dark corner, we steered in that direction. A lank hand with two fingers missing groped, pulled a crooked body up into a sitting position. Half a face looked down at me. There were scars, then a ragged edge, then bare, exposed bone where the right cheek had been. The eye socket was still there, but empty, the lid puckered and sunken. The mouth, with one corner missing, failed to close properly—an effect that produced a vacuous, loose-lipped smile—as appropriate to this horror as a poodle shave on a hyena.

I was staggering now, not reacting as promptly as my leaders would have liked. The one on the left—the more vicious of the two, I had already decided—lifted me up by one arm, slammed me down, jerked me back to my feet, then shook me like a dusty blanket. I staggered, got my feet back under me, jerked free, and hit him hard in the belly. It was like punching a sand bag; he twisted me casually back into position. I don't think he even noticed the blow.

We stood in the center of the room for a while then, while the council of elders deliberated. One got mad and spat across the room at the big-bellied one; he replied with a hurled handful of offal. Apparently that was the sign for the closing of the session; my helpers backed off, shoved me out into the corridor, and hustled me off on another trip through the crooked passages, with the hoots and snarls ringing from the chamber behind us.

This journey ended in still another room, like the others, no more than a wide place in the corridor. There was a stone bench, some crude-looking shelves big

enough for coffins in one corner, the usual dim bulb, heaped garbage, odds and ends of equipment of obscure function. There was a hole in the center of the chamber from which a gurgling sound came; sanitary facilities, I judged, from the odor. This time I was strapped by one ankle and allowed to sit on the floor. A clay pot with some sort of mush in it was thrust at me. I got a whiff, gagged, pushed it away. I wasn't that hungry—not yet.

AN hour passed. I had the feeling I was waiting for something. My two proprietors—or two others, I wasn't sure—sat across the room, hunkered down on their haunches, dipping up their dinner from their food pots, not talking. I could hardly smell the place now—my olfactory nerves were numb. Every so often a newcomer would shamble in, come over to gape at me, then move off.

Then a messenger arrived, barked something peremptory; my escort got to their feet, licked their fingers carefully with thick, pink tongues, as big as shoe soles, came over and unstrapped the ankle bracelet, started me off again. We went down, this time—taking one branching byway after another, passing through a wide hall where at least fifty hulking louts sat at long benches, holding some sort of meeting, past an entry through which late-evening light glowed, then down again, into a narrow passage that ended in a cul-de-sac.

Lefty—my more violent companion—yanked at my arm, thrust me toward a round two foot opening like an oversized rathole set eighteen inches above the floor. It was just about wide enough for a man to crawl into. I got the idea. For a moment, I hesitated; this looked like the end of the trail. Once inside, there'd be no further opportunities for escape—not that I had had any so far.

A blow on the side of the head slammed me against the wall. I went down, twisted on my back. The one who had hit me was standing over me, reaching for a new grip. I'd had about enough of this fellow; without pausing to consider the consequences, I bent my knee, smashed a hard, ikedo-type kick to his groin. He doubled over, and my second kick caught him square in the mouth; I got a glimpse of pinkish blood welling—

The other man-ape grabbed me thrust me at the burrow almost casually. I dived for it, scrambled into a damp chill and an odor as solid as well-aged cheese. A crawl of five feet brought me to a drop-off. I felt around over the edge, found the floor two feet below, swung my legs around and stood, facing the entrance with

the slug-gun in my hand. If Big Boy came in after me, he'd get a surprise.

But I saw the two of them silhouetted against the light from along the corridor. Lefty was leaning on his friend, making plaintive squeaking noises. Then they went off along the corridor together. Apparently whatever their instructions were, they did not include taking revenge on the new specimen—not yet.

CHAPTER IV

THE traditional first move when imprisoned in the dark was to pace off the dimensions of the cell, a gambit which presumably lends a mystic sense of mastery over one's environment. Of course, I wasn't actually imprisoned; I could crawl back out into the corridor—but since I would undoubtedly meet Lefty before I had gone far, the idea lacked appeal. That left me with the pacing-off to do.

I started from the opening, took a step which I estimated at three feet, and slammed against a wall. No help there.

Back at my starting point, I took a more cautious step, then another—

There was a sound from the darkness ahead. I stood, one foot poised, not breathing, just listening. . . .

"Vansi pa' me' zen pa'," a mellow tenor voice said from the darkness. *"Sta' zi?"*

I backed a step. The gun was still in my hand. The other fellow had the advantage; his eyes would be used to the dark, and I was outlined against the faint glow from the tunnel. At the latter thought, I dropped flat, felt the cold wetness of the rough floor come through my clothes.

"Bo' jou', ami," the voice said. *"E' vou Gallice?"*

Whoever he was, he was presumably a fellow prisoner. And the language he had spoken did not sound much like the grunts and clicks of the ogres outside. Still, I had no impulse to rush over and get acquainted.

"Kansh' tu dall' Scansk . . ." the voice came again. And this time I almost got the meaning. The accent was horrible, but it sounded remotely like it could be Swedish. . . .

"Maybe Anglic, you," the voice said.

"Maybe," I answered, hearing my voice come out as a croak. "Who're you?"

"Ah, good! I took a blink from you so you come into." The accent was vaguely Hungarian and the words didn't make much sense. "Why catch they you? Wheriform commer you?"

I edged a few feet to the side to get farther from the light. The floor slanted up slightly. I thought of using my lighter, but

that would only make me a better target if this new chum had any unfriendly ideas—and nothing I had encountered so far in giant-land led me to expect otherwise.

"Don't be shy of you," the voice urged. "I am friend."

"I asked you who you are," I said. My hackles were still on edge; I was tired and hungry and bruised, and talking to a strange voice in the dark wasn't what I needed to sooth my nerves just now.

"Sir, I have honor of to make known myself: Field Agent Dzok, at the service."

"Field agent of what?" My voice had a sharp edge.

"Perhaps better for further confidences to await closer acquaintance," the field agent said. "Please, you will talk again, thus allowing me to place the dialect more closely."

"The dialect is English," I said. I eased back another foot, working my way up-slope. I didn't know whether he could see me or not, but it was an old maxim to take the high ground . . .

"English? Ah, yes. I think we've triggered the correct nmemonic now. Not a very well-known sub-branch of Anglic, but then I fancy my linguistic indoctrination is one of the more complete for an Agent of Class Four. Am I doing better?"

The voice seemed closer, as well as more grammatical. "You're doing fine," I assured it—and rolled quickly away, too late felt an edge under my back, yelled, went over, slammed against hard stone three feet below the upper level. I felt my head bounce, heard a loud ringing, while bright lights flashed. Then there was a hand groping over my chest, then under my head.

"Sorry, old fellow," the voice said up close. "I should have warned you. Did the same thing myself my first day here . . ."

I sat up, groped quickly, found the slug gun, tucked it back into my cuff holster.

"I guess I was a little overcautious," I said. "I hardly expected to run into another human being in this damned place." I worked my jaw, found it still operable, touched a scrape on my elbow.

"I see you've hurt your arm," my cell-mate said. "Let me dab a bit of salve on that. . . ." I heard him moving, heard the snap of some sort of fastener, fumbling noises. I got out my lighter, snapped it. It caught, blazed up blindingly. I held it up—and my jaw dropped.

AGENT Dzok crouched a yard from me, his head turned away from the bright light, a small first-aid kit in his hands—that were tufted with short, silky, red-brown hair that ran up under the grimy cuffs of a tattered

white uniform. I saw long thick-looking arms, scuffed soft-leather boots encasing odd long-heeled feet, a small round head, dark-skinned, long-nosed. Dzok turned his face toward me, blinking deep set yellowish eyes set close together above a wide mouth that opened in a smile that showed square, yellow teeth.

"The light's a bit bright," he said in his musical voice. "I've been in the dark for so long now that . . ."

I gulped, flicked off the lighter. "Sorry," I mumbled. "Wha—who did you say you were?"

"You look a trifle startled," Dzok said in an amused tone. "I take it you haven't encountered my branch of the Hominids before?"

"I had a strange idea we Homo Sapiens were the only branch of the family that made it into the Cenozoci, I said. "Meeting the boys outside was quite a shock; now you . . ."

"Ummm. I think our two families diverged at about your late Pliocene. The Hagroon are a somewhat later off-shoot, at about the end of the Pleistocene—say half a million years back." He laughed softly. "So you see, they represent a closer relationship to you Sapiens than do we of Xonijeel. . . ."

"That's depressing news." Dzok's rough-skinned hand fumbled at my arm, then gripped it lightly while he dabbed at the abrasion. The cool ointment started to take the throb from the wound.

"How did they happen to pick you up?" Dzok asked. "I take it you were one of the group taken on a raid?"

"As far as I know, I'm the only one," I was still being cautious. Dzok seemed like a friendly enough creature, but he had a little too much hair on him for my taste, in view of what I'd seen of the Hagroon. The latter might be closer relatives of mine than of the agent, but I couldn't help lumping them together in my mind—though Dzok was more monkey-like than ape-like.

"Curious," Dzok said. "The pattern usually calls for catches of at least fifty or so. I've theorized that this represents some sort of minimum group size which is worth the bother of the necessary cultural analysis, language indoctrination, and so on."

"Necessary for what?"

"For making use of the captives," Dzok said. "The Hagroon are slave-raiders, of course."

"Why 'of course'?"

"I assumed you knew, being a victim. . . ." Dzok paused. "But then perhaps you're in a different category. You say you were the only captive taken. . . ."

I ignored the question. "How did you get here?"

The agent sighed. "I was a trifle incautious, I fear. I had a rather naive idea that in this congeries of variant hominid strains I'd pass unnoticed, but I was spotted instantly. I'm afraid these fellows all look pretty much alike to me, but it seems the reverse isn't true. They knocked me about a bit, dragged me in before a tribunal of nonagenarians for an interrogation, which I pretended not to understand—"

"You mean you speak their language?" I interrupted.

"Naturally, my dear fellow. An agent of Class Four could hardly be effective without language indoctrination."

I let that pass. "What sort of questions did they ask you?"

"Lot of blooming nonsense, actually. It's extremely difficult for noncosmopolitan races to communicate at a meaningful level; the basic cultural assumptions vary so widely—"

You and I seem to be doing all right."

"Well, after all, I *am* a Field Agent of the Authority. We're trained in just such communicative ability."

MAYBE you'd better start a little farther back. What authority are you talking about? How'd you get here? Where are you from in the first place? Where did you learn English?"

Dzok had finished with my arm now. He laughed—a good-natured chuckle. Imprisonment in foul conditions seemed not to bother him. "I'll take those questions one at a time. I suggest we move up to my dias now; I've arranged a few scraps of cloth in the one dry corner here. And perhaps you'd like a bit of clean food, after that nauseous pap our friends here issue."

"You've got food?"

"My emergency ration pack. I've been using it sparingly. Not very satisfying, but nourishing enough."

We made our way to a shelf-like flat high in the right rear corner of the cell, and I stretched out on Dzok's neatly-arranged dry rags and accepted a robin's-egg sized capsule.

"Swallow that down," Dzok said. "A balanced ration for twenty-four hours; arranged concentrically, of course; takes about nine hours to assimilate. There's water too." He passed me a thick clay cup.

I gulped hard, get the pill down. "Your throat must be bigger than mine," I said. "Now what about my questions?"

"Ah, yes, the Authority; this is the great Web government which exercises jurisdiction over all that region of the Web lying within two million E-units radius of the Home Line. . . ."

I was listening, thinking how this news would sit with the Im-

perial authorities when I got back—if I got back—if there was anything to go back to. Not one new Net—travelling race but two—each as alien to the other as either was to me. And all three doubtless laying claim to ever-wider territory. . . .

Dzok was still talking: our work in the Angelic sector has been limited, for obvious reasons—"

"What obvious reasons?"

"Our chaps could hardly pass unnoticed among you," Dzok said drily. "So we've left the sector pretty much to its own devices."

"But you *have* been there?"

"Routine surveillance only, mostly in null-time, of course—"

"You use too many 'of courses', Dzok," I said. "But go on; I'm listening."

"Our maps of the area are sketchy. There's the vast desert area, of c—" he cleared his throat. "A vast desert area known as the Desolation, within which no world-lines survive, surrounded by a rather wide spectrum of related lines, all having as their central cultural source the North European technical nucleus—rather a low-grade technology, to be sure, but the first glimmering of enlightenment is coming into being there. . . ."

HE went on with his outline of the vast sweep of A-lines that constituted the scope of activities of the authority; I didn't call attention to his misconceptions regarding the total absence of life in the Blight, or his seeming ignorance of the existence of a line with Net-traveling capabilities; that was information I would keep in reserve.

". . . the scope of the Authority has been steadily extended over the last fifteen hundred years," the agent was saying. "Our unique Web-transit abilities naturally carry with them a certain responsibility. The early tendency toward exploitation has long been overcome, and the Authority now merely exercises a police and peace-keeping function, while obtaining useful raw materials and manufactured products from carefully selected loci on a normal commercial basis."

"Uh-huh." I'd heard the speech before. It was a lot like the pitch Bernadotte and Richthofen and the others has given me when I first arrived at Stockholm Zero-zero.

"My mission here," Dzok went on, "was to discover the forces behind the slave raids which had been creating so much misery and unrest along the periphery of the Authority, and to recommend the optimum method for eliminating the nuisance with the minimum of overt interference. As I've told you, I badly underestimated our Hagroon; I was arrested within a quarter-hour of my arrival."

"And you learned English on your visits to the, ah, Anglic Sector?"

"I've never visited the sector personally, but the language libraries naturally have mentioned the developing dialects."

"Do your friends know where you are?"

Dzok sighed. "I'm afraid not. I was out to cut a bit of a figure, I realize now—belatedly. I envisioned myself reporting back in to IDMS Headquarters with the solution neatly wrapped and tied with pink ribbon. Instead—well, in time they'll notice my prolonged absence and set to work to find my trail. However, in the meantime . . .

"In the meantime, what?"

"I can only hope they take action before my turn comes."

"Your turn for what?"

"Didn't you know, old chap? But of course not; you don't speak their beastly dialect. It's all because of the food shortage, you see. They're cannibals. Captives that fail to prove their usefulness as slaves are slaughtered and eaten."

"About how long," I asked Dzok, "Do you suppose we have?"

"I estimate that I've been here for three weeks," the agent said. "There were two poor sods here when I came—a pair of slaves of a low order of intelligence. As well as I could determine, they'd been here for some two weeks. They were taken away a week ago. Some sort of feast for a high official, I gathered. Judging from the look of the menu, they'll have need of these ferocious teeth of theirs. Tough chewing, I'd say."

I was beginning to see through agent Dzok; his breezy air covered a conviction that he'd be in a Hagroon cooking pot himself before many more days had passed.

"In that case, I suppose we'd better start thinking about a way to get out of here," I suggested.

"I hoped you'd see that," Dzok said. "I have a scheme of sorts—but it will require two men. How good are you at climbing?"

"As good as I have to be," I said shortly. "What's the plan?"

"There are two guards posted along the corridor; we'll need to entice one of them inside so as to deal with him separately; that shouldn't be too difficult."

"How do we get past the other one?

"That part's a bit tricky—but not impossible. I have some materials tucked away here—items from my survival kit as well as a number of things I've salvaged since I arrived. There's also a crude map I sketched from memory. We'll have approximately one hundred meters of corridor to negotiate before we reach the side entry I've marked as our escape route. Our only hope lies in not running into a party of Hagroon before we reach it; your disguise

won't stand close examination."

"Disguise?" I had the feeling I had stumbled into somebody else's drunken dream. "Who are we going as? Dracula and the wolf man?" I was light-headed, dizzy. I lay back on my rags and closed my eyes. Dzok's voice seemed to come from a long way off:

"Get a good rest. I'll make my preparations; As soon as you wake, we'll make our try."

I CAME awake to the sound of voices—snarling, angry voices —blinking through deep gloom.

Dzok said something in a mild tone, and the voice snapped back —a booming, animalistic snort. I could smell him now—even in the fetid air of the cell, the reek of the angry Hagroon cut through. I could see him, a big fellow, standing near the entry. I wondered how he'd gotten through; the opening was barely big enough for me. . . .

"Lie still and make no sound, Anglic," Dzok said in the same soothing tone he had been using to the Hagroon. "This one wants me. My time ran out, it seems . . ." then he broke into the strange dialect again.

The Hagroon snarled and spat. I saw his arm reach, saw Dzok duck under it, plant a solid blow in the bigger creature's chest. The Hagroon grunted, crouched a little, reached again. I came to my feet, flicked my wrist, felt the solid slap as the slug gun filled my palm. Dzok moved back and the jailor jumped after him, swung a blow that knocked the agent's guard aside and sent him spinning. I took two quick steps to the Hagroon's side, aimed, and fired at point-blank range. The recoil kicked me halfway across the room as the monster-man reeled back, fell to the floor, kicking, his long arms wrapped around himself. He was making horrible, choked sounds, and I felt myself pitying the brute. He was tough: the blast from the slug gun at that range would have killed an ox, but he was rolling over now, trying to get up. I followed him, picked out his head against the lesser dark of the background, fired again; fluid spattered my face. The huge body gave one tremendous leap and lay still. I wiped my face with a forearm, snorted the rusty odor of blood from my nostrils, turned back to Dzok. He was sprawled on the floor, holding one arm.

"You fooled me, Anglic," he panted. "Damned good show . . . you had a weapon. . . ."

"What about that plan," I hissed. "Can we try it now?"

"Damned. . . . brute," Dzok got out between his teeth. "Broke my arm. Damned nuisance. Perhaps you'd better try it alone."

"To hell with that. Let's get started. What do I do?"

Dzok made a choked sound that might have been a laugh. "You're tougher than you look, Anglic, and the gun will help. All right; Here's what we have to do. . . ."

TWENTY minutes later I was sweating inside the most fantastic get-up ever used in a jail break. Dzok had draped me in a crude harness made from strips of rags—there had been a heap of them in the den when he arrived: luxurious bedding for the inmates. Attached to the straps were tufts of greasy hair arranged so as to hang down screening my body. The agent had traded his food ration to his former cell-mates in return for the privilege of trimming hair samples from their shaggy bodies, he explained. The dead Hagroon had supplied more. Using adhesives from his kit, he had assembled the grotesque outfit. It hung down below my knees, without even an attempt at a fit.

