NEW ALWAYS THE BLACK KNIGHT

A New Kind of Fantasy Novel by Lee Hoffman

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FANTASTIC stories

June 1970 60c

NEW

- David R. Bunch: IN THE LAND OF THE NOT-UNHAPPIES
- Joe W. Haldeman: I OF NEWTON
- Bob Shaw: COMMUNICATION
- Howard L. Myers: PSYCHIVORE
- David Mason: THE TIME
- Benford & Littenberg: THE PRINCE OF NEW YORK
- *Beginning in this issue:* SCIENCE FICTION IN DIMENSION, *a new column by* ALEXEI PANSHIN

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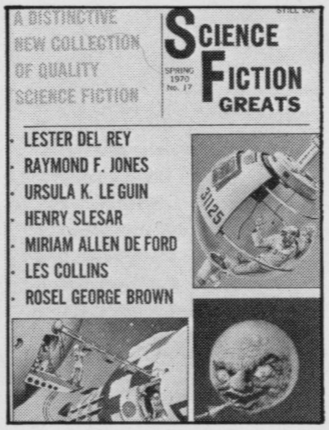

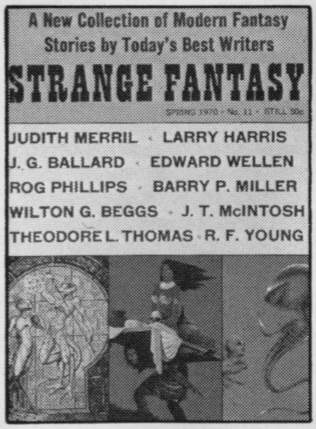

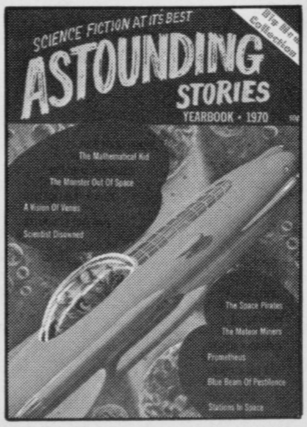

SCIENCE FICTION ● FANTASY

FANTASTIC

JUNE, 1970 Vol. 19, No. 5

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"ALWAYS THE BLACK KNIGHT"

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FANTASTIC, Vol. 19, No. 5, JUNE, 1970 is published bi-monthly by **ULTIMATE PUBLISHING CO., INC. 69-62 230 Street, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364.** Editorial office: Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Business office: Purchase, N.Y. Box 175, Portchester, N.Y. at 60¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions: $3.00; Canada and Pan American Union countries: $3.50; all other countries $4.00. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364. Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y. and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1970 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs, or manuscripts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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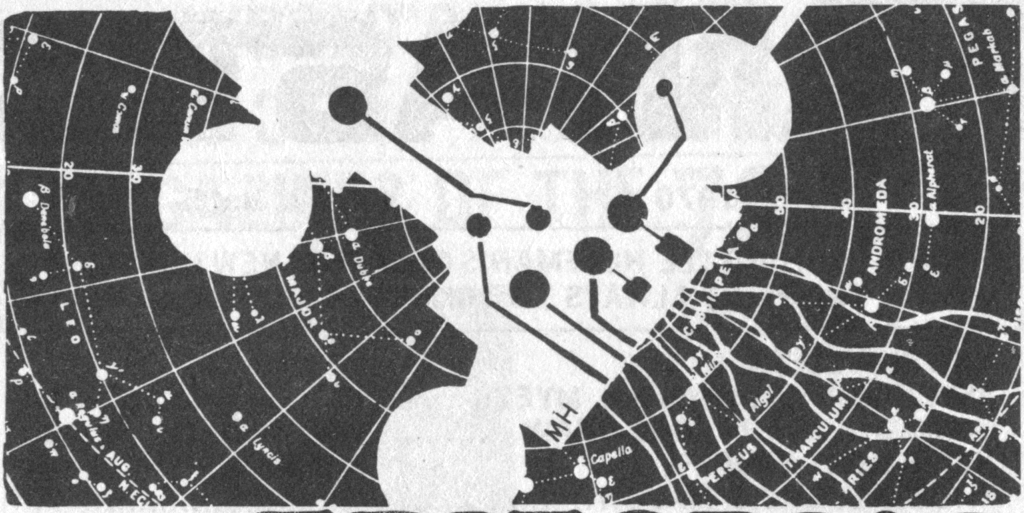


TED WHITE: EDITORIAL

One of the unexpected rewards of my position with this magazine is the way in which so many of you have declared your faith in me. Sometimes this is, indeed, a little embarrassing, but I try to live with it in all due modesty and decorum.

Still and all, as the changes I've made in successive issues have become more obvious, their very occurrance has seemed to whet the appetites of many of you for yet *more* change, and you have made me the privy of your long, thoughtful, searching, and usually demanding strictures. You have observed what I have already done, and you have decided that I require only direction and encouragement to make the really *necessary* changes which will—must!—bring about the 100% improvement of this magazine and result in no less than double the sales.

It seems a shame that so many of your often ingenious suggestions have the effect of cancelling each other out (were I to act upon them), but the real shame is that in many cases I can not only see the wisdom in what you have to say, but even wish I *could* do as you would like. But I can't, and the reason is usually bound up in the very nature of my job and of this magazine. We are all limited by reality.

It occurred to me that if I told you something of what goes on behind the scenes—if I took you on a tour of the magazine's production—it might aid in your appreciation of the possible. Therefore, let us imagine that we have formed a tour-group, safely invisible and insubstancial, and able to penetrate solid walls at will. Let us suppose that we begin our tour at Post Office Box 73, at the Bush Terminal Station in Brooklyn.

It is a corner—ground floor—of a vast, block-long, industrial building, one of the many which make up Bush Terminal City. Located on Brooklyn's Third Avenue and extending west toward the Bay and the docks, Bush Terminal City would be a drab and unpleasant place if

not for the fact that all the huge loft buildings are painted white—all, that is, but the one in which the Post Office is located. It is a soft cream color, which denotes (for some obscure reason) its Federal ownership.

A grey Cadillac of some age pulls up in the yellow-curbed bus stop space, and stops. A man in his early thirties climbs out. The day is grey and bleak and the wind whips the man's long but thinning hair about. He strides quickly to the corner and up the steps into the warmth of the building. He is carrying a large manilla envelope, addressed to a Manhattan typesetting firm. It probably contains either manuscripts or galleys. He goes to one of the windows facing the door, and Mr. Fish, a pleasant-looking heaviset man, weighs the envelope and informs him that first-class postage is 98¢. It is usually 98¢, for some reason.

Free of the parcel, the man turns to a wall of boxes, and peeks through the window of Box 73. There is almost always something inside it. Today there is a manuscript from David Bunch and two letters. One is addressed to *According to You;* the other to *Or So You Say.* He retreats to his car, opens his mail, and scans it. One of the letters informs him that his last editorial was entirely too self-congratulatory, and the lead novel stank. The second is shorter, but praises all the stories and tells him to keep up the good work. He decides to use the first in the letter column.

It is early afternoon, but only a matter of an hour or so since he awoke; he usually sleeps until around noon, having found that he is useless during the early morning hours, no matter when he got to sleep the night before. He will now drive south on Third Avenue, a mile or two further, perhaps to do the grocery shopping at the A&P, or to stop off at his bank, or perform other necessary errands. On Tuesdays and Thursdays he stops in at the candy store on Fourth Avenue and 53rd St., where he scans the newsstand thoroughly. This candy store has a remarkably thorough newsstand.

Returning home an hour or so later, he parks his car on a side street in upper Bay Ridge, usually directly in front of the modest building in which he has the ground-floor apartment, a duplex which includes a lower floor and back yard. The front room on the upper floor is his office, but he will as likely as not dump his mail on the dining room table on his way out to the kitchen with the groceries. He will probably stumble over one of several cats in the process.

The rest of the afternoon will be occupied with a variety of tasks. They depend upon the time of the month and the specific month itself. Since FANTASTIC and its companion magazine, AMAZING STORIES, are prepared simultaneously, a two-month cycle follows on the 20th of every other month. The cycle is launched by the selection of stories for the pair of issues. This is usually done before the previous pair have been sent to the printers, but not always, brinksmanship being all too often the order of the day. The lead novel or serial is the first chosen; once its length in wordage has been established, short stories from the file drawer marked "Inventory" are pawed through and selected both for length and quality of themes, the object being a decently rounded pair of issues. These stories must be copyedited (spelling and grammar checked, instructions made to the typesetter on the typography, blurbs written, etc.) and sent to the typesetter in Manhattan no later than the 20th. They rarely are, however.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 137)

Lee Hoffman is the author of the award-winning The Valdez Horses *(soon to be a movie), and more than a half-dozen other uncommonly fine western novels. She is also the author of* Telepower *(Belmont Books) and* The Caves of Karst *(Ballantine), both tough and unusual science fiction novels. Now she turns to the introspective question:* Is the adventure and romance of swords and chivalry all it's been cracked up to be? *Follow Kyning, the Black Knight, as he ponders that question on the "perfect" planet Elva . . .*

ALWAYS THE BLACK KNIGHT

LEE HOFFMAN

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

(First of Two Parts)

CHAPTER 1

BRILLIANT SUNLIGHT glinted off the chrome-plated boss of the white knight's buckler as he touched spurs to the sensor plates in his horse's sides, urging it to a gallop.

Kyning couched his lance, taking precise aim at the white shield. It would just take a couple of inches, he thought. Just a couple of inches off and he could unhorse his opponent so easily—if this weren't the breakaway lance. Sitting easy but alert, ready to brace for the impact, he spurred his own horse.

The end of the lance was pre-splintered, an assembly of pieces that fit together as ingeniously as a Chinese puzzle and concealed a percussion cap. As it struck the white shield the splinters flew apart. The cap exploded with a gratifying snap, as if it were the cracking of wood strained beyond endurance. And within the same moment, the white knight's lance rammed into Kyning's black buckler.

Despite the spring-loaded tip that absorbed much of the impact, the blow jarred Kyning. He rocked back against the high cantle of the saddle, his thighs gripping the horse's sides. He could feel the vibration of its mechanism between his legs—and that clicking in rhythm with its pounding hooves that shouldn't have been there.

Damned worn gears, he thought as he drew rein, activating the brake. The horse was badly in need of an overhaul. He brought the machine up onto its hind legs at the end of the list. Wheeling it, he reached out to exchange his broken lance for the fresh one his squire held toward him.

Facing his opponent again, squinting

against the sheen of Deptfort's white armour, he threw the horse into a gallop and couched the spear. Those gears *had* to be replaced—the horse's timing was off. He nudged his spurs against the sensor plates, speeding up to meet the white knight at the correct spot.

With a quick jerk of his hand, he swerved the horse, at the same instant shifting his lance, sweeping it to the side.

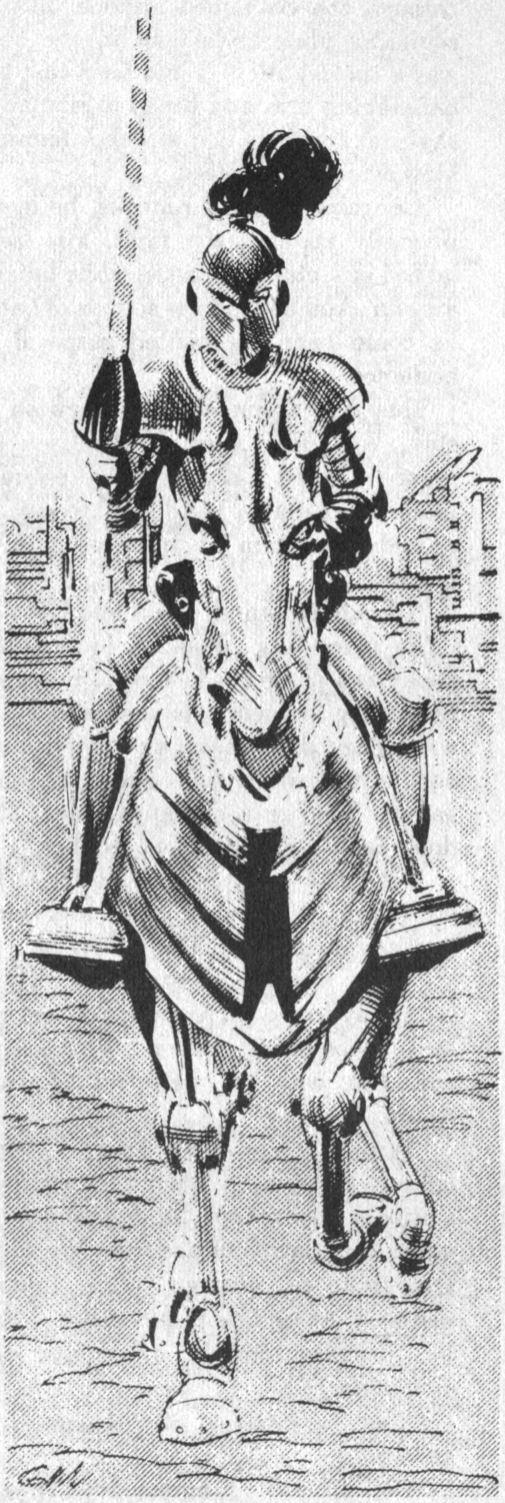
Deptfort's blow glanced off his shield. His own lance was held out across Deptfort's path now—a dishonorable stroke. And Deptfort had started out of the saddle an almost imperceptible instant before the spear struck against his armour. He fell with the practiced skill of a tumbler, hitting ground and rolling, then lying still while Kyning swung the horse around again.

There was no list-fence dividing the tiltyard. Flinging away the lance, Kyning drew his sword as he rode directly toward the downed man. Slowly, Deptfort lifted himself to his hands and knees, as if stunned by the fall. He hesitated, seeming only then to realize he was about to be ridden down.

Kyning leaned well out of the saddle with his sword swinging. He'd kicked free of the stirrups and was ready, vaulting as Deptfort, suddenly on his feet, grappled a hand around his outstretched wrist. His own timing was off. He landed badly, his weight thrown against Deptfort's shoulder. From under the white helmet, he heard a muffled curse. But there was no time to argue. The dance began now.

His first steps were to fight free of Deptfort's grip on his arm, moving back to give the white knight time to draw his own sword. Then he closed in battle.

He caught the first blow against his arm. The stroke of the sword's impact-absorbent edge was barely perceptible



through the cushioned armour. But the sounding plate embedded in the blade was a special alloy. It had been cast by a bellmaking firm and tuned to ring at the slightest touch as if it struck a hammer-blow against steel plate.

Returning stroke for stroke, he moved precisely through the fight. His sword lashed out, clanging on the white knight's armour. And beyond the sounds of battle, he could hear the excited gasps of the audience.

They had surprised him. Back on the ship, he'd done a quick check on this planet called Elva. The reference material available had been meager, but it had given him an impression of the planet.

"It's a lousy stand," he'd told Deptfort. "The place was colonized by a cult of kooks and it's got a history of peace and prosperity. Its people haven't ever known war. They don't have any blood sports and I can't even find any competitive games. They're a contented race. They don't know anything about conflict."

"All the better," Deptfort had answered. "They're a pure and virgin territory for us, Kyn. They'll love us."

"They won't understand us. They'll never pay to see us. And chances are once we've done a performance, we'll get run out, the way we were on Hastings' Island."

"Wrong, wrong, wrong! They're *human*, my friend. They have the basic instincts of humans hidden somewhere under that patina of pacifism. We will be the first to awaken their inherent instincts, their latent blood-lusts. We'll be bringing them a unique new experience."

"The spectacle of violence and sadism."

With a nod of agreement, Deptfort declaimed in reply, "A harmless outlet for the natural instincts they've suppressed for centuries. We'll be giving them thrills and excitement such as they've never known. And all under the simple, socially-acceptable guise of historical pageantry."

"We got kicked off Hastings," Kyning reminded him.

"That was a different situation. On Hastings they know war and are in the process of trying to suppress it. And, foolishly, man's normal aggressive instincts along with it. They don't appreciate the necessity of a show like ours—the vicarious expression of those instincts. Alas, that we must masque ourselves thusly, our true purpose and value to mankind unappreciated!"

"Our true purpose is to make a buck, and we'd better do it on Elva. Those horses are about to fall apart. I can only keep them running on spit for so long. I've got to have replacement parts."

"We will profit on Elva. Take my word for it." He waved an authoritarian finger at Kyning's face. "And I'll expect a decent performance from you, regardless of the audience."

Kyning grunted in disgust. Turning his back to Deptfort, he punched off the reference scanner. It wasn't just uncertainty about their reception on Elva that bothered him: In a way he wished to hell that they would be kicked out and Deptfort would be proven wrong—but yet they *had* to turn a profit and repair the equipment or there wouldn't be a show to put on much longer.

The audience on Elva had surprised him. Tickets for all performances had sold out, and so far there'd been no complaints. The portable stands were crammed full with mobs that gasped in awe at the clash of lances on shields and the clanging of swords on armour.

Deptfort swung a mighty blow that jolted Kyning and roused a cheer from the spectators. Staggering back, Kyning let himself fall. He sprawled on the dusty earth of Elva and the white knight leaped astride him, sword upraised for the final thrust. Through the visor's eyeslits, he could see Deptfort thumb the stud on the sword's hilt that would open its reservoir of synthetic blood.

The blade rammed down, sliding along the side of Kyning's neck, and the red fluid gushed, spurting as if from a severed artery. That brought another awed gasp from the mobs in the stands. Kyning winced and lay still, watching Deptfort turn to take a few bows.

It would be fun to spring up now and strike out at the white knight, he thought. Slaughter the bastard with some *honest* swordplay. He was certain he could do it. Deptfort was actually a second-rate swordsman. Kyning took pleasure in contemplating how easily he could have out-fought the man. Edged blades and honest battle, he thought, then the mobs would have something to gasp about—some real blood to feast their eyes on. Deptfort's blood.

But it was no go. Killing Deptfort was a dream to contemplate, not an act to commit. Kyning lay motionless as his squire brought out the horse-drawn sledge and tumbled him onto it. His limp hand trailed in the dust as he was dragged away. It oozed a stream of synthetic blood from the container hidden in his gauntlet. And the crowd roared its approval.

A light breeze fluttered the pennants on the brightly colored pavilions set up beyond either end of the listyard. The squire turned the horse, stopping it behind the tent that bore the stark black pennon. Hidden from the audience now, Kyning got stiffly to his feet. Despite all the training and all the precautions of cushioned armour and impact absorbent weapons, a full performance still produced a few bruises along with tired muscles. Ill-timed falls didn't help either.

Wearily, Kyning lifted the tent's back flap and ducked inside. The squire followed him in and began to unsnap the armour for him. Even the light plastics and alloys seemed heavy after a few hours, and under that blazing Elvan sun, they were hot as hell. He was glad to have the helmet lifted off. He ran his finger through sweat-damp hair, then rubbed his face, as the boy opened the catches on his breast and back plates.

Hesitantly, the squire knelt to start pulling off the greaves. He glanced up and Kyning looked questioningly at him.

"Kyn," the kid began, his voice tentative. "I—I've written another sonnet."

"And you want me to read it?"

He nodded.

"Hell," Kyning grunted. "You're wasting your time and mine on that rot."

"But it's *good!* I know it is!"

"Good for what?" he snapped back at the kid. "Look, Riss, unless you're a professional scholar, poetry's no damned use to you and you're wasting your time with it."

"But . . ."

"Bedamned if I can see why a kid smart enough to pass qualifications for post-doctorate study could be dumb enough to quit school before he got his degree," he muttered as he faced the mirror. "Especially to go after a career of falling off mechanical horses and banging swords with some bastard in a tin suit twice a day. It's not *chivalry*, Riss. It's show business, entertaining a bunch of morons who'd like nothing better than to see your guts strung out on a lance . . ."

"But *you* did it! *You* quit school to be a knight with the show!"

Kyning froze, one hand half-raised. Tensely, he gazed at the boy's reflection in the mirror and said slowly, "Where the hell did you get that idea?"

Riss swallowed hard. "I—I saw it in one of your books."

"What did you see?"

"In your locker—a study book—a mnemonic scan cube of Deev's *Analysis of the Arthurian Cycle.* I only just glanced at it. It had your ownership recorded in it—your registration number for level eight classes. That's the final year of study for a PD in Lit. I—I—you quit school to go to work for Deptfort, didn't you, Kyn? Didn't you?"

"What I've done is none of your damned business! You understand?"

The kid nodded, his eyes mingling accusation and guilt. Kyning could feel them both. He looked down at his hands, thinking he'd snapped too hard. His words had stung Riss like a whip. It had been his own sense of guilt driving them, overaccentuating the whole affair. He could have—*should have*—passed it all off with a casual lie. Maybe it wasn't too late.

"Okay, but I didn't *quit,*" he lied. "I flubbed out. Had to find some kind of job. I work for Deptfort because he pays me. I'd work for anyone who did." As he said it he bent to busy himself with pulling off the greaves. How good a liar was he, he wondered. Had he convinced Riss? Dammit, he seemed unable to convince the kid of anything that was for his own good.

Wordlessly, Riss turned back to his duties as squire. Fetching a basin of cool water, he placed it on the chest in front of Kyning, then gathered up the pieces of armour and began hanging them on the rack.

Kyning leaned his hands on the chest and looked into the mirror. The damp black hair straggled over his forehead, accentuating the dark hollows under his eyes. Looked a damnsite older than he was, he thought. But age couldn't be counted in years alone. And it didn't matter anyway. He scooped his hands full of the water to splash it into his face.

From outside the tent, he could hear the murmurings of the crowd as it slowly emptied the stands. There'd be plenty of time to eat and shower before the evening performance, even to relax a while. He wondered if a drink would help.

Riss was ready with the towel. Kyning took it and swabbed at his face, then stripped off the quilted tunic. He reached for the light robe the squire held out and wrapped it around his bare shoulders. Wearily, he sprawled on the couch and closed his eyes. For long moments, he lay in dark silence.

"Kyn?" the boy's voice was small and hopefully apologetic.

"Huh?" he grunted, opening his eyes again.

Riss was brushing out the full plume of black plastic fibres that topped his helmet. Without looking up, the boy asked, "Don't you ever get tired of being the *black* knight?"

"Why should I?"

"I mean—wouldn't you like to be the good guy sometime? Wouldn't you like to win for a change?"

"I never win," Kyning mumbled.

Riss lifted his eyes, frowning in question.

"It doesn't make any difference who wins," Kyning answered him. "I fight and I get paid. That's what counts."

Riss made no reply, but Kyning could feel the lack of completion. He knew he

had to add something more. Propping himself up on one arm, he gazed at the kid as he said, "Look, this is a *show*. We're not black and white knights battling on the field of honor. We're a bunch of goddamned actors going through a play. You get *that* into your skull, will you?"

The boy nodded, but it was acquiescence, not agreement.

"That horse outside is no snorting charger that will carry you off to do battle with dragons and evil giants," Kyning insisted. "It's a concoction of precision gears and transistors. There aren't any faery castles with damozels to be rescued from their turrets. There isn't anybody to write sonnets to—not here—it's all a fake. The stories are lies and this damned show is the worst mockery of all. You get that into your head. If it's sonnets you want, go back to school and get your degree. Get a government subsidy as a scholar and you can write all the sonnets you want to. But as long as you're with this troupe, you forget the poetry. Your job here is polishing plastic armour and greasing mechanical horses. You understand?"

"Yes," Riss said, unbelieving.

Kyning closed his eyes again. What the hell more could he say? He'd said it all before anyway. He'd tried over and over again to make Riss understand, but words didn't seem to do any good. The kid was bound and determined to throw himself away chasing an illusion.

"Kyn," Riss said softly. "Would—could—I mean—would you let me borrow that Arthurian Cycle—just for a little while. I wouldn't . . ."

"No!" Kyning snapped.

Angrily, he got to his feet and strode toward the tent flap. Pausing there, he looked back at the squire and said, "Give my horse a good lube before the next performance. And be sure you get all the grease off the hull."

It was a long walk across the back of the open field toward the spaceport gate, but the shower would be worth the trouble. And so would a drink. He walked hurriedly, the robe swirling like a long cape at each stride.

It was a damned waste of energy talking to Riss, he told himself. Why the devil should he care what became of the kid? The little bastard could go to hell on a tin horse as far as he was concerned.

Impatiently he dug out his temporary field-pass and inserted it into the scanner at the gate. The thing hummed as it compared the print on the pass to the ridges and sworls of his thumb, then opened the gate for him.

On board the docked ship, he went into the closet-sized cabin he shared with his squire. As he pulled open his locker, he thought that from now on he'd have to remember to keep it locked. Impulsively, he pulled down the box of scanner cubes and fumbled through it, hunting the *Analysis*.

He picked out the book and tossed it in his palm, thinking it was a damned fine work. And a clever piece of electronics. The mnemonic study recordings read quickly and implanted themselves in the memory firmly. But they were expensive as hell. That was why he'd had his ID recorded onto the blank opening molecules—the books were too expensive and too important not to be marked as his own property. Or they *had* been, when he'd gotten them.

He shoved the *Analysis* into the scanner and pressed the *on* stud. The screen lit, showing him the registration. It brought back a damned lot of memories. He stared at it a moment, then jerked out the cube and tossed it back in with the

rest of the books. Should throw the whole mess down the disposal, he told himself.

Aloud, he quoted, *"One of the many enchanters from those books might cast a spell . . . There is no reason why you should pardon any of them, for they have all been offenders. Better throw them out of the window into the courtyard, and after piling them in a heap, set fire to the lot; or else, take them into the backyard and let the bonfire be lit there, and the smoke will not trouble anyone . . . they all deserve to be burned as heretics."*

He grinned slightly, thinking that of all authors Cervantes had best understood books and the evil they could do to a mind. They gave a man the materials with which to build his dreams.

With a sigh, he stuffed the box of recordings back into the locker and took out a bottle of Kalvaran pulque. As he snapped the seal and flipped up the cap, he told himself this was a compromise. It was a false salve for scars that never felt a wound, a buttress against harsh reality—but not so violent or destructive a one as those Deptfort peddled. Were those mysterious drugs a true escape or a false death? Whichever, there was no turning back from them. At least a man *could* put down a bottle of Kalvaran and turn his back to it.

He wondered just what caused his aversion to the idea of addictive drugs. In a way it seemed out of character. After all, they were escape. But on the other hand, an addictive was a definite thing that required positive decision. It was final.

Always uncertainty, always compromise, he thought as he took a long swallow from the bottle. It burned in his throat but that was all. He felt no kick. Hell of a thing—did compromises always fail eventually? Was a man someday *forced* to make an ultimate decision?

He put the bottle back in the locker and began to strip for the shower.

Elva was an Earth-type planet, its single vast city undomed. The sun was low when Kyning headed back to his pavilion, and a rising breeze had relieved the oppressive heat of the afternoon. Even so he was thankful that he wouldn't have to get into armour until it was time for his part of the performance—the finale. With the addition of sword and buckler, the costume he wore now would be adequate for the Grand Entry. After all, accuracy and authenticity were of no importance.

The black tights and trunks and the quilted black tunic with its silver mock-embroidery somewhat resembled ancient prints of clothing, but the ankle high boots were far more practical than authentic. Of the entire costume only the dagger with the silver-inlaid hilt that hung at his side was real—not a prop but a genuine antique. And it was not Deptfort's but his own, a long-treasured possession.

When he'd first joined the show, he'd gloried in the Pageant's costumery, despite its anachronisms. After all, he was no historian. The legends of chivalry weren't history—they were a mingling of morals and lore from many centuries and far from accurate to any particular time or place. In his own speech, he'd never hesitated to mix idioms from a spread of centuries. It had been the *spirit* of the legends, not their historical background, that had mattered.

The spirit had mattered. And in time he'd come to hate the costumes for the sham that they represented. But that too had passed—he told himself—now he didn't care.

He ducked into the tent. Riss was gone,

but the lamp had been lit against the growing twilight and there was a sheet of paper lying conspicuously next to it on the chest. Almost reluctantly, he picked up the paper and scanned it.

The kid's calligraphy was good. So was the sonnet—dammit. With a PD degree, Riss could easily get himself a scholar's subsidy back on Earth. Hell of a thing for him to waste his life knocking some other dolt off a tin horse.

Settling on the couch, he reread the poem. As he let it slide out of his fingers, he asked himself how long it had been since he'd written a sonnet. Or had a reason to. But there were no reasons—not in the *real* world.

Riss came into the tent, rubbing at his grease-smeared hands with a towel. He paused to glance at the paper that lay by Kyning's hand and then to look hopefully into the knight's face. The question was an obvious lump in his throat, but he didn't voice it. Instead, he said as casually as he could, "I did my best for your horse. It's in bad shape though. Needs an overhaul."

"I know," Kyning muttered. "I'll strip it down in the morning and see what I can do. But I need new parts."

Riss nodded. And waited.

Finally Kyning picked up the paper and held it out. "You're wasting your time and mine."

Hesitantly Riss stepped toward him and accepted it. Folding it carefully—stalling and hoping—he slipped it under his doublet. And waited.

Kyning gave in to the wordless plea. "It's good. Probably make quite an impression on your professor—*if* you had one."

"But, Kyn . . ."

"But hell!" He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to argue with the fool kid anymore. It was futile. Swinging his feet off the couch, he stood up and stretched. "Be time for the Grand Entry pretty soon."

Disappointment stained Riss's face as he silently took the sword and buckler from the rack and held them out. Kyning could feel the boy's emotion and he wondered why the hell Riss looked up to him and respected his opinions so. Sometimes he seemed as eager to please as a puppy. During the workouts when he was practicing his role as Kyning's understudy, it was hard to keep from giving him a kind word, a verbal pat on the head, when he tried so hard. But, dammit, Kyning didn't want the responsibility of having encouraged him to stay with the show.

The horse stood outside the tent. Kyning swung into the high saddle and gigged the sensor panels to put it into a fast amble. A vague uncomfortable feeling about Riss clung to him as he turned the machine toward the procession that was beginning to form up.

As the spotlights over the tiltyard flared to full power the crowd fell silent and the parade began. At its head Deptfort, in his costume as the Hero of the pageant, was magnificent. The caparison on his big white horse was bedecked with electrical jewels that sparkled with every measured step. His costume, the white of the young and pure-hearted knight, was treated with fluorescents and the ultra-violet lamps gave it a faint glow almost as if he wore a halo.

Watching him, Kyning felt a twinge of envy. After all the years Deptfort had been an actor—a phoney—he could still play the part with gusto and flair. Onstage or off, it was with him as if he'd made it a part of his being.

But it was all a goddamned pose, Kyning told himself. Under that pristine white, Deptfort was a rotten, lecherous moneygrub, as corrupt as any evil figure in history or legend. He'd made his airs and courtly-manners habit, even offstage, so that he wouldn't fall out of character at the wrong time—like during an intense moment of romance in one of various bedrooms throughout the universe.

Kyning followed the white knight into the arena, presenting himself to the audience as an ominous figure in his stark black. Forwarned by the programme notes and perhaps by earlier audiences, the spectators hissed him appropriately.

The opening event was a hand-to-hand combat between the idiot brute, Fessler, and a mechanical beast supposed to be a griffon. According to Deptfort, Fessler had been one of the original knights in the show, but had suffered irreparable damage to his nervous system in an accident. Kyning had suspicions that it was one of the exotic drugs Deptfort handled as a sideline that had done the brain damage and made Fessler a hulk hardly more human than the device he struggled against.

A fitting end for dreams of glory, Kyning thought as he turned away from the field.

By the time the lesser events were done, Riss had finished helping him into his armour, and he was astride the horse again, ready for his entrance. At the call of the horn, he approached the listyard, while Deptfort rode in from the white pennoned tent at the far end of the field. They met in the center to perform a ritual of challenge that Deptfort had concocted for dramatic effect. Then they took their places at the ends of the list and fewtered their lances.

At the signal, Kyning spurred his horse. It jolted into a lopsided gallop. The lube hadn't done much good, he thought as he couched the spear. He leaned into it, ready to slam its breakaway tip into Deptfort's shield.

The horse seemed to stumble. It lunged in an unexpected burst of speed as something inside snapped. The lance in Kyning's hands was askew. He jerked at it, trying to fling it safely away as he felt the horse lurch.

Deptfort had no warning. He was almost upon Kyning. His spear was braced, intended to strike a moment later against Kyning's shield. But the horse lunged, and Kyning was in the wrong place too suddenly . . .

The impact of the spring-loaded tip wasn't enough to pierce the armour as it rammed against Kyning's chest. But it jarred him badly. He felt himself thrown back against the cantle of the saddle as the spear slid across his breastplate. He felt himself jerked violently as its tip caught under the pauldron over his shoulder, hanging up there.

The lance was a lever, twisting against his body as it wrenched itself out of Deptfort's surprised hands. Under him he could feel the mechanical horse faltering, pitching forward as if its knee-joints were folding. He threw the stirrups to try vaulting himself clear of the encumbering saddle. But it was all happening too fast. And the lance wedged into his armour was dragging him off balance. He felt himself falling with the collapsing horse.

He could hear the approving roar of the spectators who assumed this was part of the show. And he heard the snap of splintering plastic as his body twisted against the lance.

There was nothing in that raw stub of the spear to absorb impact. Flung with his own weight and the momentum of the

falling horse, Kyning felt himself hit it. Prongs of pain slashed through the armour and pierced deep into his flesh.

For an instant he knew that the hot wetness spurting from his chest was no synthetic dye. And then he knew nothing.

CHAPTER 2

KYNING AWOKE to whiteness. He was surrounded and overwhelmed by it, lost in a snow-sterile field of whiteness. Slowly it resolved itself into sparkling pure walls, washed with natural sunlight through a pair of crystal-clear windows.

He lay under a sheet of white, with his head deep in the cloud of a white pillow. Moving seemed an alien concept, something he had to give consideration to before he tried it. After a while he decided to lift a hand.

The one he chose was lying conveniently atop the sheet. He concentrated on it and it rose to hover before his face. It seemed to be attached to *his* arm, *his* shoulder, and it acted at *his* command. But it didn't look like *his* hand. For one thing it was absolutely clean and the stubby nails were neatly manicured. *His* fingernails'd had black grease under them that the usual washing compounds never completely scoured away and there'd been similar suggestions of dirt worked into the pores and fine creases of the knuckles.

Maybe the whole body wasn't his, he thought abstractly. He used the strange hand to lift the sheet. Craning his neck, he peered at the bare body under it. The thick black hair on the chest looked familiar, but he didn't remember that vast patch of puckered scar tissue to the right, extending on under the arm. He bent one of the legs. Light filtering through the sheet showed him a far older scar on the knee. He was certain that was his. He'd gotten it a long time ago in a bit of swordplay that had gone awry.

Well, he decided, if he owned one leg, he probably owned them all. Nobody he knew of had found ways of replacing entire bodies yet. He let his head sink back into the cloud as he thought about it. Evidently it was the same old body, but overhauled—damaged and repaired since he last remembered. Badly damaged from the look of that chest scar.

Closing his eyes, he tried to sort out memories and find the most recent of them. It came to him first as a recollection of fear and pain—as a kaleidoscope of images tumbling. But it had been he who'd tumbled, hadn't it? He'd gone down with the falling horse, the cheers of the crowd harsh in his ears, as he was impaled on the broken lance.

He had been wrong about Elvans: They'd loved all the show of violence. He added silently that they would have enjoyed it even more if they'd known that was real blood he'd been spilling into their soil.

Certain that this was a hospital bed, he searched for some means of calling an attendant. His groping hand located a sensor set into the headboard and in a moment a woman dressed in the traditional white of a nurse appeared. She wore the traditional bright smile as she said, "Well, so we're awake at last."

Centuries ago some fair damozel had bent over a wounded knight with just that same vacuous smile spread over her face, he thought. Her teeth were probably rotten and she would have been speaking Anglo-Norman or one of the Medieval European languages, but the words would have meant the same. He corrected himself: *Would have been as*

meaningless.

There was a tradition-hallowed speech for the waking man, too. Hoarsely, he voiced it. "Where am I?"

The Elvan dialect was an archaic-sounding variant of Standard. He had no difficulty understanding it as she answered, "Convalescent Wing Six, Elvan General Hospital."

She leaned over him and prodded at the pillow, bunching it into an uncomfortable lump under his head. When she straightened up, he asked, "How long have I been here?"

He'd affected the mixed accent common with spacers for so long that it had become habit. He made no attempt to dilute it but spoke slowly to make it easier for her to understand.

She paused a moment, then stepped to the foot of the bed and pressed a scanner control. He couldn't see the screen, but the light from it reflected on her face, giving a devilish cast to that set smile.

"Eighteen days," she told him.

"God's Wounds!"

"What?"

"Nothing," he muttered. "Look, do you know the show I was here with?"

Her expression was completely blank.

"The Historical Pageant of Chivalry—the show that was playing in an empty field next to the spaceport . . ." But he got no response of comprehension. He tried again, "That thing over by the spaceport with all the flags."

"Oh yes, I know what you mean. The cultural exhibit."

"It's not still there, is it?"

"No."

"Of course not," he mumbled to himself. "But Deptfort must have left something for me—a message, passage money to follow him, something . . ."

She shook her head, her eyes blank. "I don't know."

"Who would know? You can check for me, can't you? Maybe at the reception desk."

"I suppose so," she said uncertainly. She stood a moment, seeming to consider the idea, and then left.

He lay waiting impatiently until she returned with a brown-plastic wrapped bundle and a slim envelope.

Ripping open the envelope, he shook out a folded slip of paper. He recognized Deptfort's sloppy scrawl as he thumbed it open.

Kyn, My Friend, it grieves me that we must part ways thusly, but the company has engagements to fulfill. The stream of time awaits no man. Woefully, I must replace you in our troupe. D.

With a muttered curse, he refolded the note and shoved it back into the envelope. No passage money and not so much as a mention of the back pay he had due him. He told himself he shouldn't have expected more of that whoreson. Deptfort had probably taken sadistic pleasure in running out, leaving him stranded and broke on this oddball planet in the middle of nowhere.

He turned his attention to the bundle of belongings. There was another note inside it, this in Riss's precise calligraphy. It said simply, *Sorry, Kyn. I'll miss you.*

Sure, Kyning thought as he fingered through the small pile of clothing in the bundle. The kid would miss him—like hell. Riss had probably moved into his spot in the show.

The box of books was there, with several missing, the *Arthurian Analysis* among them. Then he found the silver-hilted dagger folded into his coveralls. And the almost-full bottle of Kalvaran. He grinned, thinking Riss had packed

this stuff. Deptfort would have held out the liquor and the precious weapon too. He decided he didn't begrudge the kid the stolen books.

The nurse still hovered at the bedside, as if she waited by a deathbed to collect some doomed soul.

"Don't you have work to do?" he asked, hoping she'd take the hint.

"No hurry," she said cheerily. "You know, Mister Kyning, you're a very fortunate man."

"I am?" he grunted, wondering what the hell she could mean.

"You were quite seriously injured. It was the talk of the hospital. You had splinters of plastic in your lungs. If your ribs hadn't deflected the major part of the foreign object—well—there are limits to what we can repair, even with our Radiant Surgery."

"Yeah sure," he muttered, wishing she'd get the hell out. So he'd almost been killed—so what?

"You're going to have a visitor this afternoon," she told him. "Adstrator Gorman is coming to see you."

"Who's he?"

"Why, the Chief Adstrator of Elva!"

"The what?" he asked, startled.

"Chief Adstrator," she repeated, seeming confused by his failure to understand.

"You mean the head man? The boss of the planet?"

She nodded.

He looked at the dagger he still held, wondering what kind of trouble he was in that would bring the head man of Elva down on him. He'd tried to warn Deptfort about playing an idiot planet like this . . .

"Is there anything else you'd like?" the nurse asked dutifully.

"No."

She glanced significantly at the cabinet beside the bed. "Nothing?"

"No!"

Before she turned to leave, she flashed that smile at him once more.

She *meant* well, he told himself. He thrust the dagger back into hiding among the folded clothes and then settled his head into the pillow again to ponder the unknown trouble that would bring the boss of Elva to visit him.

Adstrator Gorman arrived precisely on schedule. He walked into the room with a quick confident stride and introduced himself cheerily. He was middle-aged and medium-built, running to soft flesh and beginning to gray at the temples. The type who got cast as the heroine's wise and understanding father, Kyning decided. The aged king whose land is attacked by some evil villain—the one who inevitably overplays the role. There was something sincere in the man's smile and something naive in his manner that suggested he was either a figurehead or an extremely shrewd politician.

Settling into a chair at the bedside, Gorman asked, "How are you feeling?"

"That's not what you came here to find out," Kyning said.

Gorman looked disconcerted. He harrumphed and then, leaning forward, said, "If I may, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Sure. Ask."

"What is your home planet?"

Kyning eyed him suspiciously and mumbled, "Davina."

Slowly Gorman shook his head. He seemed genuinely puzzled. "You're presenting us with a unique problem, Mister Kyning. Very few offworlders come to Elva—mostly performers in cultural exhibits like yourself. None has ever remained here after his show left

before. At first we thought it would be simple enough but—but we checked your credentials through the nearest Davinian outpost and . . ."

Kyning had a dull feeling that he knew what the Elvan was about to say. He asked, "And?"

"They've reported back that they have no record of you—that your passport is a forgery!"

"Tough," Kyning mumbled.

"Where are you from?" Gorman asked again, a hint of desperation in his voice.

"Nowhere."

"But you have to be from somewhere."

"Do I?"

"Of course."

"Prove it."

The Adstrator insisted, "You *have* to be from somewhere. You have to have a home planet that will take responsibility for you as a citizen!"

Kyning shrugged.

Gorman gazed at him in complete confusion.

"If you don't like my credentials, just give them back to me. I can find my own way to get where I'm going." He paused, but when the Adstrator made no reply, he went on, "I can hire onto a non-union ship to get out of here. I can take care of myself. Just give me back my passport . . ."

But Gorman was shaking his head.

"Ships do land here, don't they?" Kyning said. "You've got a spaceport. You have some interplanetary traffic. An occasional tramp freighter . . ."

"It's not that, Mister Kyning. It's—I'm afraid the Davinians have confiscated your passport."

"God's Blood! How the hell am I supposed to get off this planet without a passport?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid you can't leave without credentials. You couldn't enter our spaceport without a pass and no ship would accept you."

Muttering to himself, Kyning let his head down against the pillow. This was a damned worse mess than he'd anticipated. Well, he'd gotten off Earth once without credentials. He could manage it here too, if he could get the chance. But there were some governments that would automatically condemn a vagrant without identification to a prison colony . . .

He asked, "Well, can I *stay* on this planet a while without credentials?"

"I don't know."

That was a hell of an answer. "What am I supposed to do?" Kyning demanded. "Disappear—*poof*—because I don't have papers to prove I exist?"

"If you'll only tell me what your home planet is . . ."

For a moment, Kyning felt his determination wavering. But, dammit, not unless there was no other way! He said, "I told you, I don't have a home planet!"

Still frowning in puzzlement, Gorman mumbled, "I'll have to speak to the Supervisor."

"Who's he?"

"The Master Computer."

"Oh Lord, is this planet run by computers?"

"No, of course not!" the Adstrator snapped back at him. Then he added thoughtfully, "But the Supervisor will know what to do."