"This is fantastic," I told him. "It wouldn't fool a newborn idiot at a hundred yards in a bad light!"

Agent Dzok was busy stuffing a bundle inside what was left of his jacket.

"You'll look properly bulky and shaggy; that's the best we can do. You won't have to pass close scrutiny—we hope. Now let's be going."

Dzok went first, moving awkwardly with his broken arm bound to his chest, but not complaining. He paused with his head out in the corridor, then scrabbled through.

"Come on; the coast is clear. Our warden is taking a stroll."

I followed, emerged into air that was comparatively cool and clean after the stale stink of the den. The light was on along the passage as usual; there was no way to tell the time of day. A hundred feet along, the corridor turned right and up; there were no openings along the section we could see. The guard was presumably loitering farther along.

Dzok moved silently off, slim-hipped, low-waisted, his odd, thin legs slightly bent at the knee, his once natty uniform a thing of tatters and tears through which his seal-sleek pelt showed. Before we reached the turn, we heard the rumble of Hagroon voices. Dzok stooped and I came up beside him; he stood with his head cocked, listening.

"Two of them," he whispered. "Filthy bit of luck. . . ."

I waited feeling the sweat trickle down inside my clown suit of stinking rags and dangling locks of hair. There was a sudden sharp itch between my shoulder blades—not the first since I had been introduced to Hagroon hospitality. I grimaced but didn't try to scratch; the flimsy outfit would have fallen to pieces.

"Oh-oh," Dzok breathed. "One of them is leaving. Changing of the guard."

I nodded. Another minute ticked by like a waiting bomb. Dzok turned, gave me a large wink, then said something in a loud, angry snarl—a passable imtation of the Hagroon speech pattern. He waited a moment, then hissed: "Count to ten, slowly—" and started on along the passage at a quick, shambling pace. Just as he moved out of sight around the corner, he looked back, shouted something in a chattering language. Then he was gone.

I started my count, listening hard. I heard the Hagroon guard snort something, heard Dzok reply. Five. Six. Seven. The Hagroon spoke again, sounding closer. Nine. Ten—

I took a deep breath, tried to assume the sort of hunch-shouldered stance the Hagroon displayed, moved on around the turn in a rolling walk. Twenty feet ahead, beyond the light Dzok stood, waving his good arm, yelling something now, pointing back toward me. A few yards farther on, the guard, a squat, bristly figure like a pile of hay, shot a glance my way. Dzok jumped closer to him, still shouting. The Hagroon raised an arm, took a swing that Dzok just managed to avoid. I came on, getting closer to the light bulb now; Dzok dashed in, ducked, got past the guard. The Hagroon had his back to me, fifteen feet away now, almost within range. I flipped the gun into my hand, made another five feet—

The guard whirled, started an angry shout at me—then suddenly got a good look at what must have been only a dim silhouette in the bad light at his last glance. His reflexes were good: he lunged while the startled look was still settling into place on the wide, mud-colored face; I got the shot off just as he crashed into me, and we went down, his four-hundred pound body smashing me back like a truck hitting a fruit cart. I managed to twist aside just enough to let the bulk of his weight slam past before I hit the pavement and skidded. I got some breath back into my lungs, hauled my gun hand free for another shot, but it wasn't necessary; the huge body lay sprawled half on me, inert as a frozen mammoth.

DZOK was beside me, helping me to my feet with his good hand.

"All right so far," he said cheerfully rearranging my hair shirt. "Quite a weapon you have there. You Sapiens are marvelous at that sort of thing—a natural result of your physical frailty, no doubt."

"Let's analyze me later," I muttered. My shoulders were

hurting like hell where I had raked them across the rough paving. What next?"

"Nothing else between us and the refuse disposal slot I told you about. It's not far. Come along." He seemed as jaunty as ever, unbothered by the brief, violent encounter.

He led the way down a slanting side branch, then up a steep climb, took another turn-off into a wider passage filled with the smell of burning garbage.

"The kitchens" Dzok hissed. "Just a little farther."

We heard loud voices then—the Hagroon never seemed to talk any other way. Flat against the rough-hewn wall, we waited. Two slope-shouldered bruisers waddled out from the low-arched kitchen entry, went off in the opposite direction. We went on, following a trail of spilled refuse, ducked under a low doorway and into a bin layered with putrefying food waste. I thought I had graduated from the course in bad smells, but this was a whole new spectrum of stench. We splashed through, looked out a two yard wide, foot high slot crusted with garbage. The view was darkness, and a faint glistening of wet cobbles far below. I twisted, looked up. A ragged eave line showed above my head.

"I thought so," I said softly. "The low ceilings meant the roof had to be next. I think these people stacked this pile of stone up here and carved the rooms out afterward."

"Precisely," Dzok said. "Not very efficient, perhaps, but in a society where slave labor is plentiful and architectural talent nonexistent, it serves."

"Which way?" I asked. "Up or down?"

Dzok looked doubtfully at me, eyeing my shoulders and arms like a fight manager looking over a prospective addition to his stable. "Up," he said. "If you think you can manage."

"I guess I'll have to manage," I said. "And what about you, with that arm?"

"Eh? Oh, it may be a bit awkward, but no matter, Shall we go?" And he slipped forward through the opening in the two-foot thick wall, twisted over on his back; then his feet were through and out of sight, and suddenly I was very much alone. Behind me the growl of voices and an occasional clatter seemed louder than it had before. Someone was coming my way. I turned over on my back as Dzok had done, eased into the slot. The garbage provided adequate lubrication. My head emerged into the chilly night; above I saw the cold glitter of stars in a pitch black sky, the dim outlines of nearby buildings a few faint lights gleaming from openings cut at random in the crude masonry

walls. It was a long reach to the projecting cornice just above me; I stretched, trying not to think about the long drop below, found a handhold, scrambled up and over. Dzok came up as I rolled and sat up.

"There's a bridge to the next tower a few yards down the far side," he whispered. "What kept you?"

"I just paused to admire the view. Here, help me get rid of the ape-suit." I shed the costume, caked and slimy with garbage now, while Dzok slapped ineffectually at the samples adhering to my back. He looked worse than I did, if possible; his sleek fur was damp and clotted with sour-smelling liquid.

"When I get home," he said, "I shall have the longest, hottest bath obtainable in the most luxurious sensorium in the city of Zaj."

"I'll join you there," I offered. "If we make it."

"The sooner we start, the sooner the handmaidens will ply their brushes." He moved away across the slight dome of the roof, crouched at the far edge, turned, and slipped from sight; it appeared that there was a lot more monkey in Dzok than I'd managed to retain. I got down awkwardly on all fours, slid over the edge, groped with a foot, found no support.

"Lower yourself to arm's length," Dzok's voice came softly from the darkness below—how far below I couldn't say. I eased over the edge, scraping new abrasions in my abused hide. Dangling at full length, I still found nothing under my toes.

"Let go and drop," Dzok called quietly. "Just a meter or so."

That was a proposal I would have liked to mull over in the quiet of my study for a few hours before acting on it, but it wasn't the time to argue; I tried to relax, then let go. There was a dizzy moment of free-fall; then a projecting stone ripped my cheek as I slammed against a flat ledge and went down, one hand raking stone, the other arm stabbing down into nothingness. Dzok caught at me, pulled me back. I sat up, made out the dim strip of dark, railless walk arching off into the night. I started to ask if that was what we had to cross, but Dzok was already on the way.

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, after a trip that would have been unexceptional to the average human fly, Dzok and I stood in the deep shadow of an alley carpeted in the usual deposit of rubbish.

"This place would be an archaeologist's paradise," I muttered. "Everything from yesterday's banana peel to the first flint they ever chipped is right here underfoot."

Dzok was busy opening the bundle he had carried inside his jacket. I helped him arrange the straps and brasses taken from the Hagroon I had killed in the cell.

"We'll exchange roles now," he said softly. "I'm the captor, if anyone questions us. I may be able to carry it off: I'm not certain just how alien I may appear to the average monster in the street; I saw a few Australopithecine types as they brought me in. Now, it's up to you to guide us to where you left the shuttle," Dzok said. "About half a mile, you said?"

"Something like that—if it's still there." We started off along the alley which paralleled the main throughfare I had traversed under guard eighteen hours earlier. It twisted and turned, narrowing at time to no more than an air space between crooked walls, widening once to form a market place where odd, three-tiered stalls slumped, deserted and drab in the postmidnight stillness. After half an hour's stealthy walk, I called a halt.

"The way these alleys wander, I'm not a damned bit sure where we are," I said. "I think we'll have to risk trying the main street, at least long enough for me to get my bearings."

Dzok nodded, and we took a side alley, emerged in the comparatively wide avenue. A lone Hagroon shambled along the opposite side of the street; wide-spaced lamps on ten-foot poles shed pools of sad, yellow light on a littered wall that ran under windowless facades adorned only by the crooked lines of haphazard masonry courses, as alien as beehives.

I led the way to the right; a trough of brownish stone slopping over with oil-scummed water looked familiar; just beyond this point I had seen the harnessed mastodon. The alley from which the shuttle had operated was not far ahead. The street curved to the left; I pointed to a dark side-way debouching from a widening in the way ahead.

"I think that's it; we'd better try another alley and see if we can't sneak up on it from behind. They probably have guards on the shuttle."

"We'll soon know." A narrow opening just ahead seemed to lead back into the heart of the block of masonry. We followed it, emerged in a dead-end, from which an arched opening like a sewage tunnel led off into utter darkness.

"Let's try that route." Dzok suggested. "It seems to lead in the right general direction."

"What if it's somebody's bedroom?" I eyed the looming building; the crudely mortared walls gave no hint of interior function. The Hagroon knew only one

style of construction; solid-rock Gothic.

"In that case, we'll beat a hasty retreat."

"Somehow the thought of pounding through these dark alleys with a horde of aroused Hagroon at my heels lacks appeal," I pointed out. "But I guess we can give it a try." I moved to the archway, peered inside, then took the plunge. My shoes seemed loud on the rough floor. Behind me I could hear Dzok's breathing. The last glimmer of light faded behind us. I was feeling my way with a hand against the wall now. We went on for what seemed a long time.

"Hssst!" Dzok's hand touched my shoulder. "I think we've taken a wrong turning somewhere, old boy. . . ."

"Yeah. . . ." I thought it over. "We'd better go back."

For another ten minutes we groped our way back in the dark, as silently as possible. Then Dzok halted. I came up behind him.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Shhh."

I heard it then: a very faint sound of feet shuffling; then a glow of light sprang up around a curve ahead, showing a dark doorway across the passage.

"In there," Dzok hissed, and dived for it. I followed, slammed against him. There was a sound of heavy breathing nearby.

"What was that you said about bedrooms?" he murmured in my ear.

THE breathing snorted into a resonant snore, followed by gulping sounds. I could hear a heavy body moving, the rustle of disturbed rubbish. Then an eerie silence settled.

Suddenly Dzok moved; I heard something clatter in the far corner of the room; his hand grabbed at me, pulling me along. I stumbled over things, heard his hand rasping on stone; then we were flat against the wall. A big Hagroon body rose up, moved into the light from the open door through which we had entered. Another of the shaggy figures appeared outside; this would be the one we had first heard in the alley. The two exchanged guttural growls. The nearer one turned back into the room—and abruptly the chamber was flooded with wan light. I saw that Dzok and I were in an alcove that partly concealed us from view from the door. The Hagroon squinted against the light, half-turned away—then whirled back as he saw us, Dzok jumped; the gun slapped my hand—but Dzok was past him, diving for another opening. I was behind him, ducking under the Hagroon's belated grab, then pelting along a tunnel toward a faint glow at the far end, Dzok bounding ten yards in the lead. There were yells behind

us, a horrible barking roar, the pound of feet. I hadn't wanted a horde of trolls chasing me through the dark—but here I was anyway.

Ahead, Dzok leaped out into the open, skidded to a halt, looked both ways, then pointed, and was gone. I raced out into the open alley, saw Dzok charging straight at a pair of Hagroon in guards' bangles—and beyond him, the dark rectangular bulk of the shuttle. The agent yelled; I recognized the grunts and croaks of the Hagroon language. The two guards hesitated; one pointed at me, started forward; the other spread his arms, barked something at Dzok. The latter, still coming on full tilt, straight-armed the heavier humanoid, dodged aside as the Hagroon staggered back, and made for the shuttle. I brought the slug gun up, fired at extreme range, saw the Hagroon bounce back, slam against the wall, then reach—but I was past him. Dzok's opponent saw me, dithered for a moment, then whirled toward me; I fired—and missed, tried to twist aside, slipped, went down and skidded under the Hagroon's grasp, leaving a sleeve from my coat dangling in his hands. I scrambled, made it to all fours, dived for the open entry to the shuttle; Dzok's hand shot out, hauled me inside, and the door banged behind me as the sentry's weight hit it like a charging rhino.

Dzok whirled to the operator's seat.

"Great Scott!" he yelled. "The control lever's broken off short!" The shuttle was rocking under blows at the entry port. Dzok gripped the edge of the panel with his one good hand; the muscles of his shoulder bunched, and with one heave, he tore it away, exposing tight-packed electronic components.

"Quick, Anglic!" he snapped. "The leads there—cross them!" I wedged myself in beside him, grabbed two heavy, insulated cables, twisted their ends together. Following the agent's barked instructions, I ripped wires loose, made hasty connections from a massive coil which I recognized as an M-C field energizer to a boxed unit like a fifty KW transformer. Dzok reached past me, jammed a frayed cable-end against a heavy bus-bar. With a shower of blue and yellow sparks, copper welded to steel. A deep hum started up; abruptly the shattering blows at the entry ceased. I felt the familiar tension of the M-C field close in around me. I let out a long sigh, slumped in the chair.

"Close, Anglic," Dzok sighed. "But we're clear now. . . ." I looked over at him, saw his yellowish eyes waver and then he fell sideways into my lap.

CHAPTER V

DZOK was lying where I had dragged him in deep grass under a small, leafy tree, his chest rising and falling in the quick, shallow, almost panting breathing of his kind. The shuttle rested fifty feet away, up against a rocky escarpment at the top of which a grey, chimp-sized ape perched, scratching thoughtfully and gazing down at us. My clothes were spread on the grass along with what remained of Dzok's whites; I had given them a scrubbing in the sandy-bedded stream that flowed nearby. I had also inventoried my wounds, found nothing worse than cuts, scrapes and bruises.

The agent rolled over on his side, groaned, winced in his sleep as his weight pressed against his bound arm; then his eyes opened.

"Welcome back," I said. "Feel better?"

He groaned again; his pale tongue came out, touched his thin, blackish lips.

"As soon as I'm home again I shall definitely resign my commission," he croaked. He moved to ease the arm, lifted it with his good hand and laid it against his chest.

"This member seems to belong to someone else," he groaned.

"Maybe I'd better try to set it."

He shook his head. "Where are we, Anglic?"

"The name's Bayard. As to where we are, your guess is better than mine, I hope. I piled the scout along full tilt for about five hours, then took a chance and dropped in here to wait for you to come around. You must have been in worse shape than you told me."

"I was close to the end of my resources," the agent admitted. "I'd been beaten pretty badly on three occasions, and my food pellets were running low; I'd been on short rations for about a week."

"How the devil did you manage to stay on your feet—and climb, and fight, and run—and with a broken arm?"

"Small credit to me, old fellow. Merely a matter of triggering certain emergency metabolic stimulators. Hypnotics, you know." His eyes took in the scene. "Pretty place. No sign of your former hosts?"

"Not yet. It's been about four hours since we arrived."

"I think we're safe from intrusion. From what little we'd learned of them, they have very poor Web instrumentation. They won't trail us." He studied the ragged sky line.

"Did you maneuver the shuttle spatially? We seem to be out in the wilds."

I shook my head. "These cliffs here," I indicated the rising pinnacles of warm, reddish-brown

stone that ringed the glade. "I watched them evolve from what were buildings back in the inhabited regions. It gives you the feeling that we men and our works are just a force of nature, like any other catastrophe."

"I've seen the same thing," Dzok agreed. "No matter what path you choose to follow across the alternate world-lines, the changes are progressive, developmental. A puddle becomes a pond, then a lake, then a reservoir, then a swimming pool, then a swamp filled with dead trees and twenty-foot snakes; trees stretch, or shrink, grow new branches, new fruits, slide away through the soil to new positions; but always gradually. There are no discontinuities in the entropic grid—excepting, of course, such man-caused anomalies as the Desolation."

Do you know where we are?" The grey ape on the cliff-top watched me suspiciously.

"Give me a moment to gather my forces," Dzok closed his eyes, took deep breaths. "I'll have to drop back on self-hypnotic mnemonic conditioning; I have no conscious recollection of this region."

I WAITED. His breathing resumed its normal rapid, shallow pattern. His eyes popped open.

"Right," he said briskly. "Not too bad, at all. We're about six hours' run from Authority Central at Zaj, I'd guess." He sat up, got shakily to his feet. "May as well get moving. I'll have a bit of work to do calibrating the instruments; bit awkward navigating with dead screens." He was looking at me thoughtfully "Which brings me to wonder, Bayard; ah . . . just how did you manage to control the shuttle . . .?"

I could feel my forehead wrinkling. I couldn't tell yet whether I was going to frown or grin.

"I may as well confide in you, Dzok," I said. "I know a little something about shuttles myself."

He waited, looking alert and interested.

"Your Authority isn't the only power claiming control of the Net. I represent the Paramount Government of the Imperium."

Dzok nodded kindly. "Glad you decided to tell me. Makes things cosier all around; lends an air of mutual confidence."

"You already knew?"

"I must confess I used a simple hypnotic technique on you while you were resting, back in our digs. Dug out some fascinating data. Took the opportunity to plant a number of helpful suggestions, too. Nothing harmful, of course. Just a little dampening of your anxiety syndrome, plus, of course, a command to obey my instructions to the letter."

I looked at him, gazing airily at me. My expression settled into a wide and rather sardonic grin.

"I'm very relieved to hear it; now I don't feel like such a stinker for working on you while you were out."

For a moment he looked startled; then his complacent expression returned.

"Sorry to disappoint you, old chap, but of course I'm well protected against that sort of thing —" he broke off, looking just a little worried as though a thought had just struck him. I nodded. "Me too."

Suddenly he laughed; his cannon-ball head seemed to split in a grin that showed at least thirty-six teeth. He leaned and slapped his knee with his good hand, doubled over in a paroxysm of hilarity, staggered toward me, still roaring. I took a step back, tensed my wrist.

"You have an infectious laugh, Dzok," I said. "But not infectious enough to let you get me in range of that pile-driver arm of yours."

He straightened, grinning rather ruefully now. "Seems to be a bit of an impasse," he conceded.

"I'm sure we can work it out," I said. "Just don't keep trying those beginners' tricks; I've had to learn all about them."

He pursed his wide, thin lips. "I'm wondering why you stopped here. Why didn't you press on, reattain the safety of your own base while I was unconscious?"

"I told you; I don't know where I am. This is unfamiliar territory to me—and there are no maps aboard that tub."

"Ah-hah. And now you expect me to guide you home—and myself into an untenable position?"

"Just rig up the board and calibrate it; I'll do my own steering."

HE shook his head. "I'm still considerably stronger than you, old fellow—in spite of my indisposition." He twitched his broken arm. "I fail to see how you can coerce me."

"I still have the gun we Sapiens are so clever about making."

"Quite; but shooting me would hardly be to your advantage." He was grinning again. I had the feeling he was enjoying it all. "Better let me run us in to Xonijeel; I'll see to it you're given all possible aid."

"I've had a sample of hairy hospitality," I said. "I'm not yearning for more."

He looked pained. "I hope you don't lump us Australopithecines in with the Hagroon, of all people, just on the basis of a little handsome body hair."

"Are you promising me you'll give me a shuttle and turn me loose?"

"Well . . ." he spread his

wide, deeply-grooved hands. "After all, I'm hardly in a position . . ."

"Think of the position you'd be in if I left you here."

"I'd have to actively resist any such effort, I'm afraid."

"You'd lose."

"Hmmm. Probably. On the other hand, I'd be much too valuable a prisoner in this Imperium of yours, so it's just as well to die fighting." He tensed as though ready to go into action. I didn't want that.

"I'll make another proposal," I said quickly. "You give me your word as an officer of the Authority that I'll be given an opportunity to confer with the appropriate high officials at Zaj—and I'll agree to accompany you there first."

He nodded promptly. "I can assure you of that much. And I'll take it upon myself to personally guarantee you'll receive honorable treatment."

"That's a deal." I stepped forward, put out my hand, trying not to look as worried as I felt. Dzok looked blank, then reached out gingerly, took my hand. His palm felt hot and dry and coarse-skinned, like a dog's paw.

"Empty hand; no weapon," he murmured. "Marvelous symbolism." He grinned widely again. "Glad we worked it out; you seem like a decent sort, Bayard, in spite—" The smile faded slightly. "I have a curious feeling you have done me, in some obscure way . . ."

"I was wondering how I'd talk you into taking me to Zaj," I said, grinning back at him now. "Thanks for making it easy."

"Ummm. Trouble at home, eh?"

"That's a slight understatement."

He frowned at me. I'll get to work on the instruments, while you tell me the details."

ONE hour, two skinned knuckles, and one slight electrical shock later, the shuttle was on its way, Dzok in the operator's seat crouched over the jury-rigged panel.

"This curious light you mentioned, he was saying. "You say it seemed to pervade even enclosed spaces, cut off from any normal light source?"

"That's right; a sort of ghostly, bluish glow."

"There are a number of things in your account that I can't explain," Dzok said. "But as for the light effect, it's plain you'd been transposed spontaneously into a null time level; the Hargoon are fond of operating there. The apparent light is due to certain emanations arising from the oscillation of elementary particles at a vastly reduced level of energy; a portion of this activity elicits a response from the optic

nerve. Did you notice that it arose particularly from metal surfaces?"

"Not especially."

Dzok shook his head, frowning. "A fantastic energy input is required to transfer mass across the entropic threshold; far more than is needed to set up the drift across the A-lines, for example. And you say you found yourself there, without mechanical aid?"

I nodded. "What is this null time?"

"Ah, a very difficult concept." Dzok was busily noting instrument readings, twiddling things, taking more readings. As a shuttle technician, he was way ahead of me. "In normal entropy, of course, we move in a direction which we can conveniently think of as forward; with Web travel, we move perpendicular to this vector—sideways, one might say. Null time . . . well, consider it as off-set at right angles to both; a stunted, lifeless, continuum, in which energies flow in strange ways.

"Then it wasn't the city that was altered—it was me; I had been ejected from my normal continuum into this null-time state—"

"Quite correct, old fellow." Dzok blinked at me sympathetically. "I can see you've been laboring under a ghastly strain, thinking otherwise."

"I'm beginning to get the picture," I said. "The Hagroon are studying the Imperium from null time—getting set for attack, I'd guess off-hand. They've got techniques that are way beyond anything the Imperium has. We need help. Do you think the Authority will give it to us?"

"I don't know, Bayard," Dzok said. "But I'll do my best for you."

I HAD a few hours restless nap on the floor behind the control seat before Dzok called me. I climbed up to lean over his chair, staring into the screen. We were among spidery towers now; minarets of lofty, fragile beauty, soaring up pink, yellow, pale green, into a bright morning sky.

"Nice," I said. "We're close to your home line now, I take it?"

"Ah, the towers of Zaj," Dzok almost sang. "There's nothing to equal them in all the universes!"

"Let's hope I get a reception to match the pretty buildings."

"Look here, Bayard: there's something I feel I ought to . . . ah . . . tell you," Dzok said hesitantly. "Frankly, there's a certain, well, ill-feeling in the minds of some against the Sapiens group. Unreasonable, perhaps—but it's a factor we're going to have to deal with."

"What's this ill-feeling based on?"

"Certain, ah, presumed racial

characteristics. You have a reputation for ferocity, ruthless competitiveness, and a love of violence . . ."

"I see; we're not nice and mild like the Hagroon, say; and who was that I saw bounce one of the latter out of the way on his way to steal this scout we're riding in?"

"Yes, yes, all of us are prey to a certain degree of combativeness; but perhaps you noticed: even the Hagroon tend to enslave rather than to kill; and though they're cruel, it's the cruelty of indifference, not hate. I saw you kick one of them just as you entered the cell; did you note that he took no revenge?"

"Anybody will fight back when he's been knocked around enough."

"But only you Sapians have systematically killed off every other form of hominid life in your native continua!" Dzok was getting a little excited now. "You hairless ones; in every line where you exist—you exist alone! Ages ago, in the first confrontation of the bald mutation with normal anthropos—driven, doubtless, by shame at your naked condition—you slaughtered your hairy fellow men! And even today your minds are warped by ancient guilt-and-shame complexes associated with nudity!"

"So you're holding the present generation responsible for what happened—or may have happened—thousands of years ago?"

"In my world sector," Dzok stated, "There are three major races of Man; we Australopithecines, to employ your English term; the Rhodesians—excellent workers, strong and willing, if not overly bright—the Pekin derivatives—blue-faced chaps, you know. We live together in perfect harmony, each group with its societal niche, each contributing its special talents to the common culture. While you Sapiens—why, you even set upon your own kind, distinguishable only by the most trivial details!"

"What about me, Dzok? Do I seem to you to be a raving maniac? Have I indicated any particular distaste for you, for example?"

"Me?" Dzok looked amazed, then whooped with laughter. "Me!" he choked. "The idea . . ."

"What's so funny?"

"You . . . with your poor bald face—your spindly limbs—your degenerate dentition—having to overcome your natural distaste for *me!*" He was almost falling out of his chair now.

"Well, if I had any natural distaste, I at least had the decency to forget it!" I snapped.

Dzok stopped laughing, dabbed at his eyes with a dangling cuff. He looked at me almost apologetically.

"You did, at that," he conceded. "And you bound up my arm, and washed my poor old uniform for me—"

"And your poor old face too, you homely galoot!"

Dzok was smiling embarrassedly now. "I'm sorry, old boy! I got a bit carried away. All those personal remarks—a lot of rot, actually. Judge a chap on what he does, not what he is, eh? None of us can help our natural tendencies—and perhaps overcoming one's instinct is in the end a nobler achievement than not having the impulse in the first place." He put out his hand uncertainly.

"Empty hand, no weapon, eh?" He smiled. I took the hand.

"You're all right, Bayard." Dzok said, "Without you I'd have been rotting in that bloody cell. I'm on your side, old fellow—all the way!"

He whirled as a buzzer went, slapped switches, threw out the main drive, watched needles creep across dials, flipped the transfer switch. The growl of the field generators faded down the scale. Dzok beamed at me.

"We're here." He held a thumb up. "This may be a great day for both our races."

WE stepped out into a wide sweep of colorfully tiled plaza dotted with trees, the bright geometric shapes of flower beds, fountains splashing in the sunlight. There were hundreds of Australopithecines in sight, strolling leisurely in pairs, or hurrying briskly along with the air of urgency that was apparently as characteristic of Xonijeelian bureaucrats as of their hairless counterparts at home. Some wore flowing robes like Arab Djellabas; others were dressed in multi-colored pantaloon-and-jacket outfits; and here and there were the trim white uniforms that indicated the IDMS. Our sudden arrival in the midst of the pack caused a mild stir that became a low murmur as they caught sight of me. I saw noses wrinkle in flat, toothy faces, a few hostile stares, heard snickers from here and there. Someone called something to Dzok. He answered, took a firm grip on my arm.

"Sorry, Bayard," he muttered, "Musn't appear to be running loose, you know." He waved an arm at a light aircraft cruising overhead; I thought it was a heli until I noticed its lack of rotors. It dropped in to a landing and a wide transparent hatch opened like a clamshell. A close relative of Dzok's showed a fine set of teeth and waved; then his gaze settled on me and his grin dropped like a wet bar rag. He fluted something at Dzok, who called an answer back, took my arm, urged me along.

"Ignore him, Bayard; a mere peasant."

"That's easy; I don't know what he's saying."

I climbed into the well-sprung seat; Dzok settled in beside me, gave the driver an address.

"This adventure hasn't turned out too badly after all," he said expansively. "Back safe and sound—more or less—with a captive machine and a most unusual, ah, guest."

"I'm glad you didn't say prisoner," I commended, looking down on a gorgeous pattern of parks and plazas and delicate spires as we swooped over them at dashing speed. "Where are we headed?"

"We're going directly to IDMS Headquarters. My report will require quick action, and of course you're in haste as well."

There didn't seem to be much more to say; I rode along, admiring the city below, watching a massive white tower grow in the distance. We aimed directly for it, circled it once as though waiting for landing instructions, then hovered, dropped down to settle lightly on a small pad centered in a roof garden of tall palms, great banks of yellow and blue blossoms, free-form reflecting pools, with caged birds and animals completing the jungle setting.

"Now, just let me do the talking, Bayard," Dzok said, hurrying me toward a stair well. "I'll present your case to our Council in the most favorable light, and I'm confident there'll be no trouble. You should be on your way home in a matter of hours.

"I hope your Council is a little less race-minded than the yokels down below,: I started—then broke off, staring at a camoflaged cage where a hairless, tailless biped, two feet tall, with a low forehead, snouted face and sparse beard stared out at me with dull eyes.

"My God!" I said. "That's a Man—a midget—"

Dzok turned sharply. "Eh? What?" He gaped, then grinned. "Oh, Good Lord, Bayard, its merely a tonquil! Most amusing little creature, but hardly human—"

The little manikin stirred, made a plaintive noise. I went on then, feeling a mixture of emotions, none of which added to my confidence.

WE descended the escalator, went along a wide, cool corridor to a glass door, on into a wide skylighted room with a pool, grass, tables, and a row of lockers at the far side. Dzok went to a wall screen, talked urgently, then turned to me.

"All set," he told me. "Council's in session now, and will review the case."

"That's fast action," I said. "I

was afraid I'd have to spend a week filling out forms and then sweat out a spot on the calendar."

"Not here," Dzok said loftily. "It's a matter of pride for local Councils to keep their dockets clear."

"Local Council? I thought we were going to see the big wheels. I need to make my pitch to the top level—"

"This is the top level. They're perfectly capable of evaluating a situation, making a sound decision and issuing appropriate orders." He glanced at a wall scale which I assumed was a clock.

"We have half an hour. We'll take a few moments to freshen up, change of clothes and all that. I'm afraid we still smell of the Hagroon prison."

* * *

There were a few other customers in the room, lanky, sleek Xonijeelians who stroked the length of the pool or reclined in lounge chairs. They stared curiously as we passed; Dzok spoke to one or two, but didn't linger to chat. At the lockers, he pressed buttons, used an attached tape to measure me, worked a lever; a flat package that popped out from a wide slot.

"A clean outfit, Bayard—not exactly what you've been used to, but I think you'll find it comfortable—and frankly, the familiar garments may be a help in overcoming any initial—ah—distaste the Council Members may feel."

"Swell," I muttered. "Too bad I left my ape suit; I could come as a Hagroon."

Dzok tutted and selected clothing for himself, then led me into a shower room where jets of warm, perfumed water came from orifices in the domed ceiling. We stripped and soaped down, Dzok achieving a remarkable lather, then air dried in the dressing room. My new clothes—a pantaloon-and-jacket outfit in blue and silver satin with soft leather-like shoes and white silk shirt—fitted me passably. Dzok snickered, watching me comb my hair. I think he considered it hardly worth the effort. He gave the mirror a last glance, settled his new gold-braided white pillbox cap on his round head, fitted the scarlet chin-strap under his lower lip, gave the tight-fitting tunic a last tug. "Not often an agent returns from the field with a report he's justified in classifying Class Two sub-Emergency," he said in a satisfied tone.

"What's the emergency? Me or the Hagroon slave-runners?"

Dzok laughed—a bit uneasily, perhaps. "Now, now, don't be anxious, Bayard. I'm sure the Councillors will recognize the unusual nature of your case . . ."

I followed him back into the corridor, thinking that one over.

"Suppose I were a 'usual' case; what then?"

"Well, of course, Authority policy would govern in that instance. But—"

"And what would Authority policy dictate?" I persisted.

"Let's just wait and deal with the situation as it develops, eh?" Dzok hurried ahead, leaving me with an unpleasant feeling that his self-confidence was waning the closer we came to the huge red-gilt doors that blocked the wide corridor ahead.

TWO sharp sentries in silver-trimmed white snapped to as we came up; Dzok exchanged a few words with them; then one thumbed a control and the portals swung open. Dzok took a deep breath, waiting for me to come up. Beyond him I saw a long table behind which sat a row of faces—mostly Australopithecines, but with representatives of at least three other types of man, all with grey or grizzled heads, some in red-or-namented whites, a few in colorful civvies.

"Stiff upper lip, that's the drill," Dzok muttered. "To my left and half a pace back. Follow my lead on protocol . . ." Then he stepped off toward the waiting elders. I adjusted a non-violent, uncompetitive look on my face and followed. A dozen pairs of yellow eyes watched me approach; twelve expressions faced me across the polished table of black wood—and none of them wore warm smiles of welcome. A narrow-faced greybeard to the left of center made a smacking noise with his mobile lips, leaned to mutter something to the councillor on his left. Dzok halted, executed a half-bow with a bending of the knees, spoke briefly in his stacatto language, then indicated me.

"I introduce to the Council one Bayard, native to the Anglic Sector," he said, switching to English. "As you see, a Sapiens—"

"Where did you capture it?" the thin-faced member rapped out in a high, irritable voice

"Bayard is not . . . ah . . . precisely a captive, Excellency," Dzok started.

"Are you saying the creature forced it's way here?"

"You may ignore that question, Agent," a round-faced councillor spoke up from the right. "Councillor Sphogeel is venting his bias in rhetoric. However, your statement requires clarification."

"You're aware of Authority policy with regard to bald anthropoids, Agent?" another put in.

"The circumstances under which I encountered Bayard were unusual," Dzok said smoothly. "It was only with his cooperation and assistance that I escaped prolonged imprisonment. My report—"

"Imprisonment? An Agent of the Authority?"

"I think we'd better hear the Agent's full report—at once," the councillor who had interrupted Sphogeel said, then added a remark in Xonijeelian. Dzok replied in kind at some length, with considerable waving of his long arms. I stood silently at his left and a half pace to the rear as instructed, feeling like a second-hand bargain up for sale with no takers.

The Councillors fired questions then, which Dzok fielded crisply, sweating all the while. Old Sphogeel's expression failed to sweeten as the hearing went on. Finally the round-faced councillor waved a long-fingered, greyish hand, fixed his gaze on me.

"Now, Bayard, Agent Dzok has told us of the circumstances under which you placed yourself in his custody—"

"I doubt very much that Dzok told you any such thing," I cut him off abruptly. "I'm here by invitation, as a representative of my government."

"Is the Council to be subjected to impertinence?" Sphogeel demanded shrilly. "You speak when ordered to do so, Sapiens—and keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"And I'm also sure," I bored on, "that his report included mention of the fact that I'm in need of immediate transportation back to my home line."

"Your needs are hardly of interest to this body," Sphogeel snapped. "We know quite well how to deal with your kind."

"You don't know anything about my kind!" I came back at him. "There's been no previous contact between our respective governments—"

"There is only one government, Sapiens!" Sphogeel cut me off. "As for your kind . . ." His long, flexible upper lip was curled back showing shocking pink gums and lots of teeth, in a sneer like an annoyed horse. ". . . we're familiar enough with your record of mayhem—"

HOLD on there, Sphogodo," Another member broke in. "I for one would like to hear this fellow's account of his experiences. It appears the activities of the Hagroon may have some significance—"

"I say let the Hagroon do as they like insofar as these fratricidal deviants are concerned!" Sphogeel came back. He seemed to be even more upset than his prejudices warranted. I could see the line he was taking now: he didn't intend even to give me a hearing. It was time for me to get my oar into the water.

"Whether you like it or not, Sphogeel," I cut across the hubbub, "The Imperium is a first-

class Net travelling power. Our two cultures were bound to meet sooner or later. I'd like to see our relations get off to a good start."