It was the next day before Gorman came back. By then, Kyning had convinced himself that he could work it all out somehow, no matter what the Adstrator answered. Hell, he always found some damned only half satisfactory way to work things out. He never

succeeded but he always survived.

Gorman was no longer perplexed. Smiling with cherry confidence, he announced, "It took quite a session but the Supervisor has come up with a suggestion."

"What?" Kyning asked sharply. He was getting sick of being given those cheerful smiles.

"There are precedents," Gorman said as if that were the most important factor. "In the early days of Elva's colonization, the Forefathers occasionally had pilgrims come to them seeking sanctuary from their own angry worlds. Strangers who sought peaceful refuge were accepted as novitiates into our society. It will, therefore, be possible for us to accept you."

"Goodie, goodie," Kyning mumbled. But there wasn't anything else to do, was there? For the time being, he'd have to play along with this dolt and his pet computer.

"The Supervisor has located a residence for you," Gorman told him. "One of the employees in our Customs Department, Chai Riker, has space in his room. His roommate married recently and hasn't been replaced yet. You can move in there and Riker can help you adjust to Elva. Of course we can't give you employment immediately, but the computers will make up a training program for you as for the early novitiates and you'll receive a student allowance until you complete it and can be placed."

"Money?"

"Yes."

Not so bad, Kyning thought. He could learn his way around this planet and find a way off—and get paid at the same time. Not bad at all.

"Have you had any previous training in any field?" Gorman was asking.

Kyning grinned slightly. That could be a leading question. If he admitted to his formal education, the next question would be *where*. He said, "Well, I can read and write. And I'm a damned good practical mechanic."

Gorman looked uncertain again. "Of course there'll have to be aptitude tests. The computers will take care of that."

The computers take care of everything on Elva, don't they, Kyning thought. He said, "Alright."

Gorman seemed satisfied. As he got to his feet, he said, "I'll go arrange for your release from the hospital. Then I'll drive you over to Riker's. He's already been told you'd arrive this afternoon."

So it was all arranged, all according to computerized schedule, he supposed.

"You know, Mister Kyning," Gorman was saying. "You are a very fortunate man. Elva has accepted no new immigrants for centuries."

"Have any applied?" Kyning muttered. But it only seemed to confuse the Adstrator all over again. And what the hell, they were going to give him a place to live and regular welfare checks. It could have been a damnsite worse.

A few minutes after Gorman left, a nurse came in carrying the costume he'd worn under his armour when the accident happened. The clothes had been cleaned and the gash in the tunic almost invisibly patched.

He gave some amused consideration to wearing the outfit, but decided against it. Better to underplay until he found out more about this kook society he was trapped in. No point in making it rough for himself by getting off to a bad start.

He chose a suit of two-piece coveralls that were acceptable street wear on any planet that had space traffic, and stowed the costume with the rest of his gear in

the brown-plastic wrapper.

Soon after he'd finished dressing, Gorman came back to lead him down to a surface car in the hospital's parking lot. It was an old-fashioned wheeled electric. All of the cars in the lot looked like antiques—not specific ones from particular periods, but like a meager evolution on lines popular centuries ago.

In fact, Kyning thought as he gazed at the buildings they drove past, the whole damned city looked like some artist's conception of a City of the Future from a twenty-third century scan. There were wide swaths of open ground, some landscaped, some paved and decorated with abstract sculpture. The buildings they surrounded were squat and blank-faced blocks banded by ranks of blindly translucent windows. Everything was in dull pastel plastics, cast in drab colors that managed to look grimy, though they were obviously well-scrubbed and maintained.

He wasn't sure which bothered him most, the mathematically precise quality of the overall city or the small erratic outbursts of vegetation that looked so damned incongruous in the schematic parks.

The building they stopped at was a grey-green similar to the color of flesh under a mercury vapor lamp. An elevator took them to the fifth floor and dumped them in a stark corridor decorated in more tones of the same color.

The door Gorman led him to was quickly opened by a young man who identified himself as Chai Riker. His voice was a little too taut, high-pitched with nervousness and, as Gorman made introductions, his eyes darted uncertainly from one man to the other.

Kyning judged Riker to be about his own age though it was hard to be sure. In appearance, they were completely different. Riker was round-faced, almost chubby, with hair the pale yellow of natural tutilin fibres. His face was soft-skinned and lightly tanned in the peculiar even way that comes from artificial UV exposure. The texture of his chin suggested that he'd undergone a permanent depilatory at an early age.

He shuffled weight from one foot to the other as Kyning looked him over. His grin was vague and self-conscious. His eyes were as hesitantly suspicious as Kyning figured his own must have been.

"Come in, come in," Riker said, gesturing, trying hard to look the hospitable host.

"I'm afraid I haven't time right now," Gorman told him.

He looked badly disappointed. There was a trace of reverence in his manner toward the Adstrator. And something in his attitude toward Kyning that might have been fear.

Gorman gave him a peculiar handshake, nodded and mumbled good wishes to Kyning, and then left. As he closed the door behind him, Kyning and Riker stood gazing warily at each other.

Riker blinked first and started to walk across the room. Over his shoulder, he asked, "Aqapa?"

"Huh?" Kyning grunted.

Sliding back a wall panel, Riker revealed a tiny wall kitchen and pulled a bottle down from one of the shelves. Holding it toward Kyning, he said, "Care for an aqapa?"

Well, it was a drink of some kind, Kyning thought. And he could use a drink. He nodded, hoping it was alcoholic.

Riker filled two glasses and handed one to him. A sniff told him it wasn't spirits in any sense he'd sampled them before. The

scent, and the taste of it he tried, were unique. The closest he could come to describing it for himself was *musty,* and that didn't really fit.

"Sit down please. Make yourself at home," Riker said, waving toward the couch.

Kyning sat down and leaned back, looking at the room he was to live in. It was reasonably large and starkly bare, but the panelling of the walls and a set of sensor switches near the door suggested that it had hidden built-ins. Riker followed his gaze and started sliding panels and touching the sensors, showing him the furnishings.

There were two narrow instant beds, a pair of bureaus with mirrors, a fold-out table with snap-open chairs, a large closet, the wall kitchen, and a bathroom, all concealed within the walls and reminiscent of the equipment in the cramped quarters of old model ships like Deptfort's.

When the demonstration was completed, Riker seated himself stiffly on the far end of the couch and sipped at the drink he held. He seemed to be groping for something to say.

Kyning felt awkwardly uncomfortable himself. He'd never counted social grace as one of his accomplishments. But he felt obligated to be decent to this host cum roommate. Hell, he'd be stuck sharing quarters with Riker—he had to get along with him. He tried asking, "Did Gorman tell you about me?"

Riker nodded thoughtfully and finally said, "Yes, he told me some. He said you were with the Historical Pageant of Chivalry."

"Yeah."

"I saw it!" There was suddenly a new emotion in Riker's face. A tense strained excitement flashed in his pale eyes.

"You liked it?" Kyning asked him.

"I never saw anything like it before," he said hoarsely. "I never—I—it gave me strange feelings."

Awaken their inherent instincts, their latent bloodlusts . . . Kyning could almost hear Deptfort's voice. With a slight cynical grin, he asked, "What'd you like best?"

"The sword fighting," Riker said softly, almost reverently. He looked at Kyning with lively interest now. "You're one of the knights, aren't you?"

Kyning nodded.

"Which one?"

"The lean and foolish one."

Riker's gaze was blank.

"I was the one in the black armour," Kyning offered.

"Yes, I remember you. You unhorsed the white knight and then fought him with a sword. Did they really fight that way back in olden times on Earth? Our histories don't say much about Earth. Did they really fight each other—with swords and lances and things?"

"Yeah."

His voice awe-laden, Riker asked, "What's it like to fight somebody with a sword?"

"We're not really *fighting* in the Pageant," Kyning said. "It's just a play. The whole thing is planned—choreographed."

Riker looked vaguely disappointed. He sipped at his drink and stared thoughtfully into space. Almost inaudibly, he muttered, "But in ancient times there really were knights with swords."

Kyning took a long swallow of the strange musty drink and leaned his head back. He was beginning to feel odd—not exactly at ease, but unconcerned and distant.

"Knyghthode is not in the feates of warre," he quoted dreamily, *"as for to fight in quarrell ryght or wrong, but in a cause which trouthe can not defarre . . ."*

"What?" Riker asked.

Kyning blinked, surprised at himself. He wondered if he'd been falling asleep. But he was sure that he was awake now and he still had that vaguely distant and uncaring feeling. That was strange. It was an attitude he'd tried for often enough, but had never really reached, even with the help of Kalvaran pulque. A nebulous tranquility—he looked at the glass in his hand and asked, "What the hell's in this liquor?"

"What do you mean?"

"What kind of tranquilizer. If it's some damned addictive, I don't want any part of it."

"Tranquilizer?" Riker said thinly. He gazed at the drink he held as if it were something he'd never seen before. In a voice of slow realization, he added, "I don't know what's in it. I never thought about it."

"You drink much of it?" Kyning asked as he put down the near-full glass. Alcohol yes—unknown drugs no.

Riker nodded. "All the time. Everybody on Elva does. But—but—are you sure it's got a tranquilizer in it?"

"Yeah. You mean you've been drinking this stuff without knowing you were being drugged?"

"Drugged," Riker mumbled, staring at the drink. His expression vaguely distressed, he got to his feet and walked to the wall kitchen. He took down the bottle and studied the labelling on it but evidently found no further information. Once more he asked, "You're sure?"

Kyning nodded.

Slowly, Riker tilted the glass over the sink, letting the rest of his drink gurgle down the drain.

Kyning watched with amused curiousity. He wondered if the Elvan would accept *everything* he said that readily. There was a strange air of naivete about the man that suggested he might.

"You're in Customs?" he asked.

Riker nodded.

"Do you have anything to do with passports?"

"With what?"

"Passports. You know what a passport is, don't you?"

"No."

The hell! Well, maybe they had a different term for them on Elva, Kyning told himself. He said, "When the show was here, I had a temporary gate pass to get in and out of the spaceport . . ."

"Oh, I have a gate pass," Riker interrupted. "As a customs official I have a permanent one."

"Do you have anything to do with issuing them? Gate passes and the identification papers a man has to have to board a ship leaving the planet?"

Riker seemed to understand what he meant, but he shook his head. "No, we don't have these passport things. Nobody ever leaves Elva."

"Huh?" Kyning grunted. "You don't have any migration offplanet? Any commercial travellers? Any political representatives on other worlds?"

"No. Nobody ever leaves Elva."

Shocked, Kyning leaned back his head again. That was a hell of a note. But there had to be *some* way off Elva.

CHAPTER 3

KYNING WOKE SUDDENLY. He lay still, his eyes closed, listening as he

oriented himself. The room sounded empty. After a moment he sat up and looked around.

Riker was gone. His instant bed had been folded away, the wall-kitchen was closed, and the whole room was in a state of unoccupied neatness. Even the clothing Kyning had left heaped on the couch had been stowed away somewhere. A hand-written note magnatacked to the door was a jarring element, an incongruously human touch in this barren desert.

He sat a while in the rumpled oasis of the bed, feeling like Huck Finn trapped by the widow and Miss Watson. Staying with a creature who kept house this way could be a real drag. Well, at least Riker'd had the decency to let him sleep, instead of waking him in accordance with whatever computer-calculated timetable the Elvan lived by.

Finally he got up and walked over to look at the note. The Elvan script was as close to Standard as the dialect. A few of the squiggles were unfamiliar, but it was simple enough for him to get the sense of the message: Riker had gone to work and Kyning was invited to make himself at home. It advised him that there was food in the kitchen—he could have guessed as much—but it didn't say what had become of his clothes.

He slid back the panel that hid the wall kitchen and looked over the shelves. An openfaced freezer was loaded with individual food packs and there were other assorted odds and ends. He was grateful to find a large container half-full of coffee tablets. That habit, at least, was well-nigh universal. Experimenting with the plumbing, he found the boiling water tap, filled a cup and dropped in a tablet. There was a shaker of ulka among the condiments, but no cinnamon. He settled for an extra heavy shot of the ulka in the coffee and gulped at it while it was still almost scalding hot. Then he went to examine the shower.

It was sonirad. So were the rest of the sanitary facilities. He doused himself thoroughly with the radiation but it wasn't exactly satisfactory. Efficient and effective maybe, but it didn't leave him with the clean, refreshed feeling he expected of a shower. Hell, even on that crummy ship of Deptfort's they'd had water-plumbing. Back in the kitchen he splashed utility water into his face and over most of his body, then rubbed himself dry with a disposable towel from the roller over the sink. That was a damnsite better.

He located his clothing in the closet. The coveralls were on hangers and freshly cleaned by the sonirad radiators installed in the walls. Dressed, he made another cup of coffee. It tasted dull without cinnamon. Looking at the space he'd just made in the cup, he thought of the bottle of Kalvaran tucked away in his belongings. Why not a spacer's breakfast? But no—better not to waste that precious stuff until he was sure he could replace it. When he'd mentioned Kalvaran the night before, Riker'd said he'd never heard of it.

There seemed to be a lot of things Riker didn't know about, he thought as he sipped at the coffee. Curious, he glanced around the room, then opened the panels concealing the two bureaus. The one Riker used was as bare and clean-surfaced as the one that was to be his own.

He found the brown-plastic wrapped bundle in the bottom drawer of his and opened it to take out his razor. Elvans could depilate permanently if they wanted to, he thought as he rubbed the flexible pad over his jaw, but he was stuck

with an Earthling's subconscious. Logical or not, he still felt there was something unmasculine about a face that was incapable of sprouting hair.

Done with that chore, he tossed the razor back into the drawer and closed it. Then he turned to Riker's dresser. The top drawers held odds and ends in neat compartments. Middle drawers were filled with carefully folded clothing. The big bottom drawer contained a folio-sized book that turned out to be a loose-leaf binder with sheets in it made up of small transparent pockets. About half of them held plastic tabs with odd marks printed on them. A container in one corner of the drawer had a handful of loose tabs in it. In the other corner was a variable frequency UV handlamp. He tried it, slowly turning the control dial. Most of the little tabs turned out to have UV-sensitive symbols on them as well as visible ones.

A hobby collection, he decided as he returned the things to the drawer, carefully putting them back the way he'd found them. He wondered if it might be worth money and how one might profitably dispose of such items here on Elva. Then he closed the panels and went to settle himself on the couch.

Bored, he tried prodding the control sensors set into the end table at the side of the couch. One lit suddenly and a dot of light appeared in the room, standing out from the far wall, seeming suspended in midair. It hovered for less than an instant, then blossomed. The wall seemed to disappear and he was looking beyond it into a slightly distorted drapery-walled room where a man in an appropriate costume sat at the keyboard of a Frazian Klamier. It was very realistic and the sound was excellent, but after a few moments, he found the six-toned Frazian concerto damnably dull.

He tried poking the sensors again and changed channels. Experimenting, he got a ballet, a Haiku-reading, a vashante, and an autoclang performance. At the end of the range, he found a catalog of programming available from some sort of library file. But the descriptive listings sounded about as dull as the other shows. Finally he switched off the TV and turned to his own collection of books for amusement.

He'd scanned them all before, but most of them were just reading cubes, not mnemonics, and he considered them well worth rereading. He picked out a twentieth century adventure story and slid it into the scanner. The image of a typrinted title page produced itself on the screen. He punched the page-change until he was past the preliminaries and then settled down to read the text.

He'd finished the first book and was well into a second one when he heard noises from the hallway. As he looked up the door opened and Riker stepped in. Closing the door softly behind him, the Elvan stood there. He looked as uncertain as if he'd walked into the wrong apartment.

"Hi," Kyning said.

Riker grinned self-consciously and said hello. He seemed to gather courage to walk on into the room and seat himself on the far end of the couch. With a small cough, he cleared his throat and said, "Adstrator Gorman called me at the office. He's set up your appointment at the MCC and he asked me if I'd bring you over—show you the way and all that."

"What's the MCC?" Kyning asked.

"The Master Computer Complex. It's our capitol building. He's arranged your placement interview. For this afternoon."

"Okay," Kyning mumbled. He was almost looking forward to this—to finding

out what happened next. "What time?"

"Seventeen o'clock," Riker said, glancing at his watch. "We've got plenty of time. Have you eaten yet?"

"No."

"I'll fix something. Any preferences?"

"Whatever you usually eat here."

He got to his feet and went to the wall-kitchen. For a long moment he stood studying the packages in the freezer. Then he pulled out two and stuffed them into a cooker slot. By the time he'd set up the table and snapped open two chairs, the cooker had sounded its bell and dimmed its light. He took out the food packs, set them on the table and then reached for the bottle of aqapa. His hand stopped, fingers barely touching it, and he looked questioningly at Kyning.

"None for me," Kyning said.

Riker seemed to hang suspended, frozen in the act of grasping the bottle, for most of a minute. Then he drew back his still-empty hand. With a vague and nervous gesture, he motioned toward the table. "It's ready."

Kyning put down his book and seated himself to eat. The Elvan food proved as exotically dull and flavorless as he'd anticipated. Probably nourishing as hell, he thought. At least it satisfied his hunger.

When they were done with the meal, Riker cleaned up, tossing empty trays down the disposal, folding away the furniture, and ridding the room of every sign of use. Kyning purposely left the scanner and the box of books lying haphazardly on the couch when they left for the MCC. He could almost feel Riker's urge to put them away too.

The capitol building was white—the same kind of absolute and sterile white that had surrounded him in the hospital. It was a big blank-windowed box squatting in the middle of a paved, sculpture-decorated park. A ramp of steps reminiscent of the Classical Revival Period of Earth architecture led up to an asymetrically arched entrance.

There was a sterile white lobby with a multitude of corridors opening into it like conduits into a storage tank. As Riker stopped to study a wall directory, Kyning gazed at the color-coded directional arrows set into the floor tiles and mumbled, "Just follow the yellow brick road."

If Riker heard, he showed no signs of it. After a thorough study of the directory, he chose a corridor and led Kyning along it into the bowels of the building.

They entered a small and austere office with a small and austere human receptionist seated behind a console. She listened, blank-faced, as Riker introduced himself and Kyning. With a mumble and a nod, she pushed buttons on the board in front of her, nimble fingers darting like anxious spiders. She seemed almost a machine herself. After a moment of gazing into a shielded screen, she asked Riker to wait and sent Kyning on to the inner office.

The computer console in this room was huge, dominating it and dwarfing the operator. It would have put Professor Marvel to shame, he thought. But the operator was no kindly wizard. She looked more like the Wicked Witch of the West. Grim faced and middle aged, she wore her hair drawn back in a tight knot and was dressed in sterile white as if she were a surgeon. She studied something on the hidden screen of her console—gazed into her crystal ball, he thought—then she spoke. Briskly, she told him to take the chair opposite her.

She read to him from the screen and coded his replies back into the computer.

After the first few questions, he caught on to what was expected of him. She—or the computer—wanted simple straightforward replies and preferred them a little naive. Hedged or qualified answers, and touches of irony seemed only to cause confusion or delays. He gave in and told the machine simple lies that he thought would satisfy it.

Evidently they did. When the operator terminated the interview she gave him a brief attempt at a smile as she told him he'd receive the results the next day.

He found Riker sitting in the outer office staring into space. As they headed back to the apartment together he thought he saw traces of curiosity in the Elvan, but he couldn't be sure. There were no questions. And the interview had left him with such a sense of irked perversity that he refused to volunteer any information.

Back in the room Riker strode to the wall kitchen and started to take down the aqapa, but then drew himself back from it as if he'd suddenly remembered he'd sworn off the stuff. Flinging himself down on the couch, he punched on the TV.

Kyning glanced at the screen, wondering if it was prime time yet. The program Riker got was of Changarian dance. That was an artform Kyning generally enjoyed so he settled to watch. This seemed to be a polished professional troupe, but in his opinion it was performing some of the most undistinguished work available. It had all the verve and excitement of a set of studio exercises.

As he gazed at it he found himself thinking of aqapa—thinking that a glass of it would be rather pleasant—that it would be nice to relax and enjoy its piquant flavor. He could almost taste it on his tongue, warm and mellow and delightful.

Riker stood up and headed for the wall kitchen. As he slid open the panel, Kyning said, "The subliminals getting to you?"

"The what?" Riker asked as he took down the bottle of aqapa.

"Subliminals," Kyning repeated. Apparently Riker didn't know the word. He offered, "The low-level advertising they're broadcasting."

Riker still didn't seem to understand.

"They're transmitting subliminal advertising for that stuff," Kyning explained, gesturing toward the bottle. "They're sending out information that's too slight for you to be aware of it, but it gets through to your subconscious. You feel an *urge* to take a jolt of that, don't you?"

Nodding, Riker muttered. "I usually enjoy a glass of aqapa in the evening while I watch TV."

"Sure. The TV's telling you to."

He looked at the bottle, then at the projection of the dance. "But I don't see or hear it."

"It's below the threshold of conscious perception," Kyning said. "It's an old gimmick—been outlawed on Earth for centuries—but it's effective."

"I never heard of it before," Riker said thoughtfully. With obvious effort, he put back the unopened bottle. Then he walked to the couch and hesitantly switched off the TV.

Seating himself, he looked questioningly at Kyning. "They're doing things to me I don't know about?" he asked as if he couldn't quite believe it.

"Sure."

He seemed distressed by the concept.

"Look, you're not the only one," Kyning told him with a broad casual sweep of his hand. "It happens all over

the universe. Only most people are on to it now. There were so many scandals a few decades ago, and so much exposure literature is floating around that most civilized people are plenty familiar with sublims in entertainment and addictives in edibles. They're illegal or regulated by law on a lot of planets. But I guess Elva isn't one of them."

"No—I never heard of these things before," Riker said, shaking his head slowly. "Why would they do this to us and not even tell us about it?"

"Sales gimmick," Kyning answered. "The sublims are to make you try a product, and the addictives in it are to keep you buying it. It's all part of competitive business."

"But we don't have competitive business on Elva."

"Huh?"

"Competition is an evil. Our businesses are all integrated with each other. They're state-controlled. There isn't any competition."

"Bedamned," Kyning mumbled. He leaned back, thinking about it. "So the peace and tranquility of Elva is drug-induced and state-supported."

Riker nodded slightly, but Kyning wasn't sure whether it was agreement or only a reflex. The Elvan was staring into space, seeming lost in deep thoughts of his own. Kyning waited a while to see if he'd say anything, then went back to his reading. But the book only held a part of his attention.

He could sense Riker's determined struggle against hands that wanted to turn on the TV again, and to pour out a slug of aqapa. Physically addictive or not, those things could be psychologically habit-forming, he told himself. Especially on as deadly dull a world as Elva appeared to be.

He couldn't bring himself to laugh at an addiction of any kind, even to TV. He watched Riker with a growing sympathy.

The Elvan hadn't touched aqapa since last night and now seemed to be in the first uneasy throes of mild withdrawal. His fingers were drumming on the arm of the couch, close to the TV controls, and his eyes gazed into space where the projection would have been if the set were on.

A vicious cycle, Kyning thought. Aqapa and sublims. Wondering if there were any way to help, he asked. "You really want to kick it?"

Riker winced as if he'd been stabbed. His head swivelled and his eyes seemed to slowly focus on Kyning.

"What?" he asked.

"You're determined to give up that aqapa stuff?"

"Yes," he said, his voice quavering slightly.

"Then get your mind off it," Kyning told him.

He glanced desparingly toward the projection area. "How?"

"*Not* with sublims. Here—try this." Kyning pressed the return stud on the book viewer until it had run back to the opening page, and held it out to him.

"What?" he asked dully.

"Try reading. Lose yourself in escape literature," Kyning said. "It may be mindwarping, but it's guaranteed free of sublims and shouldn't be harmful in small doses."

Riker looked at the page of typrint. "But that's not Elvan."

"It's Standard. That's close enough," Kyning told him. "Look, how many characters do you have in your alphabet?"

"Twenty nine."

"Okay, Standard has thirty three, so

you've got to learn four more. And there are a lot of idiomatic expressions you won't understand. But I'll help you get the hang of it, if you want to try."

He nodded uncertainly.

Kyning spent the rest of the evening working over the book with him. He grasped the language differences easily enough. It was the cultural background of the novel that befuddled him, so most of the time was taken up with explanations. The story was one of chivalric adventure. And as Kyning talked of ancient legends and heros long dead, or who never had been alive, he became engrossed himself. He spun for Riker the gossamer yarns that he himself had been ensnared in long ago. With words he led the Elvan through such halls as the Caer Sidi, Carbonek, Gormenghast, the Joyous Gard and many more.

It was with sudden surprise that he realized they'd been at it for hours. Night was edging into morning and he was punctuating his talk with yawns. He switched off the scanner, feeling vaguely reluctant to end the session. And scorning himself for the feeling.

Riker protested. His eyelids looked heavy but his red-rimmed eyes gleamed with enthusiasm and his voice was animated as he insisted that he wanted to know more—to know *everything*—about the Ages of Legend and Chivalry.

Satisfied that the diversion was working, Kyning agreed to another session for the next day. And hell, he admitted silently, he was enjoying it himself.

The computer report on Kyning's interview arrived the next day, accompanied by a package of forms and instructions. It told him that he had the aptitude to qualify for training as an *electronic receptor field engineer*—he translated this to mean a TV repairman—and it assumed that he'd accept the decision.

The report surprised him. He had tried to slant the interview so as to qualify in literature. After all, that had been his major once, a long time ago. Studying the results of the interview, he suddenly realized he hadn't qualified simply because literature just was not a field of specialization on Elva.

To his amusement, the report concluded with a stern recommendation that he exert himself to concentrate on his new field, stating that he had a basic character flaw—a tendency to dissipate his potential by pursuit of too many factious interests.

When he'd finished reading the report, he went on to examine the papers in the package. The instruction sheets outlined a preliminary course of home study. There were lists of items from the TV library to be viewed and each day a form pertaining to the session was to be filled out and returned to the MCC. At regular intervals he was to report in person for a computer interview—the equivalent of an oral exam, he supposed.

Oddly, there was no practical work included. Well, maybe that came in a more advanced part of the course. Theory first and practice later, though that approach to study had been outmoded on Earth long ago.

To his disappointment, he discovered that TV viewing was the only form of home study available on Elva. There were no mnemonic scanner books, or even regular readers. And he had no control over the playing speed of a TV book. He could get repeats and replays if he wanted them, but he couldn't hurry up the things, and while the subject matter had its interesting moments, the

presentations were uniformly dull.

He found it easy enough to read for entertainment while the TV played and still to fill out the daily work-sheets satisfactorily. But he read too quickly and knew his own collection of books too well. He ran through his library and found that no fiction was available on Elva. For a short time, he took hope in the imported poetry in the TV catalog, but that turned out to be consistently second rate.

By the end of the first week, he'd changed his original opinion of being stranded here. In the beginning he'd thought the proposed study would be an easy way to kill time while collecting his student allowance. Now he felt he was damned well *earning* that money by enduring the boredom.

There was small encouragement to be gotten from the things he'd found out about space traffic on Elva. It was not on any of the regular trade routes. Tramp freighters did set down with cargos of imported culture in exchange for Elvan food-concentrate surplus and it would be possible for a man to get passage on one of them—but for a man without a passport, it would be damned expensive.

Hoarding his student allowance would eventually give him passage money but it would take a hell of a long time. Was there some quicker way, he wondered. Could something like that hobby collection of Riker's be stolen and sold? So far he hadn't been able to learn a thing about handlers of stolen goods onplanet. It seemed almost as if there weren't any. He considered the possibility, and resigned himself to the fact that it would take time both to acquire escape money and to learn his way around Elva's peculiar society.

Riker was a poor source of information. He could give adequate answers to only a few of the questions Kyning asked. It was as if Riker himself knew almost nothing of his own world. And social life seemed scant. So far Kyning hadn't met any other Elvans to make casual conversation with. There were no public eating places, no saloons, and damned little else in the line of public gathering places.

But there were the weekly imported *cultural* events, such as the Pageant had been. From the way Riker talked, these were the high points of Elvan life and few citizens would willingly miss one. Aside from these shows, the average Elvan seemed to spend his free time sitting around his home watching TV and sipping aqapa.

The next big cultural event was to be a concert by a vocal group from Stovni. Riker was anticipating it eagerly. Kyning looked forward to it too, as a break in the monotony and as an opportunity to see another aspect of Elvan life.

CHAPTER 4

RIKER GOT TICKETS for Kyning and himself for the first evening's performance of the Stovnian chorus. They joined the multitude of tittering, excited Elvans descending on the concert hall in hopeful anticipation. But within ten minutes after the program had begun, Kyning found himself as bored by it as he had been by Elvan TV. He squirmed in the comfortable lounge chair and scanned faces in the dim light of the hall, wondering how so many people could seem so enthralled by such garbage. He tried speculating that it was simply a matter of different standards derived from different ethnic backgrounds, but he couldn't convince himself that this music would be *good* by any discriminating

standards. He twiddled his thumbs, stared at his hands and drifted into day dreams to kill time.

At last it was over. Relieved to be done with it, he ambled at Riker's side through the muddled milling throng that drifted toward the exits in what seemed to be an aimless Brownian movement.

"It wasn't as good as I'd expected," Riker muttered as if this reaction puzzled him. "I always liked them a lot on TV."

"It was lousy," Kyning said.

Riker seemed a little cheered to have his opinion confirmed. But he was still bewildered. "What do you suppose was wrong?"

"This is a backwater planet," Kyning offered with a shrug. "Evidently you get second-rate road troupes here."

"I don't know," Riker mumbled, his face twisted into a thoughtful frown.

"Chai!"

It was a female voice that called. Kyning wheeled and spotted the girl pushing through the mob and waving. He looked her over critically as she came up to them. She had the potential to be attractive. Her face was well-shaped and her hair a dark rich brown, but the straight cut of the hair was particularly unsuited to her and with no makeup of any kind, her face seemed too pallid. She wore the loose cream-colored blouse and ankle-length split skirt that seemed almost uniform for Elvan women and it covered her so thoroughly that he could only guess at the figure under it.

"Janneth!" Riker replied in greeting. "Hello there."

She smiled at him and darted a quick glance toward Kyning. Riker made brief introductions. She gave Kyning her attention then, saying conversationally, "I don't believe we've met before."

"I'm new in the neighborhood."

That seemed to satisfy her as an answer. She turned to Riker again. "Are you coming up to Cleb's?"

"Of course."

"What's Cleb's?" Kyning asked as they followed her through the crowd.

"He's a friend. A bunch of us like to get together after the concerts. Cleb's is nearby," Riker told him.

He was surprised at the amount of relief he felt to learn that Elvans indulged in such a normal sort of social activity. Maybe they really were human after all.

The apartment they went to was similar to Riker's. It even had that same precise unlived-in neatness about it. Once the guests had settled themselves around the room, Riker made quick introductions for Kyning.

There were six men and three women but none seemed to be paired into couples. The hosts were a chubby fellow named Cleb and his roommate, a taller thinner but still soft-looking one named Frak. The girl, Janneth, seemed to be most vibrant of the group. The other dark-haired girl, Cindy, showed signs of vitality, too. But the one with the pale blond hair and light eyes seemed in a trance, or half asleep. She sat in a corner looking at nothing in particular and seeming to be unaware of the conversation around her.

Kyning made a small effort to tie names to faces as Riker called them out, but it seemed impossible. There was a vague sort of *sameness* to them—he just couldn't be sure which tag went with which face.

With a formality that seemed almost ritualistic, the hosts handed around glasses of aqapa. Kyning watched with a touch of pride as his pupil, Riker, declined and asked for coffee instead. When he did the same himself, his host

seemed disconcerted.

Once the serving was done, Cleb seated himself next to Riker and asked, "What's the matter? Can't you take these late hours anymore?"

"Not that. I'm giving up aqapa."

"What? Why?"

"It's got *tranquilizers* in it!"

"What?" Cleb squeaked incredulously. And around them conversations stopped short as all attention turned to Riker.

He nodded solemnly. Dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, he told them all, "Aqapa's got drugs—tranquilizers—in it. And the TV's got sublimals."

"Sublim*in*als," Kyning mumbled in correction.

"What's that?" Janneth asked.

With broad gestures, Riker enthusiastically rephrased and repeated the things Kyning had told him. There was a moment of thoughtful silence when he'd finished. Then one of the men said loudly, "I don't believe it."

The pale blond girl murmured, "I do."

Kyning looked toward her, surprised to hear her express an opinion. She was sitting up straight now, her back stiff. Lifting her glass, she added, "I don't really like the taste of it. I know I don't. But I keep on drinking it anyway."

"Habit," someone answered her.

"That's exactly what I mean!" Riker said. "It's habit-forming!"

"But that's against the Basic Principles the Forefathers established," Cleb protested. "All men have the right of free will. These things on TV would be a violation of that."

"It's true though," Riker insisted.

"Where'd you get all these ideas?"

"Kyning told me."

Cleb turned to look at Kyning with vague suspicion. "How do you know?"

Riker quickly answered for him. "He's from offworld. He knows all kinds of things we don't."

"What I tell you three times is true," Kyning mumbled to himself.

"Offworld!" Cleb grunted. And a murmur of awed surprise ran among the others. Someone asked, "Where?"

"Everywhere," Kyning answered, feeling uncomfortably conspicuous now.

It was the blond girl who objected. "You can't be from everywhere. You have to come from some certain place. You have to start somewhere."

"I've been too many places," he muttered. "I've forgotten now where I started."

She seemed to accept this—to take it literally.

"Kyning's a knight from the Historical Pageant," Riker volunteered, making an announcement of it. And again that ripple of awed surprise ran through the gathering. From the sound of it most of them—maybe all—had seen the show and had been impressed.

Riker had gotten a grip on their attention, and he held onto it, launching himself into a spiel about knights, chivalry and the books the two of them had been working over. Glad to be out of the spotlight, Kyning leaned back and watched. Riker had a natural aptitude for story-telling. He held his audience fascinated. All except the pale blond girl.

Moving cautiously as if not to disturb anyone, she seated herself at Kyning's side and looked up at him with a slightly perplexed, slightly pitying frown. In a soft whisper, she said, "I think you're from *Earth.*"

"What makes you think that?"

With wonderfully naive sincerity, she answered, "I think you're crazy. They say all Earthmen are crazy."

He grinned, a mixture of amusement and self-consciousness. "Earthmen aren't the only ones who are all crazy."

"*Are* you from Earth?"

"All men are," he hedged. "Earth is the mother planet to our ancestors, your and mine alike."

She cocked her head, studying him thoughtfully. "Are you ashamed of being from Earth?"

The innocent question cut unpleasantly deep. He cast about for a way to change the conversation's direction.

"You should wear something blue," he said. "Something to catch the color of your eyes."

That disconcerted her. She gazed at him in obvious confusion.

He told her, "You have a lovely face." And as he said it, he realized that it was true. Her features were pale and plain, but there was a fineness about her—something intangible—something lovely.

Mentally he costumed her in damask velvet, her train looped and pinned, hinting at ells of Ypres linen underskirts. The gown would be open to the waist, revealing a stomacher of Bruges satin worked with myriad tiny seed pearls. She'd be a vision to grace any court.

"Lovely," he repeated, mumbling to himself. And he thought maybe Elva wasn't such a barren wasteland as he'd figured at first. He asked, "What did you say your name is?"

"Neffa Deegney."

It was terribly wrong. He said, "I can't call you that."

"What do you want to call me?"

On impulse, he answered, "Dulcinea."

"I've never heard that before. Is it a good name?"

"Let all the world stand still if all the world does not confess that there is not in all the world a fairer damsel," he quoted. He could see that she couldn't make sense of the words. But she found something in them worth a small, inturned smile. It flashed only a moment, then her face was solemn again.

As if he had confirmed her original opinion, she said, "You are from Earth."

"You mean I'm crazy?"

She nodded gravely.

He groped for something to say that would convince her there was nothing wrong in his particular kind of madness. But before he could find words, Riker interrupted him.

"Kyn, listen to this and tell me what you think of it."

Cleb had turned on the TV and was scanning the library catalog. He found what he wanted, touched a control, and the chart dissolved into the same chorus they'd seen earlier.

Riker watched and listened intently, a frown spreading across his face. The girl Kyning had christened Dulcinea turned her attention to it, too. And, with annoyed impatience, Kyning gave in. It only took him a moment to decide that this canned performance was as bad as the live one had been.

When the number was finished, Cleb turned off the TV and the whole of the group looked to Kyning for his opinion. But before he could say anything, Riker commented thoughtfully, "It's not as good as I remembered it."

"I thought it was splendid," Janneth said.

"Beautiful, absolutely beautiful," one of the others added.

"I've been to every concert they've played here," another put in. And someone else said, "I've listened through all their recordings in the library, most of

them twice."

The original question seemed forgotten. The discussion turned into a comparison of who'd heard what, when and how often. Kyning turned back to pick up his conversation with the blond girl. But she was gone.

He sat silently then, listening but growing more and more bored with the discussion that seemed more concerned with quantity than quality. And Riker seemed to have lost interest too.

Eventually the party broke up.

"What's the matter?" Kyning asked as he and Riker walked back toward their own quarters.

"The music. I think it's lost something for me."

"It really is just second-rate stuff."

"But I've enjoyed that music all my life. I always—Kyn, is it the music? Or is it me?"

"Huh?"

"I've been feeling strange—different—for days now. Ever since you came here. Is something happening to me?

"Well, you've stopped loading your system with aqapa," Kyning suggested.

Riker nodded, but asked, "Would that make a difference?"

"The ataraxic in it might have been dulling your perception."

He nodded again, as if he could see logic in the idea. "I *am* changing," he mumbled.

"So? Is that bad?" Kyning said. "Change is the essence of progress. Maybe you're changing for the better."

"But Elvans don't change. Nothing on Elva can change. It's already perfect."

Kyning whistled through his teeth. "Is *that* what they tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well, every man to his own perfection, I suppose."

"It *is* perfect, isn't it?"

"Look, if it really were, do you think the state would be feeding you tranquilizers and encouraging you to keep on the stuff by transmitting subliminals?"

"I don't understand it. I don't understand at all."

"Just keep changing. Maybe you'll catch on eventually."

Riker walked on in silence for a few moments. Then with abrupt suddenness, he said, "Kyn, it matters, doesn't it? I mean—it's bad to have things like sublims making you do things, isn't it?"

"Where I come from, it's bad," Kyning told him. "But here you seem to have some different ideas about good and bad."

"Well, *I* don't want it that way. I want my mind to be my own. I want to know what I do and why I do it. That's my right as a man," he said intensely. Then, after another moment of thought, he added, "It's easier to think about things than to do them, isn't it?"

"Yeah. A hell of a lot of the time it is."

"Do you think I could—could—"

"Could what?"

The words hung up in Riker's throat, then came out in a sudden tight bunch. "Could learn to fight with swords?"

"What!"

He stopped walking. Rigidly tense, he faced Kyning. His face was twisted and his voice a mixture of hope and hopelessness as he asked, "Could you—would you teach me?"

"Sure," Kyning said. What the hell—it might be fun. And it seemed damned important to Riker.

The Elvan's shoulders slumped. He seemed almost to fall apart with relief. He beamed. He glowed with happy

excitement. "When can we start?"

"I dunno," Kyning mumbled as he began to have second thoughts. "We'd need swords and a place to work out. That room of yours isn't big enough."

"I'll find a place! I'll get swords!" Riker was almost pleading.

"It'll take time and work. Even slash-and-hack fencing isn't the kind of thing you can learn from a recording."

"I'll work! I promise, Kyn—I'll work hard!"

"Okay, you get hold of swords and find a place to practice and I'll teach you," Kyning said. He looked into Riker's eager pudgy face. "To begin with, you're going to have to turn some of that baby-fat into muscle. You can begin with a few exercises before we've gotten the equipment."

"Tonight?"

He was in no mood for calisthenics, but Riker's desperate enthusiasm was so intense that he gave in. When they got back to the room, he demonstrated some simple exercises. Riker fell to so avidly that he had trouble stopping him before he'd badly overexerted himself.

Even so, Riker awoke the next morning sore and aching. But he showed no signs of discouragement.

A few days later, almost stuttering with excitement, he announced that he'd found a place for the fencing lessons. He led Kyning through a service door in the hallway, into the system of corridors and conduits hidden in the walls, and downward to a subcellar within the building's foundations.

It was a large room lit by a single worklamp that left the corners filled with long dusty shadows. Whatever heavy equipment had once been housed here was gone leaving only mounting brackets and capped power outlets as scars of its removal.

Kyning stood in the center of the bare floor, turning slowly, savoring the atmosphere. The ceiling reinforcements could have been smoke-stained oaken rafters in this musty-dim light. But the light should have been golden and flickering, he thought. Firelight should be making those shadows dance as if they were filled with malevolent spirits. Tapestries should hang against those cold walls, wavering in drafts as if the fingers of the dead plucked at them. There should be a huge T-shaped table divided by a salt cellar. Or perhaps a round table with a hundred and fifty chairs. There should be fresh rushes on the floor to protect feet from its chill and to absorb dropped morsels of food missed by the dogs. There should be the sounds of pages' footsteps hurrying along unseen corridors . . .

"Will it do?" Riker asked hesitantly.

"It's great!" Kyning said with honest enthusiasm.

"What do we do first?"

"We've still got to have something to use for weapons. And maybe we can rig up a popinjay of some kind."

"What's a popinjay?"

"A practice dummy. The original ones were stuffed birds used for archery targets. I figure if you've got a dummy to practice swings and thrusts on, it'll save a lot of wear and tear on me."

"We can make one," Riker said, confidence in his voice now.

"What about swords?"

"We can make them too."

Kyning was doubtful of that. And when Riker came up with long lath-like strips of plastic, he wasn't impressed. The stuff could be cut into suitable shapes of the right size for one-handed hacking swords, but it was much too light.

Disappointed, Riker had fallen into an almost trancelike study. After offering an

assortment of ideas, he struck on one that had possibilities, so they tried it. Somewhere, he got hold of a power drill and a couple of ingots of Woods metal. They spent hours putting small holes into the blades they'd fashioned, and loading them with the heavy metal. Testing and balancing after each additional loading, they finally achieved something Kyning accepted as an adequate heft for the homemade weapons. Shaping cruciform hilts was simple enough, and a popinjay went together out of old clothes and more plastic laths.

At last, in the practice chamber, Riker stood with a sword gripped in his hand and his eyes fastened on the dummy.

"Go ahead, take a swing at it," Kyning said. "Just to get the feel of it."

Slowly Riker raised the blade over his shoulder as if it were a bat for some kind of field game. He stopped there, standing like an awkward statue.

Kyning had settled himself onto the cushions they'd brought down to furnish the room. He sat with his back against the wall and his arms on his knees, relaxed and figuring he could goof off while Riker experimented with the new toy. But now Riker seemed to be completely stalled at the very start of it.

"Go ahead," Kyning told him. "Bash the popinjay. No harm done if you break something. We can repair it again."

"I—I—" Riker stammered. He sputtered out like a dying candle. The sword over his shoulder was visibly trembling now and Kyning could see the thin film of sweat glistening on his smooth upper lip.

Dumbfounded, he asked, "What's the matter?"

"I—I—" Riker began again. Almost tearfully he blurted it out. "I never hit anything before."