"Net-travelling?" the fat Councillor queried. "You failed to mention that, Agent." He was looking sharply at Dzok.

"I was about to reach that portion of the briefing, Excellency," Dzok said smoothly. "Bayard had made the claim that although he was transported to the Hagroon line in a Hagroon shuttle, his people have a Web drive of their own. And, indeed, he seemed to be somewhat familiar with the controls of the primitive Hagroon machine."

"This places a different complexion on matters," the official said. "Gentlemen, I suggest we take no hasty action which might prejudice future relations with a Web power—"

"We'll have no dealings with the scum!" old Sphogeel shrilled, coming to his feet. "Our present policy of expl—"

"Sit down, Councillor!" the fat member roared, jumping up to face the thin one. "I'm well aware of the policies pertaining to this situation! I suggest we refrain from announcing them to the world!"

"Whatever your policy has been in the past," I interjected into the silence, "It should be re-evaluated in the light of new data. The Imperium is a Net power, but there's no need of any conflict of interest—"

"The creature lies!" Sphogeel snarled, staring at me across the table. "We've carried out extensive reconnaissance in the entire Sapient quadrant—including the so-called Anglic Sector—and we've encountered no evidence whatever of native Web-transit capability!"

"The Zero-zero line of the Imperium lies within the region you call the Desolation," I said.

Sphogeel gaped. "You have the audacity to mention that hideous monument to your tribe's lust for destruction? That alone is sufficient grounds for your expulsion from the society of decent Hominids!"

"How is that possible," Another asked. "Nothing lives within the Desolation . . ."

"Another of the debased creature's lies," Sphogeel snapped. "I demand that the Council expell this degenerate at once and place a class two reprimand in the file of this agent—"

"Neverless," I yelled the Councillors down, "A number of normal lines exist in the Blight. One of them is the seat of a Net government. As an official of that government, I ask that you listen to what I have to say, and give me the assistance I ask for."

"That seems a modest enough demand," the fat member said. "Sit down, Councillor. As for

you, Bayard—go ahead with your story."

Sphogeel glowered, then snapped his fingers. A half-grown youth in unadorned whites stepped forward from an inconspicuous post by the door, listened to the oldster's hissed instructions, then darted away. Sphogeel folded his arms and glowered.

"I submit," he snapped. "Under protest."

HALF an hour later I had finished my account. There were questions then—some from reasonable-sounding members like the chubby one whose name was Nikodo, others were inflammatory remarks of the 'are you still beating your wife' type. I answered them all as clearly as I could.

"We're to understand then," a truculent-looking councillor said, "That you found yourself in a null-time level of your native continuum, having arrived there by means unknown. You then observed persons, presumably Hagroon, boarding transports, preparatory to departure. You killed one of these men, stole one of their crude Web-travelers, only to find yourself trapped. Arriving at the Hagroon world-line, you were placed under confinement, from which you escaped by killing a second man. You now present yourself here with the demand that you be given valuable Authority property and released to continue your activities."

"That's not fairly stated, Excellency," Dzok started, but a dirty look cut him off.

"The man is a self-confessed double murderer," Sphogeel snapped. "I think—"

"Let him speak," Nikodo barked.

"The Hagroon are up to something. I'd say an attack on the Imperium from null-time would be a likely guess. If you won't give us assistance, then I'm asking that you lend me transportation home in time to give a warning—"

The young messenger slipped back into the room, went to Sphogeel, handed him a strip of paper. He glanced at it, then looked up at me with a fierce glitter in his yellow eyes.

"As I thought! The creature lies!" he rasped out. "His entire fantastic story is a fabric of deceit! The Imperium, eh? A Web Power, eh? Ha!" Sphogeel thrust the paper at the next councillor, a sad-looking, pale tan creature with bush muttonchop whiskers and no chin. He blinked at the paper, looked up at me with a startled expression, frowned, passed the paper along. When it reached Nikodo, he read it, shot me a puzzled look, re-read it.

"I'm afraid I don't understand this, Bayard," his look bored into me now; his dark face was getting blackish-purple around the edges. "What did you hope to gain by attempting to delude this body?"

"Maybe if you'll tell me what you're talking about, I could shed some light on it," I said. Silently, the paper was tossed across to me. I looked at the crow-tracks on it.

"Sorry. I can't read Xonijeelian."

"That should have been sufficient evidence in itself," Sphogeel growled. "Claims to be a Web operative, but has no language background . . ."

"Councillor Sphogeel had your statement checked out," Nikodo said coldly. "You stated that this Zero-zero world line lay at approximately our coordinates 875-259 within the area of the Desolation. Our scanners found three normal world-lines within the desert—to that extent, your story contained a shred of truth. But as for the coordinates 875-259 . . ."

"Yes?" I held my voice steady with an effort.

"No such world line exists. The uninterrupted sweep of the destroyed worlds blankets that entire region of the Web."

"You'd better take another look—"

"Look for yourself!" Sphogeel thrust a second paper across the table toward me—a glossy black photodiagram, far more detailed than the clumsy constructions used by the Imperial Net mapping service. I recognized the familiar oval ring shape of the Blight at once—and within it the glowing points that represented the worlds known as Blight Insular Two and Three and a third A-line within the Blight, unknown to me. But where the Zero-zero line of the Imperium should have been was—nothing.

"I think the Council has wasted sufficient time on this charlatan," someone said. "Take the fellow away."

Dzok was staring at me, "Why?" he said. "Why did you lie, Bayard?"

"The creature's purpose was clear enough," Sphogeel grated. "Ascribing his own base motivations to others, he assumed that to confess himself a citizen of a mere sub-technical race would mean he'd receive scant attention; he therefore attempted to overawe us with talk of a great Web power—a veiled threat of retaliation! Pitiful subterfuge! But nothing other than would be expected from such a genetic inferior!"

"Your equipment's not working properly," I grated. "Take another scan—"

"Silence, criminal!" Sphogeel was on his feet again. He had no

intention of losing the advantage his shock technique had gained him.

"Sphogeel has something he doesn't want known," I yelled. "He faked the shot—"

"That is not possible," Nikodo rapped out. "Wild accusations will gain you nothing, Sapiens!"

"All I've asked for is a ride home," I flipped the scan photo across the table. "Take me there, and you'll see soon enough whether I'm lying!"

"Suicidal, he asks that we sacrifice a traveller and crew to playing out his folly," someone boomed.

"You talk a lot about my kind's murderous instincts," I barked. "Where are the Sapiens types here in this cosy little world of yours? In concentration camps, getting daily lectures on brotherly love?"

"There are no intelligent hairless forms native to Xonijeel," Nikodo snapped.

"Why not?" I rapped back at him. "Don't tell me they died out?"

"Their strain was a weak one," Nikodo said defensively. "Small, naked, ill-equipped to face the rigors of the glacial periods. None survived into the present era—"

"So you killed them off! In my world maybe it worked out the other way around—or maybe it was natural forces in both cases. Either way you slice it, it's ancient history. I suggest we make a new start now—and you can begin by checking out my story—"

"I say we put an end to this farce!" Sphogeel pounded on the table for attention. "I move the Council to a formal vote! At once!"

NIKODO waited until the talk died away. "Councillor Sphogeel has exercised his right of peremptory motion," he said heavily. "The vote will now be taken on the question, in the form to be proposed by the Councillor."

Sphogeel was still standing. "The question takes this form," he said formally. "To grant the demands of this Sapiens . . ." he looked around the table as though gauging the tempers of his fellows.

"He's risking his position on the wording of the Demand Vote," Dzok hissed in my ear. "He'll lose if he goes too far . . ."

". . . or, alternatively . . ." his eyes were on me now." . . . to order him transported to a sub-technical world-line to live out his natural span in isolation."

Dzok groaned. A sign went around the table. Nikodo muttered.

"If you'd only come to us honestly, Sapiens," he started—

"The vote!" Sphogeel snapped. "Take the creature outside, Agent!"

Dzok took my arm, guided me out in the corridor; the heavy panels clicked behind us.

"I don't understand at all," he said. "Telling them all that rubbish about a Web power; You've prejudiced the Council hopelessly against you—and for what?"

"I'll give you a clue, Dzok," I said. "I don't think they needed any help; they already have their opinion of Homo Sapiens."

"Nikodo was strongly inclined to be sympathetic," Dzok said. "He's a powerful member. But your senseless lies—"

"Listen to me, Dzok—" I grabbed his arm. "I wasn't lying! Try to get that through your thick skull! I don't care what your instruments showed. The Imperium exists!"

"The scanner doesn't lie, Sapiens," Dzok said coldly. "It would be better for you to admit your mistake and plead for mercy." He pulled his arm free and smoothed the crease in the sleeve.

"Mercy?" I laughed, not very merrily. "From the kindly Councillor Sphogeel? You people make a big thing of your happy-family philosophy—but when it gets right down to practical politics, you're as ruthless as the rest of the ape-stock!"

"There's been no talk of killing," Dzok said stiffly. "Relocation will allow you to live out your life in reasonable comfort and—"

"It's not my life I'm talking about, Dzok! There are three billion people living in that world you say doesn't exist. A surprise attack by the Hagroon will be a slaughter!"

"Your story makes no sense, Anglic! Your claims have been exposed for the fancies they are! There is no such world-line as this Imperium of yours!"

"Your instruments need overhauling. It was there forty-eight hours ago—"

The Council Chamber doors opened. The sentry listened to someone inside, then beckoned Dzok. The agent gave me a worried look, passed inside. The two armed men came to port arms, silently took up positions on either side of me.

"What did they say?" I asked. Nobody answered. Half a minute went by, like an amputee on crutches. Then the door opened again and Dzok came out. Two of the Council Members were behind him.

"An . . ah . . . decision has been reached, Bayard," he said stiffly. "You'll be escorted to quarters where you'll spend the night. Tomorrow . . ."

Sphogeel shouldered past him. "Hesitant about performing your duty, Agent?" he rasped. "Tell the creature; his plots are

in vain! The Council has voted relocation—"

It was what I had expected. I stepped back, slapped my gun into my hand—and Dzok's long arm swept down, caught me across the forearm with a blow like an axe, sent the slug gun bouncing off along the carpeted hall. I whirled, went for the short flit gun the nearest sentry was holding. I got a hand on it too—just as steel hooks clamped on me, hauled me back. A grayish-tan hand with black seal's fur on its back was in front of my face, crushing a tiny ampoule. An acrid odor hit my nostrils. I choked, tried not to breathe it in. . . . My legs went, slack as wet rope, folded; I hit the floor without feeling it. I was on my back, and Dzok was leaning over me, saying something.

". . . regret . . . my fault, old boy . . ."

I made the supreme effort, got out one word—

". . . Truth . . ."

Someone pushed Dzok aside; close-set yellow eyes stared into mine. There were voices:

". . . . deep nmemonics . . ."

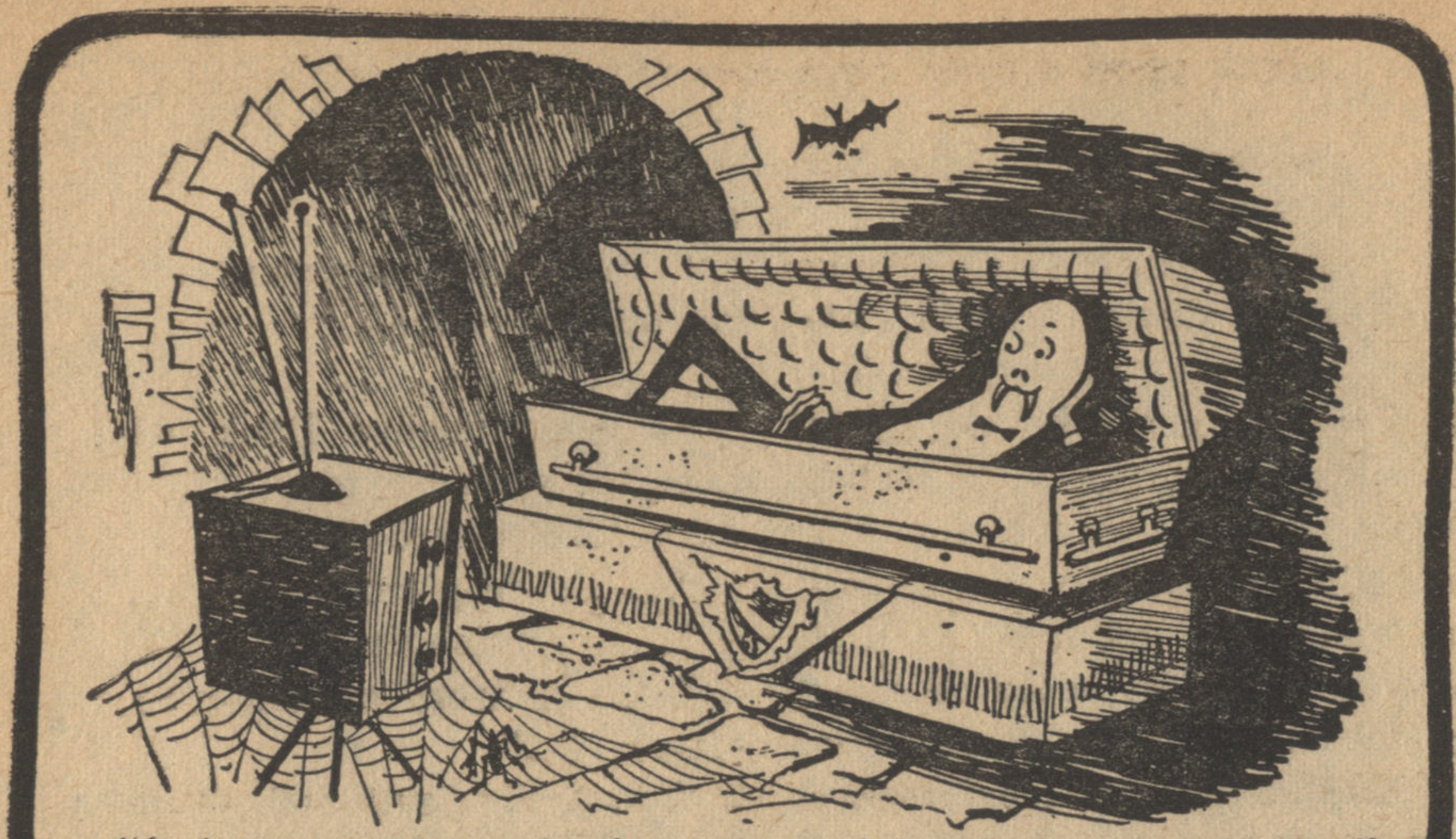
". . . . finish the job . . ."

". . . . word of honor as an officer . . ."

". . . . devil take him; a Anglic's an Anglic . . ."

Then I was falling, light as an inflated balloon, seeing the scene around me swell, blur, fade into a whirling of lights and darkness that dwindled and was gone.

(*continued next month*)



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Once upon a time there was a talking parrot, a beautiful princess, an awful misunderstanding, and a happy ending. They are here in this fable of . . .

THE DREAMER

By WALTER F. MOUDY

THERE once was a lazy young fellow named Claudius Parbinder who lived in a small coastal space port not too far from Old London. By trade he was a merchant, albeit a singularly unsuccessful one; for while the other merchants in the little city were industriously trading their merchandise for furs, spices, and rare metals from the greater galaxy, the foolish Claudius Parbinder was wont to spent his time idly dreaming of great wealth and lasting fame while his inheritance was wasted by his gross inattention and disinterest.

The time came when he had not two coins to rub together. No, nothing but the clothes on his back, a few pieces of distressed merchandise in his shop, and a rather cantankerous bible-reading parrot which had a pronounced tendency to lisp in a dozen languages and a profound lack of morals, and was, besides, named Mr. Peabody.

One day Claudius Parbinder was sitting in his shop surveying the last of his poor merchandise when the silence was broken by Mr. Peabody's shrill screams: "Thy creditors be upon thee, Claudius."

Claudius Parbinder looked through the curtains, and—sure enough—the streets outside the shop were lined with creditors of all descriptions. Some were armed with summons, and some with writs, and one even came with a *habeas corpus*. Young Claudius could plainly see that he had been out-lawyered, and so, pausing only to seize the cage containing Mr. Peabody, he departed by a rear exit, leaving his creditors to squabble over what remained of a once prosperous shop. When he reached the street, he began to run, and he did not pause until he was alto-

gether free of the city.

One would think that the foolish fellow would have learned his lesson and would now mend his ways and turn his thoughts toward useful pursuits. Yet no sooner had he arrived at a pleasant hill overlooking the city than did he begin again to dream. Seating himself beneath a tree and watching the merchant ships come and go, he expressed himself as follows to Mr. Peabody:

"It is quite plain to me," he said, "Why, until now, my affairs have not prospered. The answer should be obvious even to you. I have been dealing in merchandise which any trader could obtain from fifty other shops in the city. I need a monoply."

"Monopolies," said Mr. Peabody, who was a prodigious reader, "are prohibited by section 341.020 World Government Code Annotated."

"Exactly so," said Claudius Parbinder. "It follows then that we must seek our fortune on some other world."

"But you have nothing to trade, sir."

THERE was a gleam in young Claudius' eyes as he replied, "Nothing but you, Mr. Peabody. While it is true that here an educated parrot is a glut on the market, who knows what fantastic price you might bring on some other world.

"Yes, I shall ship out on the next trade ship bound for the inner galaxy. There I shall find a world rich in metals and furs where talking parrots are unknown. I shall trade you for as many furs and as much metal as a ship can carry, and these I shall sell on earth for a good price. With the money I have thus obtained, I shall buy enough merchandise to load two ships, and with these I shall return and again trade for furs and precious metals."

"And what, good master, shall I be doing while you are accomplishing all these wonderful things?" the old bird inquired petulantly.

Ignoring the question, Claudius Parbinder continued: "Doubtless, in a few years I shall become rich. As my wealth grows, the king of that distant world will wish to have me as an ally and will offer me the hand of his beautiful daughter in marriage.

"For dowry the king will bestow upon me a fine palace and a hundred servants to do my bidding. When the king grows old and breathes his last, as he surely must, I shall become king in his stead."

"And what of me?" Mr. Peabody screamed.

"Perhaps one day my courtiers will come to me with a tale of a wretched talking bird who has fallen into evil days. I shall seek

you out and find you reciting Latin poetry with a French accent to the jeers of a drunken audience in a third rate pub. With a stamp of my foot I shall silence the mocking crowd, and then . . ."

At this point the foolish dreamer became so caught up in his story that he stamped his foot in sudden rage, and in so doing he carelessly kicked the cage in which the unhappy Mr. Peabody perched. Fortunately Mr. Peabody and the cage were both unharmed, although the bird's curses were so potent that they shriveled all flowers within hearing.

With characteristic enthusiasm, Claudius Parbinder picked up the cage with the protesting Mr. Peabody inside and made his way to the space port. As luck would have it, he managed to ship out on a ship as a cabin boy that very same night. So eager was he to give shape to his dreams that he failed even to ask for the ship's destination.

Alas, he was soon to regret his carelessness, for next morning he learned that the ship he had chosen was not bound for one of the trade worlds. In fact, the ship was not a merchant ship at all, but rather a government vessel making a journey to Carthos. By the time he had discovered his mistake, it was too late to do anything about it, for the ship had already slipped into overdrive.

IF Claudius Parbinder's recent resolutions were shaken by this latest coincidental blow to his ambitions, he could hardly be held to blame. For of all the ships and of all the planets, the combination fate had handed him was the least favorable for an ambitious young merchantman.

For four hundred years merchants from earth had been trying, with small success, to establish normal trade relations with Carthos. For Carthos' science had produced a drug of very useful properties to earth people. This drug was called Duranium, and following is a list of some of the ills for which it is a known cure: the common cold, baldness, cancer, ingrowing toenails, sterility, impotency, frigidity, hemorroids, near sightedness, sleeping sickness, insomnia, halitosis, yellow fever, tuberculosis, kleptomania, muscular aches and pains, and many other maladies too numerous to mention. And the best part was that the drug had absolutely no bad side effects.

Yes, if he could but gain possession of a few grams of Duranium, his fortune would be made. But even to Claudius Parbinder the task appeared hopeless. One may easily imagine, therefore, the melancholia with

which the young merchantman passed the remainder of the sixty day voyage. Only Mr. Peabody, who kept himself occupied by translating Homer into Hindustan, appeared to maintain his good spirits.

While on board ship Claudius Parbinder had thought his fortunes had reached their lowest ebb, but he was soon to learn that Dame Fortune's frown had turned to an even uglier scowl. After the ship docked at the space port outside Carthos' capital city, the captain and all his crew, dressed in their finest uniforms, departed for the palace to pay homage to the king and to try once more to establish normal trade relations with Carthos.

Now there was a custom on Carthos, which time had turned into law, that the recipient of a gift must give an equal gift in return. It was by means of this custom that the captain hoped to obtain a larger supply of Duranium. For this purpose the captain and his crew bore many gifts of great value of which the following are only a few: a portable anti-grav machine, a self-educating translater, a signed copy of Entslinger's classic book: *Did Mark Twain Write Shakespeare's Plays?*, an automatic dishwasher, a vest-sized storage cell which could record a planet's entire history, a pack of French postcards, and many other gifts too numerous to mention and too valuable to audit.

One may well imagine with what trepidations poor Claudius Parbinder entered the king's palace with the other members of the crew. He had nought to give the kind save on erudite parrot which seemed a poor gift indeed when compared to the magnificent treasures which the others had brought. Moreover, he had grown quite fond of his pet. He remembered now that Mr. Peabody had been his first tutor and had, in fact, been his closest companion since his early youth. Still he had no choice. Mr. Peabody was his only hope to regain his fortunes.

WHEN the king entered the anteroom where the earth men were assembled, the presentation of gifts began. The captain went first, as befitted his position, and presented the king with the anti-grav machine. In exchange he received a gift of six ounces of Duranium. The captain smiled. The king seemed unusually generous this trip. One by one the other members of the crew came forward with their assigned gifts which they first demonstrated and then presented to the king, and to each the king alloted a comparatively generous supply of Duranium. At last the king came to the trem-

blnig cabin boy and his bird.

"And what, may I ask, have we here?"

"A—a talking bird, sire," Claudius Parbinder stammered.

"I see. And for what is he useful?"

Claudius Parbinder hardly knew how to respond to this question, and for a time he was utterly speechless. Now at this moment the rascally bird, who had been listening to this conversation and who was not at all eager to be traded to a master who might disturb his quiet, scholarly life, spoke up and said: "Greetings, sire. My name is Mr. Peabody. I am a money lender from the planet Usury, and I am here to drive the religious fanatics from your temples."

In this manner the clever bird hoped, of course, to discourage the king from accepting his person as a gift, but he had not reckoned on the king's reply.

"Wonderful!" cried the king in unconcealed delight. "We have had a veritable plague of religious fanatics in our temples of late. Rid me of them, and whatever is your liver's desire shall be yours."

Claudius Parbinder whose expectations had been utterly cast down at his parrot's treachery felt his hopes again spring to life with the king's surprising reaction. Perhaps he would be rewarded with a full ounce of Duranium. If so, he could live in wealth and luxury the rest of his life. His heart beat furiously as he waited for the king to continue.

"And to you, young sir," the king said turning to Claudius Parbinder, "What gift can possibly equal in value this marvelous beast you have brought me? Your gift is unique. It cannot be duplicated. My first thought was to fill your ship with Duranium since your race appears to value it so much. Yet how can a ship filled with Duranium be said to equal this priceless gift? Our warehouses are filled with Duranium.

"No," the king continued as Claudius Parbinder's imagination threatened to spring a leak, "your gift demands my most priceless, my most unique possession. To you, young sir, I give in marriage the hand of my only daughter."

What could young Claudius Parbinder say? Was this not the fulfillment of his dreams? He accepted the hearty congratulations of the captain and his crew with only vague misgivings for the future.

THAT evening the king gave a great feast in honor of Claudius Parbinder. Seated next to the king, the young prince-to-be greatly impressed the king's noble court with his wisdom and

wit. To the Minister of War he said, "Speak softly, but carry a big stick." To the Director of Transportation he advised, "The dog that runs finds a bone." And to the Secretary of the Interior he was heard to observe, "A rolling stone gathers no moss." These things he said and many others too numerous to mention.

After dinner Claudius Parbinder, who had perhaps partaken too freely of the native wine, passed into the garden to clear his head. His senses were still reeling from the suddenness of his transition from cabin boy to prince, and he wished for a few moments to himself to consider his situation. He could hardly believe his good fortune. Would a king give his only daughter in marriage to a common adventurer?

To Claudius Parbinder, who had always prided himself that he was no fool, it seemed unlikely that the king should exchange an only daughter for a blasphemous parrot. Where was the profit in that? Unless, indeed, there was something the king had not told him. Now Claudius had observed the women of Carthos with a practiced eye and had found them comely enough. True the people possessed broad, flared nostrils, golden complexions, and rather less fingers and toes than he was used to; still these were the kind of things one must expect when traveling abroad, and he had foreseen no great problem with that. Why then should the king offer his only daughter to such as he?

The answer came to him there in the garden with the clarity of cymbals clashing in a valley. Why then the princess which this base king would have him marry must have a face to shrivel men's souls and a voice to echo the sound of hell itself.

"Alas, I am utterly undone." In his dismay he had spoken aloud.

"How so, my lord?" The voice from the darkness startled him. He turned and saw there in the light of two moons a face of uncommon comeliness. She was obviously one of the maids from the servant quarters who had managed to secrete herself in the garden where she could observe the festivities which were otherwise forbidden her.

"How so, my lord?" the voice repeated. "For are you not the same Claudius Parbinder who was this day favored with the hand of the king's only daughter?"

"Alas, I am he," he replied.

"You are not pleased? You were, then, such a lord on your own world that you may scorn a king's daughter?"

"Not I," said young Claudius. "I was merely a humble cabin boy. Such a one as I has the king

chosen to unload this merchandise with which, no doubt, the men from his own world were too well acquainted to accept."

"You have met our princess then?"

"Must the cook view the stove to know when she has burned her finger? The aroma from the pot the king has stewed for me has reached my nostrils. It was well spoken when the poet said, 'Something is rotten in Denmark.' Truly I have bought a pig in a poke."

"The princess is a pig?"

"Oh," moaned the unhappy bridegroom, "would that it was so. For with a pig I could trade for a fine cow, the cow I could trade for a horse, the horse I could enter in a race, and when the horse had won, I would—"

"You are, then, a trader. Was the bird which you gave to the king worth so much more than this princess whom you have never seen?"

"Mr. Peabody? The bird was utterly worthless. Why the king should value him is beyond my kin. Still I was attached to him and would not have parted with him had I but realized the trick the king had planned for me. Small wonder the king pretended to be so delighted with my gift."

"I can see, my lord," the young servant girl said, "that you are not one who may be easily fooled. Yet the swift arrow of reality seems to have split your dream in mid-air. On this world we have a saying: 'He who would capture a large dream must first find a fertile woman.' The women on this world are quite fertile, my lord." She cast her eyes to the ground demurely.

"Oh, I never doubted that for a moment," said the gallant Claudius. "Indeed," he added, "I find you most fertile. In my eyes you are altogether fertile." And he moved to take her in his arms.

"What!" the young girl cried. "Would you make love to me in the princess' own garden? For shame, sir. Would you betray our princess even before you have met her?"

Now the passionate young man was so taken with the charming wench that he had begun to dream of doing just that. Unfortunately, at that very moment the king's chamberlain appeared and, seeing them standing in the garden, bowed low and said, "Your highness."

It was a moment of truth. Claudius Parbinder instantly recognized that the young maiden with whom he had conversed so freely was none other than the princess herself. The young man, who did not count courage as his strongest virtue, turned and fled the garden. Even as he ran, he realized that all was lost. Surely even his life would be forfeit if the king were to catch him now.

He dared not return to the palace.

LET us pass quickly over the events of the next few months. Suffice it to say that one day six months later in a remote province located far from the capital city a shabbily dressed traveler approached the gates to the estate of the local Duke and demanded the right of food and shelter for the night. Now the Duke was much distressed to have to extend the hospitality of his estate to a beggar on this of all nights, for he had just been informed by visaphone of the expected arrival of an important emissary from the capital city. Still there was nothing he could do, for custom decreed that none might be refused food and shelter during the season of no moon. So he bade his cook to feed him and to bed him down in the servant quarters.

That evening as Claudius Parbinder (for such was the weary stranger's name) dined on table scraps and sour wine, he heard the sounds of merriment from the main dining room as the Duke entertained the king's special emissary with feasting, music, and dancing. At the sound of their gay laughter the wretched fellow could hardly contain his sorrow. For six months he had wandered this alien world under circumstances not even a beggar could envy. He finished wolfing down his poor dinner and was preparing to follow the cook to his chambers when the Duke's chamberlain appeared and asked:

"Is your name Claudius Parbinder?"

It was quite obvious that his identity was known even here, so Claudius Parbinder said: "Alas, I am he."

"Then you are to come with me, sir."

A frightened Claudius Parbinder followed the chamberlain into the great hall. Plainly the king had been seeking him these many months. Now he must suffer the punishment of those who scorn a king's daughter. Curiously he found himself somewhat relieved. He had suffered so much these past few months that even death seemed preferable to a continuation of his present misery.

"We have heard," the Duke began when Claudius was brought before him, "of a stranger who wanders among us who calls himself Claudius Parbinder. Are you that man?"

"I am he."

"Our king's special emissary has expressed a desire to have you brought before us and," the Duke paused to clear his throat, "has instructed us to present you with this gift."

And to Claudius Parbinder's

great astonishment the Duke then held forth a rare gem of unsurprased brilliance.

"Is this to be mine?" he asked in disbelief as he took the precious stone.

"Yes, it is yours," the Duke replied. "The king's special emissary has expressed an interest in knowing what you intend to do with this bounty."

"Why as for that, your excellency, I shall take this stone and trade for furs. The furs I shall trade for spices, and the spices I shall convert to money. With the money I shall buy more precious stones and—"

"Enough! Enough!" A thin voice echoed through the hall. Claudius Parbinder immediately recognized the sound as coming from his former tutor. Yes, it was indeed none other than Mr. Peabody who was now the king's special emissary and, by virtue of his success in converting religious fanatics, the second most powerful figure on Carthos.

THERE are some moments that are too intimate for words. Let us, therefore, pass quickly by this tearful reunion between tutor and pupil to a time a few hours later when emotions are under control. On the way to the capital city, Mr. Peabody explained the importance of his post of special emissary for the conversion of religious fanatics.

"But how do you do it?" asked the incredulous Claudius.

In response the bird loosed a flow of blistering curses.

"I see," said Claudius. "Now tell me what punishment awaits me at the capital for my—ah—indescretion."

"Punishment? Why my dear fellow the princess has been most distressed at your absence. She was charmed by your behavior. Absolutely charmed. Did you not know that on Carthos it is a great compliment to be the object of a seduction attempt? Although the women here are most fertile, the men are somewhat lacking in virility."

"But I thought she was a servant."

"All the more reason she should feel complimented. This shows that it was she—and not her rank—that attracted you."

Thus did they discourse of life and love during their journey to the capital city.

And so it was that Claudius Parbinder married the princess who proved to be very fertile indeed. Following are the names of some of their children: Svelt Parbinder, Claudius Peabody Parbinder, Claudius Parbinder II, Claudius Parbinder III, Claudius Parbinder IV, etc., Llan Parbinder, Percival Parbinder, Priscilla Parbinder.

And many others too numerous to mention. **THE END**

TROUBLE WITH HYPERSPACE

By JACK SHARKEY

A prardox, a paradox, as Gilbert & Sullivan observed we've heard in flocks—but none to match this paradox.

THEY tried a short hop the first time, for test purposes. With a battery of tight-beamed radarscopes blanketting the Estimated Point of Arrival, the man in the shack gave the nod to the radio operator, and ten seconds later, the stubby spaceship vanished from its berth with a clattering crash of colliding air particles, leaping to fill the void it had left. One second later, the radar men were yelping with joy as the oblong blip appeared upon their screens. EPA had been the moon's orbit—albeit the moon was on the other side of the Earth—at a height above the takeoff platform of roughly 250,000 miles. Radar had been buzzing steadily since before the takeoff, which meant that the instant the ship appeared again in space, its interrupting shape would send an image back to the screens. Light and radio waves take approximately one and one-third seconds to travel from moon to Earth. So, the ship's image on their screens after but one second meant that they had far surpassed their hopes for the new space-leaping velocity of the ship. Because, to get its image on the screens from a one-and-one-third distance in but one second, the ship had to arrive in the moon's orbit one-third second *before* it left the Earth.

While the ten-hour wait for the ship's return (by normal rocket-thrust; they didn't want to try any more hyperspace-delving until they'd talked to pilot and crew) was being impatiently endured by the scientists back at the takeoff site, a lot of conjecture was raised about the

ship's third-of-a-second coexistence with itself, even if 250,000 miles away.

They'd figured, of course, on a mere instantaneous arrival of the ship in space. This quicker-than-instant business was giving them a lot of qualms. The only real answer they could conceive of was based on Einstein's idea of light-speed. In his workings with it, he always considered it (since it is the fastest thing around) as being, for all practical purposes, instantaneous. But now, with this strange development regarding the spaceship, they were forced to conclude that Einstein had been righter than he knew: Light was *actually* instantaneous. So, through strict Newtonian mathematics, anything "faster" than that speed would have to start preceding itself in Time. While waiting for the ship s arrival, they figured out a formula of sorts to cover the situation: "If an object travels faster than the speed of light, the object will reach its destination at a minus-time equal numerically to the plus-time it would have taken a light-beam to travel the remaining distance."

They were happy to have come up with the formula, but not too pleased when they considered its consequences. It meant that a trip to nearby Alpha Centauri (a mere four light-years away) would get the ship there four years (Earth-time) before its takeoff. Of course, as one of the scientists pointed out, there was a small advantage in this: The ship, on arrival, could start radioing its findings back home, the radio-waves, at mere light-speed, would take four years to make the interstellar trip, and therefore, approximately a split instant after the ship's vanishment from the rack, the scientists could plan to sit down and take notes in the radio room from a broadcast beamed to them four years earlier.

EVERYONE admitted this advantage readily, but it did nothing to alleviate worries about the one awkward detail in the setup: The voyage home.

The date of the test was July 26th, 1998. If they chose to send a ship up to Alpha Centauri on this same day, the ship would arrive (Earth-time, always) on July 26th, 1994 (give or take a few months). If the ship turned around right then and there, and started back, the same cosmic lag would set in, and the ship would get back to Earth on July 26th, 1990, or, eight years before it took off. This could have awkward consequences.

But what could the solution be?

Nothing thus far built could fly—with normal fuel-thrust—at anything even approximating

the speed of light. Were *that* possible, the ship could fly back on fuel-power from Alpha Centauri, and arrive, four years later, just as its original self was vanishing. The crewmen would be four years older than when they'd left, but that couldn't be helped.

But the fastest spaceships known could make barely 100,000 miles an *hour*. Light still had the edge, a lot of edge, at nearly double that speed per *second*. But there just didn't seem to be a *middle* speed. The space-warp drive was instantaneous; the top spaceship speed was anything but. So the problem remained: Either go "faster-than-instantaneous", or go so much slower that an interstellar trip wouldn't be worth the effort.

But the hitch of true instantaneity was irksome: Obviously, if light gets someplace instantly, and you want to get someplace *before* light gets there, you can't do it in distance, so you must do it in time.

The haggling, theorizing, expostulating, and just plain squabbling was still going on when the ship settled down on its flaming exhaust and bumped to steaming rest in the concrete landing pit. The scientists gathered eagerly about the pit, their differences momentarily put aside as they awaited the word-of-mouth description of hyperspatial sensations from the pilot and crew of the ship. It was almost fifteen minutes after the actual setdown that the hatch opened up, since it took that long for the water in the pit (necessary to keep the concrete from charring and cracking in the heat of the flames) to cool below the temperature of superheated steam.

"Now," said the head scientist, avidly, "we shall at last find out man's sensations when he is subatomically disrupted at one point and simultaneously reformed at another. On the health, morale, and mental abilities of these men hangs the entire future of the space program!"