"Not anything?"

He shook his head.

Kyning picked up the cup of coffee he'd brought with him. It was half-empty, the dregs tepid now. He sipped at it more to cover a moment of thought than because he wanted it. Getting to his feet, he said, "You've never lost your temper and thrown things, or swung a hammer, or anything like that? You never whopped the little girl next door when you were a kid?"

Riker shook his head again. His arms were limp now, the weight of the sword resting on his shoulder. He looked as if even that were more than he could bear. He seemed a marionette hung by a single string, about to collapse, as his moist frustrated eyes gazed miserably at Kyning.

"I *can't,*" he said. "I never did. I don't know how."

"God's Blood," Kyning muttered. He held the cup toward Riker. "Here, drink some of this."

It took Riker a perceptible moment to break his stance—to put down the burden of the sword and accept the coffee. He finished it in a sobbing gulp. It wasn't much, but at least he'd moved—done something—and it seemed to help the tension.

Kyning studied him, amazed at the grip of emotion that overwhelmed him. Thoughtfully, he asked, "Are other Elvans like this?"

"I suppose so," Riker said, but it didn't seem to be any comfort to him. "We're peaceful people. We don't—we don't—we never—"

"That's the secret of your Pax Elvana," Kyning said.

"Huh?"

"Your Elvan peace—no war, no strife, no conflict. Elva claims to be a society of

perfect harmony. No wonder. Hell, you're completely brainwashed."

Still shaken, but with his curiosity piqued now, Riker asked, "What's brainwashed?"

"Late Twentieth Century Earth term. Look, aggression—striking out—it's a basic human instinct, but you can't do it. You're psychologically conditioned against acts of violence, aren't you?"

"No! It wouldn't be legal. Man has free will," Riker snapped back. Then he paused, gazing into a thought. He mumbled, "But those sublims—the aqapa—Kyn?"

Kyning shrugged.

Fearfully, Riker asked, "Does that mean I can't *ever* learn sword fighting?"

"I don't know."

"Please, Kyn, I've *got* to!"

"Why?"

"It's—it's—oh *hell!*" He gave a peculiar twist to the archaic Earth word he'd picked up from Kyning. It sounded strange on his tongue, as if he had trouble indulging in even that small semantic violence.

His frustration was painful to see. Sympathetically, Kyning asked, "It's really important to you?"

Riker nodded. He struggled to put together words. "It's something inside me—something that's been growing lately. It's like being in a cage and trying to get out—like being in a nightmare and knowing you're asleep and yet not able to wake up and—and—*hell,* Kyn, I've *got* to do it!"

This time the ancient interjection came more freely.

"Take it easy," Kyning muttered as he thought about it. "Look, maybe all you need is some preparation. Maybe if you got into the mood first . . ."

"How?"

"Build up to it. Wallow in some literature first," he suggested. "Get the feel of the atmosphere. Put yourself into the fantasy world of the legends. Maybe the costume would help. And maybe . . . come on upstairs and we'll see what we can do."

He led Riker back to the room, dug out his pageant costume and helped the Elvan into it. At first Riker was doubtful, his words all edged with forlorn self-pity. But when he looked at himself in the mirror, dressed in the exotic black tunic and hose, with Kyning's silver-hilted dagger sheathed on his thigh, he began to brighten.

Kyning put together a lamp, using a cup of cooking oil and a tatter of fabric for a wick. It burned feebly, sending a thin streak of black smoke twisting up from the wick, but at least it worked. As he put the container of oil back on the shelf, he eyed the bottle of Kalvaran.

He'd withheld himself from the liquor a dozen times or more. It was rare and precious stuff here, too valuable to be wasted. No form of inebriantia were sold on Elva, and coffee was the strongest analeptic available. He'd been saving the Kalvaran for an emergency.

Looking at Riker, remembering the sheer despair in the Elvan's face, he wondered if this might not qualify as an emergency. With a thought that he'd come to regret this waste, he took down the bottle and tucked it under his arm.

They returned to the subcellar, and Kyning set up his props—the cushions and the oil lamp. Riker, in the black costume, seated himself at his side and took the cup of Kalvaran he offered.

He sipped at his own drink and then began to talk. As the small flame in front of him wavered, casting long flickering shadows into the musty corners of the room, he filled them with ghosts and illusions. He chose among tales of adventure and quests, of valiant men-at-arms and mighty single combats, limning out scenes with words of clashing swords, thundering axes and spilled blood that steamed hot with shed life.

He built castles of oak and granite, of ivory and amber. He bedecked queens in samite and velvet, and garbed bold heroes in leather and steel. And occasionally between moments of his own visions, he looked into Riker's enthralled face.

By the trembling bronze glow of the lamp, he could see images of his own thoughts reflected in Riker's eyes. He could see the dreams gaining form and substance there. And when he judged the time ripe, he bade the man in black rise up and smite the popinjay.

Riker lumbered to his feet. His clumsiness was more Kalvaran-induced now than fear-begotten. Feet braced apart, face flushed, he drew a deep determined breath and launched the blade. It swung in a jerky uncontrolled arc, coming to rest after the first bounce of a light tap against the sagging dummy.

"I did it!" he screamed.

Kyning grinned. In his own Kalvaran-warmed imagination, he could hear the sudden frightened flapping of the wings of gorecrows that had roosted on the curtain wall, now startled and taking flight at Riker's outcry.

"Verily, a mighty blow," he said, stretching out an arm dramatically. "Yon beast is well-smitten, Good Sir. Strike again, I pray thee."

Riker struck again—another gentle tap—and after that another. His hands were shaking even worse now, but the swing came more freely. And suddenly on the sixth stroke the pseudo-sword slammed into the dummy hard enough to stir an audible thud with its impact.

Bright-eyed and breathless with delight, he turned to face Kyning. "How's that!"

"Thou hast slain the obscene creature, M'lord! God gra'mercy, thee shall have thine by-our-Lady spurs ere Pente cost."

"Huh?"

"Bloody good show, vombic bloody good show," Kyning said. He realized vaguely that he'd run a quick gamut of idioms. Bad habit, he thought. Had to break himself of it or he'd never graduate. "Sloppy," he mumbled to himself. "Flub out of school on a goof like that."

"Huh?" Riker grunted again, frowning in confusion.

"Nothing," Kyning said. "Nothing at all, Guv'ner." He started to his feet and discovered that the Kalvaran had taken more effect than he'd realized. "Abstinence makes the heart grow fonder," he muttered under his breath. Fumbling, he achieved a standing position and announced, "I dunno about you, but I think I've had it for today."

"Just once more," Riker protested, hefting his weapon.

"Sure. Go ahead."

Wheeling, he swung at the popinjay. He stumbled, off-balance and unable to recover. The blade waved wildly in his hand as he tried to keep from falling. It was to no avail. He landed on his hands and knees, the sword still tightly grasped in his fist.

Kyning found helping him up to be awkward work, but at last it was done and they stood facing each other. Swaying slightly, Riker held out the sword. It was undamaged, but there was skin gone from his knuckles. A few tiny drops of red oozed through the abrasion.

"It hurts," he said thinly.

"Good cheer, M'lord," Kyning told him. "An honorable wound, a badge of valor. Blood shed in combat for fair cause is most sweetly spilt. Come on, friend, I'm tired. Let us be abed ere the cock crows."

Reluctantly, Riker abandoned his battle with the popinjay and put away his sword. Sucking at his skinned knuckles, he started back through the hidden passages.

Kyning followed, clutching the almost-empty Kalvaran bottle and singing softly to himself, " . . . *for flesh is bruckle and foot is slee, Timor Mortis Exaltat me . . .*"

"Huh?" Riker asked.

Gesturing with the bottle, Kyning answered in nonsequitur, *"Then fill up the glasses with treacle and ink, Or anything else that is pleasant to drink . . .*"

Riker nodded as if in complete agreement. And behind them in the cellar, the forgotten lamp had the grace to burn itself out, relieving the ghostly shadows of their vigil.

CHAPTER 5

KYNING WOKE feeling slightly feverish, with a distinct impression that the mechanism synchronizing his eyeballs had slipped a gear. The sonirad shower was no help at all. He tried filling the sink with cold water and dunking his head in it. That did some good.

When he turned back toward the room, he discovered that Riker's bed was still open and that the blanket-wrapped lump on its middle had a human foot sticking out of it.

After due consideration, he concluded that the foot probably had Riker attached to it somewhere within the wad of bedclothes. He couldn't bring the dial of his watch into clear enough focus to confirm his opinion but he had a distinct feeling that Riker *should* have been on his way to

work by now.

He prodded at the lump and shouted softly, *"Wake up, knight, wake up, I say, Sleep in Holland sheets no more . . ."*

The lump groaned. It shifted and moaned—and became inert again.

He tried poking harder.

Finally the blankets responded by heaving and wriggling until a mat of pale yellow hair appeared. For a long moment nothing more happened. Then a pair of red-rimmed eyes emerged to squint unhappily at him.

"I think you're late for work," he offered in apologetic explanation.

"Ungh," Riker replied.

"Come on, wake up. You want to go to work or you want me to call in for you and tell 'em you're sick?"

"Ungh," Riker repeated. After another long pause a thin feeble voice from under the blanket asked, "Huh—sick—?"

"Okay," Kyning said, assuming it was an answer. "Who do I call?"

The squinting eyes showed no comprehension.

"Who do I call?" he said again. "Who are you responsible to?"

"Work," Riker groaned. "Got—go—work." Then slowly the eyes and the pale yellow hair withdrew under the blanket like a turtle receding into its shell.

With a shrug, Kyning walked back to the kitchen and punched for boiling water. He made two cups of coffee, shook a fair dash of ulka into both, and sampled one. It was almost scalding.

He jabbed at the blanket until Riker's head reappeared, held out the second coffee and ordered, "Drink this."

Dociley, Riker obeyed. He wrapped trembling fingers over Kyning's hand as it thrust the cup toward him. A short sip seemed to jar him. His face screwed into a tight knot, then opened out with a sigh. Wrinkles spread apart revealing eyes that looked as pitiful as a basset's.

"You've never been hung over before, have you?" Kyning said.

Riker started to shake his head, then decided against it and instead worked his mouth into a weak "No."

Kyning grinned slightly. "There are a multitude of new worlds for you to conquer, friend."

"Not today," Riker mumbled. He sipped at the coffee again and, slowly, his hands steadied. Kyning let him take control of the cup. Once he'd emptied it he dragged himself out of bed and hurried into the bathroom.

Kyning had more coffee ready when he reappeared. It sufficed for breakfast. The mention of more solid food brought an almost-greenish tint to his face. And Kyning wasn't particularly excited by the idea either.

As he finished his coffee, Kyning asked again, "You want me to call your office and tell them you won't be in today?"

The question seemed to perplex Riker. Finally he said, "I can't do that. I've got to go in. It's important."

It couldn't be *that* important, Kyning thought. Missing just one day shouldn't hurt. He asked, "Exactly what is it you do?"

"I'm in Customs."

"I know, but what is it your job consists of?"

"Processing declarations," Riker said.

"How?"

Speaking slowly as he thought through the steps, he answered, "Well, the declarations come into my office after they've been passed. I make out a form for each one according to its classification. I feed the forms into my computer and it compares them with the

original declarations. It rejects any that I've made mistakes on. When that's done and I've corrected all my errors, I make a list of the code numbers of the forms and pass them all along to Nash. It's very important."

Curious now, Kyning asked, "Then what happens to them?"

"Nash checks my list against the originals. Then he breaks it all down according to sub-classifications and makes out his lists."

"And then?"

"Then? Why, then they all go to Records for cross-indexing and filing."

"So the declarations have already been okayed and the imports passed by the time these things come to you?"

"Yes."

"Hell," Kyning grunted. "*That's* important? Sounds like a makework job to me."

"What's a makework job?"

"Something to keep your hands busy. Something unnecessary that somebody dreamed up to *make* employment for an idle worker."

"Huh?"

"Look, what happens if you miss a day at the office? What does it matter if you're a day late passing all that garbage along to the next man?"

"Why, the—the—" Riker stared a moment at Kyning, then looked down into his cup as if it were full of tea leaves that he might be able to read if he tried hard enough. Softly he mumbled, "I don't know. I never missed a day before. I suppose it—it—wouldn't matter at all."

"Then don't worry. I'll call and tell them you're sick. You don't feel like working, do you?"

"No—only it's—it *was* important. I *thought* it was important," Riker said hoarsely.

And Kyning realized that he'd just knocked a very important prop from under his ego. A makework job could be quite necessary—to the man doing it. The paper-shuffling had served to give Riker a sense of purpose.

Kyning knew now that in one swift unthinking stroke he had destroyed that for Riker. He looked down into his own empty cup, disturbed by the sudden sense of guilt. He ruined dreams—he touched them and they crumbled into dead decay—not just his own dreams but those of others, too.

The small dark curses he muttered at himself didn't help at all.

Riker was still moody and silent when he returned from work the next day. He changed hurriedly into the costume of black and stalked off to the subcellar. There wasn't much Kalvaran left in the bottle. With a sense of personal loss, Kyning let him finish it.

Primed, Riker addressed himself to the popinjay, sword in hand. It took him effort to make his first tentative swing. But once that was achieved, he began to move more freely and before long he was slamming the makeshift blade against the dummy with vigor enough to produce really soul-satisfying thuds.

Kyning settled himself on the cushions and began to browse a book, but he couldn't hold his attention to it. He still felt dull and brooding himself. And the monotony of Elva and damned difficulties of escape nibbled at the edges of his mind.

Suddenly—like a fanned ember blazing to flame—Riker's vigor turned to pure violence. Startled, Kyning looked up as he slashed viciously, the dull plastic blade hammering against the dummy.

Deep in his throat, Riker gave an animal snarl.

"Hey, take it easy," Kyning said, starting to his feet.

Riker drove at the popinjay with the sword again, swinging with a force that split open the stuffed fabric of its body.

Holding out a hand to stop him, Kyning stepped forward, and repeated, "Take it easy."

With the snarl rising in his throat again, Riker spun. His blade lashed toward Kyning.

"Hey!" Kyning shouted, leaping back. The tip of the sword barely swept past his stomach, brushing at his shirt.

Riker swung again—madly—frenzied. But Kyning was agile and skilled. He evaded the wild slashing of the blade as Riker pressed after him. Step by step, he moved back, trying to calm Riker with words—trying to grab at the weapon. And suddenly he realized he was being driven into a corner.

The plastic blade was dull-edged but as hard as ivory and weighted to the heft of a hacking sword. It could be damned effective even without a cutting edge. Kyning ducked, his surprise now tinged with fear. He had to get that thing away from Riker before somebody got hurt.

It's easy enough for an unarmed but skilled man to take a sword away from a moderately adept opponent. But Riker was untrained. His insame swings were erratic and Kyning was barely able to anticipate his moves fast enough to elude them. He scrambled away, watching, hunting for some kind of pattern in Riker's attack.

Finally the form began to shape itself. Kyning could guess at the next move. He dove under the whip-quick blade to grapple Riker.

The Elvan knew nothing of wrestling. Kyning hauled him down and wrenched the flailing weapon from his hand. Flinging it away, he pinned Riker's shoulders and held him, writhing, against the floor.

The wild glaze faded slowly from Riker's eyes. His breaths became more evenly drawn. He looked up into Kyning's face—seeing and recognizing now. Thinly, he asked, "What happened?"

"You blew your safeties," Kyning muttered, deciding that the man was in control of himself again. As he got to his feet, he added, "You tried to knock my head off."

"I *what!*" Riker had started to rise. Kyning's words seemed to hit him like a fist, shoving him down again. He sat there, with his legs sprawled awkwardly. Wiping at his sweat-damp face, he mumbled, "I don't understand."

Kyning strode a few thoughtful paces away, then turned toward him. "I guess it makes sense. This damned stupid static society you live in—it's got your normal human instincts buried so deep you don't even know you have any. Guess it builds up a helluva lot of pressure. You need to ease it off somehow. You get the chance and you go out of your head doing it."

Riker followed him with questioning, half-comprehending eyes.

"What I want to know now is—are you going to blow up like that again," he continued. "Because if you are, I'm calling it quits. Swordplay is a fun *game,* but I'm not interested in going at it for real. Especially when *I'm* not armed."

"I promise . . ." Riker said, his voice all hoarse breath. "It won't happen again, Kyn! I promise! Please don't quit."

"You're sure?"

He nodded, his face a mask of misery.

He was such a strange damned and pitiful creature, Kyning thought. Grinning with reassurance, he said, "Okay, we'll try again."

Riker's smile was pure relief and joy.

"Go on," Kyning told him. "Go bash the popinjay some more. But try not to break it again."

Scrambling to his feet, Riker picked up the sword. His first swing at the dummy this time was softly cautious. But his hand seemed controlled.

"A *little* harder," Kyning suggested.

Riker thudded the blade against the dummy. And in moments he was swinging freely at it, finally at ease.

Satisfied that all was well, Kyning returned to the nest of cushions and his book. It looked like Riker was past the crisis.

Tired but beaming happily, Riker eventually stopped to rest. He flopped down on the cushions at Kyning's side and glanced at the scanner.

"Okay now?" Kyning asked him.

He nodded. Then, his face clouding, he said, "Is it *me,* Kyn? Or are all of us like this?"

"Like what?"

"All so damned miserable and knotted up inside."

Kyning gave it a moment's thought. "Did you feel this way before you quit aqapa?"

"No. Not the same. But there were times—a lot of times—when I felt like *something* was wrong. Like there was something deep inside me that wanted to get out. Only I didn't know what. When I felt that way I'd just drink a lot of aqapa and after a while I'd be alright again."

"It's probably the same for the others. Everybody's got instincts and aggressive urges, but here on Elva you keep them snowed with tranquilizers. You never find out what's bugging you or let off steam."

"That's bad," Riker mumbled. It was something between a statement and a question.

"I dunno. It makes a bunch of automatons out of you, but maybe that's okay when you're born and raised to it. It's not for me, though. Too much like being a jellyfish or amoeba."

"Yes! That's exactly it! Kyn, life's too wonderful. I'm miserable now, but I'm *happy* too, and I knew I never was either before. Now I can soar—I'm alive—for the first time, I'm really alive!"

Kyning grinned at his enthusiasm.

"If the others knew," he went on. "If only they could know what they're missing, they'd feel the same. I'm sure they would! But—but we're *prisoners of our own ignorance,* aren't we, Kyn?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," Kyning muttered, trying to place the phrase. He was sure Riker'd gotten it out of one of the books.

"I can tell them, can't I?" Riker continued, his eyes almost feverish-bright. "They don't have to be ignorant. I can teach them the things I've learned!"

He seemed to be gazing at some vision and he was so ecstatic at the sight of it that Kyning felt a vaguely envious sympathy. It would be a lousy thing to destroy another dream for him now, so soon.

"Sure," he said, "only take it easy."

"Why? What do you mean?"

He searched for some stall that would hold Riker in check without disillusioning him too much. "You can't rush people into a thing like this. You can't turn their lives upside down suddenly. You've got to work into it slowly. Prepare them for the changes. Educate them, but do it cautiously so you don't pull the props out from under them and leave them with nothing to hang on to. And don't forget, they're on aqapa. They won't *feel* things the way you do."

"No. I suppose not," Riker mumbled.

"But *I* learned. I can lead them. I can guide and help them."

Sure, Kyning thought. *Dream now while you've got the chance—before you come up against reality and get your damnfool face smashed in.*

The hours Riker kept had become more and more erratic since he'd begun his fencing lessons. Some days he'd hurry home from work, eager to get at his practice. Other times he'd wander in late, after having drifted around lost in his own thoughts. It was late afternoon, but Kyning wasn't concerned that he hadn't gotten in yet.

It had been a dull day—like most days on Elva. Kyning had already finished filling out his study sheets and was browsing a book he'd read at least half a dozen times before. He was desperately wishing something would happen to break the monotony when Riker burst excitedly into the room with a package in his hands.

The look on his face would have been appropriate if he'd had canary for dinner. Grinning so broadly he probably couldn't have spoken if he'd tried, he tore the wrappings from his package and held out a still-sealed bottle of Kalvaran.

Kyning dropped the scanner and reached for it. Amazed, he asked, "Where the devil did you get this?"

"It was really strange the way it happened," Riker said, beaming with self-conscious pride. "Sometimes when there are ships in, I drop down to the field and look at them. There was a shuttle in today and I was standing around admiring it when I got to talking with one of the crewmen. I said things—maybe more than I should have—but anyway, after a while he asked me if I'd like to get some more Kalvaran. I told him I would and he said he had a bottle on board that he could let me have for a price. I jumped at the chance. So here it is."

"That's smuggling, you know," Kyning muttered, grinning.

Riker nodded. There was a little guilt in his expression, but his eager pride overrode it. Half-whispering, he said, "He told me he could get me other things if I wanted them. He said he could get almost anything in the universe for me."

"Next time you see him, ask him how he's fixed for passports," Kyning grunted, not really expecting anything to come of it. His hands were busy snapping the seal on the Kalvaran and pouring a shot.

"I dunno," Riker answered. "But I've asked him to get me more books. Lots of them."

Kyning took a long, deep satisfying swallow of the liquor. Damned funny thing, he thought as he settled on the couch again. Where did reality stop and fantasy begin? What was the difference in principle between Kalvaran and aqapa? They both affected the function of the mind, though in different ways. Yet, he accepted one and rejected the other.

Hell, for that matter, what about books? Wasn't fiction a drug, too? So he'd weaned Riker from aqapa by putting him onto stories and sword-games and an alcoholic drink—was it an improvement or only a change?

Most of the worlds he'd known had outlawed the mind drugs and the addictives, except in supervised therapy. But they only taxed alcoholic beverages and the mild stimulants like coffee, mate and the various teas. Hardly any planets regulated against fiction though. Yet they were all degrees of the same evil, weren't they? Or was it an evil? Didn't life itself corrupt the mind? Wasn't that the natural order of things?

For tens of thousands of years mankind

had sought the panacea. Even Neanderthal's ancestors had left signs that they, too, had tried to understand and influence the world around them. The alchemists had hunted a Philosopher's Stone that would transmute lead into gold and similarly purify and perfect base mankind. The psychiatrists had tried to root out the sprouting seed-events of man's corruption and cleanse him of evil. The biochemists thought to cure chemical deficiencies in the brain and thereby perfect the human mind. The electronicists tried to retrace and repair defective circuitry among the cells. The mentalicists attempted to repattern thought-flows. Each had managed to make his own contributions to the theories of the mind and each left traces of his work.

They all tried—and they all failed. Mankind was proof of their failure. Men were still damned far from perfect. Hell, they couldn't even agree on what perfection might be.

Kyning glanced at Riker, wondering if the ones who had arranged for him to be fed drugged aqapa had been as wrong as he, Kyning, felt they were. To *his* mind, the deadening of natural instincts was an evil. But was that truth, or just his own distorted opinion? And what was it he did to himself when he tried to drown misery in Kalvaran, or to lose it—and himself—in fiction?

What was *truth?*

Hell, *he* didn't know. He acknowledged that, and asked himself why he kept hunting a damned Beast Glatisant that left no sign to his blind eyes—a beast that might not even exist.

He took another deep drag at the Kalvaran and tried to focus his attention on the book again. But the questions continued to twist themselves inside his mind. He began to wonder if the ones who sought—and found—escape in complete flight from reality might not be right after all.

Finally he put down the book and asked Riker, "You like being off aqapa?"

"Sure."

"You didn't feel better—more at ease—then?"

Riker shrugged. "Sometimes maybe," he said doubtfully. "But not really at ease. It's like those sublims, I guess. I could feel things bothering me, but always so deep down that I couldn't focus on them or even tell what they were. Just sort of an undercurrent of something wrong. Now, when I'm unhappy, at least I *know* that I am."

Was that what distinguished man from the animals, Kyning thought. Was it their awareness of their own emotions? He remembered Fessler, the brain-damaged brute who'd performed in the Pageant. He'd never known what emotions Fessler felt—if any. In that case the human body functioned but as an automaton. Was it possible that the brainless creature might be happier, more content, than the thinking man? Could that be better . . .?

God's Blood! How the hell did he think himself into these damned intellectual cul-de-sacs anyway? And why? Devil take it—*why?* But that was the first question as well as the last one. Always *why?*—always the question that had no answer.

He emptied the glass of Kalvaran and poured out another, wondering if aqapa wouldn't be a quicker, easier way to drown the questions. Still, the idea revolted something basic within him. He felt that some part of himself would never let him take the final long step away from reality. Fear? There was an ancient

folksong that said it concisely—*tired of living, fear'd of dying.*

Was it really that simple? Did a man cling to his personal devils in preference to the unknown ones only because he was already familiar with them—and dreaded the unknown?

He looked at Riker with a mingling of envy and pity. In the womb of Elva's weird society, Riker had been a foetus, not a human being but only a potential. Now he was filled with a child's curious questioning and delight of discovery. What next? Would he grow into the mature misery of disillusionment? Was it wrong to have midwifed him out of his aqapa-cushioned state of semi-existence?

To hell with it! Tens of thousands of years of all mankind seeking answers—how could he expect to find them in one short and damned imperfect lifetime?

CHAPTER 6

ANOTHER LIVE CONCERT proved as dull as the one before it for Kyning. Riker, too, failed to find the pleasure he'd hoped for in it. He fidgeted through the performance, impatient to get on to the usual gathering at Cleb's afterward.

As they were settling themselves into the room, Cleb paused at Riker's side to make some comment about the show. Kyning caught only a part of it, but it sounded as if Cleb had been disappointed.

He heard Riker answer, "That's natural. You'll find out there are a lot of things that you don't like as much as you used to."

Kyning glanced at them, slightly curious, but his interest was on the blond-haired girl he'd christened Dulcinea. All he'd been able to find out about her so far was that she worked at the MCC and shared a room with Janneth. With luck, he hoped to learn more—much more—this evening. But at the moment she was deeply involved in conversation with one of the others and he felt too uncertain about Elvan etiquette to try breaking in right now.

He settled himself beside Riker and watched Cleb open the wall-kitchen to set up drinks. This time there were four coffees. Two were for Kyning and Riker. Cleb took the third himself and gave the other to his roommate.

Holding the cup in a slightly unsteady hand, he seated himself next to Riker and said, "I've been trying, but it's not easy."

"I told you it wouldn't be," Riker answered smugly.

Janneth came to join them. She sipped at her aqapa almost furtively, then said in a small voice, "I tried. I really did. But I couldn't."

"You're a woman," Riker said as if that excused her weaknesses.

Intrigued, Kyning nudged him and asked softly, "What's everybody trying?"

Cleb caught the question. A self-conscious grin spread itself across his face as he gave an answer. "Chai's been telling us about aqapa. We're giving it up."

One of the other men edged into the conversation. "I don't believe it's really drugged."

"It is! I'm sure of it," Janneth said, looking at him with wide, serious eyes. "I *tried* to stop but I couldn't."

Riker waved for silence. "It *is* drugged. And it *is* hard to quit," he said, making a portentous announcement of it. "The trick is to concentrate on something else of . . ."

"I've been putting my mind to my concert programme collection," Cleb

broke in. "I've been cross-indexing them. That helps."

"I know of something even better," Riker told the assemblage.

"What?"

He leaned forward, making his revelation in conspiratorial tones. "Books! Books like nothing you've ever seen before. Books of *fiction* about the Age of Chivalry."

Kyning listened a moment as Riker launched into detail. Then he turned his attention to Dulcinea. She was watching Riker, apparently enthralled with his words. There seemed to be something different about her tonight—yes—she was wearing a scarf at her throat. It was a bit of soft cloth that caught the color of her eyes.

He grinned to himself, thinking maybe it would be easier than he'd anticipated . . .

Riker's voice rose with enthusiasm. He had them all fascinated now and he seemed to be building to a point. He reached it. With fervor, he suggested that they form a group to study literature together and to help each other kick the aqapa habit. His audience agreed eagerly.

Kyning watched with cynical amusement. So Riker was proceeding with his evangelism. Well, in planning and organizing this group, with himself as its leader, he seemed to be regaining the sense of self-importance he'd lost when he discovered his job was just a meaningless sham.

A good thing, Kyning thought. A man needed something to give him a feeling of purpose. He needed dreams, even such damnfool ones as Riker was building for himself. He hoped the inevitable intrusion of reality wouldn't be too harsh.

The group set a time for its first meeting at Riker's and Kyning agreed to lend them books and assist them in their studies. Then the conversation began to break up again, splintering into small discussions.

Kyning grabbed the chance to speak to Dulcinea alone. Moving to her side, he said, "The scarf's lovely."

She smiled, her face suddenly animated with pleasure at the compliment. "I wasn't sure the color was right," she said with a small gesture of self-depreciation.

"It's perfect, fair damozel."

"What's that mean?"

"Damozel? It's an archaic Earth word for a beautiful maiden. Are you going to come to the literary group?"

"Do you think I should?"

He nodded.

"Maybe I will."

"I can teach you a lot of things . . ."

She looked at him so strangely that for an instant he was afraid she'd understood his thought. But then he saw in her face that she hadn't.

"Is *chivalry* just swords and armour and things?" she asked.

"It's a theory, too," he said. "A philosophy, a way of life."

"Tell me about it."

"It involves a belief that there's some basic nobility in mankind—some purpose—some inherit good and honesty. It's a code of ethics and a discipline for achieving a goal."

"What kind of goal?"

"San Graal," he muttered, beginning to feel ill-at-ease.

"What's that?"

"I don't know."

She seemed to seriously consider this. After a moment, she asked, "Is Earth like that? Like *chivalry* I mean."

He laughed.

"Was it that way a long time ago?"

"A *very* long time." And even that was a lie, he thought. Sure, there'd been knights in armour on their white chargers, giving lip service to the credo of knighthood. But they'd probably all been a damned lot of Deptforts hiding behind their helms and crests.

"I don't think we've ever had *chivalry* on Elva," she mused. "Not with swords."

"No, not with swords," he agreed.

"You're studying about us, aren't you? Chai said you were learning to be an Elvan."

"Yeah, kinda."

"What's it like?"

"Peculiar," he answered, grinning slightly.

"Elva?"

That wasn't the impression he'd meant to give. He hurried to explain, "I mean the stuff I've been studying. Your Supervisor-computer wants to make an electronics receptor field engineer out of me. I'm being exposed to a hell of a lot of theory—mathematics, electronics and something they call the philosophy of electronics . . ."

Her expression was blank.

"It's a medieval sort of thing all involved with symbolic significances," he told her. "The odd part of the course, though, is that I don't have to *learn* anything. All I have to do is answer enough questions to prove I've been *exposed* to the information, and they're satisfied.

"Why do you have to be exposed to it if you don't learn anything?"

He grinned at that. "I think it's a makework project. It's supposed to give me the feeling that I'm a highly-skilled specialist and damned important. From what I can figure, all a *field engineer* really does is unplug a defective unit and plug in a new one."

"That doesn't make sense," she said. "If it were that simple couldn't just anybody do it?"

"Sure, except that you're required to have a graduation certificate to get the replacement units. It's just part of this whole phoney makework set-up you've got here. Besides, it would probably never occur to a native Elvan to repair his own TV."

"What?"

He realized he was going astray, on the verge of talking about things that were wrong with this oddball planet. That was no way to impress a lady.

"It's nothing important," he mumbled.

She plucked at the scarf with her fingertips, looking vaguely ill-at-ease herself. He wondered if perhaps what he'd said had begun to register with her.

As if to make conversation, she asked, "It's not anything like being a knight, is it?"

"No. Except that I did do a lot of repair and maintenance on the machinery when I was with the Pageant."

That seemed to surprise her. Did she have a prejudice against manual labor, he wondered. A lot of Earthlings did. To many of them dirty hands and unmanicured nails were like caste-marks that set a worker somewhere far below a thinker. And a man without a high-level college degree was something sub-human.

He found himself remembering his own parents. For a while when he was a kid he'd hung around the hacking stables in the park, working in exchange for riding lessons. He'd thoroughly enjoyed learning to disassemble and overhaul horses. But when his parents found out about it, they'd forbidden him to go on with it. There was no disgrace in *riding*—they'd agreed to pay for his instruction. But handling tools was menial and beneath

him. In their minds it had been a waste of his ability. But what ability, he asked himself.

"In a way I suppose there really is a philosophy of electronics," he said to Dulcinea. "It's not what the Elvan books teach though."

"What is it?"

He grinned self-consciously, wondering if it could be explained in words. "Maybe it's not exactly a philosophy. But it's *something*—maybe just *beauty.*"

"Beauty?"

He nodded. "There isn't any morality to an electron or a gear or lever. They're elements of pure logic. They're straightforward and *honest.* A machine works or it doesn't work, and there's always a reason. Sometimes you can't find the reason—you run up against the damned intermittents and sometimes the instruments'll tell you there's nothing wrong when you *know* the machine won't work. But you can be sure there's a logical cause. You know it's *you* who can't find it—you can't see or can't reason far enough to locate the trouble. But you know it's there and it's logical. Electronics and mechanics—they have form and reason, and that's beauty, isn't it?"

Could it be that there really was some damned form and reason in life, too? Was there actually something there that he was blind to? In machinery he'd always been able to find the flaws eventually, but in all his searching he'd never found form in life. It had never even given him cause to suspect it of logic.

The girl was frowning. She looked as if she were really trying to understand what he'd said. He felt certain it was meaningless to her. He wasn't even sure she knew what electrons or levers were. This was no good, he decided. This kind of talk would get him nowhere but into brooding.

He said, "Do you like stars?"

She looked confused again. "I don't know. I never thought about it."

"They're a lot of fun to look at. Especially on a night like this."

"Oh?"

"Sure. If you'd like, I'll show you."

"Alright," she said uncertainly.

He held out a hand to her. She didn't seem to understand, so he reached, taking hers in his. It was a small, warm and very female hand.

Docilely, she let him lead her out of the room, and out of the building.

At this late hour, the street was empty. The silence that surrounded them seemed almost mystical to Kyning as he stopped on the walk and faced her.

Light from a streetlamp, colder than Earthly moonlight, limned her upturned and questioning face. She could have been a sculpture, carved of icy white, he thought. A Snow Maiden. But her hand in his was humanly warm. He anticipated the heat of her mouth as he moved nearer.

A sound startled him—a thin hiss like the indrawn breath of a dragon. He recognized it for the murmur of a fast-approaching surface car. Sudden shadows jumped forth to gyre and gimble across the wall behind Dulcinea.

He glanced toward the bright headlights of the oncoming car, cursing silently. *This was the wrong place and the wrong time.* If he pressed too quickly, he'd frighten her. He told himself to proceed slowly and gently, to build the mood first.

He took her hand again. She no longer seemed hesitant, but came willingly at his side.

"Where are we going?" she asked curiously.

"To some enchanted place to gaze at stars. To some quiet glade where I might catch you a small bird or two."

"There aren't any birds on Elva. Just a few flying lizards and they all live out in the jungle."

"But there are secrets and enchantments waiting to be shown to you," he said. In the distance he could see the lights of the spaceport. He turned toward them.

Pausing, he put an arm over her shoulder and drew her close, as if to enable her to sight along the finger he pointed with. "You see yon castle towers, M'lady? You see yon faery lights dancing along the battlements?"

"That's the spaceport," she said.

"In this mundane guise perhaps, but you must look past the prosaic, fair Dulcinea. Look with the eyes of your imagination." The thought flashed through his mind that he sounded like Deptfort turning a tip. He had always loathed the way Deptfort spieled to an audience.

With effort, he ignored the thought and continued, "There is an enchanted isle of green and gold. It rises from a misty lake, its escarpments scarfed in haze. Upon its rocky crag sits the stronghold, Caer Wydr, surmounted by towers the colors of jewels, girded by a great curtain wall of amber and amethyst. And there the rolling greensward stretches down from the outer moat to the strand of crystal and ivory sands . . ."

She was gazing along his arm, frowning with the intensity of her thought. Softly, she said, "I'm not sure. I don't understand. I don't know what all the words mean."

As they walked on, he told her, building images of light and magick with words of stone and smoke. And they came to the edge of the broad open field that had served as fairground for the Pageant.

"Upon this land," he said with a sweep of his arm, "were held the glorious tournaments where knights did joust in the name of honor, for truth and for a woman's sake . . ."

"I saw that!" she exclaimed, happy in comprehending some part of what he was saying.

He grinned slightly at her eagerness. "Did you like the Pageant?"

She was hesitant in answering. "The others did. They said it was grand and magnificent and inspiring."

Feeling a touch of disappointment, he asked, "Did *you* like it?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "It was beautiful with the flags and the bright colors and all the shining armour. But it was sad."

It was the first time he'd ever heard anyone call the show *that*. He asked, "What was sad about it?"

She shook her head. "I just felt sad. I felt like it was all *wrong* somehow. And when the knight in black fell down with his horse—I was frightened—I thought he was really dead. He bled so much. Why did the white knight want to kill him?"

"Because the black knight symbolized evil," he told her. "The knight in the white armour represented Righteousness and Truth Triumphant."

"Is that always the way? I mean with the white knight killing the black one?"

"In dreams," he said. "Only in dreams. Look, it was only a show. Nobody really died. It's just an illusion."

"I'm glad."

She was looking toward him now, her face uptilted with the brilliant starlight whispering over it. This is the moment, he thought. Gently, he drew her close. His mouth burned against hers.

There was no response.

The desire was his alone. She caught no spark of it from him. His kiss communicated nothing to her. She yielded, accepting the touch of his mouth and making no struggle against him. But she did not respond.

The realization was like a stone wall—a solid obstacle that jolted him as he rammed headlong into it. Stunned, he let his hands fall away from her.

She took a short step back and stood looking at him. Under the pale starglow, her face was white—cold and emotionless as ice. He saw her lips part slightly, as if a marble statue stirred itself to speak.

"You were the black knight, weren't you?"

It wavered between a question and a statement. He felt as if it hinted at deep intent, but revealed nothing for certain. There was sweat on his forehead. He wiped a hand across his face.

" 'Sblood," he mumbled to himself. Impulsively, he added aloud to the girl, "I'm sorry."

She touched her fingers to her mouth, then asked, "What was that?"

"Huh?"

"What was it you did?"

Swallowing hard, he said, "Don't you do that on Elva?"

She shook her head.

I'll teach you, he thought. He rubbed at his face again. Dammit, he needed a drink. An idea followed quickly on that thought: Maybe this was more of the kind of brainwashing he'd run into with Riker. Maybe this girl had been conditioned to a point where her natural instincts were lost to her awareness. If he could set up an atmosphere and develop a mood—it had worked with Riker's inability to swing the sword—maybe it would work in this situation as well.

"Will you come to Riker's with me? There's something I want to show you," he said tentatively.

She nodded.

As they headed back into the city, he was hoping fervently that the gathering hadn't broken up early. Luck was with him. Riker wasn't home yet. Grateful to the Fates, he quickly collected the fresh bottle of Kalvaran and more cushions from the room and then led the girl down to the subcellar chamber.

With the overhead light off, the darkness broken only by the trembling glow of the oil lamp, he seated himself on the cushions and drew her to his side.

Her interest had immediately centered on the home-made lamp. "That's a *fire,* isn't it? I've seen them before."

It was as good an opening as any, he thought. He started with straightforward facts, telling her about fires and how for so much of mankind's existence flames had been his only controlled source of light and warmth. And then he drifted into the wonder and magic of a flame, into tales of great halls lit by burning logs, of tapers and rushlights, of phosphorescence and faery lights, of will-o'-the-wisp and of the mysteries of the night.

She politely accepted the cup of Kalvaran he offered her, and drank with him while he talked. And in time, she leaned against his shoulder, her pale hair brushing his cheek in faintly felt whispers. The fire before them was flickering low, a warm and mellow spark in the heart of the dark, hollow universe that surrounded them.

His stories waned into drowsy bits and pieces and, during a long moment of silence, she stirred against his encircling arm, murmuring, "I'm sleepy."

He smiled, feeling the relaxed

contentment himself. He knew that he could easily rekindle the flame that had burned so demandingly within him earlier. But that could wait. For now there was pleasure enough in sitting here, holding her and drifting in the echoes of the dreams he'd spun for her.

Reality intruded abruptly. The door snapped open.

Startled, Kyning jerked bolt upright, his arm wincing guiltily away from the girl. He scowled in angry astonishment at the figure framed in the doorway.

"Hi, Kyn," Riker grinned as he sauntered in.

"Oh, Chai, it's you," the girl muttered sleepily. Sitting up, she brushed at her tousled hair. She didn't seem very surprised—or unhappy—at the sight of him. With a gesture toward the cushions at her side, she said, "Come on and join us. Kyn's been telling me pretty stories."

Cheerfully, Riker started to seat himself. He hesitated in mid-motion, completely bewildered by the malevolence of Kyning's gaze. "Is something the matter?"

"No!" Kyning snapped.

It was all shot to hell now, he thought in disgust as he reached for the bottle of Kalvaran. He drank and sulked while Riker and Dulcinea exchanged bits of conversation. And when they tried to prod him into telling more stories, he called it quits for the night.

Riker shattered the last thin thread of hope for this evening by insisting that the *two* of them walk her home. Returning, he blathered on about his newly-formed literary group, oblivious to Kyning's brooding silence.

As far as Kyning was concerned, the walk had been a mistake. He should have let Riker take the girl home. The exercise and night air were doing too much toward sobering him, and he didn't want to be sober.

Back in the room, he took a long drag from the Kalvaran bottle, then sprawled on the couch, setting it on the floor close at hand.

Blithely, Riker opened the kitchen and fixed himself a cup of coffee.

"I was worried about you for a while," he said as he shook ulka into it. "You'd disappeared from Cleb's when I wasn't looking, and I couldn't think where you might have gone. I'm glad I thought to look in the practice chamber . . ."

"I wish to hell you hadn't," Kyning mumbled.

Riker lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "Why not?"

"Don't you know?"

He shook his head, his expression blankly puzzled.

"Good God! Don't you know about sex on this planet?"

"Of course we do. What's that got to do with it?"

Kyning was staring at him, disbelieving.

He sipped self-consciously at his coffee, then looked up, vague comprehension flickering in his eyes. "You and Neffa?"

"That's what I had in mind," Kyning grumbled.

"But why?"

"God's Blood! Don't you *know?*"

Riker gave another slow shake of his head.

"For *fun!*" Kyning said, sitting up. He scowled thoughtfully at Riker, then asked, "Look, do you plan to get married some day?"

"I suppose so."

"Why?"

"I'll be scheduled for it, if I pass all the genetic exams," Riker told him. "But I don't have to worry about that for a few

years yet."

Kyning's hand dropped to grope for the Kalvaran bottle. His fingers found it and lifted it for him to take a long, deep swallow from it. He sighed, then wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Okay," he said. "Tell me about it. What's the setup for marriage and for sex here on Elva."

For a thoughtful moment, Riker considered the question. "We have to maintain a stable population," he began.

Kyning took another deep drag at the Kalvaran. This sounded like it was going to turn into a helluva story.

"So in theory every Elvan is responsible for producing a child to replace himself," Riker continued. "Of course, that's only in theory. Actually not everyone is suitable for reproduction, or required to participate."

"The computers pick out the prospective parents?"

Riker nodded. "It's a very complex program, but the computer system manages to keep the schedule updated so that at any given time, the birth rate is in close balance with the death rate."

Sarcastically, Kyning asked, "You use artificial insemination?"

Riker seemed to miss the implication. "No, the Forefathers didn't make any provision for that."

"Then you *do* indulge occasionally for pleasure?"

"Pleasure?" Riker mumbled. "I never thought about it that way."

"Just procreation?"

He nodded.

"But you do have marriage and families?"

"Yes, the two-parent environment is very important for a child until he comes of age to become independent."

"Did you ever hear that sex might be fun?"

This time he shook his head.

Kyning tried another swallow of Kalvaran. As Riker described it, this society was becoming more fantastic—less credible—than he'd ever imagined. He asked, "Does the computer tell you *who* to marry?"

"Man has free will," Riker protested. But even as he spoke, he seemed to remember he'd already run into disproofs of this dogma. His voice modified the claim, as he added, "Well, if you haven't already made plans with anybody in particular, the computer makes suggestions and arranges introductions to suitable mates."

"Sure. And if you've made a selection on your own, do you have to get the computer's okay?"

"It's done that way," he mumbled. "I don't know what would happen if anyone went against the computer's decision. I don't think it's ever happened."

"No, not with a populace full of aqapa," Kyning muttered. "Look, you're a big boy now. While you're waiting around for the computer to come through with the love of your life, what do you do for kicks?"

"Kicks?"

"Entertainment."

Riker gave this a long moment of perplexed thought. Self-consciousness and enthusiasm mingled in his reply. "*I* collect haga marks. It's a very popular hobby. I have one of the finest collections on Elva. Would you like to see it?"

"No!" Kyning waved a hand to stop him, but he opened the bureau anyway, and pulled out the big looseleaf binder.

"I haven't had time to work on it since you arrived," he said, holding it out. "I used to spend hours with it. It's really quite a marvelous collection."

Stubbornly, Kyning refused to look at the book. Riker's disappointment was obvious as he put it back into the drawer.

Half-apologetically, Kyning mumbled, "That's not what I mean."

"It's fun," Riker insisted.

"You don't know what fun is." Kyning eased his head down onto the arm of the couch and stared at the ceiling. Then, propping himself up on one elbow, he said, "Look, the other day down in the cellar, when you really swung the sword for the first time—when you really whopped hell out of the popinjay—was that fun?"

"Yes!"

"More fun than collecting those whatchamacallits?"

Riker's answer glowed in his face. "Hell, yes! A lot more fun. Swinging that sword was like—like nothing I've ever done before!"

"Well, you try imagining something that's so much fun you'd be glad to give up sword fighting forever in trade for it."

The Elvan's brow wrinkled in concentration. He looked doubtful.

"Basic instincts," Kyning said. "Don't you ever feel a sort of *urge?*"

"Urge to what?"

With a deep, despairing sigh, Kyning rubbed a hand across his face, then tried again. "A restlessness—an urge to be with somebody—to—to—"

Riker was nodding as if he understood now. He mumbled, "But I would drink a lot of aqapa."

"All your life you've been filling yourself with those damned tranquilizers and depressants, living in a damnfool environment that suppressed and inhibited you in every way possible," Kyning said. "It's a wonder you're as close to human as you are. It's a wonder you're not a planet full of catatonics."

Thoughtfully, Riker said, "I've got a lot to learn, yet, haven't I?"

"You damned well have."

"Will you teach me?"

"About sex? Hell, that's one you're going to have to learn on your own. *Girls* make the best partners."

"I know about biology," he protested.

"That's just the beginning," Kyning told him. His own thoughts were drifting back to Dulcinea, wondering and hoping.

—to be concluded—

NEXT ISSUE

Lee Hoffman concludes her unusual novel, "Always The Black Knight," as Kyning discovers the fruits of Romance and Chivalry on the planet Elva. Also coming next issue, "The Good Trip" by Ursula K. LeGuin, "Say Goodbye to the Wind," a Vermillion Sands story by J. G. Ballard, "A Gift From The Gozniks" by Gordon Eklund, "Directions Into The Darkness" by Robert E. Toomey, Jr., "Music In The Air" by Ova Hamlet (as told to Richard Lupoff), and "Treaty" by Greg Benford & David Book.

In his "Questor" (in the January issue of Amazing Stories*) Howard L. Myers unveiled a sharply defined talent for warm and human characterization . . . even of non-humans. Now, in the story which follows, he tells the story of a young boy with the memories of an old man, and of the strange creature known as the—*

PSYCHIVORE

HOWARD L. MYERS

Illustrated by MICHAEL WM. KALUTA

CARGY WAS a hard boy to take by surprise.

Although he was just ten years old (or twelve and a fraction, Earth reckoning) he had knocked about his world enough to know it pretty well. And his world was Merga, where surprises were commonplace.

And if his world was strange, so was his time. Humanity had arrived on Merga only ninety Earth years earlier, and had barely had time to settle down, get in an argument among themselves, and resolve the dispute with a war.

Cargy was orphaned by the war at the age of five, on his own as a runaway at six, an independent tradesman at eight. He knew his world well enough to find a unique niche for himself in the Mergan-human ecology. He considered himself a success, and viewed his world with eyes more calculating than startled.

In fact, when he saw the crossed-eyed man, it had been so long since anything had struck him as strange that he stopped in his tracks and stared.

Maybe the man was staring back. Anyway, his face turned toward Cargy and he propped up on an elbow as if to get a better look at the boy and the wagon he was tugging. The man's eyes were hidden behind goggles of opaque black plastic into which crossed slits had been cut for him to see through.

Cargy couldn't guess the purpose of such goggles, and in general he didn't like the looks of the man sprawled in a patch of padgrass beside the trail. He had a beggarly look, and Cargy knew how vicious beggars could be. This fellow seemed very old, and scrawny, and maybe sick, but he'd had the strength to walk to this spot in the foothills, a good twenty miles from anywhere. Cargy didn't like getting too close to old Crossed-Eyes.

But he couldn't go around him. The hillside on both flanks of the trail was a tangle of sackle trees and bladebriar. If Cargy were to get on into town and about his business, he had to pull his wagon down the trail and past the man.

He scowled, shifted his grip on the wagon handle to his left hand, and moved forward. He had learned early that timidity didn't pay.

Crossed-Eyes was smiling at him as he got close.

"Headed for Port City, son?"

The voice was whispery and cracked with age, but it didn't have the sly whine Cargy had expected. And now he saw the man's clothes were too good for a beggar sneak. Also, a backpack lay on the grass at the man's side. Like he was a hunter, or one of those off-planet sport-guys who liked to hike over a few foothills so they could brag about "exploring" the wilds of Merga. But Cargy could see that Crossed-Eyes was too old to be anything like that.

"Yes, sir," he replied to the man's question.

"What's in your wagon?"

"Wildfruit."

"What kind?"

"All kinds. Shavolits, blues, jokones, swerlemins, muskers, hawbuttons, greenlins . . ."

"I haven't eaten a hawbutton in years," said the man. "Too dangerous for me to climb for them. Are you selling them?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll take half a dozen."

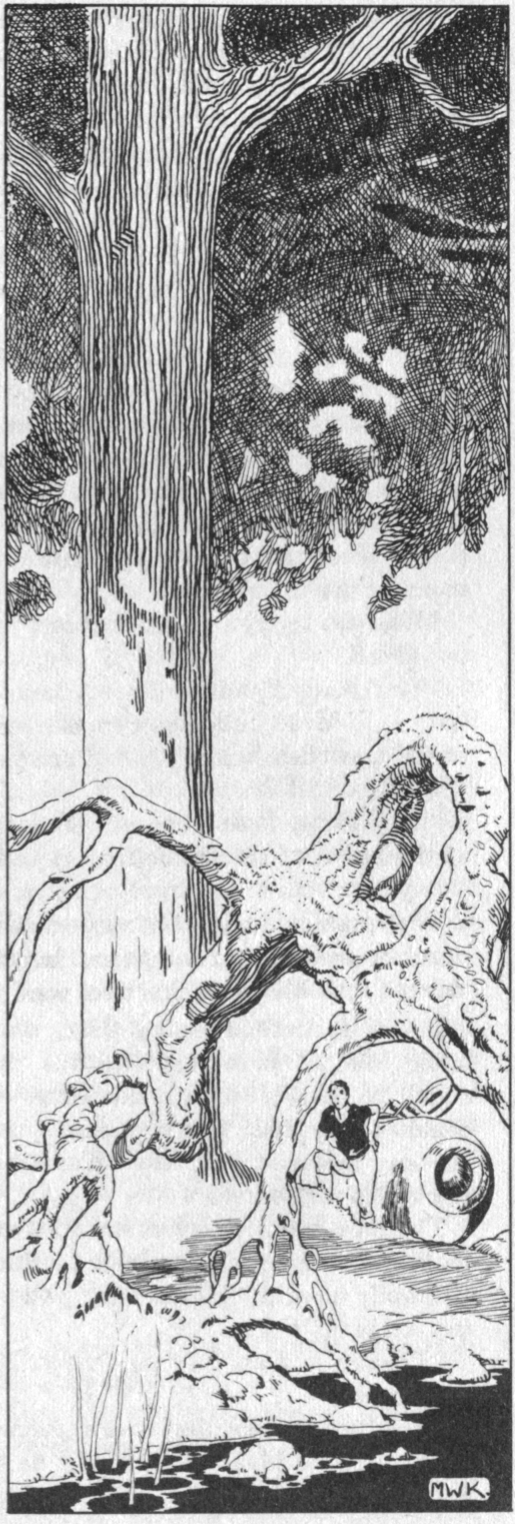
Cargy went to the back of his wagon and tugged out a corner of the spacesheet that covered his load. He picked out six of the dark brown, fully ripened fruits and handed them to the man.

"They're three minals each," he said.

Painfully, Crossed-Eyes dug into a trouser pocket and brought out a hakon. "Keep the change, son," he said.

"Thank you, sir," said Cargy, quickly pocketing the coin. The man had overpaid like an off-worlder, even with nobody around to impress. Cargy was more puzzled than ever. Instead of pulling his wagon on down the trail, he squatted on his heels and watched the man eat.

The slitted goggles were the big mystery, but what bothered Cargy more than that was the realization that the old guy looked awfully sick and might be



fixing to die. He didn't do too well with the hawbuttons, either. He gobbled one, worried down a second, and just messed with a third.

"I overestimated my appetite, son. You can have these three back. What's your name?"

"Cargy Darrow, sir."

"Glad to know you, Cargy. I'm Thomis Mead."

The name sounded vaguely familiar. "Glad to know you, Mr. Mead." They sat in silence for a while, then Cargy asked, "Are you sick, mister?"

"Yes, but it won't last much longer," the man nodded, and Cargy knew he didn't mean he'd soon get better. He meant it the other way.

"Was you trying to walk to town?" the boy asked.

"Yes, and I might have made it but . . ." Mead pulled up a trouser leg to reveal a swollen ankle. "A bad sprain. I can't walk on it."

"Oh." Cargy looked at the ankle, then at the pallor of the man's face, and felt annoyed.

The problem was that he couldn't hurry on alone into town to get help for this old man Mead. Sackle trees were far less active and dangerous than many other Mergan plant species, but they could be deadly to an old man who couldn't stay alert and who might pass out any moment. And the hillside was thick with sackle trees.

The only thing Cargy could do would require a considerable business sacrifice. Grumpily he said, "I guess I can pull you to town in my wagon."

"Thank you, Cargy. I'll pay you well for your trouble."

Cargy began unloading. The wagon was big enough for Mead to ride in, if he sat with his knees drawn up, but it couldn't contain the man plus the load of wildfruit. Ungraciously the boy asked, "Why'd you try to walk, anyway? They send out clopters for sick people."

With a dry chuckle Mead said, "Not unless they're called, and I let my transceiver rot on me. I hadn't tried to use it for perhaps twenty years, and etchmold got into the circuits. The supply serviceman was due to come by my place in six weeks, but I didn't think I could wait that long. I started walking."

Cargy felt a touch of disgust for anybody who would let etchmold ruin a perfectly good radio. All you had to do was switch the set on for a second or two, say once every ten days, because etchmold couldn't stand electricity, no more than any other kind of Mergan life could. And . . . and to have a radio, and not use it for twenty years! It didn't make sense!

The old man must have read the boy's expression. He explained, "You see, son, when I was a young man something happened that stopped me from caring about much of anything. I was interested enough in staying alive to eat regularly, but that was about all. I went to my place in Dappliner Valley, quit seeing people, and sort of vegetated. Recently I've started to care a little more, and . . ."

The name of Dappliner Valley rang a bell with Cargy. Only one man was known to live in that isolated spot. The boy now knew who Thomis Mead was.

"You're a . . . a *first-comer!*" he exclaimed in awe.

The old man smiled. "That's right, son. Probably the last of the first-comers still alive."

Cargy's formal education had been limited by the war to less than three weeks, but even before that he had been taught by his father that the first-comers

were the real heroes of Merga. They were the special band of explorers and scientists who had come from the older planets ahead of everybody else to find out about this world, to see if it was a safe place to live, or what would have to be done to make it safe.

The voracious plant life had gotten many of them, while they were finding out what the different species did to kill their animal prey, and how men could defend themselves. There was a big memorial statue to the first-comers in Port City. Cargy had heard people read aloud the names carved on the statue's base. That was why Mead's name had sounded familiar.

"What happened to you," he prompted, "must've been awful bad."

"It didn't upset me at the time," Mead replied distantly, "since it left me not giving a damn. But thinking back, and caring a little after all this time, I suppose it was, as you say, awful bad. But it's nothing for a youngster like you to think about, son."

"Yes, sir."

Cargy felt a bit better about this rescue mission, now that he knew old Mead was a hero. As for his business losses . . . well, he'd make out some way. He had counted on getting at least three kons for this load of wildfruit, which he was now building into an old spacesheet to leave by the trail where it would probably ruin before he could get back to it.

As for Mead's promise that he would be "paid well for his trouble," Cargy knew from experience just how little adults valued the time and effort of a boy. Maybe Mead would give him another hakon, or perhaps a whole kon, and that would be that. It wouldn't pay for the meals of meat he craved, and for recharging his defense batteries, much less for the new batteries and new boots he was beginning to need.

Regretfully he dragged the big bundle off the trail and maneuvered his wagon to the old man's side.

"You can get in now," he said.

Slowly, with stifled grunts, Mead lifted himself into the wagon bed. It was a tight fit as the wagon was hardly more than a toy, and in fact had probably been constructed by some father for a son of about Cargy's age. Cargy had stolen it from a yard in the Port City suburbs and had disguised it with a coat of dark green paint. The wagon had enabled him to triple the size of his business, since he was no longer limited to the wildfruit he could carry in a sack over his shoulder.

There wasn't even room to tuck Mead's backpack in with him, so the old man had to wear it. He said he was used to it and didn't mind its weight.

Cargy grasped the wagon handle and resumed his journey to Port City. He glanced back occasionally at his passenger, but Mead kept his head slumped forward and didn't speak. The boy wondered if the man's eyes were open behind the goggles, or if he were dozing.

Then the trail, not smooth to start with, suddenly got rougher. The surface was corrugated by underground sackle roots. Mead grunted when Cargy tugged the wagon over one of the higher root bulges.

"The rooters ain't been working this part much," said Cargy.

"Probably a lone bull," Mead remarked.

"I guess so." Cargy studied the trail ahead uneasily.

Men had opened the Mergan trails, but maintenance was left mostly to the rooters, local animals that resembled Earth boars in many respects. The rooters

had taken to the trails with alacrity, moving in family groups along territorial stretches about three miles in length, digging out and feasting on the roots which bordering trees kept extending under the open strip. The trails gave the rooters mobility and safety from plant attacks while allowing them to eat well. They had never had it so good before man came.

But their lives had imperfections. Sometimes a bull would lose his mate, or never succeed in getting one. Then he would turn psychotic and vicious. He would claim a mile or so of trail and defend it bitterly, not only against intruding rooters. Sometimes he would attack a passing human. And an animal who lived by digging roots out of the hard soil had to have natural tools that could function as murderous weapons.

If there was one thing in the wilds that Cargy really feared and hated, it was a lone bull rooter. True, he had managed to come away unscathed in the two encounters he'd had with the creatures, but with the handicap of having to defend old Mead as well as himself, he wasn't sure how a fight now might end.

And he couldn't even hurry through the dangerous stretch of trail. A maverick bull claimed more territory than it could keep eaten clean, which made the going slow and rough.

"I don't guess you got a gun, Mister Mead," Cargy said.

"No. It's been a long time since I needed one."

Cargy grimaced. The old man was no help at all. And that crazy bull had to be somewhere in front of them.

The confrontation came moments later. The boy heard an angry snort, and fifty feet ahead a large, battle-scarred rooter leaped into view. Its tiny eyes studied Cargy, then it repeated its snort and began approaching in a fast, short-legged trot, head held high and tusks extended.

Cargy dropped the wagon handle while he drew and electrified his knife. He took a few threatening steps toward the bull.

"Stay close to the wagon, boy!" Mead called out in a nervous quaver.

Cargy realized that he couldn't worry about Mead's safety at this instant. He had to fight the rooter the only way he knew how, and that would give the animal several opportunities to get at the old man. He had no idea if the rooter would take these opportunities or not.

The animal charged, zig-zagging very slightly as it came to confuse any evasive attempts by the boy. But Cargy's move wasn't merely sidewise; it was mostly upward, the way a high-jumper lifts his legs high and to one side as he goes over the bar. As the animal sped underneath him, Cargy got his knife down in time to slash a shallow cut in the tough hide over the animal's hind quarters. The bull bleated in pain and rage and, as Cargy had hoped, it turned. Old man Mead was going to be safe on this first pass of the fight.

At such close quarters, and hampered by the uncertain footing, Cargy didn't have time to get set for another high-jump, but the rooter was too close for a zig-zag approach. Cargy was able to sidestep its charge, but had to let it pass on his left and couldn't get his knife across in time to do it any damage. He flicked a glance at Mead before whirling to face the animal again.

"Don't look at me!" called Mead. "Keep your eyes on the rooter!"

Good advice. In two passes Cargy had done the animal no serious damage. And a rooter, he was numbingly aware, took a lot of killing. This beast could take several slashes from his knife and go on

fighting, but if it got a sharp tusk into any part of him *just once,* the battle would be over.

It was turning to come at him again.

"Hah!" old Mead screeched.

The rooter's eyes shifted to the man in the wagon, and its gaze became fixed for an instant. Then it started behaving very peculiarly. It screamed as if being tortured. It lowered its head and shook its whole body like a wet Earthdog. It was breathing in hard, hurting snorts as it began running in a tight circle with its lowered tusks plowing furrows in the ground. That was nest-digging activity, and Cargy had never seen a male rooter do that before. It was as if the animal were trying to dig a hole to hide in.

The boy took a quick glance at Mead, and saw the old man had his hands on his goggles, like he had taken them off and had just finished putting them back on.

The rooter was now standing motionless, not looking at anything. Then it fell on its side and twitched. A moment later it stopped breathing.

"I . . . I think it's dead," Cargy said, feeling wobbly.

"Yes," said Mead, "it's dead. Can you drag it aside so we can get by?"

"Yeah." Puzzled and dazed, Cargy approached the rooter with caution, seized it by a foreleg and tugged it to the edge of the trail. The animal was thoroughly dead.

"Sit and rest a while, son," said Mead when the boy returned to the wagon and reached for the handle. Cargy dropped to the ground, glad to be off his wobbly legs.

"W-what killed it?" he asked.

"Something it couldn't take," said Mead. "Something was poured into it that it couldn't contain. What happens to a paper bag if you try to carry hot coals in it?"

"The bag burns."

"But if you put the coals in a metal can?"

Annoyed by this simpleton-type questioning, Cargy replied, "The can gets hot."

"But it carries the coals," nodded Mead. "Well, son, the rooter's nervous system is a paper bag in some ways. It isn't built to hold certain things, such as rational intelligence. Pour in something like that, and the rooter's nervous system burns out, and it dies."

Cargy thought this over for a moment, then asked, "What's wrong with your eyes, Mister Mead?"

"You're a sharp lad," Mead approved. "You made the connection quickly. Yes, I killed the rooter by removing my goggles and looking it in the eye. It happens that my eyes are such that an unobstructed meeting of glances with any animal forces the animal to—so to speak—*read* my mind completely. The rooter suddenly had all my knowledge impinging on its nervous system, and no equipment in which to receive that knowledge and store it. So its system overloaded and collapsed."

Cargy nodded his acceptance of the explanation. He had never heard of mind-reading before, but that didn't bother him. A first-comer, and one who wore cross-slitted goggles, might be capable of doing almost any strange thing.

"What if you looked at me?" he asked.

Mead winced at some old memory and said, "You would be a metal can, son. Your nervous system would heat up and warp, but you would hold my knowledge."

The boy sat up straight and his eyes were wide. To know everything a man like Thomis Mead knew! To have an Earth education, probably—maybe even

remember what Earth looked like!

Cargy understood the value of education, and he was ambitious. With Mead's knowledge, why, he could do almost *anything*.

But there was that business about the metal can getting hot. And warping.

"Would it hurt much?" he asked.

"It would leave you insane," Mead replied expressionlessly. After a moment he added slowly, "It happened once, two days after I got the way I am. I didn't know it would happen, of course, and the first man I met . . ." His sentence trailed off, and he muttered "Horrible. Horrible."

Feeling chilled and frightened, Cargy stood up, grasped the wagon handle, and resumed the trek toward Port City. After going a short distance they moved out of the dead bull's territory and onto smoother ground.

Over his shoulder Cargy asked, "Has anybody else got eyes that do like yours?"

"I hope not." Mead's response was weak and tired. "But it could happen. That's why I'm going to town, to warn the Bureau of Xenology. Ought to have told them decades ago."

Xenology? That, Cargy knew, meant stuff about native life. Had old Mead caught a new disease that did things to his eyes?

But why had he waited so long to tell the Xenology experts? That was not a polite question to ask out loud. For *anybody* on Merga, much less a heroic first-comer, to withhold information about a local-life danger was worse than criminal.

Mead tired rapidly as the afternoon wore on. Cargy saw he was on the verge of falling out of the wagon long before dark, so at the next widening he pulled off the trail to camp for the night.

He helped the man out of the wagon and let him rest while he attached his ground-needles to his defense batteries and carefully electroprobed out a small campsite, listening with ear near the ground to the crackings and suckings as mobile roots were drawn back from the area between his probes. When he was satisfied that all dangerous roots were withdrawn, and all small plants within the campsite area were thoroughly stunned or dead, he put down a groundcloth and pitched his tent.

Mead said, "There's a foamsheet in my pack, son."

"Yes, sir." Cargy was pleased, because a foamsheet was almost like a mattress. He opened the man's pack and stared at its contents. "You got stuff to eat, too."

"Take whatever you need, son," the old man mumbled.

"I'll fix us a good supper," Cargy said, delighted with the thought of real canned meat to eat, instead of what he could forage in the way of native seedpods.

He got Mead settled comfortably on his half of the foamsheet in the tent. Then he opened various heatercans of Earthspecie meat and vegetables and spread the feast at the man's side.

They ate—the boy ravenously and the man nibblingly. "You ain't ate enough to go with, Mister Mead."

"All I can do, son," mumbled the man, heaving an exhausted sigh. Almost immediately he fell asleep.

Cargy studied the oldster with concern. An all-day journey still lay between them and the nearest of the farms surrounding Port City—farms where help could be found or summoned. Would the man be able to make it?

The boy wasn't sure. He had seen plenty of sick people, and injured people, and insane people, especially back during

the war when he was just a kid. He could tell pretty well whether a person was too sick or hurt or crazy to live, just by appearance. But extreme old age he didn't know much about, and that was what seemed to be ailing Mead. He recalled hearing two men in town talking and laughing about some man who was so old he died suddenly because about a dozen things went wrong with him at the same time. Maybe old Mead was near that point. As a first-comer, he had to be awfully old, and that was for sure.

Unhappily, Cargy ate the remains of Mead's supper, rigged the camp's defenses, and went to sleep.

II

IF ANYTHING, Mead was worse the next morning. The night's sleep may have rested him some, but it had drained his energy reserve even more. Also, it had stiffened him. He wouldn't try to eat anything solid, and only after using a discouraging amount of patience did Cargy get half a cup of liquidized nourishment into him.

©The only prospect that kept Cargy from feeling sure of defeat was the hope that, getting closer to the city, he might meet a hiker or hunter or somebody else with a radio pretty soon.

He broke camp and drew the wagon up close beside Mead, who was still resting on the foamsheet. "Time to go, Mister Mead. Maybe I can help you get in."

"I'll need help," the man whispered, sitting up slowly. "Get behind me and help me pull up."

Cargy kneeled at the man's back, clamped his arms around his waist, and heaved. With a groan Mead pushed down with his arms and swung his body sideways to sit halfway on the rim of the wagon bed. "Now," he wheezed, "help me slide . . ."

As he shifted his weight on the bed rim, the wagon tilted toward him. He started to fall. Cargy tried to grab him again and hold him up, but the old man slid through his arms before he could get a grip. The old man slumped flat on the foamsheet with a look of intense pain in his eyes.

"I'm awful sorry, Mister Mead," said Cargy.

Mead glanced at him and said, "That's all right, son," but Cargy never heard the words.

His mind was a fearful hell-pit of pain and wild confusion. Identity screamed for existence under the smothering impact of other-identity. Nerves quivered with messages of pleasure and pain utterly foreign and totally unwelcome. Nerve centers were swamped with billions of information bits, with the tight interference patterns that, when in orderly array, compose the stuff of thought-imagery. These were unloaded at random, and necessarily in tremendous haste, wherever there were cells available and approximately *appropriate for their storage.*

Cargy fell, squirming and twitching, in the grass behind his wagon, breathing in irregular gasps, his eyes wide open and staring at nothing.

"Oh, my God!" moaned Mead. He fumbled at his eyes, from which the goggles had been raked by Cargy's arms as the boy tried to slow his fall. "Oh, my God!"

He studied the quivering boy for a few seconds with a stricken expression on his face. A strong, tough lad, well-muscled and broad-shouldered even in early puberty. A promising sharp mind. All ruined now.

"This might help," said Mead, unmindful of whether or not the boy could attend his words. "I don't know,

but I've thought about it. It isn't automatic, like what just happened, but I think it can be made to happen. And this old hulk is finished, anyway.

"Life force can be *taken,* boy. I know that. It happened to me. So it ought to be able to be *given.* Perhaps with enough life force in you, you'll be strong enough to straighten out. Boy, look at me. Boy? *Boy!*"

With what physical strength he had left, Mead hitched himself over to Cargy's side. He slapped the boy's face, and saw the young eyes come to a focus.

"Look at me, boy!" he commanded. Cargy's eyes met his, and something immaterial shifted.

The body that had been Thomis Mead slumped down lifeless. Beside that hulk, Cargy Darrow's body lived. Its twitches gradually faded, its breathing became even, and its eyes closed. It slept . . .

. . . But only briefly. The training of two minds warned it that the bare surface of Merga was no place for safe slumber. Cargy's eyes reopened and he crawled onto the foamsheet. For a moment he looked at Mead's body . . . the old body of part of himself . . . and knew it was dead. But that was all right. He slept some more.

III

WHEN HE WOKE again he knew he was alone, as he hadn't been when he crawled on the foamsheet. And he knew what had happened to restore his sanity. It was all there where he couldn't miss it, on the very top of his now neatly-ordered store of Mead-memories.

There was a life force, a soul, an energy, that survived physical death, the memory stated. This fact had been established as such for centuries, and suspected long before that. Just what became of the released spirit of a man was uncertain, debatable—perhaps because the spirit had a number of choices.

Mead had suspected that he could direct his own life energy into Cargy, where it would double the boy's own power to bring a return of order to his chaotic mind. And Mead had been right.

The reason Mead had been able to do so was that when Mead was a young man in the early days of the Mergan colony, he had met a *psychivore.*

A what? Cargy asked. *A creature that devours the life energy—the psyche—of other creatures,* his new memories supplied.

That encounter with a psychivore was the terrible thing that had happened to Mead when he was a young explorer of Merga. It was the reason for his retreat behind black goggles, and to the solitude of Dappliner Valley, with most of his soul-stuff gone and a doorway behind his eyes left dangerously ajar.

Cargy tried to get the old memory to come up clearly, but he could not. Over the years, Mead had not actually forgotten it, but had buried it nevertheless. What was available to Cargy amounted to a memory of a memory . . . with each step away from the original event vaguer and less complete than the one before. What Cargy found was little more than a verbalism instead of a picture, and the verbalism did not go into great detail.

During the moments while Mead's life force had cohabited Cargy's mind, Mead had attempted to remedy this situation, but he hadn't had time. His spirit could not share the boy's nervous system long, especially after Cargy began regaining his sanity.

He had managed to make his intention plain: that Cargy should go to the Xenologists and give them the knowledge

he had received concerning the psychivores. For that purpose, Mead had meant to put the entire recall of the psychivore encounter at the top of his memory-store.

But perhaps he had buried it too thoroughly to dig it out in the time he had. In any event, the only picture he had put in place for Cargy to examine was simply a map, pinpointing the habitat of the psychivores. It was deep in the interior of Merga's major land mass, far from the coastal regions which man—as was his wont—always tended to colonize first.

Sitting on the foamsheet beside Mead's body, Cargy tried hard, but briefly, to dredge up an image of the psychivore. He drew a blank, but the very effort made him feel weirdly uneasy, and he shivered.

That memory, he decided, was one he could do without. With a vast and valuable new education, most of it readily accessible to him, why fret over one frightening and occluded detail? But there was one worry he could not dismiss that way—the possibility that he had inherited Mead's "evil eye." He meant to check on that as quickly as he could.

Also, he had to get back down to business. The time he had lost trying to rescue Mead had kept him from meeting the spaceship due to land at noon. He was not going to miss the ship coming in day after tomorrow morning.

His Mead-memories told him not to make a fuss over the disposal of the old man's body. He removed the valuables from its pockets and stuffed them in the backpack to examine later. The body he dragged to the lower side of the clearing where he tumbled it out of sight among the sackle trees and bladebriar thickets. The vegetation would make good use of it.

When he was ready to hit the trail, pulling his almost empty wagon, he backtracked to the spot where he had first seen Mead. His bulging bundle of wildfruit was where he had left it, but sliverworms had gotten into the muskers, and the blues were too ripe to last another couple of days. But the other items he recovered in good shape.

He barely beat a family of rooters to the fruit. Minutes after he had reloaded his wagon and resumed his up-trail journey to find fresh muskers and blues, he met the rooters working their way down. The animals stared at him, and silently moved aside to let him pass. He had a charged probe ready, but didn't have to use it.

After he was past them he realized he didn't have Mead's "evil eye." The sense of relief hit him so strongly that he giggled.

IV

TWO MORNINGS LATER he met the spaceship with time to spare.

At his usual spot outside the spaceport gate he got everything set up, arranging his merchandise in attractive assortment-packs, bribing his friends the gate guards with a few of his choicer fruits, and erecting his sign.

While he was out foraging, his sign rode face down in the wagon bed. Now he got it out and started to prop it up when the words on it caught his attention. He blinked as he read them for the very first time:

EKZOTIK WILDFRUT
Frash frum Merga Wildrnes
Exsitin Tasti Trete
Miksed Asortment Pack
Onli 25 Minals
Garanteed
Wont Make Yu Sik

It took him a moment to get over the enchanting discovery that *he could read.*

Then annoyance came. He had paid a drunken crumbum 40 minals to paint the sign, and it was a mess of errors!

He knew how to paint a sign for himself now, but still, he had to admit, this sign sold wildfruit. A Mead-memory suggested that it was appropriate for a ragamuffin peddler, that it drew attention, amusement, and sympathy.

Cargy frowned impatiently. He could think up his own reasons for keeping this sign, without help from the Mead-memories. For instance, the gate guards and other people he knew in town thought the sign was made for him by a ne'er-do-well father, and he didn't want anybody getting the idea that his parent was imaginary. So he would keep the sign . . . and keep those Mead-memories in their place and not let them start running his life.

"Comin' down," a guard announced boredly.

Cargy tilted his head to look for the descending ship. He found it when a gleam of sunlight caught a polished surface. It was a speck in the sky that seemed to move only slightly as the minutes passed.

"Where's this one from?" he asked.

"Vega Nine."

"That's close to Earth," Cargy said, since that was an appropriate remark to come from him. He now knew that Vega Nine was not close to Earth at all. It was merely twice as close as Merga. Cargy watched the incoming ship with an awe he hadn't felt before, because he was beginning to grasp the meaning of interstellar distances.

The spaceship was now swelling visibly. Cargy thought about the giant closrem drivers, in the forward third of that quarter-mile-long cylinder, that were spinning and roaring loudly enough to shatter eardrums—or even skulls—except that they were behind yards-thick layers of refrigerated sound insulation.

So well was that mighty noise muffled that the ship floated down without a sound that Cargy could hear. But there was a grinding screech as its big tripads touched down on the platicrete apron, and rock and metal gave under the strain of the ship's tremendous weight.

If he could only figure out some way to be aboard that ship when it lifted off again!

That was something he had never wanted before. Merga was his world, and he liked it. But at this very moment, and for as long as he remained on Merga, he was going to be agitated by a powerful temptation to do something very foolish.

That was to follow Mead's final wish and go tell the Xenologists about the psychivores.

Mead oughtn't to have put that in with his memories, he thought plaintively. The old man had been isolated for years! He didn't know what was going on. He had hardly been aware of the war that Cargy and thousands of other children had suffered through with varying degrees of anguish that had left them indelibly marked. So Mead didn't know Merga was full of kids who were mental cases! Cargy knew, because he had been in the Refugee Rescue Home with several hundred, and he still encountered no few of them in the streets and alleys of Port City.

Some of them were belligerent (but soon learned not to start anything with *him!*) but most of them were just cracked. They didn't know what was real and what wasn't, and Cargy had listened to a lot of fantastic stuff from these kids, told in perfect seriousness. Most of the time he pretended to believe what they said, because it made them feel better.

Anyway, these kids provided a well-defined and well-populated category into which the Xenologists could plop him if he came in with a wild tale about a psychivore. And when the Xenologists learned there were no parents or guardians to come take him off their hands . . . well, Cargy could guess what would happen then. Well-meaning adults would take charge of his life for him.

That was why the temptation had to be resisted. But resisting was hard, because he had to fight more than Mead's final wish. He was bucking his early training as well.

Humanity on an alien planet had to stay alert to dangers posed by local lifeforms. Nobody on Merga was allowed to forget the absolute necessity of reporting anything unusual observed in the behavior of the local flora and fauna. And Cargy, a farmer's son, had as his earliest memories the reports he made to his father after he had been out playing in the fields of cultivated Earthplants. He knew beyond question that it was *wrong* to withhold information on the activities of local lifeforms.

And the psychivores were creatures nobody else knew *existed,* and the fate of Mead, and that man he had evil-eyed, proved the psychivores to be the gravest peril man had found on any planet yet!

Why, if one came into Port City right now, Cargy thought with a shiver, in no time at all everybody in town could be evil-eyeing like Mead or gone crazy like that other guy!

He *had* to stop thinking about it!

Then the passengers from the spaceship began coming through the gate, and they amply occupied his attention. Now he knew why so many of them laughed when they read his sign, and he noticed that most of the laughers stopped to buy. Sales went briskly for a while.

The last to pass through the gate were eight of the handsomest, most flamboyantly garbed people Cargy had ever seen. They passed his stand without buying.

"Who was that bunch?" he asked a guard.

"Some people bringin' in a show."

"A show?"

"Yeah. Live entertainment. You know what that is, Cargy?"

"I guess so. It's stuff like on TV tape, except real people do it right where you're at."

The guard chuckled. "You got it. Them folks're goin' to do a show at Civic Hall the next four days."

Cargy gazed speculatively at the show people as they loaded into ground-taxis and sped away. "I guess they'll go on to another planet right after that," he remarked.

"Yeah," said the guard.

Cargy began packing his stuff. He handed the guard two packs of his unsold fruit. "Here's for you and Bill," he said.

"You got a lot left over this time, ain't you?" the guard sympathized. "Let us pay you."

"Naw. You guys're friends, and I got money left from last time yet." Cargy said his goodbyes and moved away, drawing his wagon around the spaceport perimeter and into the Old Town section of the city.

A half hour brought him to Mrs. Tragg's Room and Board, an old brick dwelling showing numerous indications of decay. He pulled his wagon around back and rapped on the kitchen door.

Mrs. Tragg appeared, wiping a wisp of stringly grey hair out of her big dried-pudding face. "I expected you day before yesterday, boy," she snapped accusatively. "Where was you?"

"I got slowed down," Cargy replied meekly.

"Somethin' wrong with your stumbum daddy?" she prodded.

Cargy lowered his eyes and didn't speak.

"Well," she huffed, "you gotta use that room *regular* if you expect to keep it. It's *costin'* me, keepin' a place for you that you don't use more'n two nights in a week! And on top of that, here you come strayin' to my door two days late! You can't do that and expect anything from me!"

"No'm," agreed Cargy. He had expected this scene, but found that it didn't shake him up as it had when it happened before. His Mead-memories let him understand that Mrs. Tragg was trying to ease her own insecurity by making him feel insecure.

"Well, lucky for you, nobody got your room this time," she finally admitted. "Here's your key. I reckon you want me to take your leftover fruit on your rent like always?"

"Yes'm, and I'll pay you for four days this time. I'm going to stay that long and look for a town job."

"Has somethin' happened to your daddy?" she demanded.

"No ma'am. He just said I might make more money in town, now that I'm getting some size on me."

"Fine daddy!" she growled.

After settling with Mrs. Tragg, Cargy pulled his wagon into the dim little basement room that was his in-town home. With the door locked behind him, he sat on the edge of his cot and pulled Mead's wallet from inside his jacket.

He had looked at the money in it before, and his Mead-memories had confirmed what his eyes had seen. But he wanted to count it a bill at a time.

He fingered lovingly through the sheaf of currency. Yes, four of them really were hundred-kon bills. Also, there were nine twenties, and a ten, and two ones. Combined with his own earnings, this gave him a total of K602.85!

But . . . tremendous as this sum would have seemed a week earlier, he knew this was a pitiably small amount of wealth compared to his need. A single fare to Princon IV—Merga's nearest populated neighbor—was over K400. He was, he decided bleakly, far from rich enough to be an interstellar traveler. Even if spaceships took unaccompanied, undocumented kids aboard, which they didn't.

So what he really needed instead of a lot more cash was an adult ally to take him away from Merga. This thought brought him back to the troupe of show people who had just arrived, and would be moving on in a very few days. His Mead-memories defined show people as a wild, unpredictable breed. Which meant that someone in the troupe might be just the adult he needed.

V

WHEN HE SHOWED UP backstage at Civic Hall, Cargy looked like a snappy city lad. He had spent money as never before, on a haircut and new clothes, and considered it a wise investment. He hunted down the troupe's manager, a man named Petron.

"What do you want, kid?" Petron asked brusquely.

"My name is Tommy Larkan," said Cargy, "and I want to know if your bunch needs an errand boy. If you do, I know where the best coffee in town is, and the best and cheapest sandwiches, and a lot of things like that."

"Yeah?" Petron stared speculatively at him. "I suppose you're too young to know

where the action is, though. If there *is* any action in this burg!"

"I know where there's a card game, and where the women hang around."

"Don't try to string me, kid," Petron growled.

"No stringin'," Cargy vowed.

"Well . . . you're on. Two kons a day, and any tips you can get."

That started Cargy on four fascinating and exciting days that built to a big disappointment. He had no trouble making friends with all the players, but these experienced troupers knew the hazards of emotional entanglements with locals. They were willing enough to like Cargy, but not one was about to *love* him . . . certainly not to the extent of going along with any kind of adoption scheme.

The defeat was upsetting. For years Cargy had worked hard to keep his freedom, and now when he was perfectly willing to place himself in the hands of an adult, nobody who would do seemed to want him!

Also, he had been misguided by his Mead-memories in expecting a different reaction from the show people. He had presumed that his little-boy charm, plus his adult understanding of how to use it, was an unbeatable combination. But old Mead hadn't really known show people; he only knew their reputation. He hadn't suspected they kept their emotions so well-guarded.

The days passed, the final performance was given, and the troupe began packing. Cargy moped about backstage, feeling depressed, but nobody seemed to need his help at the moment. He climbed onto a high stack of dusty scenery and lay down to brood.

In a few minutes he heard one of the women, passing below him, call out, "Pete, have you seen Tommy, the errand kid?"

"Not for a while," Petron replied. "Maybe he went home after I paid him off."

"Oh. I wanted to slip him a five. He's such a sweet little guy."

"Keep your money," Petron advised sourly. "We're not taking enough kons out of here to upset Merga's balance-of-payments as it is!"

Cargy thought of climbing down to receive the five, but decided it would be best to wait a few minutes.

"Something else, Pete," he heard the woman say. "I simply must work on my costumes during the flight to Princon. Can't I have my trunk in my stateroom?"

"Afraid not, Vonica. It's regulations. All company trunks have to go in the baggage compartment. But I'll arrange to have yours stored up front where you can get to it."

"That's good enough. Thanks, Pete."

The voices moved away, and after some cogitation Cargy grinned. Vonica's costume trunk was pretty big—with room enough to hold her stuff plus a boy, an oxygen flask, and a couple of sandwiches. And on board the ship, when she opened the trunk and found him . . . well, Vonica did seem to like him more than the others, and could be talked into keeping quiet, he figured.

Once aboard the ship and footloose, he thought he could manage okay. Old Mead knew spaceships well.

In any event, he had to do something to get off this planet, because that temptation wasn't easing off the least bit. Vonica's trunk offered the best opportunity open to him.

VI

HE WAS A reasonably comfortable stowaway. He had been bounced around only a little when the trunk was loaded on a van at the Civic Hall stage entrance, and again when it was lifted into the Princon-bound spaceship.

The sounds of loading died out, and after a tiresome wait of perhaps two hours Cargy heard the soft hum of the closrem drivers beginning to turn. The liftoff was so smooth that he didn't know exactly when it came. It made him feel good to know he was on his way.

There was the sound of someone moving about among the luggage, making a tally of some sort, judging by the rustle of papers. Cargy dozed.

The sudden bark of a loudspeaker snapped him alert:

"Orbital hold! Orbital hold! Notice to passengers and crew . . . We are holding in orbit around Merga for an unauthorized person check! Please remain where you are unless requested otherwise by a ship's officer."

"What the hell?" grunted the tally-taker. Cargy was wondering the same thing. There was no procedure he (or Mead) knew of that would have revealed his presence on board.

The loudspeaker clicked twice and spoke again: *"Passenger Luggage, Deck C! Respond, please!"*

The tally-taker replied: "Luggage, Deck C, Mathurt here."

"Who's there with you, Mathurt?"

"Nobody, sir."

"Very well. Carry on, Mathurt."

If Mathurt continued his work, he did so in complete silence. A minute passed.

Then a door clanged open and the compartment was filled with loud voices. "Stand back, Mathurt, there's a stowaway in here! Getting a reading, Mike?"

"Yes, sir! This trunk in front." The lid over Cargy's head rattled briefly. "It's locked, sir. The tag on it reads 'Property of Petron Productions,' and 'Vonica' is painted on the lid."