Then the pilot, a short, lithe-framed youth, was leaning out the opened hatchway, grinning boyishly, and calling up the first post-hyperspace words ever spoken to the gaggle of hovering men of science. Words that formed a simple sentence of four one-syllable words, yet were devastating enough to send the eldest of the waiting men into a fit bordering upon apoplexy. Four tiny little sounds, amiably spoken, that managed to dash the whole future of interstellar exploration in as many seconds.

The pilot said, his face alive with excitement, "When do we leave?"

THE END

The Silk of Shaitan

By JOHN JAKES

On the throne, malevolence. By its side, a mysterious cask. In the pool, something monstrous. Magic and treachery combine in the eerie palace—and, in a setting such as this, one naturally finds Brak, the Barbarian.

HALL opened into great, brooding hall as the strange little procession of four went to answer the summons. And in each succeeding hall, the sense of prevading evil grew.

The huge, yellow-headed barbarian scowled. A breeze tugged at the edge of the splendid silken cloak which Lord Tazim had bid him wear as part of the scheme. His single long and savage braid was hidden beneath a high-wrapped headpiece of cloth-of-gold. In all respects, down to the kidskin boots with curling toes, he was garbed identically with the scrawny, obviously awe-struck retainer who marched beside him, but whose name Brak did not know.

A puny, worthless scimitar hung from the barbarian's ruby-studded belt. He longed for his own mighty broadsword concealed back among the pearls and opals, the sapphires and enamelling and silverwork, in one of the chests containing the dowry of Princess Jarmine.

The dowry chests had been left behind in a sumptuous apartment. Yet for all practical purposes, they already belonged to the overlord of this vast, opulent and weirdly deserted collection of spires, battlements and courts perched on a basalt outcrop above the pass which led through the mountains. Or they would unless Brak made up his mind to play the assassin.

"'Ware!" The jewelled robes of the middling-aged, stern-faced Tazim winked in torch-glare. "There's a brighter glimmering ahead. At last perhaps we can meet this bragging bandit who invited us in to be robbed."

"I wish he had a few courtiers with lyres, whoever he is," said the supple, lovely girl walking beside the older man.

Her feet and hands were delicate, her hair a copper shimmer, her mouth ripe-looking as the orchard's fruit. But she had a whining, petulant way about her which Brak had disliked from the first. The girl continued:

"There are only empty chambers and a few surly guards in this place. I will say that the furnishings give the lord the look of a wealthy man. Otherwise his domain's as dull as that belonging to Omer, the poor clod. My sisters have said it's a sleepy kingdom, anyway."

"Stop your clack, Jarmine," Tazim said curtly. "'Tis unseemly to speak of your intended the Prince in such fashion."

"I'm not the one who arranged the match, father!" The girl's pale white gown rustled in the fitful night breeze.

BORNE by that breeze through the arch under which the four passed came a stink such as Brak had never smelled. The nauseous aroma, as of a fisher-wharf and charnel house mingling their taints, seemed to drift up from a vast blue pool which occupied the center of the roofless court which they were entering.

Just a lone torch burned, ripped to flame-tatters in the high mountain wind, there along the colonnade. Despite this, the court was remarkably full of light. The unearthly pearl radiance seemed to rise from the depths of the pool, on whose lightly ruffled bluegreen surface soporifically sweet-scented petals floated by the hundreds.

No flowerpetals could mask the stench pouring up from that pool, though, Brak thought. It was a death-stench. Beneath the foreign-feeling tunic, where the cruel whips had been laid on, his backbone crawled.

Lord Tazim and his lovely daughter were already hurrying ahead toward a further arch. Beyond it, oil lamps gleamed. As Brak the barbarian and the frightened retainer kept pace, there was a ripple, a splash.

Tense throughout his still-aching body, Brak swung his head. He blinked, as if to drive out dreams. Petals bobbed gently on the water. For the merest space of time, Brak had been positive he had seen something frightful beneath the surface—a great curved tusk-like whiteness, distorted by the water, quick to disappear.

"Don't stand goggling," whispered the poor creature at his left. "The Lord was a fool to bring us into this accursed place. And he was doubly foolish to persuade you to help him. No

man, not even a warlike outlander, could—"

One of Brak's brawny arms thrust out. Powerful fingers closed around the wattled throat.

"Not one word," he whispered. "Make any sign to reveal I don't belong to your Lord's pack of retainers and this tinplate toy they gave me can probably slit your stomach open before it snaps."

"I'll say nothing," the man quavered, wrenching free. "Though what he could have offered you to go through with such mummery wouldn't be enough for a sane man. In that pool a moment ago—gods, I don't know what it was. But it swam there, alive, and it—"

At the far arch, Lord Tazim called, "Lift your feet, you oafs. Promptly!"

Ah, thought Brak with mingled fury and fear—there had been *something* unnamed and awful in that pool beneath the high mountain stars—*what Lord Tazim offered was balm for my back. Burial for the Nestorian I was unable to save. A cart to carry off the butcherwork done to my pony. And half the contents of the dowry chests.*

The contingency was that Brak was to do murder.

TAZIM, Lord of the Tilling, was thus called because of his penchant for agriculture and peaceful rule in his domain at the mountain's foot. Tazim knew of the master of this eyrie only by reputation. To test the superstitious legend, Tazim had taken the direct mountain-pass route, rather than a longer way. His purpose was to deliver his daughter as a bride to one Prince Omer.

For a lord of peaceable repute, Brak thought, Tazim concealed a rare courage beneath his mild mien.

The bargain had been simply put, back at the campsite:

"None of my people has ventured through this pass since I was small, barbarian. They had no need. But the tales drifting down from the peaks are grim. At our caravan-seris we warn the traveller to follow the longer river trail around the mountain spur."

"Yes, I was so warned."

"The first two parties of emissaries from Prince Omer of Kopt, on the mountain's far side, climbed the pass but never reached my border. 'Twas with the third such party, which came the long way round, that I struck the bargain for Jardine."

"If you suspected this menace existed, why did you not take soldiers and wipe it out?"

"For generations, barbarian, we've thrived with no army to speak of in my land. Even so, I will not be frightened off by a mountain bandit who cloaks him-

self in superstitution. I have come this way by choice, and found you, and you will be my army if we cannot reason with the master of the place. You're but one man, admitted. And some of the tales might be true. Therefore—half the contents of the chests if I decide to have the bullying creature killed."

"And what will decide you?" Brak inquired.

"Why, merely whether he persists in the demands made by that trio of horsemen who just rode on. Namely, that I surrender to him all the dowry intenced for Omer who waits for my daughter yonder in Kopt." A flinty light gleamed in the nobleman's eyes. "Turnabout. What will decide you, barbarian?"

"Why," Brak echoed uneasily, "that depends on how he in turn treats you."

MOVING toward the arch now, Brak admitted to himself that he had deceived Lord Tazim. A wandering barbarian from the high steppes, the wild lands of the north, had no use for assloads of pearls and sapphires. He was bound to seek his fortune in the warm climes of Khurdisan far southward; there was no way of foretelling whether that fortune would take shape as wealth, or something else. What prompted him to accept was the bloodthirst for revenge.

Riding up the mountain after receiving those warnings from the caravanseri hangers-on of which he later spoke to Tazim, Brak had chanced upon a priest of the Nestorian order. Shortly they were set upon by four of the riders who served the ruler of the pass. One had vilely pulled the tinned cross from its chain about the priest's neck and spat upon it, while another demanded Brak's pony and the few dinshas in his pouch. The barbarian drew his broadsword.

Numbers weighed against him. Soon both Brak and the Nestorian were roped by their thumbs from a cypress limb, whipped unmercifully and left to die. The huge barbarian was still breathing when Lord Tazim's small train came tinkling up the trail in a scarlet sundown.

They cut down the dead priest, buried him and the remains of the slaughtered carcass of Brak's pony. From among Tazim's supplies came balm for Brak's whip-marks.

The following dawn, the campsite was visited by three new outriders who brought their master's demand, plus an invitation to discuss the terms as guests. Before riding up to the strange place, Brak and Tazim struck their sinister bargain.

A gong sounded, its weird note shivering away into eerie silence.

"Please be welcome in my modest home," said a voice beyond the arch.

Tazim and his daughter approached a dais. The chamber, Brak noted, was large, high-ceilinged and relatively well lit. He and the shuddering retainer hung back near one wall. No armed guards were visible anywhere. Though this should have comforted Brak, it did not. Other circumstances lent an ominous note.

The speaker, now risen, had been seated in a round, low-backed throne chair. To its right stood a filigreed taboret on which rested an ebony cask, medium small, its sides and curved top glittering in torchshine. To the left of the dais, hundreds of strangely veined, shining black rocks piled up in a bizarre pyramid. While some were slightly smaller than others, all had roughly the same unusual shape.

"If you have no objection," said Tazim haughtily, "may we dispense with the formalities? Other than your name, of course. Your true name. I dislike dealing with anonymous thieves."

From the shadowed place where he watched, Brak saw the figure on the dais stiffen. The man was sallow-skinned. He had thinnish cheeks, a tuft of beard. His eyes were mocking, black as his little cask or the robe which belled about his feet. In a certain light, he might have passed for a young, handsome adventurer. At close hand, there was an unhealthy, flaccid quality about his skin which somehow told Brak that the man was older than old.

The man touched the tips of his beringed fingers together. "A thief? Is it wrong to extract a price for passage across one's own land? Ah, well. That's a quibble. But anonymous? That, I am sure, cannot be the case. Don't the louts in your kingdom know my name, Lord?"

"They call you only a wizard," was Tazim's reply. "A practitioner of the hellish arts, a sorcerer. I don't believe a word of it."

Two tiny spots of scarlet appeared in the man's whey cheeks. "My name is Ankhma Ra, and thus you will address me."

Tazim snorted. "I am not accustomed to accepting orders from—"

Ankhma Ra whirled down from the dais suddenly, startling Tazim into silence. "Curb your stupid tongue if you want this pretty little minx to reach her betrothed in Kopt beyond this pass. I ask the dowry chests as payment for passage, and I will get them. Is it not better than throwing away your lives?"

In dismay Brak watched the copper-haired Princess. Her head was cocked at a curious angle. Her cheeks were flushed as she

gazed at the spindly man called Ankhma Ra. She spoke with a certain tone of perverse admiration:

"He has a quick tongue, father. Few men would dare call you down that way. He also seems to have accumulated enough wealth in this place to prove—well, perhaps that his threats are not entirely idle."

So furious was Tazim, his gnarled brown hands knotted at his sides. But he spoke no reply. Ankhma Ra bowed to the Princess.

"Thank you, little one. You are a perceptive child. And a most fetching one, too."

Tazim did not miss the girl's sudden, wanton flush, nor Ankhma Ra's low laugh.

"You addle-ated little strumpet!" Tazim whispered. "Of all my daughters, 'tis you who have been a plague to me all my life."

NEVER had Brak seen a girl shrug in a more cruel or callous way, as if to say that it mattered little. Ankhma Ra strode quickly to the cask on the taboret. He laid one long-nailed hand atop it.

"Shall we come to the point? The dowry chests or no?"

Tazim glared. "I will not even deign to answer such a presumptuous—"

"I am not a man of infinite patience," the other interrupted again. "Don't imagine you can simply leave at your leisure, even though I did invite you as my guests so that you might ponder the alternatives. Should you think of swords, of your retainers, two of whom I see hulking back there, my men, though few in number, are loyal. They know the passages in this place while your men do not. They would like nothing better than feeding morsels to the amusing creature I keep in the pool which you passed. No one knows how deep that pool runs, incidentally. Perhaps to hell itself. I have a certain adeptness with natural substances, among other things, and from the earlier generations of creatures in that pool, I have managed to breed—but no need to dwell on that. Suffice it to say the Fangfish is hungry."

The Fangfish.

Brak's palms turned clammy. Underneath the blued surface of the water, he had seen something loathsome, tusk-like, darting away. Tusk or fang, it had been long as a man was tall.

"There is a simpler way," Ankhma Ra continued, opening the black cask. He pointed.

Like a red flower, many-petalled, a scarlet silk lay balled within the cask. The fabric seemed to shift and modulate from shade to shade of red.

Said Tazim, "I've already had a bellyfull of this tawdry market-

place performance. You try to frighten grown men with a simple kerchief of—*ah!*"

Tazim's cry was sharp, pained. The Lord had been reaching out for the shimmering silk. Ankhma Ra had struck his hand away with great force.

"Do not pose as an authority on things you know nothing about," said the dark-bearded man. Carefully he drew from either side of the silk a pair of immense iron gauntlets. Into the red velvet linings of these he fitted his hands. Only then did Ankhma Ra lift the bit of scarlet and toss it up like a froth of blood, catching it again.

IN bazaars along his route, Brak had often seen conjurers do tricks with silks. Yet never before had he laid eyes on a silk whose very texture seemed constantly mottling, shifting, altering between ghastly shades and tints of red—seemed *alive.*

Ankhma Ra walked past Lord Tazim and the copper-haired girl. He approached Brak and the other retainer.

"The Silks of Shaitan are very ancient," Ankhma Ra murmured. "Very rare. I am privileged to possess one, this one. To pick it up with my bare hands would be dangerous."

He smiled, pausing a few paces in front of Brak and the other man. A shudder of tension ran through Brak's gigantic body as Ankhma Ra subjected him to a moment's fierce scrutiny.

Would the man recognize the description of a barbarian hung up by his thumbs from a cypress? Surely Ankhma Ra had gotten such a description. Only the robes, the cloth-of-gold head wrappings might prevent an unmasking. His fingers curled, ready to reach for the scimitar.

But apparently Ankhma Ra preferred to abuse someone less formidable-looking. He glanced at the smaller man beside Brak. The wretch could hardly stand still, he was trembling so.

The iron gauntlets clanked as Ankhma Ra rolled the scarlet silk into a tiny ball. "The Silks of Shaitan—in the hands of a properly knowledgeable person, of course—have remarkable power. When they merely brush against human skin—"

Suddenly Ankhma Ra threw the little balk of silk.

It struck the retainer's bare throat. The man's eyes flew open. He arched his back and shrieked in agony.

Still balled, the silk clung to the man's skin like some supernatural leech. Where it touched, the man's flesh began to turn to dripping gray.

Ankhma Ra laughed again. He leaned forward, plucked back the silk, somehow swollen into a ball much larger than before.

The retainer shrieked again as the dripping grayness round his throat vanished. Moaning, he fell, kicked, died.

CAREFULLY, even daintily, Ankhma Ra peeled back the petalled corners of the silk.

Lord Tazim retched. Brak goggled, his belly cold. Even Princess Jardine pressed the back of her hand against her mouth and bit down.

Resting in the center of the silk in Ankhma Ra's hand was a pulsing, beating human heart, ripped bodily from within the retainer's flesh by some demoniacal power and still bleeding. The heart's awful ooze seemed to blend into the curiously alive pattern of the silk-stuff, blood upon blood.

Ankhma Ra turned. "Perhaps now, Lord Tazim, you comprehend why I require no great force of men. All I need do is offer my reluctant guests the gift of a silk." Then his lips writhed.

From them came strange, cabalistic syllables Brak did not understand. The pulsing human heart began to change hue, darken.

On the face of Princess Jardine Brak now saw a wild, gruesomely fascinated little smile playing as the heart hardened and blackened.

With disdain, Ankhma Ra threw the petrified heart onto the pile of similarly frozen things beside the dais. As it struck, the heart clacked like a rock, dislodged several others. They rattled down the pile and rolled across the tiles.

"When the sun is up," Ankhma Ra said, "you will deliver the dowry chests." He replaced the silk and gauntlets and shut the cask. And, with a last quizzical glance at Jarmine, he vanished through a hanging.

"Then, these many years—" Lord Tazim looked suddenly much older, feebler. "The tales—all true. All—*quickly*. Out of this hell-place, both of you."

In the torchlit gloom of the apartments provided for them, Tazim and Brak held a whispered conference. The big barbarian, remembering the dead priest, his slaughtered pony, the slain retainer, said only:

"I will try to kill him, Lord."

"By first light." Tazim shuddered, completely unnerved. "It must be by first light."

Grunting to conceal his own mounting dread, Brak swung round, knocked at the brass lock, opened the chest and dipped his powerful hands into opals and sapphires until his fingers touched the iron of his broadsword.

He pulled it free, turned—

Like his daughter, the terrified Tazim had vanished. Brak was alone in shadows.

TWICE the silver grains within the hourglass which Brak had found trickled down before he set forth on his gory errand.

Emotion prodded him to start the moment he found himself deserted in the clustering blackness of this high, awful place. Instinct alone restrained him.

On the high steppes of his birth, the big barbarian had learned the primitive virtue of patience in stalking prey. Thus he paced the lavish apartment where the one flung-open dowry chest threw back from jewel facets the flicker of low oil-wicks. The night chill deepened. Again and again Brak glanced at the trickling silver grains.

When the last ones settled the second time, he gripped hard on the haft of his broadsword, blew out the last lamp and went stealing.

Here or there, a torch in a cresset illumined the distance. The opulent courts and halls remained empty as ever. Brak came to an intersection of corridors. He halted, puzzled. "Now," he muttered half aloud, "which way?"

His spine crawled as the echo of his voice came whispering back through the labyrinth:

Whichway whichway whichway whichway—?

Mounting dread filled him. He tried to wipe from his mind the sight of that live, beating heart in Ankhma Ra's palm; wipe out the memory of the petrified heart tossed onto the pile that symbolized the sorcerer's truthfulness when he boasted that his demands were never rebuffed. Brak chose the right-turning of the cross corridor. From that direction a pearly light gleamed.

And the wind blew the dreadful stench of the wharf and the burying-ground intermingled.

The broadsword haft in Brak's right hand grew slick with the dampenss of chill fear. At least he was no longer encumbered by the so-called civilized garments in which he felt less than free. The long, savage yellow braid hung down his brawny back where the lashmarks stood out, barely healed. He was naked now save for the familiar garment of lion's hide about his hips.

Shortly he reached an arch which led into the pool court. The surface of the water was untroubled except by the light wind. The pool still radiated that eerie glow. The hundreds of petals bobbed like miniature fisherboats.