"Get Sarl Petron down here! And this Vonica, too! *You in the trunk!*"

Cargy knew the jig was up. "Yes, sir," he replied.

"A damn' kid!" the commanding voice grated. "What are you doing in there?"

That, Cargy thought, was a silly question. "Hitching a ride to Princon," he said.

"You got enough air?"

"Yes, sir."

"Relax, men. We can wait for Petron to come unlock it."

Cargy called out, "Mister Officer?"

"Yeah?"

"How'd you know I was here?"

"Our life-detection scanner showed one point too many," the man growled. "What did you think? Or didn't you know about scanners? We've had them for forty years!"

Cargy hadn't known. Mead knew of life-detectors used in hospitals and such places, but the old man had been out of touch for too long. Cargy sighed. "Well, why didn't you detect me before we took off?" he asked.

"We can't scan in the middle of a city. The population overloads the detectors."

"We can't scan in the middle of a city. The population overloads the detectors."

"Oh." Cargy's self-confidence was shaken. This was the second time the combination of his youthful vitality and Mead's mature but dated knowledge had let him down.

He heard Petron's voice raised in protest and a peevish "What's this all

about?" from Vonica. The lock of the trunk clicked and the lid was raised. Big arms plunged into Vonica's costumes and hauled Cargy out. He stood blinking in the light.

"I never saw the kid before!" Petron announced flatly. "Or . . . wait a minute. He could be the boy who ran errands for us. I believe he is. Tommy something-or-other."

"That's right," chimed in Vonica. "His name is Tommy Larkan."

"Okay," snapped the officer. "We can't hang in orbit all day! The Mergan Port Security men can get the truth out of this kid, and they will! You men, take the boy to Number Seven hatch. An autopod is being programmed to drop him back to Port City."

Cargy was hustled away. As he went, Petron and Vonica were loudly denying any complicity in the stowaway scheme. Meanwhile, Cargy's mind was busy digging out Mead's knowledge of autopods. The information was, he noted hopefully, pretty extensive. In his day, Mead had been an expert with all types of small craft, both space and atmospheric. If his data just wasn't a half-century out of date . . . !

The autopod was basically a miniature clopter, hulled and insulated for use in space, and propelled by a small set of closrem drivers that, in a planetary gravitational field, were somewhat overburdened by the pod's mass. It was a handy little vehicle for outer hull inspection and repair in free fall, and for dumping detected stowaways back to their POEs. Once its orbital velocity was nullified, there was no way it could go but down. Its drivers could power it for a safe landing, but not to go sailing away to some other planet. By using an autopod to return a stowaway, a spaceship saved the time, expense, and red tape of an extra landing and liftoff.

Cargy was safety-strapped into the pod's one seat and the transparent hatch-dome lowered over him. A tinny-voiced communicator in the pod said pod release would be in forty-five seconds. In another voice it answered itself: *"Inner lock sealed, now pumping . . . Pumping complete. Outer lock opening."*

Cargy gaped and gasped as the open lock revealed a rectangle of stars and the bright horizon-bands of Merga. It was more of a sight than his Mead-memories had led him to expect.

Then suddenly the pod's closrems came to life, and he was through the lock and dropping away from the big ship. Voices on the communicator told him the ship was once more on its way to Princon.

With the spaceship no longer to be reckoned with, Cargy went into action.

There were no manual controls within his reach, these components having been removed when the pod was being readied for this descent. There was not even an emergency override of the pod's flight computer.

There was, however, the mounting panel from which the manuals had been removed, and it was perforated by a dozen plug holes. Ordinarily, these holes would offer no possibilities to a pod passenger. But Cargy spent most of his time in the Mergan wilderness, and he was never without his defense batteries, worn like curving plates along his belt.

Being in plain sight as they were, and also being so standard an item of apparel on Merga, the batteries hadn't attracted a glance, much less a thought, from the spaceship's officers and crew.

Now Cargy unsnapped his safety harness and got busy. Setting his batteries on parallel for low voltage, he

rammed his electroprobes into a couple of plug holes and listened with satisfaction as the closrems' roar took on a lower pitch. He was feeding a counter-current into the driver power supply. This would cause the pod to lose orbital velocity more slowly and carry him past Port City. He could have plugged in the other way and dropped out of orbit more swiftly, but that would have plunked him in the ocean instead of on land.

A good two minutes passed before the communicator yapped: *"Scramble rescue squad! Autopod is overshooting! Scramble rescue squad! . . . Damnit, rescue squad! Respond!"* Cargy recognized the voice as that of a Port City Control Tower supervisor.

"Uh, this is Horax. The others are at supper."

"What the hell do you mean, at supper? They eat in the squad room!"

"Well, you see, tower, there ain't never much to do, and there's this cafe just across the road, so—"

"Good God! Heads are going to roll over this! I mean that! Get to that cafe and rout them out on the double!"

"Uh, okay."

"Kid in the autopod . . . Tommy Larkan . . . Speak up, boy."

As he recognized the tower man's voice, and figured the man might recognize his own as well, Cargy kept quiet. The rescue squad's goofing off was going to give him at least five minutes he hadn't counted on. Which opened a new possibility. Instead of letting the pod land a few miles outside of Port City and running like hell, why not go a hundred miles or so inland, land there, and try to knock out the tracer-bleep circuit before the rescue clopter could reach the scene? That way, he could keep the pod for his own use—and useful it would be indeed once he had stripped it of its overweight hull and rigged some manual controls!

He grinned at the frantic anger of the tower man's exclamations as the pod zipped over Port City at an altitude of nearly fifteen miles. *"No, he won't overshoot the entire continent,"* he heard him tell somebody. *"He's losing altitude too fast for that!"*

Soon thereafter Cargy realized he was losing altitude too fast, period. At this rate he would smash the pod and himself flat when he landed. Hastily, he yanked his electroprobes out of the plug holes, switched them about, and reinserted them. The pitch of the closrems rose and Cargy felt the increased tug of their upward and slightly rearward acceleration.

But he was already beyond Dappliner Valley and still going fast. He would come down slowly enough for a safe landing, but a good two thousand miles inland!

He thought of psychivores, and his stomach tried to turn upside down. This wasn't what he'd had in mind at all!

VII

THE SMALL DEGREE of control his electroprobes gave him permitted him to put the pod down in a small clearing instead of in the treetops. But his control wasn't enough to stop him short of—or carry him past—the area which his mental map marked as psychivore country.

In trying to put as much distance as he could between himself and these spooky monstrosities, he had landed himself precisely in their midst.

He wanted to cringe down out of sight in the pod the instant it bounced to a halt, but he knew he couldn't do that. The tracer-bleep was doubtless on the job, guiding the rescue clopter toward him. He couldn't have those guys

following him down here, where a casual glance around could cost them most of their souls and leave them with the evil-eye affliction.

He took a deep breath, threw back the dome cover, and scrambled to the ground, digging in his pockets for a thin ten-minal coin to use for a screwdriver. He undogged the hull patch that protected the antenna assembly and let it fall to the ground. He peered in at the connectors, radiants, and safety switches for an instant, and found them as Mead remembered. With shaking hands he unscrewed the stops on two switches, flicked them into OFF position, and then climbed hurriedly back into the pod and reclosed the dome.

He realized that, in sparing the rescue squad from the perils of landing here, he had cut off any hope for help for himself. And the reasons why he had gotten himself in this predicament now seemed very trivial compared to his need to be elsewhere.

With mounting distress he considered what he had just done. He had landed, gotten out, killed the tracer-bleep, gotten back in, and was now staring fixedly at the mount panel. Not *once* had he dared to raise his head and glance around!

He had *never* had to act like that before. He, Cargy Darrow, who took fruit away from the dangerous but easily-killed jokone bushes without using electricity, and who stunned the deadly swerlemin tree only a limb at a time!

But he knew how Mead had been: he had the memories of all those nothing-years to remind him he had rather be dead—or even in a rescue home for life—than to be like that.

So, even though he was thirsty and getting hungry, he did not raise his eyes and run the risk of meeting the soul-devouring glance of a waiting psychivore. Finally he closed them, reclined his seat, and fell into a fretful sleep.

It was dark outside when he woke, and the question came to his mind immediately: *Can a psychivore feed in the dark?*

It didn't seem likely, judging from Mead's experience. There had to be sight to establish that eye-to-eye rapport—not that there was anything special or magic about the photons that made this contact possible, but the caught glance seemed to be necessary first step, a preliminary that set up whatever kind of bridge it took for soul-stuff to pass over.

Or did the psychivores have vision that extended into the infrared, so they could feed at night?

Cargy wished with chagrin that his Mead-memories had never heard of infrared. Because he *had* to get out of the pod and trim it down to something flyable, and he didn't want to think about that infrared business while he did so.

He raised the dome cover and slid to the ground, where he paused and listened attentively to the night-sounds. He heard no noise he couldn't identify as normal. With a shaky sigh, he went to work.

The difficulty of his task soon took his mind off the psychivores and he felt better. Space shielding on a pod was supposed to be removable in emergencies, but it was hardly ever done, so naturally the manufacturers didn't bother to make it easy. With the proper tools he could have stripped the vehicle quickly. His Mead-memories knew just how to do it. But a coin was a poor excuse for a power-driven lock-tip screw driver, and the cutting-torch mode into which his electroprobes could be snapped was never intended for slicing the tough, heavy bolts that held the shielding in place.

But little by little, the shielding came

off and dropped to the ground with hearteningly weighty thuds.

The glare of his cutting torch kept Cargy from noticing the growing light as dawn arrived. He had finished the stripping job and was ready to run makeshift manual control lines into the pod's cabin when a sound froze him. It came from behind him, and not many feet away.

It was a sound firmly ingrained in his Mead-memories—the peculiar barking grunt of a *psychivore!*

With it came a flood of recall. It was an ample key to Mead's occluded memory of his long-ago encounter with such a creature. Cargy now knew what he would see if he turned around . . .

It was more like a limbless trunk of a young tree than a giant snake, he decided. The snake part was at the bottom, and was really the mobile taproot which the creature had pulled out of the soil when it reached the stage of going one better on the rest of Merga's active plant forms, and became locomotive. The old taproot was its one "foot", and was used much as an Earthsnake used its whole body, to wiggle along.

But most of the psychivore's length stood erect, very like a sturdy treetrunk some eight feet tall. It had a topheavy look, as it terminated in a globular head roughly the size of a man's, but a head that had no mouth or snout. In a line down the center of its "face" was a single green eye, plus one ear orifice and one nostril orifice.

With its total lack of bifurcation, it probably lacked the hemispheric brain division found in the higher animals of all planets, but the psychivore was obviously not an animal, anyway.

After a motionless second, Cargy continued with his work, never letting his eyes stray from what he was doing. After all, Mead had thought a psychivore's eye was its only weapon, so if he didn't look at that eye . . .

Two overlapping barks stiffened him with the realization that more than one of the monsters were present. He tried to work faster with hands that felt numb and clumsy.

Frantically, he scanned his newly-revealed Mead-memories for some clue that would tell him how to defend himself. Surely in all those years Mead had thought of *something . . . !*

But he hadn't. Instead, Cargy found a very convincing theory that, in order to become locomotive, a plant *had* to become a psychivore as well, because a motile plant was necessarily wasteful of life force. So a plant that actually "walked" would have to feed on life force of other creatures, and animals would have the most plentiful supply.

In fact, the psychivore Mead had encountered had been the master of a herd of bovine-like animals that it apparently "milked" of life force. It was from landing his flyer to investigate this herd that Mead had run into the psychivore in the first place, and . . .

Cargy thrust the useless memories aside, because the barks were coming closer. They sounded persistent, as if they were demanding that he look up. They were so near that he could hear their wriggling feet swish the grass.

Then he was bumped from behind, as if he had backed into a small treetrunk.

Grimacing with alarm, he poked blindly behind him with his electroprobes and made contact. There came a whooshing moan and a retreating rustle in the grass. An instant later he heard the other psychivores (there seemed to be three altogether) also drawing back. He

stopped working to listen intently. Yes, the no longer barking monsters were giving up their attack and leaving!

Cargy grinned, his confidence suddenly restored. Those things had never run into an animal like *him* before! His hands were swift and sure as he finished rigging his makeshift controls.

VIII

BUT HE DIDN'T DARE forage for food and water. Instead, he got the pod in the air as quick as he could and began flying slowly toward Port City while getting the feel of the controls.

He was not too worried about being spotted by the rescue squad. Their search would be far from psychivore territory, in the area where his flightpath over Port City would have carried him. So he felt safe in raising the pod to an altitude of three miles to take a look around. His Mead-memories picked out a few landmarks which enabled him to get his bearings more accurately.

Just as he started easing down toward a more comfortable altitude he caught a glimpse of a *structured* shape a few miles off his course to the south. A square shape, like a laid-out farm field. Curious, he angled the pod in its direction and continued to decrease altitude.

When he flew over it, there was no room for doubt in his mind. Below him, and right at the edge of what his Mead-memories identified as psychivore country, was a farm!

It wasn't anything fancy, but for any man to build the roughest sort of homestead in such an isolated and perilous place meant he had to be quite a guy in Cargy's way of thinking.

Circling at about one thousand feet, the boy studied the layout. There was only one building he could see, and that was a large, low shedlike structure near the center of the field. He could see large animals of some kind, looking like black blobs from above, moving out of the structure to wander about rather aimlessly, like cattle starting a day's grazing.

But what struck him as more interesting and more understandable at first glance was a *log fence* that enclosed the entire field, which must have been close to twenty acres in size, without a gate or any other kind of break. That fence, he realized, would not only keep domesticated animals in; it would keep psychivores out!

A psychivore could not climb a fence, nor jump over one. Maybe it could crawl under one that left crawling space at the bottom, but this fence did not.

Suddenly it struck Cargy how much work had to go into building such a fence, and keeping it maintained. A log in the Mergan wilds didn't hold together for very many years, even when it was well dried and off the ground. And that big shed probably was a continual repair problem, too, with its roof made out of some kind of thatching.

Whoever ran this farm had to be a hard worker.

Cargy brought the pod down in the field across a small stream from the shed and grazing animals. He climbed out and looked around. Nobody was in sight.

"Hello!" he shouted.

He listened to the silence for a moment, then ran down to the creek, dropped to his knees and drank deeply. With a sigh of pleasure he stood up and wiped his mouth while studying the cattle.

He recognized them. They were the same species of animal Mead had seen in the psychivore's herd!

He couldn't guess what use they would be to a farmer. Humans had yet to find a Mergan animal that was good to eat.

Reminded of food, he turned his attention to the grove of trees a short way down the stream and well inside the fence. After yelling some more and still getting no answer, he walked to the grove and began looking for fruit or seedpods, preferably the latter since they had more protein. His luck was good. He had not gone far when, carefully skirting an excitable benderbud clump, he came onto a fragbark missilenut that was loaded.

He studied his terrain for a few seconds and picked out a place under the tree where the ground was hard and free of brush. Standing well clear of the chosen spot, he picked up a fallen branch and took a precise poke with it at the missilenut limb which hung directly over the spot. At his touch, the limb *twanged* with a sudden release of vibrational energy, and a bombardment of nuts zinged to the ground. The whole tree quivered alertly for a few seconds, but Cargy did nothing else to stir it up, so it became quiescent.

Eagerly the boy gathered the nuts, not many of which had hit the ground with enough force to bury themselves completely out of sight. With mouth and pockets full, he had started out of the grove when his eye caught something that looked wrong. He stopped.

Evidently it was something the farmer had done. An uprooted sapling of some kind, with a couple of roots growing ridiculously high on the trunk, had been left leaning against a dead sackle tree. He walked closer. Why, he wondered, would a farmer bother to pull up a tree, or leave it leaning there?

"Don't knowledge me!"

The boy jumped back in alarm. The voice had come from the sapling!

"Please don't," it begged. *"Please go away."*

The sound was muffled, and like a whispered bass. The enunciation was clear, but was not supported by enough vibrations per second to give the voice much body.

A talking sapling was almost as spooky to think about as a psychivore, but after the first startled instant Cargy wasn't about to leave. Anything that pleaded with him to go away couldn't be much threat.

"I won't hurt you," he said. "Looks like the farmer has given you all the trouble you can use."

"He wasn't a farmer," the sapling replied. "He was an explorer named Mead."

This made no sense at all!

"Who—what—who are you?" Cargy demanded.

"A harmless herder, self-exiled from my kind," came the sad soft rumble, "to avoid afflicting them with madness worse than my own."

Cargy began to see the light, he thought. "Did Mead 'knowledge' you? Is that what's wrong?"

"Yes."

"But how? He did it to me, too, but you've got to have eyes for that to happen. And you haven't."

"But I have. One eye, at any rate. You don't see it because I'm hiding my head in this hollow tree trunk."

Cargy gulped. "You're the . . . *psychivore!*"

"The what? Oh. Yes. I could be so classified, if one is concerned about the manner of my nourishment. Will you please promise not to knowledge me?"

"H-hold on, while I figure this out," Cargy replied.

He hadn't paid much attention to that part of Mead's memory of the psychivore before, but obviously the creature had not come away from the encounter unscathed. Cargy recalled now that Mead had watched with amused, little-souled indifference as the creature went into a fit after it had nourished on him. Instead of walking away, it had dragged itself, root-foot first, out of the man's sight.

As part of its meal off Mead's soul, it had obviously gotten the total, indigestible sum of his knowledge as well! It wouldn't be quick to dine on another human!

"How did you get those upper roots, and a voice?" Cargy asked.

"From Mead's knowledge. The arms allowed me to construct a fence, to protect others of my kind from contact with me. The voice I developed in case I met another human, to beg him not to knowledge me again."

"You just wanted arms and a voice and got them?"

"Not at all! Much time and energy was required. Mead's knowledge defined the necessary structures."

"And you built the barn for your cows?"

"Yes. I used such as I could of the knowledge forced upon me."

"Okay," said Gargy. "I've got it straight now. I won't knowledge you if you don't try to nourish on me. If you do, you get knowledged automatically. Understand?"

"Yes." The psychivore wriggled its foot back from the dead tree and freed its head from the hole. It turned and gazed solemnly at the boy. He gazed back, and nothing happened.

The boy grinned. "We don't look much alike, but we've got a lot of stuff that's the same in our heads."

The two of them strolled out of the grove and toward the shed, chatting of such things as the diverse habits of Mergan vegetation and of Mead's life subsequent to his meeting with the psychivore. After a little mental searching, Cargy came up with the name Barkis for his new friend, and the psychivore (after consulting the same memories as Cargy's) agreed that it would be satisfactory.

It was particularly interested in Mead's theories about itself, and Cargy described these in considerable detail. Soul-stuff, Mead had thought, drifted like an insubstantial fog from Merga's motile plants, and was doubtless absorbed in great quantities by the grass-munching herd animals of the psychivores. After an animal had been "milked" its nature was such that it soon recaptured its normal supply.

Barkis agreed that Mead's theories fitted with what the psychivores knew of themselves and their animals. In the shed, where comatose herd animals were sheltered until they recovered from a "milking", Cargy watched Barkis take nourishment. Then they wandered back outside.

"Something I don't understand," complained the boy. "Your folks talk mostly by exchanging bits of soul, you say, and when you do, one of you learns everything the other knows that he didn't already know. What's already known to both sort of cancels out in the exchange. You were used to getting knowledge the way you got it from Mead, so what bothered you about that was getting too much strange knowledge at once, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Okay. What I want to know is, why do you think the other psychivores would go

crazy if you communicated with them? *You* didn't go crazy, or at least not for long."

"But I *did,* and I'm still thoroughly insane," Barkis replied.

"You don't seem like it to me," Cargy said uneasily.

"But I am. My willingness to grow arms, and to construct artifacts, would be obvious evidence of insanity to my kind. And they would know, as I did not at the time, that the insanity is permanent. At the beginning I was sustained only by the hope that the aberrative effects would gradually fade away. One of my kind, communicating with me now, would receive at once the shock of a new-data overload plus the realization that the aberrative effects of it were permanent. It would be too much to take at one time."

Cargy nodded slowly. "But somebody," he said, "will have to communicate with them."

"Yes," agreed Barkis, "in the long run contact with humanity is unavoidable. But I am obviously unfit for the task."

"Me neither," said Cargy. "That ain't my line."

"Actually, it is the task of your Xenologists. I'm afraid you must inform them of us, Cargy."

"I told you why I can't do that," the boy growled.

After a silence, Barkis suggested, "Could you not inform them by writing?"

"They wouldn't believe a letter from me, no more than they'd believe me in person."

"But," said Barkis, "they would believe one from Mead. And only you know Mead is dead."

Cargy blinked. Then he grinned.

"Hey, that'll work!" he exclaimed. "My writing looks pretty much like his did, and I can leave it where his supply man will find it. Hey, I better start to Dappliner Valley right now, to get to work on it!"

Barkis approved, and slithered along with the boy to the autopod. "When the Xenologists show up, don't tell them anything about me, Barkis," the boy urged in parting.

"I will keep your secret, but I hope you will return soon."

"I will, in a few years when I grow up. I have to watch my step till then."

And also, Cargy mused as he took the pod into the air, he was going to be too busy for much visiting for a while. He had to get that letter chore done, and then back to business, which he had been neglecting for a *whole week* already. And now that he had the pod for transportation in the wilds, he was going to be in a position to expand like mad!

Why, he could even take on a couple of Port City's snooty gourmet restaurants as steady customers! They ought to be glad to pay plenty to offer fresh wildfruit on their menus—probably priced at five times what they paid him for it!

Some guys, he mused annoyedly, will do most anything to make a buck!

—Howard L. Myers

NOW ON SALE

—In the May AMAZING STORIES: The stunning conclusion of Ted White's "By Furies Possessed!" Plus: "The Balance" by Terry Carr, "Blood of Tyrants" by Ben Bova, "A Skip In Time" by Robert E. Toomey, Jr., "Saturday's Child" by Bill Warren and "Nobody Lives on Burton St." by Greg Benford

THE TIME
by DAVID MASON

David Mason is the author of the recently published novel, Kavin's World. *Here he turns to a quietly surreal vignette about a man who waits, without knowing for what it is he waits . . .*

THE APARTMENT was in a curious condition.

It was a small two-and-a-half, in one of those clean, characterless buildings on a treelined street out at the far end of one of the subway lines. For young marrieds and bachelors with reasonably good jobs. A place to live, for awhile, that isn't a slum.

Quentin must have bought the furniture in a complete set from a department store, couch, chairs, rug, pictures and all. It had that look; besides, that was the sort of thing Quentin would have done. There was a small bookcase, with some books from a club in it, and a row of issues of a printing production magazine. That was what Quentin had done for a living, until last month . . . he'd been a printing production man.

The furniture was in a curious condition, Kirby noticed at once. With the blinds closed, in the darkened apartment, Kirby thought everything looked unnaturally neat for a bachelor's place. No papers scattered around, no empty glasses or rumpled cushions . . . but dust, in a thin, general film, and the single floor lamp was dusty enough to dim its light too. Unmarked dust, as if the place were unoccupied . . . but there sat Quentin, smiling quietly. Kirby blinked at him, trying to dispel the curious impression that Quentin too was a little . . . filmed over with dust?

"Hello, Kirby."

"Quentin . . . ah. Look, are you all right?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"Well . . . I mean. Anne's worried about you. Asked me to . . . well, look in. You know."

Quentin, with the same smile, calm, distant, a little sleepy: "I'm sorry. I mean, I really was . . . very sorry, about Anne."

Kirby, looking at Quentin, studying him: "You were sorry?

"Oh, I know. I . . . I made it a little abrupt. But . . . really, Kirby. We've all known each other such a long time. No need to be . . . diplomatic about everything. I just stopped being interested. I wasn't interested in getting married. Not to Anne or anybody. You wouldn't want to keep someone on a . . . well, a leash, would you?"

Kirby nodded, glancing around. "Still. Anne is fond of you, even so. Quentin, there must be something wrong. You understand . . . all this. You broke off with Anne, as if . . . I don't know, as if you were having a phone turned off. And you did, didn't you? Have your phone turned off?"

"I didn't need it." Quentin said. "I don't have anything to talk to anybody

about." He chuckled.

"Your job, then. You didn't even quit. You just stopped going to work. Quentin, you'll have to admit it's strange. Look, have you talked to . . . to a doctor?"

"Oh, yes." Quentin said. "I felt a little odd. Had a checkup. Nothing wrong."

Kirby shook his head. "Oh, look. This is silly. You don't seem to be . . ."

"Crazy?" Quentin suggested, still smiling.

"Mentally disturbed. I mean . . . crazy isn't . . . look, Quentin, am I getting through to you? Do you see what I mean?"

Quentin smiled even more broadly, contentedly.

"Of course, and I think it's really good of you. Not many people nowadays would go to any trouble to find out if a friend was cracking up." He chuckled again, an odd, ghostly sound. "But I'm not, you know. Look, if I try to explain . . . just a little . . . will you just stop worrying? And tell Anne not to worry, either?"

Kirby shrugged. "If you tell us to stop worrying, I guess we'd have to try."

"All right. I broke off an engagement with a nice girl who was probably reasonably fond of me. I stopped working at a fairly decent job with a reasonably good future. I've come back here, and I sat down, and I've been here, more or less all the time, ever since. I go out to eat, and I sleep, and I wash myself, and the rest of the time, I'm sitting here. I'm waiting."

"Waiting." Kirby said, in a controlled voice. "What for?"

"I don't know."

"You're waiting . . . and you don't know what for. Quentin . . ."

"I'm fairly sure that I am *not* . . . mentally disturbed." Quentin said. "I'm perfectly relaxed. I don't need that job I had; I have money on the bank."

"But . . . I don't understand." Kirby said helplessly. "You just drop out? I mean, are you going to be some sort of hippy, or what? Is this some sort of yogi stuff? Listen, Quentin, I'm not exactly stupid. I read books, I keep up with things. There's a lot of this philosophy stuff, this Oriental religion thing . . . it's going around, I know. I saw some kind of yogi on television, the other day . . . is that what you mean?"

"No." Quentin shook his head. "You see, I told you I couldn't explain. I don't know myself. I just suddenly . . . *knew* something interesting was going to happen, soon. All the other things . . . you know, job, Anne, the whole pattern . . . it was all . . . unimportant."

"Unimportant?"

"I'm sorry, Kirby. That's the best word I can think of."

"You mean *living's* unimportant. You mean . . . oh, come on, Quentin. Look, please, let me arrange to have you see a doctor. Believe me, there's something wrong . . ."

"No, there isn't. You can't really do anything, anyway. You know that. I've done absolutely nothing that I could be committed for doing . . . you realize that, don't you?"

Kirby stood up, staring down at the smiling man.

"I wish you'd let us do something." he muttered.

"I suppose a psychiatrist might think I needed treatment." Quentin said. "I imagine almost anybody would need some sort of treatment . . . according to most psychiatrists. But this isn't what you'd call withdrawal. Not really."

"Oh, come on. Of course it is. Quentin,

I'm no headshrinker, but you *are* sick, you know. I don't know what the name for it is, or what gets done about it . . . but I've read about things like this. I've seen movies."

"I know, Kirby. I have too. I know you can't understand." Quentin made a helpless gesture. "Maybe sometimes it happens, to other people . . . like this. They know about something that's about to happen, and they just drop whatever they're doing, and wait for it . . . except maybe sometimes other people might not be lucky. If I had a wife, responsibilities, a family . . . well, I guess I'd be in some sort of hospital. But I'm free to drop everything if I want to." He looked up at Kirby. "And nobody can do anything about it. Can they?"

After Kirby left, Quentin sat, still smiling, staring at the dim grey eye of the dusty TV. It was very close, now, he knew. And nobody else would bother him. Kirby had been the last one, after he had had the phone turned off. The rent was paid for three months ahead. There was nothing else. Nobody would come here again.

Quentin got up and went to the door; he double locked it, and then moved a chair against it. He went back, into the bedroom, and opened the closet door, where his clothes hung.

First, he pulled out several shirts, underwear and socks from a box; he put them all on, one atop another, stopping only when the bulk of the socks blocked putting on any more. Then the suits; he managed to get all three of them on. Both overcoats, and several scarves.

Moving with difficulty, he managed to get to the bed, where he lay down heavily, breathing hard. The feeling was very strong now. It would begin to happen soon.

He grasped the edge of the blanket in one hand, and began to roll and twist; the blankets and sheets wrapped around him, covering his head and body, until he became a huge, silent roll of cloth, motionless on the bed.

When he awoke, he knew it had happened. He felt weak, dizzy, but strangely elated. His whole body was wet, wrapped in the thick layers of cloth; and he wished desperately for one thing, only one thing: escape. Out, out . . . he twisted, writhed, and heaved weakly. Blankets and coats and layer after layer of clothing fell away . . . until at last he could get out.

The room was very dark, but a thin line of bright light under a drawn blind told him it was day outside. Though he couldn't imagine what day, or how long it had been since he had gone under. He could not even remember his name, but it didn't seem important.

He stood up, weak, and damp, shivering. Slowly, he went to the window, and got it open, blinds up and out . . . the sun glowed hotly on him, and a cool wind came into the room. For a long time he stood, staring blankly out, feeling the heat and the air drying him . . . ignoring the faint, persistent noise, outside the door behind him.

"Look, I don't know if it's legal or what," one voice said. "You can't just go busting in."

"It's just possible that he could have killed himself." Another voice, vaguely familiar.

"So, why not just get the cops? Listen, if I was to go opening up people's apartments . . ."

The babble of voices hardly reached him, but he was just barely aware of the sound, an irritant which made him turn his head back and forth restlessly. It was

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 130)

COMMUNICATION

BOB SHAW

Illustrated by MICHAEL HINGE

As the population continues to explode, information multiplies at an ever-increasing rate. The computer is designed to cope with this information explosion, as a tool for communication. But surely the manufacturers of the Logicon 30 had never grasped it full potentialities . . .

THERE WAS ONE truly creative phase in the weekly routine of Hank Ripley's job, and he liked to take care of it on Friday nights around nine o'clock.

By then he had three or four drinks under his belt and could feel the weekend—two days therapeutic idleness—opening up for him; yet he was still sufficiently in touch with his work to recall the week in detail. His skill in selecting amount and *type* of detail to put into his weekly report was, in Ripley's estimation, the principal reason he remained in salaried employment. For over two years the area office in Vancouver had received, and apparently was mollified by, accounts of computer sales he was about to make, was planning to negotiate, or had just lost because of some inherent incompatibility between the Logicon 20/30 series and the customer's specification. The reports were not entirely fictional—he never mentioned a prospect's name unless he had actually called him—but they were designed to disguise the fact that Hank Ripley's aptitude for selling computers was virtually nonexistent.

It was a few minutes before nine when he opened his portable typewriter and set it on the table, flanked by a pack of cigarettes and a glass of Four Roses. He was staring at the ceiling, awaiting inspiration, when the doorbell rang. No friends were expected to call, so he decided to ignore the bell—the report was too important to let slide. There were times when he felt guilty about having the worst record in the whole Canadian organization, but consoled himself by reflecting on the amount of priceless ingenuity he put into his reports. Any bright boy in Vancouver who took the trouble to study Ripley's file would find dozens of case histories, packed with verisimilitude, showing ways in which Logicon hardware or software could fail to meet a client's requirements. The same bright boy might wonder why such a large number of quirkish businesses should flourish in one corner of Alberta, but the lesson was there to be learned just the same.

Ripley's mind was gathering varicolored threads of imagination when the bell gave another, and more prolonged, peal. Hissing with annoyance, he opened the door and found himself facing a man of about fifty who was wearing a lustrous business suit and

carrying a softly gleaming briefcase. The stranger had a swarthy complexion and brown eyes with gray rings of cholesterol around the pupils.

"Mr. Ripley?" he said. "Pardon me for interupting your evening."

"Insurance?" Ripley pushed the door hastily. "I'm covered, and I'm busy."

"No—I'm not an insurance salesman."

"Oh, well, I'm a firm believer in my own religion," Ripley lied. "I can't be converted, so there's no point in prolonging . . ."

"You don't understand." The stranger smiled easily. "I want to buy a computer."

"You want . . ." Ripley opened the door like an automaton and ushered the man in. Suppressing a feeling of unreality, he examined the visitor from the rear and noted how his dark suit drooped expensively at the shoulders, and the way his black hair curled slightly over his collar. Ripley had a theory that all wealthy and powerful men had black curly hair on the backs of their necks. He began to feel lucky, which was an unusual sensation for him.

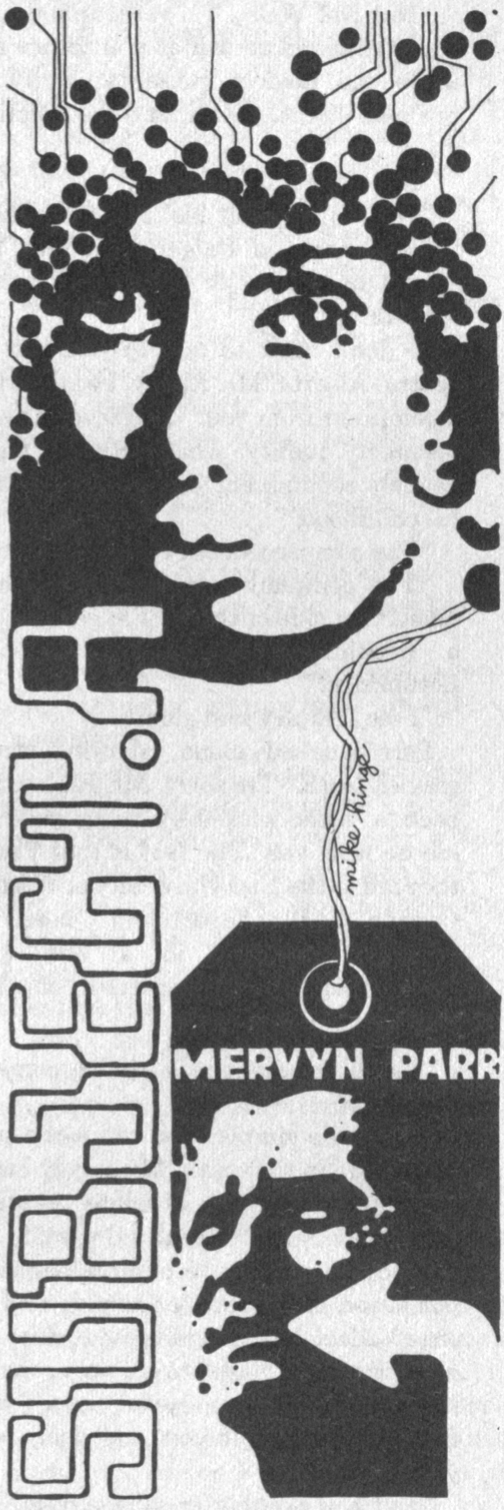
"My name is Mervyn Parr." The visitor dropped his case onto a chair and surveyed Ripley's unimpressive apartment with a curious appearance of satisfaction.

"It's a pleasure to . . ." Ripley floundered. "Have a seat. Have a drink."

"I never touch alcohol," Parr said benignly, seating himself. "But please have one yourself."

"No thanks." Ripley lifted his glass as he spoke, realised what he was doing, and set it down again. He took a cigarette and puffed it into anxious life.

Parr viewed the performance indulgently. "I expect you're wondering why I called on you like this?"



"No! No! Well . . . yes. I would have been delighted to call at your office and make the Logicon presentation during business hours. Not that I'm objecting, mind . . ."

"My office is in Red Deer."

"Oh." Ripley felt his luck desert him. "That's north of Calgary, isn't it? You should be talking to our rep for central Alberta."

"I don't want to talk to your rep for central Alberta, Mr. Ripley. I want to buy a computer from you." Parr's voice had a resonant quality which Ripley found vaguely reminiscent of something out of his childhood.

"The company doesn't work that way."

"The company won't know anything about that side of things. I'm going to use a fictitious addrdss right here in Lethbridge."

"I see," Ripley said glumly.

Parr laughed aloud, showing strong grayish teeth. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ripley. I've been a little wicked—playing cat-and-mouse with you. The fact is that I'm on the staff of the New University of Western Canada. My department needs a computer for use in a new kind sociological survey centered on Red Deer."

"I still don't see why you've come to me."

"It's quite simple. You run a one-man outfit here in the south. My survey has to be conducted in absolute secrecy. Otherwise the results would be invalidated—trying to observe particles, you know, uncertainty principle—and if I were to deal with a big live-wire office the word would be bound to get out sooner or later. Now do you see why I've . . . we've chosen to deal with you?"

"But how about after-sales service?"

"Well, Mr. Ripley, I presumed you would be willing to undertake that for me if it becomes necessary. I understand you're a qualified maintenance man, and a *private* arrangement could be beneficial to both of us." Parr glanced significantly at the shabby furniture.

"There's the question of payment. Our accounts people . . ."

"Cash," Par said tersely.

Ripley lifted his glass and took a long drink. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"Mr. Ripley!" Parr shook his head in amazement. "Do you know you must be the worst salesman in the world? If I'd approached any other Logicon representative with this proposition I'd be signing contracts by this time."

"I'm sorry." Ripley gave himself a mental shake—there was such a thing as being too ethical, even when a deal looked as queer as a fifty-cent watch. "It was the mention of cash." He laughed uncertainly. "Nobody has ever mentioned *paying* for a computer before. It's going to cause a flutter at head office."

"That doesn't matter—as long as you sit tight. Now may we discuss business?"

"You bet, Mr. Parr." Ripley pulled his chair closer to the other man's knees, noticing as he did so that one of Parr's fingers was banded with white skin which suggested he usually wore a ring. "Would you like to tell me something about the amount of data to be handled, the retrieval performance expected, and so on?"

"Fine. The population of Red Deer has grown to close on 200,000, and we've selected it for our study because it's a good example of what sociologists call a Second Magnitude Area in the Willis Classification System. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. I'm afraid not."

"Never mind—it's an abstruse technicality. The point is that the university is going to analyse social volition and interaction in the area more thoroughly than has ever been attempted anywhere else. To do this we are going to record data on every man, woman and child in the designated region."

"What kind of data?"

"Straightforward. Age, place of birth, height, weight, coloring, profession . . ."

"Height and weight?" Ripley was startled.

"Important sociological and physiological criteria, my friend. Essential too for computer recognition of individuals whose pictures may not be stored, or whose appearance may have changed." The resonance had crept back into Parr's voice, stirring Ripley's subconscious.

"Just a minute," he said. "How is this survey going to be carried out?"

Parr examined him soberly. "If the information I'm about to give you goes any further, we have no deal. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly."

"There will be a limited number of checkpoints—probably only one at first—with facilities for automatically photographing, weighing and measuring people who pass through. The computer must recognize subjects, and on command print out all available data."

Ripley took another swallow of Four Roses. "That's easy enough—the tricky part is getting your 200,000 photographs."

"We won't have 200,000. There be only a few thousand in the beginning. We'll use every source to expand the store, but in the interim would it be possible—through cross-references, deduction, what-have-you—for the computer to identify people first time without a photograph?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, supposing Subject A is a young woman already known to the computer, which also has recorded the fact that her mother is five feet tall, weighs a hundred pounds and has a mole on her forehead. If Subject A passes through the checkpoint with an unknown Subject B who matches the recorded data on the mother, would the computer be able to identify Subject B, photograph her for future occasions, and print out the available data?"

"It could. Bigger programming job, that's all." Ripley stroked his chin. "I see why you want to keep this thing secret. People would avoid it like the plague."

"Precisely."

Ripley took a deep breath and decided to risk the sale once again. "I don't even feel happy about it myself."

"Why? There's nothing illegal about sociologists studying people's movements."

"It's hard to say. If you checkpoint is centrally located the machine's going to get to know just about everybody in Red Deer. The example you gave was fine—a girl accompanied by her mother—but supposing the computer starts noting businessmen out late with secretaries, and that kind of thing?"

Parr shrugged. "Blackmail? But you should know that data stored in a computer is more secure than in any filing cabinet."

"I do know."

"Then you think *I* might be considering a little blackmail?" Parr did not seem offended.

"No. Any information you got wouldn't be very hot, certainly not valuable enough to pay your costs." Ripley lit another cigarette, wondering how Vancouver would react if they heard him hinting that a cash customer was crooked. "It's a just . . ."

"It's just the idea of a computerized Big Brother spying on the life of a city, isn't it, Mr. Ripley? Believe me—my colleagues have studied all the ethical implications, but we're proposing a new kind of analysis of urban behavior and the benefits outweigh any theoretical invasion of privacy." Parr smiled his gray smile. "Besides this is only 1982."

"Hah! Very good, Mr. Parr." Ripley tried to laugh, but he had just identified the practised resonance in the other man's voice. Mervyn Parr spoke more like a minister than a lecturer. There was no reason why he could not be a lay preacher as well as an academic, but Ripley's sense of unease deepened. He dispelled it by reaching for his presentation case, and by considering the wording of his new report. The circumstances of the sale would have to be changed, though. It would read better if he had closed the deal with Parr after a week of dedicated hard-selling.

"For the application you have in mind," he said in his best computer expert's voice, "I recommend you consider the Logicon 30. I'll need to make a full analysis of your proposed system, of course, but I'm positive the 30 Model would offer you the . . ."

Parr held up a well-manicured hand, with its white ghost of a ring. "How much?"

"Basic—sixty thousand." Ripley swallowed noisily. He should have started at the bottom of the range with the Logicon 20 and tried to work upwards.

"Done!" Parr reached for his briefcase, and clicked it open.

Inside were bulky wads of used high-denomination bills. The wads looked thicker than normal, because of the way each bill appeared to have at one time been folded into a tight square and opened out again, but it seemed that the case held enough money to buy more computers than Ripley had sold in his entire career.

II

ON MONDAY MORNING Ripley drove to the bank and deposited sixty thousand dollars in the rarely-used company account, then went on to his office. The weather was hotter than usual for late Septsmber and the only hint of approaching Fall was in the ochreous tinge of the grass in the park. He put his car in the dusty parking lot at the side of the building, went into the cool brown cave of the entrance hall and reached his third-floor office without seeing another person. He felt as though he lived in a ghost town.

In the cramped stillness of his office he picked up the phone, buttoned Logicon Incorporated's Vancouver number and got through to Sara Peart, secretary to the Western Region sales manager.

"Hi, Sara," he said brightly. "This is Hank."

"Hank who?"

"Hank Ripley. In Lethbridge. Don't tell me you've forgotten the name."

"I wasn't sure if you still worked for us, that's all."

"Sharp as ever, Sara, sharp as ever. Is the old man in?"

"You sure you want to disturb him on a Monday morning?"

"I'm not going to disturb him. I just want to find out if he can let me have a Model 30 off the shelf, in a hurry."

"You mean you've sold one?" Sara sounded more incredulous than was strictly necessary, and Ripley began throttling the cord that carried her voice.

"Of course I've sold one." He kept cool. "Didn't you read my latest report? I

mailed it Friday night."

"I never was much of a science fiction buff."

Before Ripley could attempt an answer the phone clicked, and he was through to Boyd Devereaux.

"Nice to hear from you again, Hank—sometimes I think you neglect us a little out here on the coast."

With a thrill of almost superstitious dread, Ripley recognized that Devereaux was doing his coolly menacing bit. "Good morning, Boyd. I've closed a cash deal for a Logicon 30," he said quickly, wishing he had caught his boss in his jovial tyrant incarnation. "Can you let me have one out of inventory right away?"

"A *cash* deal?" Devereaux said after a slight pause.

"Yes. The money's in the company account as of half an hour ago."

"Well, that's just great, my boy—I knew I was right in defending you at the last few regional sales conferences."

"Thanks, Boyd." Ripley squirmed, marvelling at Devereaux's skill in making a pat on the back feel like a karate blow.

"Who's the customer? I don't remember seeing anything . . ."

"Mervyn Parr—I mentioned him in my last report. As a matter of fact, Boyd, I've been working on this man for quite a few weeks now, but it was such an off-beat way-out hunch that I didn't like to list him as a genuine prospect till I was sure." Sweating freely under the strain of creative labor, Ripley went on to sketch in a picture of an idiosyncratic oil baron whose hobby was higher mathematics, and who had been interested in buying his own computer through meeting Ripley at an exclusive cocktail party. When he had finished there was a ruminative silence on the line and he wondered if he had overdone it with the invention of the party.

"Hank, my boy, this is great," Devereaux said at last. "Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Uh—no, Boyd. I don't."

"I'm going to see that you get a bit of recognition. Young Julian Roxby, our PR chief, tells me he is on the look-out for a good feature on the prairie provinces for the *Logicon Review*. I'm going to get him to send a reporter and a cameraman across to Lethbridge and give this sale of yours a real splash. We'll get you and this man Parr together; a shot of the Model 30 in his ranch-style living room . . ."

"We can't do that," Ripley neighed frantically. "Sorry, Boyd. Strictly no publicity—Mr. Parr insists."

"That's not so good, Hank."

"It can't be helped. Mr. Parr is very publicity-shy. Almost a recluse, you might say. Why, he even wants to take delivery of the unit himself, from my office here, so that nobody'll see our truck going to his place."

"Are you sure his hobby is mathematics?" Devereaux demanded suspiciously.

"Well, I can't imagine him doing anything very immoral with a Model 30. Hah! Unless he gets up to some trick with the high-speed print-out." Ripley laughed dustily then remembered, too late, that Devereaux was running for office in the Social Credit government and had a strong Puritanical streak.

"I find myself wondering just how effective our product orientation course was in your case, Hank," Devereaux said coldly. "Now I want you to speak to your friend Mr. Parr, and get his agreement for full internal and external publicity. Have you got that?"

"I'll see what I can do."

When Ripley finally got off the phone

he felt as though he had completed a full day's work—and the morning had only just begun.

III

THE COMPUTER was delivered to the office early on Wednesday, and Parr rang to enquire about it an hour later. He sounded agreeably surprised at the promptness of the delivery, but hung up before he could be tackled about publicity for the sale. Ripley walked round and round the slick gray-and-white plastic cube of the crate in an agony of decision. Devereaux had sounded determined; Parr had sounded even more determined—and Hank Ripley was caught squarely between them. He began to feel it would have been better had he never spoiled his record of failure.

It was almost lunchtime when the office door opened and Parr came in wearing a different but equally expensive dark suit. He showed his gray teeth in satisfaction when he saw the crate.

"Good morning, Mr. Parr," Ripley said heartily. "Well, there she is—the most compact middle-range computer in the world."

"Don't start selling it to me now." Parr spoke tersely, with none of the rueful friendliness he had shown on their first meeting. "You're provided a full set of operating instructions?"

"Of course. There shouldn't be any difficulty in . . ."

"Help me get it down to the van."

"Sure—but there's just one thing . . ."

"Well?" Parr's cholesterol-rimmed eyes were distinctly impatient.

"It's about publicity for the deal. Logicon has a firm policy about these things."

Parr sighed. "Refund my money in cash, please. My department doesn't want any traceable credit transactions."

"I . . . It in't really a firm policy. I just thought I should mention it." Ripley began to perspire.

"Help me get this crate down to the van." Parr made the request in exactly the same tone of voice as before, signifying his contempt.

"Glad to." Ripley decided he had done all that Logicon could expect of him. He began pushing the plastic cube, which moved fairly easily on its runners, and Parr hovered around guiding it through doorways to the elevator. The ring finger of his right hand was still banded with white. At street level they slid the crate out to a blue Dodge van which had the words "Rockalta Transport Hire" on the sides, and stowed it in the back. When the doors were closed on the computer, Parr signed the delivery receipts without speaking and turned away.

"It's been a pleasure to do business with you, Mr. Parr." Ripley's sarcasm seemed to go unnoticed, and he went back into the foyer swallowing his resentment. He paused at the inner door and looked back. Parr had just got into the driving seat and was doing something with his hands, one of them performing a screwing movement over the other. The van had moved off into the traffic stream before Ripley realised Parr had been putting on a ring. He went back up to his office, thinking hard. Mr. Mervyn Parr. The business with the ring had aroused his curiosity. What reason could Parr have for not wanting Ripley to see it? And, while questions were being asked, why did an academic dress like a highly successful businessman and speak like a preacher? On impulse Ripley looked up the number of the New University of

Western Canada and rang its Department of Sociology. Ten minutes later he had talked to almost as many people and had established that the department had nobody called Parr on either its administrative or lecturing staff.

After a moment's thought, he rang the Rockalta Transport Hire Company and was answered by a bored female voice. "Lethbridge Police Department," he said brusquely. "Lieutenant Beasley Osgood of the traffic branch speaking."

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" The voice sounded less bored.

"There's been a hit-and-run accident at the west end on the McLeod highway. One of the witnesses says a blue Dodge with the name of your outfit was involved."

"Oh, my! That's just dreadful." The voice had become animated.

"Yeah. Well, we're still checking the story out. Can you let me have the names and addresses of people who rented blue '81 Dodge vans lately?"

"You bet!" There was a rattling of paper, mingled with excited whispers, and Ripley consoled himself with the thought that he had at least brightened up an otherwise dull day for somebody. "You're certain it was an '81 Dodge, Lieutenant?"

"The witness seemed pretty definite about that."

"We have only one of last year's models out at the moment—so that's a help, isn't it?"

"A great help—can you give me the man's name and address?"

"Of course. People renting from us for the first time always have to show their licenses and insurance. That van was rented this morning to a Mr. Melvyn Parminter of . . . let me see . . . 4408 Champlain Avenue, Red Deer, Alberta."

"I see—and when's it due back?"

"Oh, it isn't due back. Not with Mr. Parminter in it, I mean. It's to be dropped at our Red Deer depot tomorrow."

"Thanks." Ripley rang off and sat heaving nervously for a moment at the success of his playacting. When the schoolboy amusement had subsided to occasional flutters in his chest he leaned back and considered what he had gained. He now had what was probably Parr's real name and address, but very little more. He had no idea, for instance, why Parr/Parminter should secretly buy a computer and turn it into an electronic busybody capable of spying on a whole city.

IV

SATURDAY MORNING was sharp and clear, filled with the special aureate radiance which—Ripley had often noticed—the sun could emit only on days when there was no work to do. After breakfast he sat around for almost an hour, pretending he was not going to make the longuish drive north to Red Deer, then went down to the parking lot and got into his car. Even when sitting behind the wheel he found it difficult to admit he was going to spend a whole day of his adult life playing detective and, furthermore, that he was expecting to enjoy it. He smoked a cigarette, waited another few minutes, cleaned his fingernails, and drove off with studied carelessness.

Once on the road, and away from the divining gaze of the neighbours to whom his bachelorhood seemed to be an affront, he shed his selfconsciousness. The route took him west to Fort McLeod and from there he followed the McLeod Trail up through prairies where the cattle shared

the ground with patient, unattended oil pumps. He reached Red Deer by noon, ate sparingly at a diner and ascertained that Champlain Avenue was the core of a plush residential development on the north side. Twenty minutes later he was parked close to the tree-screened cube of pastel stucco which was Melvyn Parminter's home.

Six hours later he was still parked there, had seen no signs of life, and was rapidly losing enthusiasm. He had got out of the car several times but had not dared to slip through the entrance gates of Parminter's miniature but beautifully tailored estate. Now he was tired, bored, hungry and—to make things worse—had just thought of a perfectly good explanation for Parminter's behavior. Supposing he was in some highly competitive business in which a new application for a computer would give him an edge on the opposition? The dictates of commercial security could make a person behave as oddly as a criminal or an enemy agent.

Ripley decided to wait another ten minutes before going home. He was nearing the end of the third ten-minute spell when a Continental saloon, resplendent in polychromatic gray, wafted through the wrought iron gates and dwindled silently into the distance. Parminter was at the wheel. Ripley, taken by surprise, started his engine and drove off in pursuit. The ground-hugging shape of the Continental was deceptively fast, and he had to swoop down the quiet avenue at dangerous speed to catch up with it. He got within two hundred yards and concentrated on following the big vehicle across the city and out to the south side. Finally it swept into a tree-lined street in one of the oldest parts of town, and turned into the driveway of a large frame house situated well back from the street.

Ripley stopped his car and got out. Darkness was coming down rapidly, the air smelled of dusty foliage and genteel decay, and suddenly he felt a cold disquiet at the thought of meddling in Parminter's private affairs instead of being back home for the Saturday night poker session. He hesitated for a moment, then his eyes distinguished a sign set just inside the opening where Parminter's car had vanished. The street was deserted, but he glanced all around before approaching the gently creaking sign. It was fretted out in the shape of an open book and said:

"RED DEER TEMPLE
OF THE VITAL SPIRIT"
"Pastor: M. Parmley"

Ripley looked at the gloomy old house—it looked exactly as he had always visualized a crackpot spiritualist temple—and back to the gold Gothic lettering on the varnished board. Was Pastor M. Parmley another manifestation of Mervyn Parr/Melvyn Parminter? And if so why should he want a computer set up to . . . ? Ripley abruptly remembered the cash with which the computer had been bought—each bill crinkled as if it had been folded into a tiny square. A startling idea flickered across his mind like a will o' the wisp. It was an unpleasant thought, and if his guess was correct he wanted nothing more to do with Pastor Parmley. Ripley shivered slightly in the near-darkness as he noticed that one of the tall shrubs close to the sign was shaped like a human being. He was turning away when the shrub spoke to him.

"What a shame," it said. "Must you leave so soon?"

"Mr. Parr," Ripley yelped. "How nice

to . . . I mean, I was just passing by . . ."

"Of course, of course—and now that you're here you must come in for a proper visit."

"Some other time, perhaps." Ripley turned with the intention of walking away very quickly, but suddenly a thick forearm was clamped around his throat and his left arm was twisted up behind his back.

"Don't make me twist your arm," Parminter whispered.

"That's a good one," Ripley said, wondering how long his shoulder joint was going to hold out. "What do you think you're doing? Look—I just happened to be in Red Deer for the day, and . . ."

"And you spent it sitting outside my house." Parminter forced Ripley to walk up the black tunnel of the driveway.

"Oh. How did you catch on?"

"I was expecting you. The Rockalta people rang my home to find out if I'd damaged their van, and there was only one person who could have given them that story about a hit-and-run accident. It was quite clever."

"Thank you."

"Yes—I misjudged you, Mr. Ripley. I wonder how much you've guessed."

"The lot, I think." The pain in Ripley's arm discouraged him from playing dumb.

"Too bad—for you, I mean. I won't be able to let you run around loose."

"Don't try anything with me," Ripley warned. He was striving for a convincing threat when they reached the entrance of the big house. The door was ajar. Parminter thrust Ripley through it and turned on a light to reveal a large, heavily furnished lobby.

"As a matter of fact, you've arrived at quite a good time," Parminter said with a kind of menacing geniality. "I haven't switched the entire system on yet, and I'll appreciate the opinion of someone more knowledgeable about computers than I."

"Go and . . ." Ripley's arm clicked audibly as the pressure on it was increased. "What do you want me to do?"

"That's better." Parminter let Ripley go and dusted his hands. He was wearing a massive gold ring which—like his sign—was in the shape of an open book and engraved with symbols. "The door's locked so don't try to run."

"Me run?" Ripley massaged his arm.

"Jump up and down," Parminter commanded. Ripley gave a half-hearted leap and felt the floor move slightly beneath him. "You're standing on a weighbridge which reads your weight to within four ounces. And over here is the camera." Parminter walked to an ornate mirror and tapped it. "One way, of course."

"I see. Where's the Logicon itself?"

"Back here." Parminter opened a door on the right and led the way into a room in which the computer sat near one wall. Its slick styling looked shockingly unfamiliar against the old-fashioned embossed wallpaper. The faded carpet had been cut back from it and a slim bunch of cables ran up to the machine through a chiselled hole in the floorboards.

"Looks all right, so far," Ripley commented. "What's this?" He pointed at a small camera positioned close to the computer's print-out.

"Closed-circuit television monitor. Follow me." Parminter went back into the lobby and entered another room. It was large and high-ceilinged, the walls completely covered by dark green velvet drapes. A long pedestal table surrounded by chairs occupied the center of the room. The chair at the head of the table was so heavy and intricately gilded as to be

almost a throne. Directly in front of it a sphere of polished crystal sat on the table in an ebony cradle carved like a pair of cupped hands. Parminter sat down in the huge chair, touched something beneath the table and a glow of greenish light appeared in the crystal.

"What do you think of it?" Parminter spoke with proprietary pride as he leaned back.

Ripley peered into the depths of the polished sphere and saw a distorted image of the computer print-out. "Neat. Very neat."

"*I* think so," Parminter agreed. "There's a fortune to be made in the spiritualist world if one goes about it the right way—but it's a chancy business. There's a ghastly story about one of my colleagues who told his audience he could draw on all the wisdom of the ages to answer any question, and was made look a fool when some smart alec asked him to name the capital of North Dakota.

"With the help of your little machine he could have answered the question, but that's not the type of information a practising spiritualist needs. The point of the story is that nobody ever asks a medium something that could just as easily be looked up in a reference book."

"How long do you think you can keep me here?" Ripley's fears for his own well-being were beginning to reassert themselves.

"The data a professional medium needs are more personal, more individual. When a middle-aged widow walks in here I can try to do a cold reading on her and win her confidence, but people are becoming too materialistic and sceptical to be hooked easily.

"From now on, when that widow walks in—knowing she has never seen me in her life, knowing she came only on the spur of the moment because a friend asked her—the computer gives me her name. More important, it gives me the name of her dear departed, his age, his former business, the names of other dead relatives, and so on. I look up at her, before she has a chance to speak, and I say 'Hello, Mary—I have a message for you from Wilbur'. Can you imagine the *impact?*"

"I've never heard anything so immoral in all my life. How long are you planning to keep me here?"

"Nothing immoral about it! Ordinary mediums give people hope—I'll be able to give them certainty."

"Sell them certainty, you mean."

"It's impossible to set a price on the happiness I shall dispense to the old and the lonely and the bereaved. Besides, I'm a businessman. I've been working towards this for years, ploughing back the profits, denying myself the pleasure of spending all those surreptitiously folded bills the marks leave in my collection box. Apart from the cost of the computer and other equipment, have you any idea how much it cost me to build a set of memory tapes? I've had dozens of people working for me coding the contents of directories, slaving in the public records offices, carrying out fake market surveys . . ."

"I guess you'll get your money back in the end," Ripley said acidly. "Is spiritualism nothing but a complete confidence trick?"

"What do you think? When you're dead, you're dead—and that's the way it ought to be." Parminter returned eagerly to his main theme. "But don't class me as an ordinary confidenceman, Mr. Ripley—I'm a pioneer. I've built something that never existed before—a computer model of the human relationships that give a city its corporate identity. Family ties, geographically created friendships and enmities,

business connections . . . everybody in this area is part of a vast intangible matrix . . . and I have it right here on tape." Parminter's eyes were luminous. He reached below the table and there came a series of faint clicks which suggested he was activating the computer.

Ripley was convinced of the deadly necessity to get away. He began backing off slowly, and at the same time tried to keep Parminter's mind engrossed in his creation. "The crystal ball doesn't quite fit in, does it? I thought that was a fortune-teller's gimmick."

Parminter chuckled hoarsely. "Not only seers use them—the ball is supposed to be the focus for all kinds of special powers—besides, do you think Mary's going to worry about that when I give her the message from Wilbur?"

"It still doesn't look right to me." Ripley reached the door as he spoke and tension made his voice a nervous squawk which caused Parminter to turn his head. The big man launched himself from the chair with frightening speed. Ripley turned and ran, but had taken only one stride when two massive hands closed round his neck from behind and pulled him back into the room. He struggled vainly against the other man's superior strength.

"I'm sorry about this," Parminter said with incongruous gentleness, "but no miserable little snoop is going to ruin my plans at this stage of the game."

"I won't talk," Ripley husked.

"Or blackmail me either?" Parminter increased his pressure. He was not compressing Ripley's windpipe, but his thick fingers had closed major bloodvessels. Black dots rimmed with prismatic color began to march across Ripley's vision. He looked around for something he might use as a weapon . . . nothing in sight . . . nobody to hear him anyway . . . nobody except those people sitting at the table . . .

People at the table?

Behind him Parminter gave a startled gasp and suddenly Ripley was free. He fell to his knees, breathing noisily while his eyes took in the group at the table. There were about a dozen men and women, some of them in distinctly antiquated dress, all of them looking slightly smeared and blurred round the edges, like images projected onto fluffy cotton.

"No! Oh, no!" Parminter sank to his knees beside Ripley. "It can't be." He pressed his knuckles to trembling lips and shook his head dogmatically.

One of the men at the table pointed at Parminter. "Join us," he said in a wintry voice, "there are things we wish to know."

"Go away," Parminter moaned. "You don't exist."

"But, my friend . . ." The blurred man stood up, rippling like a figure in a three-dimensional plastic picture postcard, and came towards Parminter and Ripley. His eyes were dark holes into another continuum. Parminter scrabbled away from him, got to his feet and ran. The front door of the house slammed behind him. Ripley and the insubstantial man faced each other.

"You," the man said. "You know how to operate the machine?"

"I . . . yes." Ripley formed the words by consciously directing his tongue and lips.

"That is good. Please be seated at the head of the table."

Ripley stood up and walked mechanically to the big chair. A dozen vaporous faces regarded him as he sat down, and he noticed they were all

expectant rather than menacing. He began to feel more at ease as the first dim understanding of the situation came to him.

"This is a great moment," the spokesman for the group said. "Communication between the two planes of existence has always been difficult and uncertain. The few genuine mediums still alive are so . . . *inefficient* that it is hardly worth one's while bothering with them. It is impossible for us to materialize for more than a minute or two and," a note of petulance crept into his voice, "you've no idea how frustrating it is to make the effort only to find oneself expected to deal with an elderly lady in some kind of fainting fit."

The blurry features became animated. "But now—at least—an effective system has been created, a pool of the kind of information about loved ones on the other side of the veil that we all crave. The information will be available quickly and easily, provided there is a human agent to operate the machine. You will continue to be available, won't you?"

"I . . ." Ripley was unable to speak.

"There's good money in the spiritualism business," the spokesman said anxiously. The other misty figures nodded emphatically. Looking around them, Ripley thought about his miserable existence as a salesman, and suddenly the decision was very easy to make, although he would still have to come to some arrangement with Parminter.

"I'll be here as long as you want me," he said. There was a flutter of pleasure around the assembly.

"That's just wonderful," the spokesman said. "And now, as I've been using up ectoplasm faster than the others, I claim the first question. My name is Jonathan Mercer and I used to live on the corner of Tenth and Third. I would like to know if my daughter Emily ever married that young accountant, and if cousin Jean finally got her divorce."

Ripley put his fingers on the keyboard beneath the edge of the table and—with the look of a man who has found fulfilment—began to address the computer.

—Bob Shaw

ON SALE NEXT MONTH

—In the July issue of AMAZING STORIES: "Orn," Piers Anthony's blockbuster of an 87,000-word sequel to Omnivore *and introducing one of the most unusual and engaging non-human since Weinbaum's Tweel! Plus Bob Shaw's latest novelette, "Invasion of Privacy," and Robert Silverberg's haunting "We Know Who We Are."*

I OF NEWTON

Sam Ingard was a mathematician with no interest in any deals with the Devil. Which is just as well, because the creature wasn't exactly the *Devil, and he offered no deals . . . only an ultimatum!*

JOE W. HALDEMAN

SAMUEL INGARD GLARED sullenly at the burbling coffee pot and felt his stomach pucker in revulsion. Eighty hours he had been up; eighty hours on coffee and amphetamine, 3.333 days of weaving a beautiful tapestry of mathematical logic, only to find that a skipped stitch in the beginning was causing the whole thing to unravel. But he would patch it yet.

"The integral, the integral," he said to no one in particular. "Who's got the integral?" He had first caught himself mumbling out loud about twenty hours ago. By now he'd stopped catching himself.

He opened a thick book provocatively titled *Two Thousand Integrals,* closed it in disgust, and leaned back, rubbing his nicotine-stained eyeballs.

"The integral of dx over the cosine to the n of x," he intoned portentiously, "is sine x over n-1 times the cosine to the n-1 of x plus over n-1—no, godammit—n-2 *over* n-1 times the integral of . . ."

Sam smelled something vaguely reminiscent of freshman Chemistry and opened his eyes. Seated Yoga-style on his desk, stripping pages from his flaming table of integrals and eating them with great relish, was a red-complexioned creature with ivory horns, hooves, and a black, scaly tail twitching with pleasure. He was all of three feet tall.

This was even better than yesterday—or was it the day before?—when he had looked in a table of random numbers and thought he saw a pattern! And the head of the Department said he lacked imagination.

The apparition cleared its throat—a sound somewhere between a buzz-saw and a double bassoon warming up—and said in a gravelly monotone, "I really wish I didn't have to inform you of this. It would make my job a lot simpler, and less time-consuming, if I could just leave you to your own devices. But I am required to give you an explanation; required by an Authority," he glanced upward with mild distaste, "whose nature you could never hope to comprehend." The creature took a deep breath, disappeared for a moment, then reappeared in the form of an elderly gentleman wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and a rumpled double-breasted suit. He climbed gingerly off the desk and brushed chalk dust from his coat with an age-spotted hand.

"Bring on the parchment, the sterilized pin!" Sam resolved to play out this hallucination for all it was worth, then get a couple of days' sleep. "That's the way the game is played, isn't it? My soul for the answer to this problem?" He gestured grandly at the reams of hieroglyphics cluttering his desk, spilling onto the floor.

"I'm afraid you've been rather misled

by your folklore and literature." The professor-demon flicked at a dust mote on his broad lapel, causing a shower of blue sparks. "I don't *trade* anything. That is what I am unfortunately required to explain. We go through a silly little ritual, and then I *take*. Your soul was forfeit the moment you summoned me."

"Summoned . . . ?"

"Hush!" The professor dissolved into an even more ancient schoolmarm, then to a bushy-haired and -faced undergraduate (obviously mathematics), who pointed a skewering forefinger at him. "—or you'll regret it! That garbage you were mumbling," He made an imperious gesture and Sam heard his own voice saying,

". . . of x plus n-1—no, godammit—n-2 over n-1 . . ."

"That garbage had the right phonetic and semantic structure to be a curse, especially since a neat little god-denial was woven into it. A nice, omnidirectional curse; easy to home in on while the supporting mood still exists."

Sam thought of his colleagues over the years who had disappeared or died in their prime. He grew a little pale.

"Yes, Samuel Ingard, you *do* have a soul, though it be a withered-up little kernel that will probably give me acute indigestion. Enjoy it while you can.

"But, quickly, to the business at hand. You are allowed to ask me three questions pertaining to my abilities. Then you will ask me another question, which I will attempt to answer, or set a task for me, which I will attempt to perform.

"In the past, mathematicians have asked me to prove Fermat's Theorem, which I can prove to be false." He gestured and a blackboard full of scribblings appeared. Sam, a man who read the last page of a mystery first, as well as a mathematician, managed to jot down the last three equations before the board evaporated.

"They have asked me to square the circle, which is trivial, find the ultimate prime, which is only a little harder, or other such banalities. I hope you can come up with something more original.

"If I fail to resolve your problem, I will be gone." The undergraduate-demon smiled a little smile.

"And if you succeed?" Sam tried to sound casual and failed.

"Ah! First question!"

"No!"

"Sorry, I'm playing by the rules, and I expect you to as well. If I should succeed, as I have in every encounter since 1930, I shall consume your soul; a relatively painless process. I *am* a soul-eater. Unfortunately, the loss of your soul will drop your intelligence to that of a vegetable."

A long yellow tusk grew out of the center of his mouth; he watched it with an eye on a stalk until it reached his chin.

"I am also a vegetarian."

Sam was strangely calm as he worded his first—no, second—question. He had the germ of an idea. "Aside from the, uh, divine restriction you mentioned at the outset, which you complied with by telling me where I stand, are there any physical or temporal limitations to your abilities?"

"None." The Ollie-the-dragonesque demon scratched his tusk idly and added complacently, "Don't try to take refuge in your own parochial view of the universe. I can go gaster than the speed of light or make two electrons in an atom occupy the same quantum state as easily as you can blow your nose." He peered intently at Sam's nose. "More easily. Next question."

"My next question affirms a corollary to the first. Is there anyplace in the universe, in all of . . . being . . . where you could go and not be able to find your way back here?"

The demon licked his tusk with a bilious green tongue. "No. I could go to the Andromeda Galaxy and back in a micro-second. In the same manner I could go to, say, what would be Berlin if the Nazis had won the war, or Atlanta if the South had, or twentieth century Rome if Alexander had lived to a ripe old age." While saying this the demon danced an Irish jig and his hair turned into a writhing mass of coral snakes, who arranged themselves into a pompadour.

"Now, finally, ask me a question I can't answer; or a task I can't perform."

Sam looked coolly at the demon, who was now a quivering lump of yellow protoplasm hanging in midair, covered with obscene black stubble, bisected by a scarlet orifice filled with hundreds of tiny pointed teeth grinding together with a sandpapery sound. "The question," it burbled.

"Not a question," said Sam, enjoying the creature's agony. ". . . a command!"

"Out with it!"

Sam smiled, a little sadly. "Get lost."

The demon resumed his original shape, but ten feet tall and all black cape and brimstone. He cursed and clutched impotently at the smiling mathematician and started to shrink. At five feet tall, he stood still and wrung his tail nervously. One foot tall, he started to stamp up and down in inarticulate rage. The size of a thimble, he whined in a piteously shrill voice, "You and Ernest Hemingway!" and disappeared.

Sam walked over and opened a window to let out the sulfur dioxide. Then he sat down at his desk, shoved all the papers onto the floor, and started to play algebraic games with the Fermat Theorem fragment he had filched from the demon. As he worked he mumbled and chortled to himself. Perhaps one day he would summon the poor thing again, and trick him into squaring the circle.

But he had only been a demon, and a little one at that.

He had a supervisor, who was to him as he was to Sam. The supervisor was a hundred billion light years away now, doing something unspeakable, on a scale that would make Ghengis Khan look like a two-bit hood.

But in a way that is His alone, He was also in that room, standing behind Sam.

Watching his language.

—Joe W. Haldeman

NEXT ISSUE

Ova Hamlet returns! Flushed with success from her foray into "Man Swings SF," Miss (?) Hamlet pitches feverishly into Cornelius Jerry, that bon vivant, man-about-story, in Richard Lupoff's "Music In The Air!" Plus—an exciting headline on nearly every paragraph!

. . . In which David Bunch asks (and perhaps he also answers) the question, What a thing is man—?

IN THE LAND OF THE NOT-UNHAPPIES

DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

HAVING CROSSED a harsh barrier, like mountains, I came down into a land where domes were: clear white domes. And the precision of the white domes in their geometric spaced beauty looked like a part of heaven to me, after what I had left—the torn house sides, the bridges heaved up on the hilltops, the bottom parts of valleys removed, and emptiness moved in on that. Oh, how to describe what we had done with the heavy stuff, the missiles, the WOW bombs, the White Witch rockets firing?

Only a small way out of the mountains—or whatever had been the harsh barrier I had crossed in the crossing to here-and-now—a lid flipped up from the gray flat surface of the here-place where I was, and a machine labeled GUARDSMAN, risen on a platform about ten feet in the air, stared at me and said, tape-voiced and precise, "Welcome to Not-Unhappy Land. You came at a fine season." With just that small speech of welcome the GUARDSMAN machine, lifting his foot to a lever, fell with his platform down through the surface of the land, and the lid seemed to hit his head with a small tinkling click as he disappeared completely.

While I was apprehensively wondering if I should move forward and meet, perhaps, more gray machines on gray platforms, a long low distant-fog-horn sound flooded up from the surface and filled the air for a moment with an urgent monotonous signal. Almost as soon as the first note of the signal had risen to my ears, I saw strange and imposing things start to happen, and they all added up, I learned later, to one impressive event. Just as the rim of the sun appeared, making a well-defined fiery arc at a far eastern edge of the smooth gray land, I saw, far as my vision extended in any direction, tops of plastic domes spring open to reveal the occupant of each dome. Then a music came up for a moment, a not unpleasant stately sound, but with little variety, and the figures saluted the sun. After that, I saw the gray figures, quite solemnly and with no noise, descend from the domes that had the lids flipped back and form in precise formations, some hundred or more in each group. Without a moment of hesitation they started marching toward the sun.

Impulsively I moved a few steps in the direction the marchers had gone, and a lid slapped up to bar my way. Soon a tall gray machine with a folding-box head was standing before me and holding in his hands a device that had several speaker cones. All this apparatus of machine and cones and folding-box head stood on a platform risen about ten feet in the air and was labeled HISTORIAN. "I know you have questions," it said, starting right off in a precise gritty-tape voice, "and I know what questions you have. This is a land where everyone is not-

unhappy. Not-unhappy Land! Those fine, not-unhappy formations you saw just now are moving, not jauntily, but steadily, as far east as the first division line. There they will be issued the necessary equipment for their task, and each will move west, not-unhappily, for the balance of the day, reaching his or her own hut in time for the evening sun ceremony. Each stroke has been timed, of course, long ago, and the stroke quotas issued according to the individual's hut location, his most comfortable stroke reach and many other considerations we must consider for precision. Ha. It does work out precisely! Tomorrow the not-unhappy formations will move west to a division line, as far as they moved east today. And they will work into the east all day, each reaching his or her own hut in time for the evening sun ceremony. So that it will work out precisely, every other day the platforms turn in the evening as they rise, and the individuals from the not-unhappy formations will each face the sun without having to speed so much as half a stroke in the daily stroking."

The machine burped a bit as a tape changed and then said, "Welcome to Not-Unhappy Land. You came at a fine season. —Now for some history. Not-Unhappy Land is just what the name suggests, a country where all the people know not-unhappiness. That is a qualification, a prerequisite, a natural must. Long ago people of Not-Unhappy Land fled from terror. All terrors were left behind the high mountains, and you and your kind saw no reason to invade our gray land for profit. Your aerial reconnaissance and your probes have bothered us at times. Your research parties we simply absorbed. Some of them are out there now not-unhappily moving toward his or her own hut and the solemn sun ceremony.

"When the pioneers came to this place after fleeing the terrors from across your barriers, they decided what things were necessary for survival in a modern land. To go back to nature would not do. Certainly in that there would be no progress, no going forward at all. It would be merely going back, to have all to do over again. To make terms with the modern was the thing to do. Not-Unhappy Land has made its terms, the not-unhappy terms with the modern. To begin with, under its gray surface this land is completely automatic. I will not tell you the long story of how from the beginning the few pioneers who fled the carnage beyond the mountains came to terms with modern technology and built the physical apparatuses of a workable not-unhappy land. This physical building of the land was a long hard matter of using the know-how the pioneers themselves possessed from their diversified backgrounds, plus the matter of kidnapping new technicians when needed and bringing them across the mountains, along with certain materials that were required as the plan took shape. Ah, perhaps it was wrong, in a way, to kidnap people and seize materials. But every new and great thing demands its price. The technicians became not-unhappy, in due time, and the stolen materials—well, perhaps that is justified now as you and the others, if there are others, come stumbling down the mountains, with not even the terrors behind you now. With nothing behind you now. —We have heard the sounds."

The machine changed tapes again, burped and said, "Welcome to Not-Unhappy Land. You came at a fine season. —But more than the physical building, much more, were the ideas behind the plan. The early pioneers, in solemn council gathered, decided a basic thing. Not-unhappiness was not a thing to come upon haphazardly. It must be finely planned. So they bargained with the human condition and came off as best they could, which I think was extraordinarily good, considering all the road blocks. And you must remember, if their bargain seems strange to you at first, when you learn more about it and go for your operation—remember that these early pioneers in Not-Unhappy Land were fed-up and full, completely sated with the terrors of modern discoveries. They saw that the time had surely come for the human mind to seize the opportunity to build this great Not-Unhappy Land, and then the human mind could take a rest, for the good of all. They bargained with the fearful human condition and bought not-unhappiness with a plan, and that let no one nor any thing underrate.

"They laid their plan on certain cornerstones of freedom. Not-Unhappy Land was to be a completely automatic, machine-served place, leaving man free of any effort toward gaining his daily physical necessities. The machines, of course, would repair and rebuild the machines, and man in his plastic hut would be served in the night, with never a care toward his servants, thus gaining true freedom on that point. Man would be free to worship, in a precisely spelled-out way—giving him freedom from worry about how to worship—the most awe-inspiring physical property in his universe, the sun. All men and women would be employed, that is, all men and women would occupy their daylight hours in a way that would leave them completely free of fret or frustration concerning employable time. And the fourth cornerstone, perhaps the most important cornerstone, was equality. After Not-Unhappy Land was operable, the basic rules were to apply to all men and all women to give everyone the gift in equal parts of being not-unhappy. Only the machines would be in any way

diversified, such diversification necessary to their needs to serve different functions. That is why you have talked only to machines. The men and women are all out there, not-unhappily stroking in from the first division line. —And to answer a natural question you must have—'Do we have children in Not-Unhappy Land to replace the used-up people?' No, we do not have children in this land. We'll machine-produce people if ever there is the need, to keep the stroke force up to allowable minimum—a minimum rigidly set in the Constitution of Not-Unhappy Land and placed in the government tapes. Now—"

"Never mind about the children and used-up people," I blurted. "What I want to know is, what are they doing all day, these strokers, from sun to sun, to be so not-unhappy?" But the machine was changing tapes and burping, or was it chuckling? "Welcome to Not-Unhappy Land," it said. "You came at a fine season. —At the first division line in the east there is a huge-domed warehouse. Each individual is issued his equipment there every other day. In the evening, just before the sun ceremony, tired and not-unhappy, he leaves the equipment at the door of his hut. A lid opens sometime in the night and the equipment is whizzed off underground to the big-domed warehouse at the western division line where each individual is issued his equipment every other day. The equipment is—perhaps you have already guessed—a simple push broom with which from sun to sun with measured strokes, from day to day, the inheritors of the lore of all the ages, mercifully dormant now, sweep the gray plastic surface of this land, westward or eastward as the case may be, toward an evening sun ceremony. And they are not-unhappy."

I moved out toward the gray lines sweeping in, and I saw the monotonous, round, not-unhappy faces that were not crinkled by smiles, and never never could I imagine them being changed and creased by frowns. The not-unhappy formations swept on, not looking to one side or the other, but paying attention it seemed only to the precision of their strokes, and that in a truly automatic way. They moved on toward the solemn sun ceremony and the lengthening shadows of their huts.

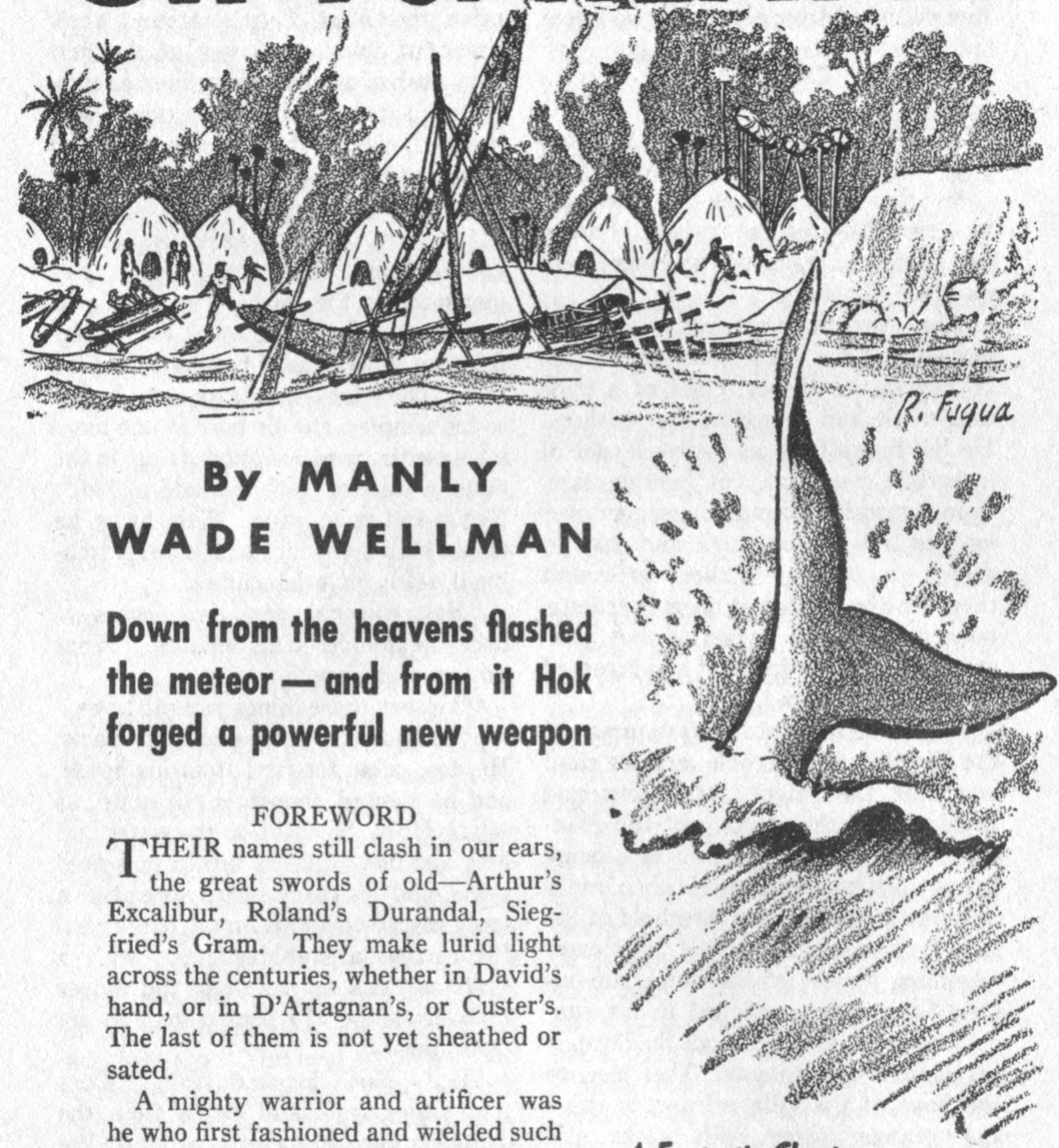
As my eyes swept over the gray distances where the bubble huts were with their lids flipped up, I saw here and there bubbles with their lids not flipped up. And somehow I knew there were vacancies, and that one of the vacant huts soon must be mine. I looked at my battered hands, hardly recognizable now as the soft white nimble hands of a scientist, a button pusher, a dial arranger, the paws of a gadgeteer. And instinctively I knew, as a great calm settled over all the land and over me, that tomorrow I must unlimber my weak white hands and stroke westward with the formations. Perhaps tonight, even, I would be assigned to a place in the line, be issued a push broom and have my strokes sized and clocked for my quota. But how could I ever assume that look, fake that bland countenance of wooden dumbness upon my face?

Then my reverie was broken as a stately sound filled the air. It was the evening sun ceremony! At the end of the brief simple worship a circle of plastic at my feet revealed itself as a lid, rose and fell backward. A platform came up and a doctor machine with a bag marked SURGICAL stood there. "It is a simple operation," the machine said. "Be not afraid. True to the founding fathers and their great dream for our land we 'replace' the parts of your brain that would make you a fretful and poor sweeper. —Welcome to Not-Unhappy Land. You came at a fine season!"

—David R. Bunch

HOK and the

GIFT of HEAVEN



By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

Down from the heavens flashed the meteor — and from it Hok forged a powerful new weapon

FOREWORD

THEIR names still clash in our ears, the great swords of old—Arthur's Excalibur, Roland's Durandal, Siegfried's Gram. They make lurid light across the centuries, whether in David's hand, or in D'Artagnan's, or Custer's. The last of them is not yet sheathed or sated.

A mighty warrior and artificer was he who first fashioned and wielded such a blade. The Bible calls him Tubal Cain, the Greeks named him Vulcan. Actually he was Hok, who lived by battle but had no taste for battle's sake, who never tortured a weak foe or feared a strong one; who glimpsed not only the promised strength of cold, sharp iron, but the woe as well.

A Fantastic Classic

In those days of man's first youth, hardly anything happened that was not of consequence. The complex brain, the eloquent tongue, the skilful hand, made this two-legged animal ruler of his world. He knew a ruler's joys, sorrows

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and cares. Not least of the things which embody joy, sorrow and care is the sword, born in fire, baptized in blood, mirroring the light and dealing the darkness. Nor has its horror and fascination vanished from the Earth we know.

CHAPTER I

THE gift seemed first to be a threat, an assault, hurled from the very cope of the dawn sky in a swaddling of fire to land between two parties of stone-axe warriors intent on bloody battle.

That battle was coming as a logical sequence of the sudden self-importance of Djoma the Fisher, chief of a tribe that dwelt and seined at the seashore. He felt himself the invincible leader of a terrible community of fighting men. Vaingloriously he sent a messenger over wooded hills to the north and east, to inform a certain smaller settlement there that he wanted at once, in tribute, every specimen it owned of that powerful new weapon its chief had invented and called the bow.

But the settlement in question was of the Warlike Flint People, and its chief was Hok the Mighty, who respected nothing save the worship of the Shining One and feared nothing save being bored. Sitting above his village of mud-and-wattle huts, on the threshold of the cave he had won in combat from overwhelming masses of the fierce sub-human Gnorrls,* he grinned in his sun-colored beard and heard out the blustering demand of the envoy. Then he gave the boys of the village leave to drive the stranger away with sticks and stones. In due time the fellow limped home to the seaside, and Djoma led every fighting man he had—more than a hundred—to take the bows by force.

* See "Battle in the Dawn"

Warned by his scouting hunters to the southwest, Hok marshaled sixty of his own stark fighters on a rise of ground where the invaders must pass. Djoma, marching by night with intent to surprise the Flint People around their breakfast fires, came just at the first gray flush of autumn dawn upon a ready skirmish line of warriors, brawny and bearded, clad in skins of lion, wolf and bear, ready to shoot with the bow or strike with the axe.

In front of these defenders strode Hok himself, taller and broader than any man on the field. The skin of a cave-lion was slung around his powerful loins, moccasins of bull-hide shod his feet. The wings of a hawk were bound to his temples, and he bore in one hand a bow with arrow ready on string, in the other a war-axe with a blade of black flint a full span wide. This latter he tossed high in the air like a baton, catching it deftly as it descended.