Long moments Brak crouched just within the arch, waiting and watching for sign of guards, of Ankhma Ra, or of the thing which supposedly swam in the pool whose bottom was down in the fathomless center of the earth. From his position, he could view a section of Ankhma Ra's apartments through an

opening on the pool's far side. He saw the dais and a part of that monstrous rockpile half-veiled in gloom now.

A sound like muted laughter came drifting. Brak stiffened. He searched the court again.

No one.

Perhaps it had been nightbirds crying out on the basalt peaks roundabout. Brak stole forward, intending to move around the left perimeter of the pool, enter Ankhma Ra's quarters and then go past the hanging through which the wizard vanished. Brak would find him sleeping and drive the broadsword into his gut.

HE was half the distance along the pool, moving like a ghost through the colonnade. Abruptly the sound came again. Even in this hour at the deeps of the night, this hour of frozen stars, of loneliness and madness, he was sure.

It was a woman's voice.

A whispering, bubbling turbulence disturbed the surface of the pool. Suddenly, above his head, iron squealed in the colonnade's roof.

Brak whipped his head up as the hinges squealed louder.

Three brutes in corselets of hammered brass dropped through the trap one after another. They landed with thumps and curses. The first drove his long wickedly-tipped spear at Brak's middle.

Brak leaped back, face contorting savagely as he hacked and parried. The broadsword's edge sliced into the soldier's arm at the elbow. Blood jetted. Brak lifted his foot, drove his naked heel against the brass breastplate.

The soldier stumbled backward. His spear fell out of his hand, rolled away onto the pool's mosaic coping. With a ghastly cry the man splashed into the water. Blood from his wound spread out in a whorling liquid cloud.

And from somewhere in the pool deeps there came new turbulence, as of something rising toward the spreading blood-cloud above—

The pair of soldiers remaining came on warily. They circled toward Brak from right and left. He crouched, mighty shoulders cording, tensed for the lunge he knew would come. In his jumbled thoughts, one question thrust through:

How did they know I would be hunting for—?

"At him!" one of the soldiers snarled. Spear points out, both rushed.

Brak fastened his hands on the broadsword haft, brought it swinging from left to right in a huge chopping arc. His sudden high leap as he swung confused the soldier to his right. The man's spearhead tore only air as

Brak came down again, hurling the man to the ornamental pavement.

The soldier writhed, tried to stab upward from a prone position with the spear. Brak rammed the broadsword point through the man's neck. Then the attacker on the left jabbed out with his spear.

A violent pain tore through the big barbarian's right arm. He shouted in pain, tried to leap away, tangled his feet on the other soldier's corpse.

Quick to press the advantage, the remaining soldier twisted his spear around. With two brutal smashes at Brak's forearm, he knocked the broadsword loose. The blade clanged, slid along the pool rim. Brak raised his hands to ward off the next blow. He was still off balance. Blood leaked down his right arm. The spear-butt flew toward his face.

He twisted his head aside. The blow was telling anyhow, slamming him backward. By instinct alone did the barbarian manage to close his hands around the spearwood to try to wrest the weapon away.

Too late—he was falling, his feet skidding and slipping.

BRAK tumbled into the pool and sank like a stone through glowing water and bobbing petals.

Down and down into the pearl-shining depths he plummeted. At last his daze and numbness abated under the hurting of his lungs. He began to thrash upward again. A mammoth shadow flickered across his vision as he fought to the surface.

The spear was still clutched in his right hand. His head broke water. He panted for air. He saw that he had been carried to the center of the large pool.

Just as he tried to gather his wits and strength to pull toward the side, a series of iridescent spines, one behind the next, broke the surface not far away.

Treading water frantically, Brak saw the spines rise higher, higher still. Then utter horror filled him.

He saw the ridged, green-slimed backbone to which the spines were attached.

Arrowing toward him came a thing of great slimness but immense length. It had a flat, milky-blind eye in either side of its head. The head looked malformed because it widened out twenty times the thickness of the creature's body and fanned, flicking tail. Gillslits as tall as Brak himself throbbed open and shut just above the water.

The immense round-shaped jaw of the gigantic fish-thing opened, opened wider. From that maw gusted the sickening stink of the wharf and the charnel house.

Fangfish, Brak's fuzzy brain screamed. He tried to swim away. But the weakness in his right arm and the weight of the spear dragged on him.

The tusks on the creature Ankhma Ra had bred and nurtured were unbelievably huge and white. The evil thing rapidly closed the distance to its newest meal.

Brak realized dimly that the monster must be some vile cross-breeding of life forms older than time; it was able to lift its long fish's body half out of the pool by means of a series of frog-like webbed appendages down either side of its shimmering scaled body. Brak counted eight, ten, twelve of those webbed half-legs on one side. They churned in rhythm like galley oars as the Fangfish bore down.

Wider the stinking maw opened, lined with slimy pulp-pink flesh. *Wider*—

AS the monster mouth loomed, those immense ivory fangs had risen above the surface; the jaw was full open. The pain and death-fear were upon Brak now.

He was too far from the pool's edge. The puny spear aching in his right fist would never penetrate those scales that glittered hard as armor.

Water roiled. Waves cascaded around him as the Fangfish literally hurled itself closer—still closer—its maw gaping to swallow the bit of human meat bobbing before it.

He would die as best he could. Brak trod water ferociously, pulled back his throbbing right arm from which blood drained into the pearly water. He would launch the spear into the maw of the Fangfish, try to strike at the pulpy lining of—

Wildly Brak flailed. His back bumped against something which floated. He twisted his head. Spray was flung in his face as the pool was thrashed into huge waves by the Fangfish almost upon him.

Drowned and bloated, hair floating weirdly, eyes open and swollen, it was the corpse of the first soldier with which Brak had collided.

Mighty shoulders aching with the torment of it, Brak floundered around and dived beneath the corpse. He drove the head of the spear upward under its chin, then thrust against the resistance of the water, which seemed heavy as lead. He shoved and thrust until the muscles in his brawny arms shuddered in torment—and at the last instant he let go.

Driven, with the dead man hanging on the spearhead like bait, the wooden weapon went into the maw of the Fangfish. Brak threw himself backwards in the water as the huge milky

eyes on either side of the flattish fishead brightened.

The corpse on the spear bumped the inside of the monster's maw. The fangs shut, snapping off the butt end of the weapon. The closing of that awful mouth nearly swamped Brak in breaking waves. He was hurled violently against the pool side. He reached upward with his left hand to grasp and lift himself.

A black boot crushed down upon his left hand and pinned it.

Panting, near-blinded, Brak flung his head back. From the pool coping, Ankhma Ra was reaching down with an iron gauntlet.

"One way," came the voice through the ferocious ring in Brak's ears, "will do as well as the next—*assassin.*"

And while Brak hung by one hand on the pool rim, unable to let go, his mind sodden with surprise and fear, Ankhma Ra leaned down still further. He extended the ball of the Silk of Shaitan toward Brak's cheek.

ANKHMA Ra's brittle laugh grew, a demoniac cackle racketing inside the walls of the barbarian's skull. Time seemed to stand still as that dreadfully alive bit of silk swelled and swelled in Brak's vision, drifting toward his skin to rip the heart from his chest and petrify it.

A slash of iron blazed at the right corner of Brak's vision, reflecting torchlight from water droplets. His broadsword, fallen.

Nearly blotting out the sight of that last hope, the Silk of Shaitan whispered and rustled toward Brak's face. The iron gauntlet grew larger, like the mailed fist of a gigantic statue, *larger*—

With one pain-wracked lunge, Brak flung out his right arm. He slapped his hand down upon the broadsword haft. Then as the blood-hued silk seemed to fill all the world, Brak used the tip of the sword in his free hand to snag a corner of it and drive it back upward.

The first sound from Ankhma Ra was a startled gasp. The pressure on Brak's left hand ceased. In a wild scramble he flung himself up out of the pool.

The broadsword point had driven into the sorcerer's neck. Brak tottered forward, seized the haft—

A burning, inhuman pain vibrated through his whole body, making him arch his back, shriek aloud in torment. But he held fast, pulled. The broadsword came out.

The Silk of Shaitan remained embedded in the wound in Ankhma Ra's pasty skin.

The moment Brak had freed the weapon, the worst of the pain stopped. He stumbled, fell, off balance from the force of the

pull. Ankhma Ra plucked madly at the silk against his throat, tearing it loose with his iron gauntlets. But the very flesh of his neck was already dripping gray.

FOR one ghastly instant, the conjurer stood rigid, staring down at his own heart lying blood-red and pumping on the silk in his hand.

Savage fury upon him, Brak leaped. He struck with the haft-end of his weapon. The thrust drove Ankhma Ra's strangely flaccid body forward. Brak had a brief, mad vision of the sorcerer's iron gauntlet closing down upon the beating heart in one awful constriction before Ankhma Ra's body—living or dead now, Brak did not know—tumbled forward and dropped into the pool.

The spines of the Fangfish broke water again. The monster came slicing through hundreds of flower petals for its new tidbit.

A scuffling of boots. Brak turned, an incredibly savage, gore-streaked figure, broadsword in his blood-bathed right hand, the lion's hide hanging sopped around his middle. Half a dozen of Ankhma Ra's soldiers had slipped into the court in the gloom. Brak took one halting step toward them, his head abuzz but the killing urge driving him on.

"Come," he croaked in a hoarse, broken voice. "Come, soldiers. There is no conjurer to protect you with hell's tricks." He made a gesture with his broadsword, as if by invitation.

The first soldier uttered a faint, guttural cry, flung away his spear and plunged off into the shadows.

The others followed. Six spears, crisscrossed like matchwood, lay abandoned after they had gone.

Trying to shake the daze from his head, Brak was unprepared for the sudden fresh rip of agony down his back. He cried out, caught himself on a colonnade pillar. Even before he pulled himself around, he knew who it would be. The attack had come from behind; from the direction of the apartments of Ankhma Ra—

Standing there with Brak's blood glistening on the tip of a tiny dagger, her nightdress disarrayed, her hair unbound, her cheeks flushed and her breath tainted with wine, was Princess Jardine.

"He was a man of great parts." She said it in a whisper. Her eyes were drunkenly bright. "He was better by far than that cow to whom my father would have married me. And you slew him. You, a witless, moneyless brute."

"He was a thing of filth," Brak croaked.

"I would have stayed with him.

There was treasure here. There were delights—" The Princess swayed, her eyes glazing slightly. Her lips curled into a smile that sickened Brak, for in it lay a love of awful vileness. He had suspected it was there, lurking beneath her loveliness, but now he saw it unmasked.

BRAK shook his yellow head. "I watched the sorcerer glance at you, there in his chamber the first time. And you returned it. As if you'd found the kind of man who suited your black soul's need for—" Brak stopped, eyes flaring. "It must have been you. You went to him. So that he had men waiting."

"Yes." Princess Jardine gave a contemptuous toss of her head. "I slipped off to his night chambers and told him you were to be the assassin for my father."

Brak shambled forward. He lifted the broadsword with his throbbing, blood-dripping right arm.

"I am going to kill you, girl. I am going to kill you so Lord Tazim will never know what you became in this place, with that abomination of a man. Your father said you, of all his daughters, were a plague to him, didn't he? Well, no more." Brak twitched the sword at the pool. Its surface was calm again, save for the faint wind-ripples that bobbed the floating flowers. "I can feed you to that creature and tell your father that Ankhma Ra himself destroyed you."

The laugh from the girl's lips was shrill.

"But you will never do that, barbarian. You are a man of *honor*. Or what you consider honor, anyway."

"I will." Brak raised the broadsword high.

Her eyes sparkled up at him, defiant, assured.

"No," she said.

The evil taint was on her. Her beauty was hollow, betrayed by the sickening, knowing smile upon her mouth. Brak the barbarian knew what she was. He knew what she had become when that which was deep within her had responded to the attraction of the conjurer. He lifted the broadsword higher, temples hammering—

Down came the sword again.

He could not strike.

She laughed, a tinkling sound. She darted the little dagger teasingly at Brak's exposed chest, like a flickering serpent's tongue. "I have no such scruples, barbarian," she said merrily, as the dagger-tip bit into his flesh—

There was a pulping thud. The pricking against Brak's chest stopped. Grasping at the wood shaft vibrating in the center of her breast, Princess Jardine tried to pluck it out, in vain.

She staggered away. She cried

out in wild terror at the sudden emptiness beneath her. Down she plummeted. Brak watched, shuddering in revulsion.

After a heartbeat or so, the spines of the Fangfish broke water. The maw opened, chunked shut. The pearly-glowing pool roiled and then gradually grew calm again.

Slowly the barbarian looked around. Where there had been six spears cast away by the frightened guards, Brak now counted five. In the murky shadows where he had listened, Tazim, Lord of the Tilling raised his palms to cover his face and turned away that he might weep in private.

* * *

In the sharp air of dawn, Lord Tazim rode back downward toward his kingdom. With fresh poultices upon his wounds and straddling his sole reward, a pony taken from among those belonging to Ankhma Ra's fled soldiers, Brak went the opposite way, following the trail which pointed somewhere between the sunrise and Khurdisan. He had said few words to Lord Tazim the rest of the night. Nor had he mentioned the bargain, or the dowry chests.

The only reward Brak wanted to claim was a quick and merciful forgetting.

THE END

PREDATOR

By ROBERT ROHRER

True horror exists inside the soul . . . and more perhaps, inside the souls of the already damned.

click the retransmitters *Mary Ellen to Port Q634F, come in Port Q634F, over. Mary Ellen to Port Q634F, come in, over / Port Q634F, read you Mary Ellen. How's the payload riding? / I'm talking to you, ain't I? We've got the stuff this far, now it's up to you to get us down. Don't stutter talking us in or we'll make one hell of a bang, over / Don't sweat about me. Start a locater-sweep at 10,000 miles, you should be able to spot us if there isn't any interference, over / Aye aye. What should I brake her down to? Over / Oh, ah, keep her down around—*

He shut the voices out and looked at a dial of the four-faced clock that revolved slowly in suspension from the high ceiling of the Second-Class Passengers' dining hall. The needle hands impaled seven o'clock. The muffled voices stopped vibrating up from his chest.

The girl was looking at him again. Whenever he glanced in her direction, he could see her eyes jump away from him. He wove between the Second-Class tables and took orders and carried food and every few minutes found her with his eyes as she wove between the tables selling cigarettes from the display box that was strapped from her neck so it rested against her belly. He wondered why she was looking at him. Maybe the bandage

"May I take your orders for dessert, sir?"

"What dessert?"

"M-hm."

"What?"

"Whatever you want, sir."

"Two banana splits, please."

"Yes sir."

no, the bandage was all right. White, no stains yet. He wondered whether any would soak through before eight o'clock. It hurt enough to soak to eat through.

He pushed the swinging door open with his good hand and shouted "TWO SPLITS!" and kept walking until he was at the window where Jeff would come and give him the desserts. It helped to yell. He would yell when it happened, a good loud yell that would let out all the pain in his hand and tear loose the knotting in his chest, a good loud long wide yell. If he had time to yell then.

"Awright." The two plates slid spinning out to him across the aluminum counter from two roast-brown hands. The china ridges clinked together as he laid the plates across his bad hand and wrist. He shouldered the swinging door open and walked out.

Other white-coated men were moving around between the tables, carrying trays or stopping slightly to hear and scribble orders. Women's hats and men's bare heads turned and bobbed around the tables. Where—

There, she was looking at him. She had let him see it that time. Like that last one had, in the bar DAMN

He didn't want to think about the one in the bar so he let the voices at the tables carry him across the restaurant, "She didn't fool him, not a bit of damned napkin ahead and tell Up two points, yeah"

"Ah."

"Mm, good."

"This'll be all, could I have the check?"

"Certainly, sir."

HE totalled the bill, backing the pad against his bandaged palm. The pencil jabbed holes in his hand.

"There you are."

"Ah-hah. What did you thih kuh ee aoombbl. . . ."

His hand really hurt. He decided he'd better go look at it. He would ask Hal to let him off for awhile. Hal knew the hand was in bad shape. Not how bad, but that it was pretty bad.

There was the girl again. She was pretty young. He hadn't spoken to her twice the whole trip. Probably making a play. She didn't look like the kind who'd have to use the hard sell, but you couldn't tell. *Sorry, sister, all out.*

He went into the kitchen and walked up to Hal.

"Hal, I got to leave off for a while."

"O.K. Call Corrigan up and sign out."

He called Corrigan, signed out, and went to his room. His room

wasn't much. He slid the door shut and went into the bathroom.

He got the scissors out of the medicine cabinet and began to cut away the bandages. The bandages and the white tile floor made him think of the place and them. They had taken him apart and put him back together again. Anyway that was what one of them had said. One of the ones who had taken him apart and put him back together again with all the little wires wrapped around his bones and the retransmitters in his chest, and had sent him back here.

Clip clip he didn't know why they had made him come back to the ship, he just knew what was going to happen because he was there. In the beginning he had often wondered who they were, what they wanted, why he was being made to do what he was doing, but he knew now that he would never know, and he didn't really care any more. All that mattered now was the pain in his hand.

The last of the bandages came off. There wasn't much of his hand left except muscle and bone. What flesh there was hung spungily from the bones and was black. He turned the hand around and gazed at it with the awful fascination that had never completely worn away. It was somebody else's hand. It was a part of him they had left dead as a reminder that he had to eat to keep going, EAT

He turned the heel of his wrist up. There were the two silver nubs where the wires ended. They hadn't wrapped his handbones. *When the pain is bad, you must eat* EAT He wondered why the ship's officers were keeping it quiet. They probably thought some wild animal was doing it—

He opened the medicine chest and took out the bottle of stuff they had given him to keep the hand from stinking. He sprinkled some of the stuff on. It didn't stop the pain.

He opened the medicine chest again and took out some fresh dressing and bandaged his hand. The hand felt as though he was holding it in a fire.