"Hai, you strangers, you eaters of fish!" he thundered his defiance. "What do you seek here?"

"We seek those things you call bows," replied Djoma, quickly and to the point. He, too, came forward from his horde, and he showed almost, if not quite, as tall as Hok. Sunlight on the water had long ago burnt him as brown as a field stone, and his black beard spread in a sooty cascade over his broad, bare chest. He carried a stabbing-spear, with a shaft as thick as his wrist and longer than his body. "I sent a man to get them, but—"

"Ho! Ho!" laughed Hok. "Does that man's back still tingle from the drubbing our little sons gave him? We surrender none of our things when proud strangers command them. Come and take them if you can, Djoma the Fisher. I think it is something else you will get, less to your liking than bows."

Djoma roared to his swarthy follow-

ing, which roared back and charged. At once Hok gave an order of his own, and the Flint People lifted their bows. A blizzard of arrows met the onslaught full and fair, striking down men on all hands. The charge wavered, while the defenders quickly set new shafts to their strings. Another deadly volley might have turned Djoma's threatening advance into a rout.

But then there fell from heaven a fiery thing that for the instant made all the dimness of heaven as bright as noontide—fell hard and heavy upon the rise of ground which Hok's men held and up which Djoma was trying to charge. It struck where an outcropping of a certain soft black stone showed.

AS the prodigy rocketed down to earth, the two opposing throngs, defending bowmen and rushing Fishers, gave a concerted yell of amazed terror and flung themselves flat on the earth. Only Hok, in the forefront of his party and nearest of all to the place where the thing struck, remained on his feet and gazed. The earth reeled under him, like a treetop in a gale. Next instant, an upflung lump of the soft black stone struck him hard in the face, so that he seemed to whirl away into an emptiness as black as the stone itself.

When his senses crept back into him, the sun was up and bright, and he was alone. Apparently the battle had rolled away from him—he saw only dead, both of his own folk and of the Fishers. It was hot, too. The heat was what had awakened him. It seemed that the earth was afire near by, and a morning wind had sprung up, enlivening the blaze and straining it toward him.

Blinking and snorting, Hok got to his feet. His head ached from the chance blow that had stunned him, but he had been stunned before, and like the later Athenians always treated headaches with contempt. He gazed about him, wondering again which way the battle had gone. Beside him lay his own bow and axe—his own side must have triumphed, else surely he would have been killed and plundered as he lay helpless. Thus allaying any anxiety, he turned back to the strange fire.

It filled the rift in the slope where the outcropping of black stone had been, now torn open as if by the blow of a mighty axe. The breeze, blowing into the opening, fanned the flame to an intense pallid heat. Hok came as close as the scorching air would allow, peering. He could see the thing that had fallen from the sky, in the very midst of the furnace. It was a round, glowing lump, bigger than his head.

"The Shining One hurled it," he remembered in his heart, "for it came from the sky, his home. Was he displeased with me, or was it a warning? . . . Had he truly wished to, he could have killed me like a fly."

Hok stooped and picked up a piece of the outflung black stone. Tentatively he tossed it at the glowing lump in the hottest heart of the fire. It seemed to him that the black stone vanished at once.

"Hai! The thing eats black stones," he mused. Some paces downhill from the fire showed another outcropping. Going there, Hok pried out great brittle chunks of the stuff and filled his arms with them. They blackened his chest and ribs, but he bore his burden to the fire and threw it in.

"If you are a living thing, from the Shining One, Hok is your friend," he announced. "I will bring you all you wish of the black stone."

He did what he could to fulfill this promise. Again and again he brought as much as he could carry, ripping out great dusty boulders of the material with his huge hands, later by prying at

it with the stout handle of his axe. High he piled the dark heap, shutting away the flames. It made a cairn as high as his chest, and wider across than he could have spanned in three strides. "That should satisfy the thing," he decided.

But he was wrong. There was a crackling and a steaming. Between the bigger lumps darted tongues of the inner fire. As Hok gazed, fascinated and wondering, the whole heap suddenly burst into roaring holocaust. He was forced to retreat before it.

"The black stones burn!" he cried. "Yes, and more hotly than wood!"*

SO small a thing as a battle with invaders was now driven from his mind. The Shining One had thrown down a marvel to him, and it behooved him to see it out. See it out Hok did, while the sun climbed higher and higher, and the blaze shot up higher than a tall tree, died down. Hok was able to approach again. At length there came a rain, a spatter that was brisk but not heavy. The fire, burning itself out, perished. He walked close, his moccasins squelching in the damp.

"Where is the gift of heaven?" he asked the smouldering ashes. With reverent insistence, he poked among them with the butt of his axe.

Something gleamed up, like water, but hard—like ice, but warm. Grunting in his new amazement, Hok scooped the ashes away to either side.

The meteor that had fallen and set so great a fire was reduced by its own works to a jagged piece of fused clinker. But from the heart of it had issued something long and lean and straight, like a sleeping snake. The thing was still hot as Hok touched it, and he had to drag it forth in a fold of his lion's skin—it was as broad as his three fingers, and well longer than his arm, tapering to a point and harder than any flint he had ever known. Yet, hard as it was, it had a springy temper to it that no stone had ever displayed.* Holding the broad end in wrappings of skin, Hok hefted it.

"The gift of heaven!" he called it again. "This is a weapon, then. But how to use it?"

The rain had abated. Hok bore his find away toward his village, studying it intently with the eye of a master workman.

It already had the beginnings of an edge to either side of it, sharper than his sharpest chipped stone, and its point was finer and leaner than any dagger he knew. As with flints, Hok tried to improve the thing by chipping with a small, heavy hammer-stone. The substance rang to a tone he had never heard before, but showed no breakage or other great effect. He learned to rub and whet, and this made the edge keener. So Hok labored as he strolled on toward home, and as he came thither in the late afternoon he had finished the blade to his liking—with a keen point, a slicing edge, and at the broad end a grip for his hand wound tightly with rawhide thongs slit from his lion's skin.

He grinned and chuckled over the thing. First he would show it to Oloana, his comely wife, who always shared his triumphs and enthusiasms—her midnight eyes would glow like stars at the sight of this new thing. And he would let Ptao, his bright-haired little son, try to lift the thing's long weight. . . .

"Hok! Hok!"

* No formal history can trace the first use of coal, which must have been accidental as in the present example. The early great civilizations knew nothing of coal, but European barbarians before the Roman conquest seem to have used it since prehistoric times.—Ed.

* Meteoric iron generally has from 4 to 10 per cent of nickel, with traces of cobalt, copper, tin and carbon—an alloy that is a makeshift steel, not at all unsuitable for making weapons.—Ed.

HIS brother Zhik, sub-chief under him, was running toward him from the direction of the village. "You live!" he panted.

"Of course I live," said Hok, laying his sword across his arm for easier carrying. "How went the fight after I was knocked over? Did you kill many of the Fishers before they ran?"

"Before—they ran?" Zhik repeated, and shook his tawny head. "But they did not run, Hok—we did."

Hok straightened up and glared, his teeth showing. "Ran? We? How was that, Zhik?"

His brother spread helpless hands. "It was that thing that fell and struck you down. Because it fell toward us—"

Hok clutched Zhik's arm to calm him. "What happened? Speak clearly, and briefly."

The words came out in a tumble. "We were frightened. The Fishers yelled to each other that the spirits fought on their side, and came at us. They drove us before them. You were thought to be dead, and nobody touched you, since heaven itself had claimed your life—"

"But I am alive," Hok assured him again. "Well, and after you ran from them?"

"We ran, thinking the Shining One hated us. But Oloana, when we told her at the village, insisted on going to find your body." Zhik shook his head ruefully. "We tried to make her stay, but she would go—she and Ptao, your son."

Hok suddenly grew chill, as though new and cold rain had fallen upon him. He sensed worse news to come. "Why have I not met them, then?" he asked.

Zhik grimaced wretchedly over what he must say. "The—the Fishers had followed us for some distance, picking up some bows dropped by our wounded. And they came upon Oloana and Ptao, carrying them back toward their village by the sea."

The glare in Hok's blue eyes grew paler and hotter. His big right hand closed upon the hide-wrapped hilt of the sword that was cradled on his left arm. "They captured Oloana and Ptao?" he repeated. "And no man tried to stop them—not even you, my brother?"

"We thought it was the will of the Shining One, grown angry. We did not know that you were alive—" Zhik broke off, and put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Come to the village. Eat and rest. We will rally the warriors that are left. When they see that you live, they will follow—"

"There is not time. Go back, and say that I have followed Djoma and his skulking Fishers." Hok suddenly lifted the sword. It caught the glow of the sun in blinding flashes. He flourished it above his blond head bound with the hawk wings.

"The Shining One gave me this," he cried, "and gave me also a deed to do; worthy of such a weapon—I want no help from the others. This sharp Widow-maker will cut me a way through the Fishers, and gain back what I have lost! Good-by, Zhik!"

He spun around and set off at a run, his eyes searching the plain for the tracks of his enemies.

SHANG, the great cave-bear,* had scented food earlier that day—tender meat, human meat—and had followed it hungrily up wind. The first

* The cave-bear, *Ursus spelaus*, was a larger and heavier creature than his modern cousin, and was a contemporary and enemy of stone-age man. The cave-drawings of Aurignacan and Magdalenean times include many representations of the cave-bear, and at least one cave-bear skeleton shows marks of a fierce attack with stone weapons.—Ed.

chill of autumn, that had turned the leaf-thickets brown and yellow and crimson, had been felt by Shang. He had been eating nuts, adding layers to the store of fat that covered his powerful frame against the long winter sleep in his cavern, and the flesh of man would prove a welcome variant. But there had been too many men, all armed and close together. Shang had watched them from a distance, his big brown body hidden in bushes—dark, bearded males, with among them one woman and one boy, these bound and guarded. Shang's mouth watered for the boy in particular, but he dared not charge the whole throng. Men had a way of fighting as an aggregation. And so he let the horde go by, dolefully and grumpily watching.

It was only a little later that he smelled man again, then sighted him. A straggler? No, for this was of another sort—big and blond and ruddy, this one, and his eyes were on the tracks of the previous party. Shang, wise in animal divination, recognized that he was a stern fighter and a brave one. But Shang did not fear one human being, even as big and resolute-seeming a one as this. He waited until the solitary marcher came within six bounds of the hiding place in the bushes; then, with a deafening cry that was half cough, half roar, he charged.

Hok took one glance at the apparition—a shaggy dun monster almost as large as a bison bull, with an open red mouth that could have engulfed his head at a single snap—and quickly sprang aside. As Shang blundered past and wheeled for another rush, Hok swarmed up the nearest tree, a thriving young beech, and came to rest in the main fork.

Howling and snarling, Shang reared his bulk to a height half again that of a tall man, and with claws like daggers he ripped and tore at the bark of the tree. But he could not climb after Hok, as a smaller and more active bear might, and the fork was well out of his reach.* Slavering hungrily, he circled the tree and flourished those immense armed paws.

HOK gazed at him, then away toward the west and south. In that direction led the trail of Djoma and the Fisher war party—and Oloana and Ptao. He himself was safe from the ravening beast, but only as long as he remained stranded. What would happen meanwhile? Leaning down, he addressed the big cave-bear:

"Hai, Shang, who would eat me—what if I come down to dispute the matter with you?" He twiddled the sword, that had never left his hand. "I am but one man against your paws and teeth, but the Shining One has given me a fang to match yours. Hai!" he ejaculated again. "I will wait no longer. Prepare to fight for your dinner, Shang."

He paused only to slash away a thick branch of the tree and trim its foliage. The heavy, sharp sword clove the wood as though it were a grass-stalk. Hok grunted his approval, and suddenly tumbled himself out of his perch, landing upright on his moccasined feet, sword and branch lifted in his hands.

"Come, Shang, and eat Hok! He has proved a tough morsel for hungrier beasts than you."

As though he understood the challenge, Shang heaved himself upright on his rear legs again. Monstrous, grossly manlike, he lumbered forward to strike this impudent human thing to earth. Hok laughed, as always in the face of deadly peril. His right hand advanced

* Remains of *Ursus spelaus* show that, for all the size of the animal, the phalanges bearing the claws were weak, denoting a loss of climbing ability from long dwelling in caves.—Ed.

the sword.

Shang dabbed at the shiny thing the man was holding out. In times past he had encountered weapons, and had knocked their wooden hafts to splinters with sweeps of his paws before descending upon the unarmed wielder. But he barely touched the iron, then snatched back his big forefoot with a howl of pain. The edge, whetted assiduously by Hok, had laid open Shang's calloused palm to the bone.

"You taste the Widow-maker, Shang," Hok taunted him. "Come, try with that other paw."

Shang was not one to give up for one wound. He tramped closer, both arms lifted, his mouth open and steaming. Hok gazed for a long, meditative moment, down that gaping throat. Then he suddenly sprang to meet the huge beast.

His left hand thrust with the branch, jagged butt foremost. It went between the open jaws, stabbing the gullet cruelly. A strangled yell rose from Shang's deep chest, and both paws struck at the stout billet of beechwood. Hok, safe for the moment from blow or hug, struck with what he held in his right hand.

The gleaming gray blade, swift as a serpent's tongue, pierced Shang's broad belly. As it went home, Hok ripped upward with all his strength, drew his weapon clear and sprang backward as far as he could. Shang, still erect, stared and gestured stupidly. Then he toppled forward, with an abrupt thud that shook the earth.

Hok waved the sword, now running blood to its hilt.

"The gift of heaven is a great marvel and magic," he exulted. "What spear or axe could have slain Shang so swiftly?"

From his head he stripped the hawk wings and tossed them on the subsiding body of the bear. If Zhik rallied the warriors and led them after him, they would come upon this evidence of Widow-maker's deadliness, would see by the hawk wings that Hok was the single-handed slayer. It would give them heart after their defeat.

Meanwhile, Hok took up once more the trail of Djoma's band.

"WOMAN," said Djoma haughtily, "there is no need for you to look back. You will not see that country again."

Oloana, bound and dishevelled in the midst of the marching Fishers, faced him with an air fully as haughty as his own. So did the lad Ptao, who trudged at her side with arms trussed but with frost-yellow head flung desperately high.

"Hok the Mighty is my husband," said Oloana with murderous dignity. "He will follow and take revenge. Even now he may be on your heels."

At that word it was Djoma who glanced back, suddenly and with furtive excitement, as though Oloana had conjured up a great honey-haired menace. But the back trail, through thickets and over knolls, was empty of any hostile figure. Recapturing his boldness. Djoma sought to wither her:

"I say again that Hok was stricken dead, by the fire-ball sent by his own angry god. He alone dared stand up before it, and in punishment he was slain."

"We passed the place of the battle," reminded Oloana. "I saw other dead, and on the ground lay Hok's bow and his axe, but not his body. He lives and follows. Prepare your skull for smashing, because he will not spare you."

"If he was gone, the angry Shining One carried him away," insisted Djoma. "In any case, my god is stronger than yours—he is the Sea-Father. Did he

not give me victory? Did he not send rain at the moment I captured you, to show that you were his gift to me? Let Hok come, if he still lives. I will shed his blood with this spear." He flourished the weapon boldly, and his men, hearing the vaunt, yelled approval.

"My father will pluck you to pieces like a little roast sparrow," spoke up the proud young voice of Ptao. "When I am grown—"

"And when, cub, will you be grown?" jeered one of the men who marched as a guard beside him. "We will take you to our place by the sea, and there we will eat you."

"I would sicken your narrow stomach," snapped the boy. "Eat fish, and leave strong meat alone."

One or two of the captors laughed at this repartee, and the guardsman growled. The march continued in silence.

THE young son of Djoma, a towering youth with a downy black beard that grew in two points, came close to his father. "I am old enough to marry," he ventured. "Let me have this woman we took from the enemy. See, she has dark hair, like our own people. And she is strong and brave and good to look upon. To judge from that sharp-tongued son of hers, she would give fine warriors to make the tribe mighty."

"Speak of this another time, Caggo," bade Djoma gruffly. His own eyes were bright as he studied Oloana sidelong. She strode free and proud, for all her plight. Djoma was remembering that he, too, was without a mate since Caggo's mother had been snapped up by a shark while swimming a year ago. If Oloana had been the mate of one mighty chief, what more fitting than that he take her for himself? . . . "Such things as concern captive women are to be decided by council of the elders," he elaborated. "Wait until we get home."

Caggo nodded acceptance, but contrived to walk near the prisoner, admiring her frankly. She spat once between his tramping feet, and took no other notice of him.

"We have heard little of you Fishers, for we never troubled ourselves about your country or possessions," she told Djoma balefully. "But now Hok will give you his attention, and you will not find it welcome. I think that stealing me will be the worst day's work you have ever done."

"We will see, we will see," said Djoma darkly, but once again he glanced hurriedly backward. His eyes dilated with sudden panic. Was that a human figure, that thing showing itself briefly among bushes far behind? If so, what did it bear that gleamed like sun on the sea? He looked hard, but saw nothing else. The thing had ducked from sight, if indeed he had really seen something. Djoma cursed himself roundly for letting his nervousness create visions. Perhaps some beast of prey, coming to the deserted battlefield, had dragged away the corpse of the Flint People's chief, because it was the largest there. In any case, Hok was dead. He, Djoma, had seen the fellow fall. And Djoma must remember in the meanwhile his own position as a leader. There must be no appearance of fear.

Yet the feeling could not be rationalized away. That night the band camped by a grass-collared spring, and ate in serious silence its ration of sun-dried fish. Oloana and Ptao, tied by the feet to a sapling, refused with disgust offerings of such food,* and talked loftily to each other of the vengeance to be taken upon the impudent raiders who had dared use them thus.

* Most inland savages, unfamiliar with fish, are suspicious of it. Both the Apaches and Zulus repudiated it as poison.—Ed.

But as night fell, Djoma looked once more along the back trail that was now too dim to be seen, and gave an order. Some of his warriors unslung the foot-lashings of the prisoners and herded them well away from the camp, binding them again under some low brown bushes. Djoma camped there also, with Caggo and one or two others. They spent the night without a fire—dangerous to do in strange country, but Djoma felt somehow that camping with a fire would be more dangerous still.

There were yells in the night. At dawn, Djoma returned to the main bivouac and learned that at dead of night something had struck down two of his sentries and raged through the camp, killing a third man and injuring five more before it was driven away. Nobody was sure who—or what—the attacker was. The wounds it had dealt were strange enough; deep, clean slashes, terrible to see, and one almost delicate stab.

Djoma ordered a forced march home.

CHAPTER III

THUS Hok, following on their heels, was not able to raid a second night camp, for Djoma marched all that night. He and his men were back in familiar country by now, and made better progress than their lone pursuer, who furthermore had a close call with a black leopard in a little glen between two of the wooded hills. By the next dawn, Hok was far behind in his chase. He wiped Widow-maker clean of leopard blood with a handful of coarse ferns, and studied the trail.

"Here among the warriors marched Oloana," he decided, picking out certain narrow footmarks. "Yes, and here went Ptao beside her—not faltering, but striding out like a warrior. O Shining One!" and he raised his anxious face to the rising orb on the eastern rim. "Keep my wife and son alive until I come at their captors with Widow-maker, your gift. Keep that chief of the Fishers alive, also—let nothing befall him save at my hand."

He trotted ahead on his grim lone hunt.

In the early afternoon of this third day, he came out from among heights, hills and thickets upon a rocky stretch of plain. Beyond was a ridge of gray granite, with a gnarled oak tree growing at its foot, the leaves turning tawny with autumn's first frosts. The multitude of footmarks, so easy to trace across the soil of forest or meadow, was all but lost on this hard surface. Hok went more than half by guess, up the ridge to the backbone of rock at the top.

It was hot underfoot, with a heat more than that of the autumn sun. Hok paused, looking this way and that. Beyond was more timber, but sparse-grown and stunted by the wind that blew from the sea—he could see that, too, on the horizon, a chill gray gleam like the light reflected from Widow-maker. To his right rose a shimmer in the air, as from a great fire. Hok scowled.

"Have men camped here?" he asked himself, looked again, and crossed the rocks to investigate. The footing grew hotter to his moccasins, but he did not see the cause until he was almost upon it—a deep pit, round and as wide across, perhaps, as a man is tall. That pit was filled with fire, blue and orange, with no discernible bottom or source of fuel supply. Hok came as close as he could, gazing down.

"The Lair of Fire," he said aloud. "I have heard of this place from traveler guests at my cave. It has always been thus, though nobody knows where the fire gets its fuel—fire cannot burn

rocks and earth.* It is a strange matter." He peered into the Lair of Fire again. "It is a good omen that my path should cross here, for fire is of the Shining One, who watches over me at this place."

Silently the blue-yellow flames fluttered, and one of them rose momentarily, pale and lean as the blade of Widow-maker.

"The fire makes me a sign—a sign concerning my weapon," Hok decided. "What is it that you wish to say, fire?"

There was a rose-tinted swirl in the blue heart of the glow, and several flames sprang up, seeming to pen like begging fingers toward him. Hok drew away.

"You want your gift again," he said accusingly. "No, fire. Widow-maker is a gift from the Shining One, not a loan. I need the gift to win back what the Fisher chief dared to steal from me."

The pit glowed redly, as if with sudden anger, and Hok made hasty departure. Going down the other side of the ridge, his feet gratefully found cooler earth. But his mind remained troubled.

Why had there been a sign at the Lair of Fire that he must give up his sword? Did the Shining One repent of his generosity? Was Hok to be warned from the adventure he had undertaken? The big man scowled and wagged his golden head, as though to banish the disturbing mystery from his thoughts. He picked up the trail of Djoma once more, and made speed upon it.

NIGHT had fallen, nippy and moonless, upon a broad bay of the ocean where Djoma and his followers had their habitation. To seaward flickered a multitude of red lights, the supper-fires of the village, seeming to float on the surface of the quiet water. On shore, just above high tide mark, burned a single blaze of driftwood, with a greenish tinge to it because of the crusting of salt on the sticks. Near by a dugout canoe had been dragged up. Within the circle of light squatted two black-haired sentries, each with his spear thrust into the sand beside him. After the manner of sentries since time's beginning, they grumbled at extra duty.

"How can this pursuer, if he is but one man as it seems, be a threat to our entire people?" demanded one. "I think that Djoma is too easily frightened."

"Do not let him hear you say so," councilled his companion, "or he will prove his courage by dashing out your brains with his axe. I saw that sun-haired giant at work the night he raided our camp, and he is a fierce one. Perhaps Djoma is right to leave a guard on shore here, where he must come if he is to attack our village. Yet I wish it was another than I who sat here with you." The warrior stretched and yawned. "I am weary from much marching and fighting."

The first speaker sat up more alertly, his ears seeming to prick. "What was that?" he demanded sharply. "It sounded like a scraping or crawling upon the beach, just there beyond the firelight." And he pointed.

The other laughed. "You hear strange things because you are young and nervous. When you are my age, and have stood many night watches, you will be calm and brave. That noise was a snake, or a nesting bird."

The younger man had forgotten his criticism of Djoma. "If the stranger

* The Lair of Fire was a well of natural gas, set ablaze by lightning or other cause, such a phenomenon as exists in many volcanic regions throughout the world.—Ed.

comes—" he began.

"We will both stay awake," his comrade comforted him. "The light of our fire will shine on that strange weapon as he comes. We will both yell, and charge him from either side. Help will come to us at once, many men in canoes from the village."

The plan recommended itself to the nervous one. "We might kill him before any came," he suggested. "Then Djoma would praise us, perhaps make us sub-chiefs. . . . Listen! I heard the noise again."

His more sober companion had heard it likewise. They both rose swiftly, seizing their spears.

"It came from directly landward of our fire," whispered the less agitated warrior. "Let us move forward a little distance apart, so that we can come up on any stranger from both sides. Then, if he attacks one of us, the other can stab him in the back."

"Well said," muttered the youth approvingly. They advanced with stealthy strides, weapons poised. Again the cooler head of the two was struck with an idea. He snapped his fingers for attention, then pointed with his spear toward a great tussock of broad-leafed vegetation that thrust up from the sand, the only nearby cover that might shelter a man. The two tightened their grips on their weapons, and charged.

AS one they hurled themselves upon the tussock, as one they plunged their points into its heart—just an instant too late.

For Hok, within that shelter, had divined their purpose. He had leaped back and up, just as the spears crossed in the tangle of leaves and drove deep into the sand on which he had been crouching. Next moment he shot out his two long arms in opposite directions, fastening a hand on each of the swarthy throats of his would be slayers.

Two hairy mouths fell open to scream for help, but Hok's quick grip had been sure and tight. No wind could come from panting lungs to give those mouths voice. Letting go of their spears, the two men strove frantically to tear away the giant fingers that strangled them. But Hok, strongest man of his time and country, laughed harshly, while his double clutch tightened as mercilessly and progressively as rawhide lashings in a hot, dry sun.

"You wanted to find me," he taunted his two victims. "You found me. Ah, you have eaten too many fish, and your mouths gape. You are dying like fish drawn out of the water . . . your flappings grow weak, weak . . . they cease."

He released the two limp-grown forms, and they collapsed in one heap at his feet. Hok spurned them, but they were both finished. He chuckled again, without mirth, and rubbed his terrible hands together. Walking forward to the fire and beyond it, he stared at the lights of the village across the water.

"I have disposed of the two warders, and without warning from this place none will expect me out there. What sort of place is Djoma's village—an island?"

Beside him was drawn up the canoe, hollowed by fire from a single log, but Hok did not know how to use such a device. He tested the lashings that moored Widow-maker to the girdle at his waist, then waded quickly into the sea-water. With powerful, silent strokes he swam toward the place where his wife and son were held prisoner.

As he approached through the water, the fire-lights seemed to rise from before him to hang above him—they were kindled at a height. Now he drew close enough to see that an angular blackness,

more solid than the mere gloom-color of the night, rose from the quiet waves. The island must be rocky. He paddled in noiselessly to where there would be a shore.

But there was no shore.

CHAPTER IV

HOK was puzzled, his blue eyes narrowing in the dark. Was he swimming into a sea-cave? Turning over on his back, he groped to right and left with his hands. The cave, if it was such, must be very wide. He let himself float to one side, and collided with wood, apparently a tree-trunk growing out of the water at this point. Puzzled and cautious, he drew himself up and climbed it. For more than his own height he clambered above water level, holding on to old broken branch-stubs. Lifting his hand, he felt wood above him—solid wood, a seeming roof of it. If this was indeed a cave, then the cave was made of tree-stuffs instead of rock-stuffs, with water for floor. Hok slid carefully down again, and swam a little way back the way he had come.

He began to skirt the village, trying to see what it stood on, if not an island. All he could make out at first was a cliff-like overhang that shut away the light of fire and stars. Then, around to one side, he came to where a hut stood at the very edge of things, with a fire at its doorway. People lounged there, talking. Hok lay low in the brine, and by the firelight made out the mystery in part.

The seeming riddle was that this island-thing was truly made of wood—made by man, by Djoma and his tribe, probably started long before them by their fathers. Up from the harbor bed projected tree-trunks, on the forked tops of which had been laid rafterlike poles. These in turn supported close-laid crosspieces of wood, each the half of a split log with the flat side up. All this was bound by broad lashings of rawhide, dried until it was as old and hard as flint itself. Upon this platform stood huts, of mud-daubed wickerwork with thatch roofs, just as the huts of Hok's own tribe stood on solid earth.

It behooved Hok to learn more about this strange construction. He dipped under water and swam down to the base of one upright log. It had no roots in the sea-bottom, but had been driven there somehow, and was made solid by the heaping of big stones around it. Lashings to cross-bars, which were lashed in turn to other uprights, made it still more strongly set in place. Hok swam on around the village of the Fishers. He saw that it was of the same fashioning throughout—hundreds of big trunks, each painfully hewn on shore with stone axes, then floated out and planted on end in a predecided position, and finally the complex fabric of the platform woven and lashed and built upon the top of this artificial water-forest. He shook his drenched head in wonder. Such a work represented collossal effort and ingenuity. It must have taken years—lifetimes, perhaps. Finished, it gave the Fishers a fortress almost unvanquishable, where they could live securely, protected in the midst of the waters that also furnished their scaly food.*

AT a corner near the shore was a low-set section of platform, its

* Such stilt-supported communities were one of the most elaborate triumphs of prehistoric man's inventive genius, arguing considerable industry and cooperative planning. The most interesting remains have been discovered in old lake beds of Switzerland. Probably others existed at the seashore of the Stone Age and were washed away. Venice and the Aztec capitol of Tenochtitlan were elaborations of the water-town idea, and the savages of New Guinea still build such towns.—Ed.

edges sloping down almost to water level. All around this were tied up the scores of dugout canoes that belonged to Djoma's people. But on this platform was another sentry party, four or five men this time, gathered around a fire that had a hearth of flat stones set in clay. They would discover Hok if he clambered out, probably would kill him before he could gain his feet and defend himself. He must win foothold in the village at another point.

Even as he came to this realization, something made a swishing sweep through the water at him.

He kicked sidewise only in the nick of time. A shark, thrice his length, slid past like a javelin within arm's reach of him, then brought itself round with frightening grace to make another ravenous charge.

Hok dipped his right arm down under water, seizing the hilt of Widow-maker. With a jerk he broke the sword loose from its lashings at his waist. The shark was upon him again, and he saved himself from a crippling bite by putting his left palm on its ugly snub nose, letting himself be carried backward through the water. At the same time he brought up Widow-maker's point, in the knowing way he had already learned. It grated on the coarse sandy hide, and he gave a vigorous shove. A moment later the shark's throat was pierced and Hok threw himself strongly sidewise, dragging on the hilt and opening the wound into a terrible gash.

The shark gave a convulsive leap clear of the water, almost disarming Hok as he dragged Widow-maker clear. It fell back with a mighty splash, and writhed past him, so that its coarse hard hide rasped skin from his shoulder. Hok swam swiftly away, for the commotion had attracted the attention of the sentries on the boat-platform. With yells and cries the men caught brands from their fire and held them aloft, shedding light over the sea. Hok, coming under the shelter of the higher platform well beyond, saw the waves he had just quitted being churned into awful turmoil.

The wounded shark was being set upon by its comrades—a whole school of them. The harbor must have been well swarmed by the ravenous creatures, drawn to the village of Djoma by the mass of refuse thrown from its platform daily, and it was a wonder that Hok had not been molested before. Even now, some of the sharks that had gathered to the smell of gushing blood turned off to pursue him. With Widow-maker held crosswise in his teeth, Hok swiftly climbed one of the uprights that supported the platform, clinging to it just beneath the cross-logs, while sharks drew silently into a press below him. Immediately overhead there was a thundering, shaking rush—the struggle of the great creatures near the boat-platform was drawing a fascinated throng of Fishers to see and exclaim.

HOK stayed where he was, with enemy warriors and their families racing above him and hungry sharks snapping just beneath his moccasin-soles, until the platform above him vibrated no longer. Then he caught hold of a horizontal pole, drew himself up and swung his weight upon the broad floor that supported the village. Quickly he crept between two of the deserted huts, glancing in all directions to make certain that he had been unobserved. This part of the village, at least, was completely deserted. Hok moved stealthily inward among the press of dwellings, toward a large central one which must be the habitation of Djoma.

This was really a combination building, made up of several huts joined with

tunnel-like passages to make a structure of several rooms that would house the chief, his family and dependents. Here, at least, remained someone—a guard, gazing wistfully in the direction of the torchlight and turmoil. He plainly stayed where he was under orders, to watch over something of value within.

Hok felt that he was close to the thing he had sought. Slipping around the side of the house as noiselessly and grimly as a huge blond ghost, he clove the man's skull with Widow-maker. Leaping across the body as it fell, he entered the place where Djoma lived.

A few coals of fire burned upon a broad hearth of stones set in clay, and he stirred them up with his sword-point. At once he beheld one of the treasures the warrior had been left to protect—the captured bows that Djoma had gleaned from the field of that unlucky battle three days ago. They were bound into a great sheaf, a good load for a strong man. Hok dragged them out, found a place in the platform where a split log was poorly fastened. He cut the stout lashings and pried the slab loose, then pushed the bundle of weapons through and heard it splash beneath. No Fisher would ever use those captured bows nor learn from studying them how to make similar ones—the tide would wash them out to sea. But this was only the smaller item of Hok's double quest. Where were Djoma's captives?

He entered the hut again, peering around in the half-gloom. "Oloana!" he called softly. "Where are you?"

"Hok!" came back a glad cry, and with a leap he was across the floor, hewing with Widow-maker at a woven door that blocked off one of the sections of the multiple hut. The tough withes that had made the basket-like obstruction fell to pieces before his onslaught, and from the dark hole thus exposed Oloana and Ptao rushed out. He caught one in each arm, and all three hugged, muttered and chuckled in their joy of reunion.

"I knew my father would come," Ptao found breath to say. "I told them that—both Djoma and Caggo. They laughed, but I knew from their eyes that they were afraid."

"Djoma and Caggo," repeated Hok. "Djoma is the chief of these Fisherfolk, I believe, but who is Caggo?"

"The son of Djoma," Oloana informed him. "He has spoken of taking me as his wife. I scratched his face once, and he keeps away, but he swears to tame me."

"I will find occasion to speak to Caggo," promised Hok, "but first, to get you free of this place, which smells of rotten fish."

"That you will never do," growled a voice behind them.

CHAPTER V

INTENT on freeing his loved ones, Hok for once had relaxed that stern sense of vigilance that every hunter and warrior must have and employ if he will prosper. The Fishers had returned from the diversion made by the sharks, had overheard Hok in the hut, and now they swarmed within the doorway and on the platform outside and around—warriors to the front, armed and fierce. In the fore of the throng stood Caggo, towering up to Hok's height and extending almost as broad across the chest and shoulders. With one foot he kicked up the fire, making light for all to see. His right hand lifted an axe of obsidian, black and broad. Just behind him, with a spear similarly poised, scowled Djoma.

"You did come, Hok," said Djoma in a voice as bitter-cold as the drip from a crag of ice. "I thought you dead,

slain by your own god. Well, it proves that your god is weaker even than I thought. I will do a better job than he."

Hok moved so that his body sheltered Oloana and Ptao. His grip tightened on the thong-bound hilt of Widow-maker.

"The Shining One gave me this weapon," he cried, and the declaration rang like a blow of the sword itself. "Widow-maker has drunk the blood of many Fishers. He will drink more, whenever you move to attack."

"Huh!" snorted Caggo. "I do not fear that shiny thing, which looks more like an icicle than any club or spear. You seek to frighten us by lies, Hok. I myself will cut you down, and that woman of yours will see that I am greater than you and worth having."

He dared to grin impudently at Oloana, who stood behind Hok, and Hok went mad.

"A-hai!"

Widow-maker sang in the air, and Caggo did not dodge quickly enough. The edge took him on the jowl. Away flew his shaggy dark head, like a flung clod. Only the grin remained—the grin and the double-pointed beard—for all the rest had been smitten cleanly from Caggo's body by that terrible slash. And while all the Fishers stared in frozen horror, the grin seemed to relax and grow wry as if, even without a head, Caggo knew that oblivion had come upon him. The lifted axe sank down in the lifeless hand, the knees bent and buckled, the decapitated body sank down and collapsed.

Hok broke that stunned silence with a joyous yell of battle, and charged into the thick of the Fishers. Thrust, slash, hack—three of them were down in the space of as many breaths. The others shrank and scrambled away. Had they not been cramped inside the narrow door those nearest him might have pressed back and created a rout of the whole party. But the stout walls of mud and wicker hemmed them in with him, and they must fight. All around him they waved their weapons.

"Do not kill!" thundered the voice of Djoma, who had himself retreated into a corner before Hok's rush. "Take him alive—drag him down, bind him!"

IT was easier said than done, but a horrified youth chanced to run blindly upon Hok's point. Widow-maker wedged between two ribs, and before Hok could wrench the iron clear, the others rushed from all sides. They swarmed over Hok like ants. He stumbled and fell, then struggled up with a powerful effort, shaking himself free and striking in all directions. Oloana screamed a warning, but too late—Djoma, running up from behind, struck once with the clubbed haft of his spear. Hok felt a thick blackness swallow up his senses.

He awoke to the impact of many water-drops—he was outside, and it was raining. Many voices murmured around him. Opening his eyes, he saw that dawn was coming among the clouds.

"See, he wakens, he lives," cackled a wrinkled old woman with cruel features. "I thought him dead, he lay still so long."

"Had he died I would have been sorry," responded the voice of Djoma. "Look up, Hok. You are my captive. To show his favor, the Sea-Father sends rain. It is his sign, veiling the weak face of your Shining One."

The prisoner sat up. He was bound with many tight-drawn straps around legs, arms and body—straps of fish skin. The swarthy folk who had captured him had canoed him ashore from their water-girt village, and had laid

him upon a great rock on the beach. Beside him was Oloana, also bound, and little Ptao. They had both been staring anxiously, and as Hok showed that he was alive and undamaged, they had the heart to smile. He smiled back, with an expression full of love and encouragement.

Djoma did not like such evidence of cheer among his captives, for he cleared his throat snarlingly to attract their attention. The light rain flowed down his beard in silvery drops.

"You killed my son, Hok," he said coldly.

"I meant to," replied Hok, his muscles surging against his bonds. "If I were free, and had Widow-maker, I would kill you as well."

"But you are not free," taunted Djoma. "As for the thing you call Widow-maker, it is here." He held out the sword, still bloody from the death-blows Hok had dealt with it. As he spoke, lightning crackled across the sky, and thunder roared.

"Ah," said Hok, "your Sea-Father is not the only one who sends signs. There was a javelin of fire waved by the Shining One."

"But the rain drowned it at once," flung back Djoma. "My god is far stronger than yours."

"Hear him, Shining One," muttered Hok tensely. "Set me free, that I may drive his lies down his throat."

Djoma laughed at the prayer. "Your worship will do you no good, Hok. I have won."

Hok again strove to break the fish-skin cords. They creaked, but held. "Set me free," he challenged, while the rain beat on his head and shoulders. "My bare hands against whatever weapons you choose—even against Widow-maker. We will see then who is the stronger. I dare you to do battle with me!"

IT was a bold defiance, and had its effect upon the listening Fishers who stood grouped all around. They muttered together, perhaps hoping that the test would be made—a fight between chiefs was always well worth watching. But Djoma, whose theological arguments had been so good, had yet another answer ready.

"You shall die without the chance to fight, Hok. Bound as you are, you shall be thrown from the platform of my village where the water is deepest and the sharks are thickest. What they leave of you will bait fish for us. But first," and his black-bright eyes turned toward Ptao, "there is something you must watch."

Hok, too, gazed at Ptao through the downpour, and the fear he would not confess for himself could not be hid as he wondered how the boy was threatened. Djoma noted, and chuckled his triumph.

"You struck down Caggo, my son. So, Hok, I will strike down yours."

For a moment Hok thought that blackness would overwhelm him again. Mightily he strove to gain his feet, but they were bound at the ankles and would not gain a grip on the rock. A great crackling bolt of lightning quivered in the sky, and the rain fell more heavily and coldly. Djoma put forth his free hand, caught Ptao by the shoulder and jerked him erect upon the rock.

"Djoma," Hok choked out, "before all your folk I name you the blackest and lowest of cowards. To kill a boy, a little boy—and bound, at that!"

"Do not speak to him, father," came the steady young voice of Ptao. He gazed fearlessly up into the grinning hairy face of Djoma. "He is less than a snake with a poisoned fang. I am not afraid to die, for my fear would make him happy.''

"That is a brave cub," said a watching warrior, with honest admiration.

"So shall he not be allowed to grow up," snapped Djoma. "Look well, Hok. I shall kill him with your weapon, that killed Caggo."

Slowly, with full sense of the drama in the situation, the chief of the Fishers lifted the sword high in air, so that its point rose heavenward in the rain. Hok suddenly cried out, in deep agony of spirit, a last prayer:

"Shining One! Save Ptao and strike down this enemy—let me win us free, and never again shall your weapon be used to stab or strike! I swear this, by the fire you gave my people in the long ago—"

"Useless!" howled Djoma, with a wild ringing laugh. The sword quivered before falling.

Thunder broke open the sky, and down jabbed one more bolt of lightning. The uplifted Widow-maker caught that lightning, glowed as with white heat.

Djoma, his laugh of mockery all unfinished, whirled over and down like a dead leaf. On his face he lay without a tremor. A purple-black wale streaked his body, from the fork of his right hand that had held the stolen sword, down across his shoulder and back, to the heel of his right foot that had stood in a pool of water.

At the same moment, Hok rolled violently from the rock where he had lain, and whipped himself erect. The final summoning of his strength had broken those strained cords of fish skin.

A scooping grab, and he had the sword that had guided down a death of fire upon Djoma. It swung around his head like a crystallized flame.

"Hai! I am Hok—I kill!"

But he could kill only the slowest of the Fishers. For, in deadly terror, they ran before him like deer, diving into the water or scrambling aboard canoes to escape. Within seconds he stood alone on the beach, astride of the body of Djoma, panting and glaring. He now had time to realize that the rain had ceased suddenly and that the sun, his god, shone in the blue morning sky.

"Hok! Hok!" cried Oloana tremulously from where she lay bound. "Cast us free, and let us be gone."

He hurried to her side. The edge of Widow-maker served to sever the bonds that held his wife and son. The three departed unchallenged from the beach where Djoma lay dead, and to which the Fishers dared not return.

CHAPTER VI

IT was noon when they came again to the Lair of Fire. All three were eating ravenously, for Hok had not tasted food since before the first battle with Djoma, and neither Oloana nor Ptao had been able to stomach the unfamiliar provisions of fish offered them. On their march home they had picked handfuls of berries, acorns and rose hips to stay their hunger. But Hok ceased munching as he came to the granite ridge and looked beyond to where flames rose stealthily from their pit, as though to peer at him. His face grew grave and intent, as when he thought deep thoughts.

"I do not like this place," said Oloana. "It is too warm underfoot."

"Wait here," rejoined Hok briefly, and approached the Lair of Fire alone. He walked gingerly but as became a chief, carrying Widow-maker with him. His wife and son watched with curious eyes.

At the brink of the flame-pit, Hok took his stand. His nostrils drank the pungent, half-smothering odor of the rising gases. He began to speak:

"You asked me for Widow-maker once, and I refused. I thought then

that only Widow-maker would win back Oloana and Ptao. I was wrong to think it, for Widow-maker was almost turned against us. Only my prayer and promise caused the Shining One to fight on my side, throwing fire down to destroy the chief of the Fishers and to prove that their god, the Sea-Father, is weak and of little account."

He paused. There was a whispering noise far beneath in the glowing depths, as though the creature that breathed out the fire was agreeing with him.

"You, being of flame, are kin to the Shining One," continued Hok formally. "I vowed to him that Widow-maker would not be used again after we were set free. I now keep that vow. You asked for it once. Here it is."

His hand yearned to keep its grip on the good sword that had served him so famously, but he forced himself to cast it in. The bright gray blade seemed to float on the surface of the fire for a moment, as though the uprush of gas supported it. Then it was gone from view, gulped away into the abyss. Up shot a tongue of flame, seeming to make acknowledgment of the returned gift.

"It was not a gift to me—only a loan," said Hok, and retraced his steps to where the woman and boy waited for him.