HE went out into his room and sat down on his bed. He put the hand in his lap and leaned over it. The bedsprings creaked under him and made him remember. He had been drinking around and then with that woman to her room up behind and something waked him in the night and someone said "There" and he was dead, and then he was on the table and then he was standing up barefooted on the white tile floor and they were telling him what he was going to do, but not why. That woman was the last they took care of that damn damn

He looked around his room trying to forget the pain. His room was very small. Almost all the rooms he had ever lived in had been small. They had gotten him in a small room. They had gotten him because he didn't have enough money to get a big room that was safe away from them and their damn two-faced.

He stood up and paced, holding his hand delicately away from his stomach. He looked at his watch. 7:25. Maybe he should go back and work, maybe if he worked he wouldn't think about it. Just until 8:00, just that long and then it would be finished, he would be out of it.

He walked into the corridor and passed two couples going the other way. The men were smiling and holding the women's arms and listening as the women talked. He stood with his back to one wall and let them pass. One of the women laughed. One of the men said, "Nn-hn, n-hn, n-hn to the other women as she talked. Then their legs flashed and they were gone.

Going to their big rooms together. They had it made. They had everything he wanted had ever wanted.

He signed in and relieved Corrigan and stepped out into the dining hall. There she was. She didn't see him yet, but she would.

The captain and the captain's lady were sitting at a table. He went over to take their orders.

"Good evening, sir."

"Yes," said the captain, not looking up from his menu. "We shall have number four this evening, with the sherry."

"Yes, sir, very good, sir. Will there be anything else, sir?"

"No, nothing," said the captain, handing the menu up without moving his eyes from the tablecloth.

"Yes, sir." He walked away on his tightrope of pain. It occurred to him that the captain might have been interested in the bandaged hand, in light of what had happened to some of the passengers. But the captain had not looked up. The captain's lady had been looking at someone at another table, so she hadn't seen the bandage, either.

So the captain and the captain's lady would be dead in half an hour, along with the rest of them. He hated the captain, anyway. They hadn't taken the captain and hollowed him out and filled him up with wires and machines. The captain had money and a big safe room to keep them out. The captain had it made.

HE looked at all the men at the tables with their women as he walked masticating his hand with each step. You got it made with all your stuff you got it all with your houses and your cars and your whores yeh, you got it

all the way you got the little wife to come home to every night, you got it all and what have I got? *what have I got* I was on that table and where were you?

His hand hurt badly and the raw nerves of his ears itched against the voices as he passed, "Well I don't reallyto the nose cone or whatever they Ohohoh, no! the butter, pleasdid you enjoy I think—that what we need—is a man who can handle."

The door thumped shut behind him. His hand click *Mary Ellen to Port Q634F, come in Port Q634F, over / Port Q634F, hear you loud and clear Mary Ellen, over* / damn / *How much longer before we catch you guys in the locaters, huh?* / damn damn / *Relax, pal, we haven't picked you up yet either. Locaters get fouled up out here all the damn time, it could be radiation, sunspots, hell, over* / STOP / *Radiation! Great! Merry Christmas to you, too, over* / stopitstopit

Something was coming up under his ribs, and there was a high singing in his ears, and he felt that his head was being forced back. It was very warm. There was the girl, looking at him from across the kitchen. A red, jumping circle crept down across his vision and the air from his lungs roared through his nostrils

HE was floating beneath a tall black figure that was inclined unrenouncably over him with—a face—

It was the girl. There was a luminescent ceiling behind above her. His hand was throbbing steadily. Why hadn't they let him go, let him rot and fall apart and forget like other people? He wanted to forget. The thing the retransmitter in his chest was so heavy *he had to ea* he had to get up

The girl was talking. Her first words had come only as a soft patter against the membranes of his ears but now he heard "I saw you—when you were taking orders and serving, you looked so —awful sick I was, I thought you were—that you might, need something, and then you passed out. Are you—are you better?" She was standing tensely on the balls of her feet looking at him.

Her voice irritated him. He had to get up. He lifted his legs and let them drop to the floor and swung himself up. His hand felt big and round. He sat bent over on the sofa, squeezing the wrist of the bad hand with the thumb and two of the fingers of his good hand.

"Is it your hand?" she asked.

"Yeh."

"Can I see it?"

He half looked up. "No." Then he sucked in his breath and squeezed the wrist tighter.

The girl's feet moved on the rug. "If you'd let me—"

"Shuttup. Just shuttup."

"Help you."

This time he did look up. He looked up slowly because it was hard to move because of the pain. "You can't," he said.

The girl said, "I've got some stuff, it could help the pain."

Stuff. He didn't need stuff. "Shuttup."

"They brought you here because I told them I had some stuff I could give you," said the girl. She was trying to hold up a conversation. Her voice was shaking.

He didn't say anything. He thought Well good, now we're in here all alone.

"How did you hurt it?" she asked.

He didn't answer. The pain in his hand began to eat up into his arm and he whined.

"If—if you just let me give you the stuff—Mr. Baker, I know it'll help, it'll stop the—"

"Shut up!" Mr. Baker shouted. She knew, did she? She knew all about it. He wanted to get out, but the sofa felt too good and his hand felt awful, and someone might be outside a doctor he did not want a doctor to see his—

"Please," said the girl.

Please. That was the big one with them. Please. Look, what you want? You got me here in the room, now what you want? You want what they all want? well sorry, we're all out, they took that away because women make you talk or make you not want to do what you have to do and too damn bad for *you* but look, I can do something better, want me to show you, want me to show you what I can do that's better, it's a *lot* better, and I can do it don't say it don't say I can't, I *can*, I *can*—

"I want to help you," said the girl.

"I don't have any money."

"I don't want any money, I want to help—"

God, a tyro! "I don't want your help." He looked at her. She didn't look bad.

She moved toward him saying, "Please, let me see it." She held out her hand *she was going to*

"Don't touch me!" he shrieked.

She jumped back. She looked at him and her eyes said it, *they said it* and he had to show her, damn her damn damn she thought she knew every damn thing she thought

He leaped and his hand dug runnels in her back and he breathed his mouth onto her neck and closed his teeth on her neck and with a great animal wrench of his head, tore.

She staggered back on both feet and looked at him and at the great ragged mop of skin and flesh that hung between his teeth. She looked and she knew, she and the gash in her throat

knew, but especially she knew because he had shown her. The gash dribbled onto the neckline of her dress. He stared at her. Her body shuddered. Something plopped to the carpet and spread. Her irises went back into her head and with the whites of her eyes staring she fell to the floor.

click the retrans*Mary Ellen to —Mary Ellen to Port Q634F, come in Port, over / Port to Mary Ellen, read you, over / Look, Port, we just measured the intensity of your radio beam and it's coming from more than 7,000 miles. What gives? / Oh, hell! We couldn't have miscalculated that much! / Well you damn well did, a red-hot 5,000 miles, Look, how about you guys getting on the ball, I don't want to get scattered halfway across the damn universe. / Okay, okay, hold on to it. Just keep following our beam and you'll be O.K., no matter how many miscalculations we . . .*

Just stick to the beam and forget about those two sides of a triangle bigger than the third side because it's too late now for that to do you any good anyway and you'd have to know what you can't even suspect for it to do you any good anyway and it's too late any way just come to momma, come

He finished rinsing his white-plastic jacket and dried it on a towel. The towel fell from his fingertips to the tile, and he left the bathroom. Shaking his arms into the jacket he walked around the thing on the floor.

In the hall he passed two women talking and smoking cigarettes. They didn't look at him.

In the kitchen he walked up to Hal. "O.K. now?" said Hal, looking around the kitchen.

"Yeh. She gave me some stuff."

"Good." Hal walked away. He didn't even ask where the girl was.

The clock in the dining hall said five till eight. He looked at the diners and thought, Just five more and it's over if you knew you'd like to take me apart wouldn't you, to save your damn tails well you don't know and you won't know, so just *give up.* Sit there and eat your damn food, eat it up, quickquick or you'll waste some of your precious precious damn money that keeps you away from them but not away from me, does it? not from *me*

The captain and the captain's lady rose from their table and came toward him walking for the door. He moved his bandaged hand from behind his back so that the captain could see it if he looked. The captain passed without looking at him.

Just a couple of minutes you'll all be dead all you, you got it all

but you'll be dead because I made you dead because they told me to but I don't care about them, I'd do it anyway even if they weren't making me I'd do it I'd kill you all one by one and I could, they gave me the teeth for it, make you suffer I've suffered. God, I've suffered. My hand you never any had a hand like mine is, you never got what happened to me, why should you stay alive you deserve it you damn got it all deserve it itit itititittttt

IT PASSED.

Suddenly all the burning and grinding left him, as though a long, violent chemical reaction had finally come to an end. And as he stood, dazed and rocking slightly after the sudden lifting of the burden, he realized that what his mind had been screaming was right. It *was* right for these to die. They were the happy ones. They had everything they really wanted or needed. Why should they mind dying? Their lives were full lives, why should they mind, could they live in hope of anything better than what they already had? The circle was full, their lives were complete, it was time for them to die, *time*—

Time. He looked at his watch. Fifteen seconds. He lowered his arm. They had fifteen seconds. These fifteen seconds would be just the same for them as all the other fifteen seconds they had ever had before, except that this time at the end there wouldn't be any more. They were lucky. They were so damned lucky.

A man with a cigarette in his mouth, one of the passengers, walked up. There was still on the man's face part of the laughter left from a joke he had just heard or a stupid, happy thing someone he knew had just said. Happily but with a slight brow-wrinkling of concentration he asked, "You, ah, you have a light?"

"Yes, sir." You reached into his good pocket with his good hand and pulled out his cylindrical cigarette lighter. He flipped back the flip-back cap of the cigarette lighter and lifted the light cylinder in the direction of the unlit cigarette. The happy passenger moved his lower lip out so that the cigarette jumped up in his mouth perpendicular to his face and held there, pulsing slightly. You put his bad hand inconspicuously behind his back and flipped the igniter of the cigarette lighter. The tiny filament of the lighter brightened to white-heat under the brown circular tip of the man's cylindrical cigarette. The man moved his head forward very slightly to touch the tobacco tip to the tiny filament of the silly cylindrical cigarette lighter in the hand of You, who noted that one grain in the tip was slightly

THE END

FANTASY BOOKS

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

Best Ghost Stories of J. S. LeFanu. *Edited and with an introduction by E. F. Bleiler. Dover Books, $2.00. 467 pages.*

Joseph Sheridan LeFanu, an Irish writer who lived from 1814 to 1873, was responsible for some of the finest ghost stories of the nineteenth century—which means some of the finest ghost stories of all time, since the nineteenth century was the high point in the romantic literature of ghostery. LeFanu's most famous short story, perhaps, is the oft-anthologized "Green Tea," that tale of the unfortunate experiences of a clergyman embroiled with an evil monkey. It is here, along with fifteen other less familiar tales, in this bulky, handsome, well-produced paperbound edition.

These are not tales for the hurried. Many of them are long-ish novelets—twenty or thirty thousand words—divided into ten or a dozen chapters, and the pace is Victorian, as is to be expected. Readers too thoroughly adapted to today's zippy prose style may feel some difficulties sliding into LeFanu's world, though perhaps not. My own adjustment was made in the space of a single sentence—the one that opens the book, in the story called "Squire Toby's Will." It goes like this:

"Many persons accustomed to travel the old York and London road, in the days of stage-coaches, will remember passing, in the afternoon, say, of an autumn day, in their journey to the capital, about three miles south of the town of Applebury, and a mile and a half before you reach the Old Angel Inn, a large black-and-white house, as those old-fashioned cagework habitations are termed, dilapidated and weather-stained, with broad lattice windows glimmering all over in the evening sun with little diamond panes, and thrown into relief by a dense background of ancient elms."

There is something reassuring about a sentence like that, with its musty tang, its involuted syntax, and above all its sublime confidence that the reader is remaining with it. *This* reader did

—in a warm, well-lit room on a bleak, rainy autumn afternoon. Just the right atmosphere for LeFanu, who was very much a master of the quiet supernatural tale. No eldritch horrors here; the effects are achieved slowly and without resort to purple prose.

Editor Bleiler has searched out these stories, many of them, from obscure and unobtainable sources. He has also contributed an intelligent, perceptive preface which could well have been longer without wearying at least one reader. As in its other recent books, Dover has come up with delightful period-piece illustrations, though there are not enough of them.

The Radio Beasts, *by Ralph Milne Farley. Ace Books, 40¢. 191 pages.*

Speaking of period pieces, here's another Ace resuscitation —the second, I think, in a once-famous series that time has faded. This was science fiction in its day, but its day was 1925, and I think it's best classed as fantasy fiction today.

Ralph Milne Farley was a pseudonym for a midwestern lawyer and politician named Roger Sherman Hoar, who died a few years ago at a ripe old age. He was a contributor to the Munsey pulp magazines of a bygone era, and in the days when radio was a startling new concept he wrote a novel called *The Radio Man,* about a gent named Myles Cabot who shot himself off to Venus via a radio matter-transmitter.

It was rapturously received, and Farley produced a host of sequels, of which this is one. (The series petered out with a short story called "The Radio Man Returns," published in *Amazing Stories* in 1939.)

The stories are Burroughsy in theme—interloping Earthman gets involved in political hassels on alien planet, marries an alien princess, meets strange beasts, etc., etc., etc. Whether Farley intended these stories as deliberate imitations of Burroughs I am not equipped to say. Fortunately, he approached his stories lightheartedly, and all the frantic action is related in a spirit of gentle fun.

For the nostalgic.

The Blind Spot, *by Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint. Ace Books, 50¢. 318 pages.*

"Fabulous!" declares Forrest J. Ackerman on the jacket of this thick reprint, and his brief introductory essay continues the rapturous tone. Forry is a kind-hearted person, soft-spoken and gentle, and perhaps he could not bring himself to admit that this lengthy novel of parallel worlds is really a stinker. It is. Like

The Radio Man, it originated in *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, vintage 1921. Word-of-mouth reputation has kept it alive through various reprintings, but I'm sure I can't say why.

Whereas the Ralph Milne Farley novel, though dated, is a readable species of literary nonsense, the Hall-Flint classic is not. Endless, wordy, ungramatical, inconsistent, full of lines like "'Good heavens!' gasped Charlotte, 'What can it mean?' "—it's a moronic exercise in archaic pulp formula fiction that leaves this youthful curmudgeon cold.

I suppose the plot is one obstacle to enjoyment, for it makes no sense whatever—as if each collaborator had neglected to tell the other what he was up to. Sometimes a book with a nonsensical plot can carry the reader along simply by force of its grand sweep of episode—I think particularly of *The World of Null-A* in that connection. But when nonsense of style is coupled with idiocy of plot, the result becomes impossible. Open this one at random and some bizarre mangling of the language leaps forth. Consider—

"She was never a woman—she was a girl—far, far transcendent."

"There was a fact between us, some strange bond that was beyond even passion."

"It was intrinsic, coming from within, like the withering of one's marrow."

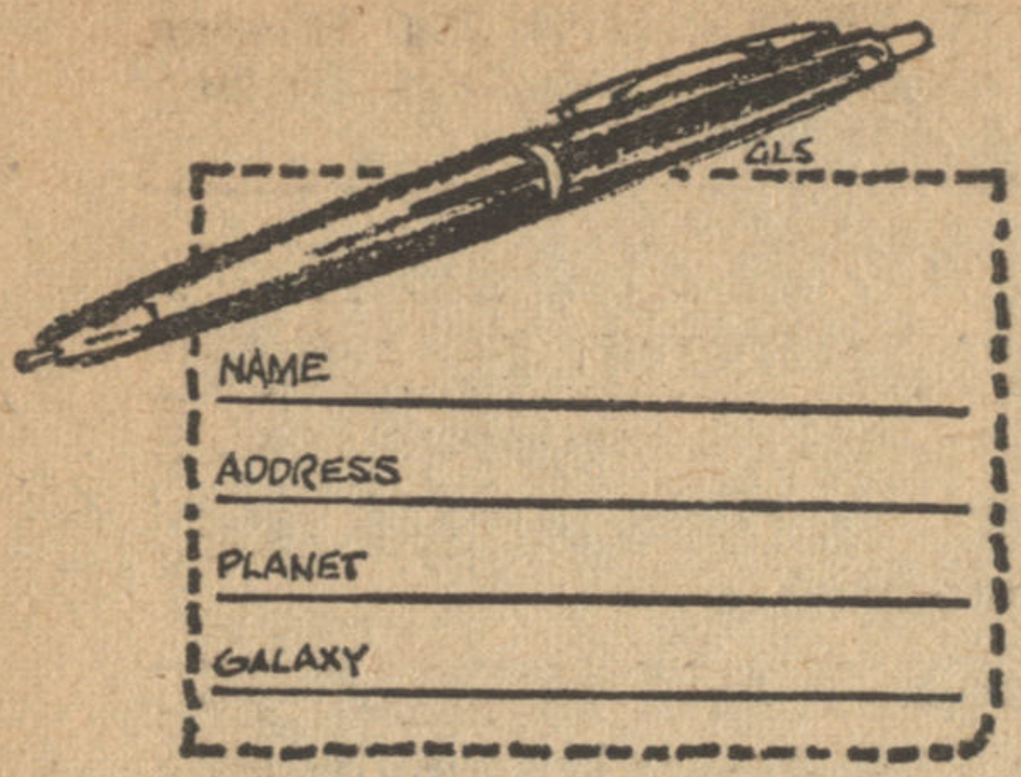
There is a sequel, *The Spot of Life*. I am braced for it.

Atlantida, *by Pierre Benoit.* ***Ace Books,*** *40¢. 192 pages.*

In a remote part of the world is a lost kingdom whose ruler is an immortal, beautiful, strangely sinister queen. A couple of men from the outside world find their way in, and one of them becomes the lover of the queen, which leads to all manner of dire catastrophes.

That may sound like a summary of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, but it will also do for a synopsis of this 1920 French novel, one of the most pleasing of Ace's recent archaeological finds. Benoit slavishly followed the Haggard formula, setting the mysterious kingdom in French North Africa and making his wanderers members of the Foreign Legion. The result is not dreadfully original—pretty close to a steal, in fact—but the tale is handled with deftness and a certain romantic verve, and I read it with almost total suspension of my normally obtrusive disbelief.

Fun, in other words. Escapist-type fun, of a kind just about extinct today. It made a lovely movie, too, about thirty years ago.



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