LEADING the way down the other side of the rocky rise, he paused once more under the gnarled oak tree that grew there. His big hands fastened upon a low-growing bough, and with a sudden exertion of his strength he ripped it loose. Stripping away the twigs, he tested the balance of this rough club, and nodded approval.

"It will serve to fight off any dangers that may rise on our way home," he announced.

Ptao's blue eyes, already bright with the dawning enthusiasm for the hunt and the war-trail, appraised the makeshift weapon. "Why did you not keep the bright thing you call Widow-maker?" he asked. "It was splendid to fight with. No axe or spear or club was ever so deadly."

"I know it, my son," nodded Hok, "but I had spoken a word of promise to do as I did. And words of promise, you know, must be kept."

"True," agreed Oloana, glad of a chance to impress a lesson in ethics upon her youngster.

The boy nodded his bright head in imitation of his father. "Yet," he continued, "it was mighty in your hand, and it would have been mighty in mine, too, when I was grown and had become chief after you."

Hok smiled at that, in understanding and comradeship.

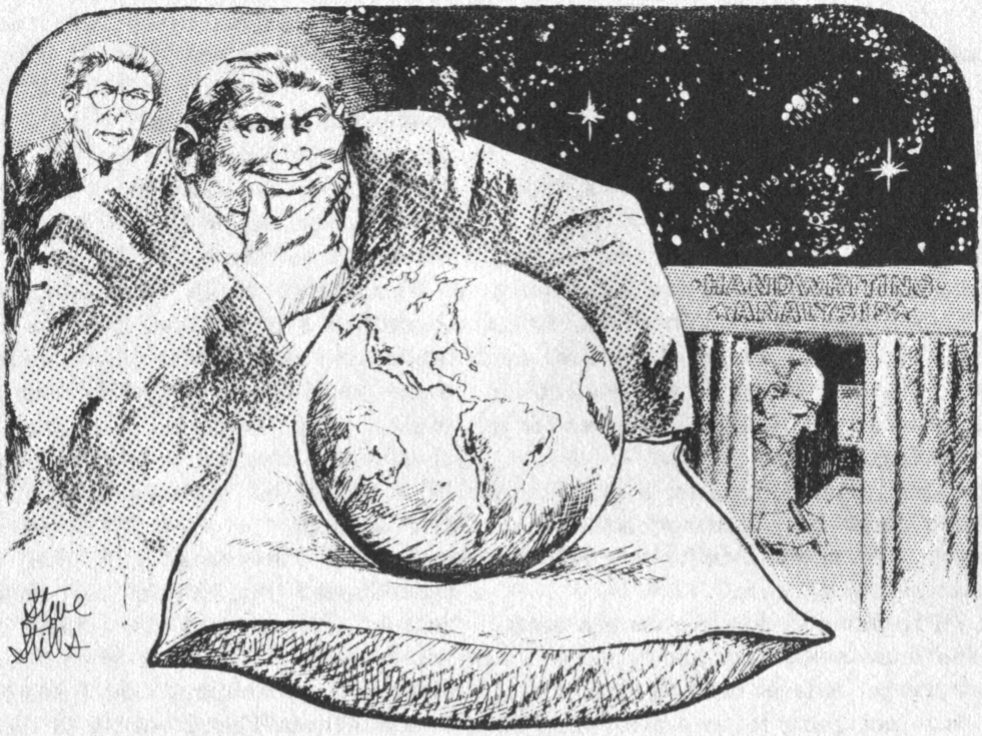
"You speak wisdom, son of mine. In my hand and in yours, Widow-maker would be a good thing. Yet, after we are both gone, who knows? A man like Djoma, or worse than Djoma, might make the good thing bad. It is best that the gift of heaven go back whence it came."

They resumed their homeward march. And so, for the time being, the dawn of the Iron Age was delayed.*

*Manly Wade Wellman, creator of Hok, the Caveman, has placed in these stories what is perhaps the most accurate and basically true story of the rise of man from the primitive that has ever appeared in fiction.

Hok may never have existed, as Hok, but he did exist as the first of the true men, under whatever name he was known by. He did find the first stone axe. He did invent the first bow and arrow. He did fashion the first sword. This story is the story, in imaginative form, of how he may have fabricated the first metal weapon of this kind. Indeed, the way he *must* have made it. And he did live the sort of life Mr. Wellman has pictured here.

Author Wellman has presented here, in sugar-coated form, a true picture of the beginnings of man, and while he wrote to entertain you, perhaps his motive was also to teach—because knowledge is progress. Hok progressed that way.—Ed.



Illustrated by STEVE STILES

Some people found it hard to take Marvin Adair seriously. After all, who could believe in a fat man who had parlayed a $300 loan into a 25-million-dollar debt? But that would be their mistake. Marvin Adair had both the ambition and an inside track on becoming—

THE PRINCE OF NEW YORK

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MARVIN ADAIR TWISTED a rhododendron leaf in one hand. "What's the matter, Eliot, don't you believe in me?"

The fat man was wearing a blue alpaca jacket with a yellow ascot and white pants, each of which would have looked ridiculous taken alone, but which blended together in an unwholesome harmony. He had also gotten even fatter since Eliot had known him in school. He pulled another leaf off the great bush that stood in the middle of his Plaza penthouse.

"Listen," he continued. "Two years ago I was a greasy little pre-med at Columbia, grinding away. Today they're calling me the Prince of New York." He gestured out the window, waves of fat flapping down his arm like frightened birds. "You could do the same—in a smaller way."

"You're a phenomenon all right," Eliot said, grimacing as he eyed the rattan furniture that completely lined the walls. The cushions were a sickly white, bloated beyond all requirements of reason or style. "But if I get mixed up with you, I'll wind up in jail."

Marvin's laugh sounded like someone beating an inflated bagpipe with a stick. "Listen, don't worry. They'll never get me. The New York police want me and the FBI want me, so they've each got an injunction to keep the other from arresting me."

Eliot looked around for a place to sit other than the rattan and selected the floor. "What could *I* do for you? I haven't even got my degree yet."

"Ah, but you do have certain assets. You know something about people and you've got a level head. You're honest, you're not going to steal everything out from under my nose. Most important you know me. You know I'm not a crank so you're less likely than the rest of these bums," he motioned toward the office next door, "to be put off by my methods."

Eliot nodded. "Administrative work, then?"

Marvin pursed his lips. "Yes, that. And decisions I can't handle. You know I'm not average, I can't always guess the impact some of my ideas will have on the public. So I need someone closer to the mean, more in touch with the common man. And I need someone I can trust." Nervously, he plucked another leaf from the bush.

Eliot frowned. "I'd have to know just what sort of thing you do."

"Well, I started in loans. I figured out the system while I was still in school, and applied it after I dropped out." Marvin neglected to add that he had been dismissed for flagrant obesity. "The first one was tough. I had to tell them I needed the money to marry Ellen de Kuyper, with whom I was going at the time. I even took her down there to talk with the man, cry and wring her handkerchief a little. It was a lot of work. That really convinced her I was serious, by the way, and it took me months to get rid of her."

Eliot paled visibly. The thought of discarding a morsel like Ellen was like lancing an eye. When she walked her dress looked like a python writhing in a burlap sack. But then, Marvin had always had a magnetic hold on people. Eliot turned his attention back to the conversation.

"I took the money, all $300, and immediately put it in my savings account. The account now totaled $500 and I used the bankbook to convince a different loan company that I was good for a $500 loan. Then I took the $1000 and bought a used car which I used as collateral for my next loan, and so on.

"It got easier and easier—after all, I never missed a payment—but now I'm getting too well known. I have to hire intermediaries. It's much more complicated." He had now completely denuded the lower branches of the rhododendron bush.

"You'll have to pay it off sometime, won't you?"

"That view of economics is outmoded. It's not true at all. I have to pay individual lenders back, but I never have to get out of debt. How do you think the U.S. government works? I'm now 25 million dollars in debt and effectively, as far as cash on the line in one minute, I'm the richest man in New York."

Eliot looked skeptical. "I'll think it over."

"Come see me tomorrow. You can start then. All you need is the old moxie, Eliot.

I take the chances other people don't even think of taking, through cowardice or lack of imagination. It'll pay off for you just as for me." One of his buttons popped off and rolled into a corner.

"That bush looks terrible," Eliot said.

"Oh, it does," Marvin agreed, glancing at it. He picked up the telephone. "Room service, send up a new rhododendron bush." He waved at Eliot as the other went out the door.

By the time Eliot came back the next day he had already decided to work for Marvin. One more evening in his shabby room working on his stamp collection and practicing his oboe had been enough to make up his mind.

He told this to Marvin and was immediately dragged to a waiting cab and hustled across town to one of the storage warehouses on the East River.

Marvin was puffing noticeably as they entered the building. "The deal is all set up," he said. "This independent supplier was the last big holdout. When I get his stock I'll control over 95 percent of the dishwashers manufactured this year."

"What do you want that many for?"

"Law of supply and demand. Hold them until the retail outlets feel the pinch, and then unload them at fantastic prices. Make your killing and get out."

"Oh." Eliot considered this for a while and then went on. "But how do you know there will be that much demand?" he asked. "The manufacturers might find out you were hoarding them and flood the market."

"All a matter of timing, Eliot," Marvin said. "Timing and a couple of other minor factors."

In the warehouse office a man awaited them. He gave them a hopeless glance as they came in but went right back to staring at the floor. "I presume you're ready to sign?" Marvin asked him, unfolding a sheet of paper.

"Hand it over," the man said. Marvin smiled and gave it to him.

He signed and without looking up said, "May I say that you are without qualification the most despicable human being I have ever met."

They left the warehouse, Marvin whistling happily, Eliot perplexed. As soon as they were out of earshot Eliot asked, "What did you do to him to make him sign?"

"I'll tell you some other time," the fat man said. He turned abruptly at a corner and shouldered his way into a cheap penny arcade, filled with excited people. "Have a look at the newest addition to the Adair chain," he called back over their heads.

Eliot followed him, trying not to breathe the hot, sweaty air inside. Popcorn crunched under his feet and children elbowed him in their haste to reach the candy country. The crowd seemed to be thickest around a small booth in the back. Only one person could get in at a time and the people outside were impatient.

"I've got a chain all over Manhattan and the suburbs," Marvin said, pointing at the sign above the door. SCIENTIFIC HANDWRITING ANALYSIS it said in green letters.

"People are always suckers for anyone who offers to tell them about themselves. You'd be amazed at the number who read the astrology column in the newspaper every day. So I decided to cash in."

A huge man pushed Eliot aside. "Get in line, bud," he snarled, and went into the booth.

"Every booth is connected directly to a

central computer," Marvin went on. "As soon as the customer enters the door, television cameras pick him up, sniffers get his body scent, the chair he sits in takes a small skin sample, and his voice is recorded and played into the computer in machine language. Every bit of data that can be absorbed from him is stored and analyzed. The computer locates his physical, mental, and social type and prints out the analysis for the operator."

"What about the handwriting?"

"Worthless. We throw it away."

They worked their way out of the penny arcade and caught a taxi back to Marvin's penthouse. A partially dismembered rhododendron plant stood in the middle of the living room. Marvin went over to it and pulled a leaf off. "Nervous habit," he grinned quickly. "Always have had a fondness for these plants, but I can't keep my hands off them."

Eliot tried to ask some more questions about the things he'd seen, but he was rushed into an adjacent office and set to work reviewing the contracts Marvin had let pile up unread, and answering late correspondence.

Marvin had just gained control of the record company that handled The Naked Fundament, the hottest rock-n-roll group of the year. Eliot checked a letter Marvin had ordered sent out, directing that The Naked Fundament record an album of big band vocals and that the two sides of their next single be "Begin the Beguine" and "When the Red, Red, Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along."

A right-wing group submitted a report on their secret training in the Rockies, in preparation for a coup in Washington. Marvin had planned and financed their group and seemed to be their patron saint.

There was another report about the same thing, only this time it was from a small left-wing army with a camp in the Appalachians. They said they were glad the time for throwing the reactionaries out was at hand and asked for more money.

A French fashion designer asked for advice, since all the successful innovations of the last two years had come from Marvin. This year he was thinking of raising the hemline to above the waist.

Far back in the recesses of Eliot's mind something was beginning to stir. He dictated some letters into a recorder for the secretarial pool, saw it was five o'clock and stuffed the rest of the records into a briefcase. He glanced around warily to be sure no one saw him. But there really wasn't any reason to be cautious; he was just a conscientious executive taking his work home. For that matter, there weren't that many other people around. Adair's office seemed understaffed. Curious.

He looked at the divan in Marvin's living room again on the way out, and shuddered. The white cushions looked like the underbelly of a fish, dead for several days. He slammed the door behind him.

Eliot came in early the next day, got on the office intercom and asked Marvin's butler for an appointment as soon as possible. There was a long wait and the butler came back and in an artificially bored voice told him that Marvin would meet him in the living room in half an hour.

Eliot waited nervously in his office, pacing the floor and eating a banana for breakfast. When the thirty minutes was up he hurried into the living room with his briefcase and found Marvin picking at

the bush, clad in a tight-fitting pink suit.

"Something bothering you, Eliot?" he said, brushing a fleck of breakfast egg from his tie.

Eliot walked to the divan without a word. He opened his briefcase and dumped a pile of papers on the cushions.

"I stayed up most of the night reading your files." He gestured at the papers. "How do you explain them?"

Marvin spread his arms expansively. "What do I have to explain? That's the way I do business."

"If you keep on this way, no one will do *any* business. You've got an empire, but it'll be in pieces in weeks, and along with it the rest of the city, maybe even the country."

Marvin looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Well, it's not easy to explain," he frowned. "You're tilting everything off balance. Just refusing to meet your next loan payments could topple the financial equilibrium of the city. And withholding the dishwashers—that's going to create an artificially high demand, with no way for that demand to be satisfied. If you were then to dump them on the market all at once . . ."

"Mere details," Marvin grimaced, tearing another leaf roughly from its stalk. "They don't add up to anything."

"But there are so many of them," Eliot gestured weakly. "They don't make sense. The handwriting booths are just another cheap business if operated properly, but if you should change the program in the computer . . ."

"Yes?"

"You could give someone an analysis just opposite to the right one. Convince him he's something he shouldn't even try to be. Knock him out of his role in society. Do that to enough people and you shatter the society."

"So you could confuse a couple of people. People are confused anyhow."

"Not nearly as badly as they will be when simultaneous coups are sprung from opposite ends of the political spectrum. Upset the political balance entirely. Throw the capital into chaos. All this at the same time the cultural scene goes into convulsions; people find their favorite rock groups singing square songs, fashions going wild, all the big magazines suddenly changing character. And I've found out what you're planning to do to the comic strips!"

At this Marvin's expression changed to one of concern. His face developed a tic Eliot had never noticed before. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"About how Orphan Annie takes a lover, Steve Canyon sells out to the Russians, Dr. Rex Morgan performs an abortion, Judge Parker accepts a bribe, to mention just a few."

Marvin's tic became a sneer. "Actually you're quite right," he said.

Eliot suddenly noticed that Marvin had produced a strangelooking little blue pistol from somewhere in his rolls of fat.

"Ak," Eliot said.

"If dishwashers go, can laundry machines be far behind? Not to speak of the rest. Very perceptive my boy, it's just that your scope was always a little too small. The chaos will extend over the world, not just the United States. I have mined the nexus points of civilization. An admirable groundwork for what follows."

Eliot noticed he had begun to perspire. "You're going to take control that way?"

"Oh no, friend, not me. I'll probably be overlord of a district—Prince of New York say—or some such second-level post. But the highest echelon will be entirely occupied by my associates."

He motioned toward the divan and Eliot turned in time to see one of the cushions rise up on stubby legs and begin to climb down the lacquered bamboo rungs to the rug. Blue eyes glared at him malevolently. "I've been waiting for a taste of this one," a thin voice squeaked, and a cushion seam gaped, revealing a row of small, sharp teeth.

"You're just their agent, then," Eliot said. He turned to Marvin. "But why hire me and dump all the information in my lap?" He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the cushion, now more repulsive than ever, as it clumsily slipped on the bamboo and fell to the floor with a little cry. He had only seconds.

Marvin's face split into a flabby grin. "We needed a test, to see if the pattern would get by the average citizen. If the mob could detect it, their leaders certainly would. You, Eliot, are the most miserably normal person I knew before I was contacted by my little white friends, so I decided to use you as the guinea pig. It is a severe disappointment to me that you were able to catch on. I hate to lose old acquaintances."

Eliot gulped. More cushions were moving now. The first one waddled closer. "What does it eat?" he said.

"It claims to be a gourmet. I've been hard pressed to keep them away from the local 'livestock,' as they put it." The leading cushion was very close now.

There was a sudden rustle. "This is not the time, gentlemen, or the place," said a deep voice.

Marvin whirled, his bulbous stomach lagging several degrees behind in the rotation. A thin stalk of the rhododendron bush held a lethal-looking tube, covering both Marvin and the alien.

"CountEx!" shrieked the cushion, producing and raising two pseudopods. "I surrender." The other cushions on the divan did the same.

Marvin froze for a moment, then jumped back and fired at the plant. The shot went wide, shattering a lamp. The rhododendron stalk gave an imperceptible flick and a spot appeared on Marvin's vest, quickly enlarging to the size of a hand. There was a small popping noise and Marvin toppled over backward, not falling very far because he was almost as wide as he was tall.

"Is he dead?" Eliot said, picking up the pistol Marvin had dropped.

"Only temporarily," the plant said. We'll bring him back in time for trial. I was glad to get a shot at that one. He tortured three of my best friends to death, and was on the way to doing the same to me. Undercover work can get nasty."

Eliot took a deep breath. "What does 'CountEx' mean?"

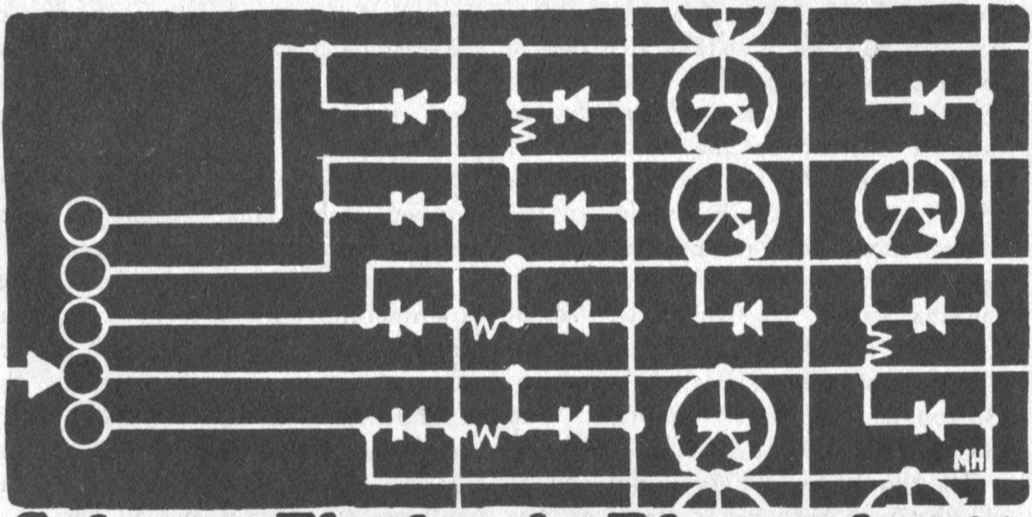
"Counter-Exploitation. It's our job to keep advanced races from taking advantage of less developed cultures. My people were picked because we closely resemble a plant this Adair had an obsession for. If I'd known what the assignment was going to be like I'd have stayed back on my native world, composing ecological symphonies."

Eliot walked over to the divan and kicked one of the cushions. "No torturing the prisoners," the bush warned. "We can get all the information we need out of them by other techniques." The cushions paled visibly, quite a trick considering their original shade. "The best thing for you to do is clear out and forget everything that happened here. If you talk about it, I'm afraid you'll have to be, ah, treated." The rhododendron looked at him significantly.

Eliot quickly found his briefcase and the lunch he'd brought and made for the door. He started to edge closer to the divan on his way out, but the bush was

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 146)

In the past few years Alexei Panshin has distinguished himself as both an author of science fiction (his novel, Rite of Passage, *won a Nebula as the best novel of 1968), and a perceptive critic. In the latter capacity, he wrote the much acclaimed book,* Heinlein in Dimension *($6.99; Advent: Publishers, Inc., P.O. Box 9228, Chicago, Ill., 60690). Now he inaugurates a column for this magazine in which he steps back to view the entire sf field as a whole. Rather than deal a specific selection of current books, Panshin will serve as a critic-at-large. Each instalment of this column will be a complete essay on an aspect of science fiction, but a larger element of continuity will tie these columns together into an overall look at—*



Science Fiction in Dimension

a critical column by ALEXEI PANSHIN

During the past few years there has been a noisy fight in science fiction between drumbeaters for a supposed "New Wave" and the guardians of all that science fiction is supposed to have been since 1926. The writers of science fiction have been muttering amongst themselves and snarling from the sidelines, but they haven't, for the most part, declared themselves for one party or the other. The actual battlers have been editors and fans, people as central to the creation of science fiction as Judity Merril and John Jeremy Pierce.

It's a murky quarrel. It seems that both sides have chosen up on the emotional strength of the one label or the other, and then found that no one else in their camp

agrees on right and proper definitions. Both the New Wavers and the Old have laid claim to the same writers. Roger Zelazny has been split like a wishbone.

Insofar as there is emotional agreement within factions, a biased outsider might say that the New Wave seems to be in favor of literary experimentation, nonlinearity and a remergence with the so-called "literary mainstream". And the Old Wave flag-wavers endorse the good-story-well-told, healthy social values, and fiction about science.

Neither package seems entirely worth having. Is science fiction indeed fiction about science, as the assumption has been since Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories?* It is my feeling that it is not. It is no more reasonable to expect sf to be about science than to expect all historical novels to restrict themselves to military history or the state of the marketplace. On the other hand, is science fiction actually inferior to the mainstream? In recent times the apparent movement has been by a "mainstream" of frustrated social literature that is moving toward science fiction and fantasy. Barth, Barthelme, Burroughs, Coover, Vonnegut and Nabokov may point a direction.

The New Wave-Old Wave argument, as its partisans have put their cases, has been an empty one, but the edginess and bad temper of the writers has been real. These are uncertain and often frightening times in science fiction. Things are unclear. Things are changing. What the shape of science fiction will be in five years, no one would be confident to say. But some of the idols of Golden Age science fiction have turned to writing popular science or other kinds of fiction, and some have stopped writing altogether in the face of pressure. And among younger writers there seems to be a sense of a new universe to be opened, though none of them have yet proved their belief with books.

Joanna Russ has characterized science fiction as the Elizabethan theater after Marlowe, but before Shakespeare. I want to believe it. I can see the empty Elizabethan theater waiting to be filled with giant magics—and see science fiction as an unknown universe impossible to fill. But Joanna's nominations for the part of Marlowe are Asimov and Heinlein, and I don't think they qualify. They seem more akin to the morality dramatists who came twenty years before Shakespeare. In the place of Thomas Kyd, who was the first versifier, the last of the moralists and the first of the tragedians, we might name Zelazny or Delany. But science fiction has still to produce its Marlowe, let alone a Shakespeare.

Still, the potential of a real rift appears between technicians content to write formula moralities and melodramas, all in the same limp gray prose, and experimenters curious to know the true range of science fiction. The rift is more potential than actual because the experimenters have yet to fully justify themselves. Roger Zelazny and Samuel Delany have superseded their predecessors but not surpassed them.

If this were Afterward, and all the possible changes of science fiction had been rung, this column would be more organized than I actually expect it is going to be from one issue to the next. Since I think that we actually stand well before science fiction's hour, this column will be a random collection of suggestions, arguments, opinions and dreams. If the New Wave and Old are drum-beaters and flag-wavers, I invite you to see me as the fellow with the piccolo playing "Over the Hills and Far Away."

I have been reading science fiction for twenty years, writing it for ten, and criticizing it for six. My opinions on the subject have been changing all the while, and you can assume that they will continue to change, possibly from one column to the next. What I say is by way of suggestion. It isn't authoritative, objective or final. Treat it accordingly—pick through what I say and accept what you can.

Science fiction has been a literary genre since the founding of *Amazing Stories* in 1926. It has been a naive, insular, uncertain and impolite literature. That's from our side, the inside. The outside has looked on us with righteous contumely.

Sf has been innocent of ordinary literary standards. Since 1950, at least, when Gold and Boucher and McComas set new standards for *Galaxy* and *F&SF*, science fiction has been literate, but even today, most science fiction continues to be written in a dull prose that not only remains much the same from story to story, but even from author to author. Prose that sings or cuts is rare. Variations in prose can distinguish characters, set a tone, produce a range of effect and stimulate a drowsy reader. But most science fiction, among all the musical effects of prose, has been aware only of pace—drone notes set to the beat of a drum.

Sf has primarily been published in pulp magazines and, more recently, in paperback books, and been shaped by their requirements. Among these is that the drum should beat very fast just before the end of the story. Melodrama. Action.

Most science fiction has been short until recently, and even novels have been usually no longer than 60,000 words—which is short. This would seem unnecessarily limiting for a fiction about the unfamiliar.

Science fiction is associated in the popular mind with horror movies, and comic strips, and the worst excesses of scientism. Who among us could say that this is unjustified?

And even after forty years, there still is no generally accepted definition of the field.

Except . . .

Even under deserved criticism and contempt, science fiction has not withered. It has continued to expand its subject, its techniques, and its ideas of its limits. Other popular magazine fiction has almost completely disappeared. But in 1968, science fiction magazines supported by readers—not advertisers, as is the usual case—published three hundred original stories. I think the science fiction short story is an irrelevance that deserves to disappear, but it is a fifteen-year-old fact that science fiction is the present home of the American short story. And *Amazing* is not only still being published after more than forty years, it is the most vigorous present science fiction magazine.

But not only has science fiction proved durable beyond all reasonable expectation, its audience is unusual. Until recently, the audience has been intense, but limited in size and composed mainly of fans, engineers and bright fifteen-year-olds.

However, at any one time, this limited audience supports amateur magazines by the hundreds, and has for forty years. With only a few recent exceptions—college club magazines and the like—these journals have been published without sponsorship, endorsement or subsidy. This is a common fact to us within the sf world,

but from the outside it is unique and remarkable.

And every year—again without sponsorship, endorsement or subsidy—science fiction supports conventions by the dozen. In the past few years, the number and size of these conventions has leaped. The first World Science Fiction Convention that I attended was the Seventeenth in Detroit in 1959. The attendance was 371 people. This year there will be any number of regional conventions with that kind of attendance, and the attendance at the Twenty-Seventh World Science Fiction Convention in St. Louis last September was over 1600 people. This makes it one of the largest conventions of any kind in the United States. And all on the basis of voluntary association.

Is it fiction about science that has brought this many people together this strongly? Or is there another more important element that binds?

Until recently, to be published as science fiction meant that a book had an assured limited sale to the traditional narrow but loyal science fiction audience. I used to think it was the general audience that was missing the point, that it was fear and ignorance that kept them from science fiction.

There may have been some truth in this. Science fiction, well ahead of its time, and all that, may only at last have been caught up to by laggard minds. On the other hand, it seems a more likely possibility that what has kept a larger audience away has been the imperfections of science fiction: the melodrama, the crudeness and the insistence upon featuring science to the exclusion of other aspects of life. Whatever the element that has bound the science fiction audience so tightly, is it so foreign to all other readers that the appeals of science fiction must inevitably pass them by? Or is it science fiction that has failed to explore its own possibilities?

There is no question that working in a pulp literature with pulp standards and pulp economies has inhibited science fiction writers from exploring the range of the field. Write a novel longer than 60,000 words? Nonsense—there is no market for such a book. Write a story about daily life in a strange society? The readers would never hold still for it. Write a legitimate tragedy? How? About what? You must be kidding. How?

But now a larger audience has shown an interest. Risk-taking books like *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Dune* have been published as science fiction, but been seized upon by a new, large, educated, hip, young audience. Are these pure accidents? I don't think so. It certainly isn't predictions about science that have caught these people—it must be some other rarer magic. But the intensity of this new appeal has been as great as it always has been within our limited audience.

And the magic—is it our own secret heart's delight? Is it an accident that Paul Williams of *Crawdaddy* should hand John Lennon *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* to read? Is it an accident that the *Whole Earth Catalog,* whose stated purpose begins, "We *are* as gods and might as well get good at it," and which lists appropriate tools, should list *Dune?* Is it an accident that rock music should be about science fiction and rock musicians should read science fiction?

What magic touched the people who saw *2001?*

What would science fiction be like if it regularly and surely engaged this audience, instead of occasionally and

erratically?

This is hypothetical, because if someone actually knew the answer he would be writing fiction like nothing any of us has seen before and enchanting us all, science fiction's old audience and its new one. It is this vision of possibility that frightens some writers out of the field and sets others to writing strange experiments.

At the same time, the spectre of respectability and academic acceptance is haunting sf writers with requests for library donations of manuscripts and old laundry lists. ("You have the complete laundry lists of *Robert Silverberg*? That's a thesis for some lucky University of Syracuse doctoral candidate, I would say.") It may mean only the academic hunt for material to analyze is insanely intense, but the degree of interest is enough to make nerves shaky. The Modern Language Association has begun to publish its own fanzine, *Extrapolation.* It has held general meetings on science fiction, and one of the MLA sessions at the just past winter meetings was devoted to John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar.* A Science Fiction Research Association for sf bibliographers is being formed. And science fiction writers like Joanna Russ, William Tenn and Jack Williamson teach college courses in science fiction.

It can be frightening. Especially if the safe common sort of science fiction is all you know. Especially if you haven't a clue to an alternative. There are people who would like to see the colleges and the new people go away. Strange to say of science fiction writers, but there is fear of the unknown.

What is science fiction?

In his contribution to the Advent symposium, *The Science Fiction Novel,* Robert Heinlein divided fiction into "the possible" and "the impossible"—Realism and Fantasy. He divided these categories again into past, present and future scene, and found most science fiction under the heading, "Realistic Future-Scene Fiction". And Heinlein in his discussion hinges his "realism" on science. This is the standard ideal of science fiction set by Hugo Gernsback—but it has never strictly been followed.

Science fiction cannot depend for its legitimacy on science. No matter how accurate a story may seem to be, or may prove to be, if it doesn't involve or move readers, it will surely die. And science alone is insufficient to explain a good story.

Cleve Cartmill's story "Deadline", which predicted the atomic bomb in 1944 and brought the FBI out to investigate, is today not much better than a curiosity. Alan Nourse's story "Brightside Crossing", on the other hand, about a Mercury we now know to be impossible, still has the power to move.

In fact, if science fiction did derive its legitimacy from science, last year's science fiction would be thrown on the same rubbish heap as last year's scientific textbooks. Science is a constant corrective procedure. Science fiction based on present science has to be insufficient. Science fiction based on hypothetical science has to be ingenious nonsense.

Science fiction has never done better than pretend to be about science—often to its great cost. L. Sprague de Camp wrote in his *Science-Fiction Handbook,* "The science-fiction magazines persist in publishing stories of strange worlds, the future, marvelous journeys, and utopias with little or no science—no pseudo-science even." Not quite true. Pseudo-

science is science fiction's greatest crudity. Gernsback's rules said that science fiction ought to be about science, and the practial result was pseudo-science. De Camp himself was purist enough to try to follow Gernsback—he wouldn't write about faster-than-light travel, for instance, because he didn't believe it was possible. And eventually de Camp gave up writing science fiction for historical novels where the facts more easily stand still.

The quarrel about the relation of science and science fiction is as new as Larry Niven and R.A. Lafferty, and as old as Verne and Wells. Verne said of Wells, "It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on a very scientific basis. No, there is no rapport between his work and mine. I make use of physics. He invests. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball discharged from a cannon. Here there is no invention. He goes to Mars in an air-ship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. *Ca, c'est tres joli,* but show me this metal. Let him produce it."

But science and the times have abandoned Verne, while Wells, who was never "right," continues to be relevant. Science fiction does not depend on accuracy, which is impossible, but on inner consistency. The subject of science fiction is not the world as it will be, but the limitless world of the imagination.

Science fiction, as a few have always insisted, is fantasy. What we are used to thinking of as fantasy is a conscious recreation of myths and symbols that are no longer believed, but merely expected to entertain. The world is Earth. The spirit is historical and nostalgic. Familiarity is half the appeal. But this is not the only possible fantasy. Fantasy can be disciplined and creative and relevant. It has been crowded out of the last empty spaces on Earth only to find an empty and inexhaustible universe. All time. All space. And that is the world of "science fiction."

For forty years we have been gingerly feeling our way out into this vast emptiness, first exploring our back yard and our neighborhood, and tied to the "realistic" world all the while by the safety line of "science"

Now is the time to cut the line. To sing. To dance. To shout up the dawn. The hurl rainbows. To discover marvels and populate the darkness. And perhaps find ourselves.

—Alexei Panshin

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 79)

a danger of some kind, he knew. Still, he wasn't quite ready. Not dry enough . . .

There was a rattle at the door, and the sound of a key. The chair that blocked it moved, a little way, and the agitated voices became clearer.

He shook himself once more, and jumped up onto the window ledge, in the hot sunlight. Just for a moment, he turned his head, admiring the glossy purple and gold flashing from his back; then he spread his wings widely, and sailed out into the blue air, and away.

"Well, he ain't here, is he?"

"There's a lot of clothes, all over . . ."

"So look, he ain't here, and we got no right to do this." The superintendent stared coldly at the open window. "Maybe he just flew away, hey? Come on, mister, let's get outa here."

—David Mason

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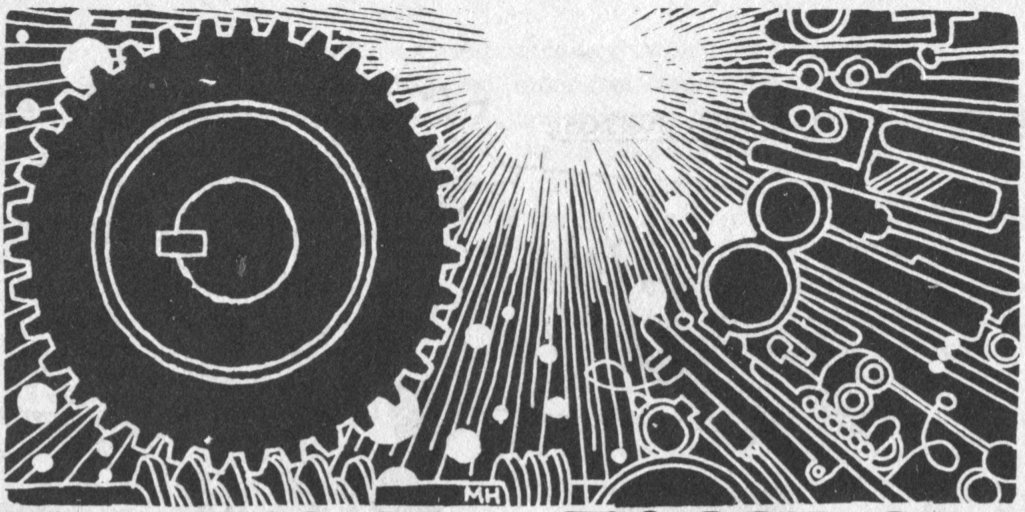

FANTASY FANDOM

SCIENCE FICTION AND DRUGS
by Donald K. Arbogast

Donald K. Arbogast is the pseudonym of a well known professional writer and former fan, and his reasons for hiding his identity will be obvious from his article. —TW

A few years ago, all the parties I attended wound up in the host's kitchen. There, in close proximity to the refrigerator, those of us who were the party's hard core would stand about chugging beer into the wee small hours of the morning, this happy idyl punctuated only occasionally by the demands of our kidneys and our periodic jaunts to the john.

Sometimes the pattern varied. At one of those exclusive room parties you hear about at conventions only the next day, we would crowd onto a bed, fill up the floor space around it, and even drape ourselves over the two or so chairs the hotel generously supplied, and pass around the bottle of (black label) Jack Daniel's. Neophytes would choke on the stuff and the rest of us would chuckle appreciatively and say something like "Smo-o-o-oth," when we got our voices back.

The alcohol added conviviality to those parties, and lent many fine (if dreadful) hangovers to our repetoire. The beer and the liquor were part of a tradition. In fandom, beer was immortalized as a minor deity, "bheer," and some fans threw "bheer bhusts" at the drop of a propeller beanie. Elaborate concoctions were thrown together, some of them, like the "Nuclear Fizz," achieving considerable fame—others, of less happy invention, being forgotten on the morrow (and sometimes with unseemly haste). Science fiction people seemed to drink a lot—at least on social occasions.

The perils and joys of the Juice were celebrated in prose as well. An entire subgenre of fantasy (probably the bastard descendant of Thorne Smith) sprang into existence a couple of decades back, based on the comical notions of the Drunken Hero. This probably reached its epitome with Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's invention of Gavagan's Bar, in 1950, and although it is not yet quite dead, the slide has definitely been downhill.

All this, you see, is now a thing of the past. We are about to enter a new age, with the dawning of what I have modestly christened the *psychedelic seventies.* Alcohol is out. Drugs are in.

It's been a quiet revolution, and its origins go back a bit further than all the recent furor over marijuana. The present respectability of drugs can probably be traced back some twelve years or more to the publication of Aldous Huxley's thin volume, *The Doors of Perception.*

Huxley was far more a pioneer than that current guru of drugs, Dr. Leary. Huxley brought the notion of "consciousness-expanding" drugs into the intellectual market-place, and, by virtue of his passing association with science fiction, into our hands as well.

With frequent references to his own *Brave New World,* Huxley described his raptures and the mystic profundities he had found in the Mexican "magical mushroom," and the cactus, Peyote. Both were used in religious rites by Indians—an actual church has been established around the consumption of Peyote—and Huxley, acting as anthropologist, hunted out these drugs and tried them.

A year later, so were enterprising fans in New York and London.

But both drugs, similar in apparent effects, extracted a grim toll: one had to take a walk through purgatory before one attained paradise. Or, to put it in simpler terms, they made their users quite sick before bestowing upon them psychedelic joys. Peyote, which could be purchased from cactus gardens in the southwest, was the most frequently used, and old hands with the drug (whose active ingredient is mescalin) used to shudder with the dry heaves when they even glimpsed a vitamin capsule. (Peyote was usually consumed in droves of big capsules, owing to its vile aftertaste.)

Marijuana was not initially considered to be part of the neo-psychedelic world. But as Peyote users tried it and discovered its own ambiguous powers, they quickly began shifting over to this easier-to-consume drug. It was illegal, unlike Peyote (then), but it didn't require an entire weekend for one experience, and one did not have to suffer for its delights. (No doubt this is why puritans still oppose the drug: it is one of the very few which intoxicate without apparent ill side-effects. One never "pays the price" for one's illicit pleasures.)

At this point—the early sixties—the use of drugs of any sort was restricted to a distinct minority in both society at large and the science fiction world. Generally speaking, the users were regarded as "beatnik" types by their righteous breathern, although that term seemed to take in a lot of territory at times. And, although a number of people experimented with the various drugs, few used them with any regularity. They were something you tried, mostly in order to find out what was going on. According to your nature, you either found them disappointing—"All it did was make me very sick"—or felt yourself to have been "improved" by them. One missionary for Peyote claimed it had restored his sight to him and threw away his glasses.

Drugs, you see—the psychedelic ones, at any rate—were *serious stuff.* Not the sort of thing one did for "kicks," don't you know . . . A psychedelic experience was like a home-made trip to the psychotherapist, and Peyote users would talk with each other with very much the same zeal one observed in those who were undergoing psychotherapy. In many cases the jargon overlapped.

It was in 1967 that I first began observing the use of marijuana at parties of sf people. Oh, it had been around before. Various of my acquaintances had tried or used it earlier. One of my friends first "turned me on" to pot in 1960, and it had hung around the fringes of bohemia for decades. But in 1967, the *nice* people

were smoking it. The people with the short hair, clean-shaven countinances, $75.00 suits, and well-polished shoes. Somehow it had escaped from the scruffy kids into polite society . . . albeit with whispers and via the back door. You can imagine my chagrin . . . I was one of the last in my circle to find out.

"I sat down and made a list," a friend of mine once informed me. As a sideline he "dealt" in marijuana, supplying most of his friends. "I calculate that over half the fans and pros in this city"—a large city on the coast—"are smoking pot." At that time I was surprised, even a little shocked. It seemed somehow sordid for the *nice* people to be doing this thing; I'd found it easier to accept in my scruffier friends.

But if I found his estimate hard to accept at first, rather quickly I became aware of the fact that the group in the kitchen wasn't guzzling beers any more . . . they were passing around a joint. And when we were all at one of those locked-door exclusive pro parties at a convention, the bottle of Jack Daniel's wasn't there any more. Instead, someone would be handing out Pepsis for parched throats.

I had my qualms at first.

I had visions of my squarest, straightest friends, suddenly abandoned to a life of drug-crazed dissolution, orgies of drug-taking and God only knew what-all else. I visualized them all sitting about giggling mindlessly, vacuously. I'd watched *Dragnet*. I knew what those drug-fiends were like. Why, on one show, a girl had let her baby drown in its bath because she was drugged on marijuana . . .

But, do you know, it was a relief to join the circle and find out how mistaken I had been. It was a relief to find I could talk to certain people again . . . people who for years I'd found impenetrable when they'd had more than three beers in an evening. The guy who always used to defend his misconceptions of what I'd said so pugnaciously was suddenly transformed into a man I could communicate with. It was marvelous.

And gradually a dichotomy began to form. On the right, the people who stuck with alcohol. Staggering, their breaths awaiting only a chance flame to become transformed into blowtorches, unpleasant in manners, impossible to talk to . . . the *drunks*. They made fools of themselves with their boasts of the drinking feats they could perform.

And on the left, the pot-heads. Generally quieter, better behaved, easily amused, but competant at the small tasks a drunk can no longer perform. There had been a revolution.

The implications of this revolution are still to be discovered. One of the most profound is the sudden radicalization of white, middle-class America. The simple act of enjoying a smoke of marijuana puts a man in the same class of criminal as a killer, rapist or kidnapper. It introduces to a man who has been until now a member of that complacent "silent majority" a paranoid way of life: he becomes a "secret nigger," a covert member of a persecuted class of people. He becomes suddenly aware that the forces of organized society are lined up against *him*.

. . . *And he knows he hasn't done anything "wrong".*

It starts him thinking. It provides him with an appreciation for the others in our society who are overtly discriminated against. And in the process he becomes more radical in his beliefs. Some—I know one man with a position high in a major corporation—have "turned hippy" and dropped out, no longer able to live with the hypocrasy of two opposed lifestyles.

What this will mean for society and our country in the coming decade is a question I can't answer.

But it *is* a legitimate question for science fiction, and, increasingly, science fiction is tackling this question.

It would be foolish to assume that every sf writer who mentions marijuana in his story has smoked the stuff, or advocates smoking it. In fact, I know of at least one writer who refuses to touch it most adamantly, but who deals realistically with it in his stories. But I think it's a safe assumption that a large minority, if not a majority of the writers in our field have at least experimented with it. One wrote an entire novel—and one which was well-received—while stoned, mostly, he said later, as an experiment, to see if he could.

By now, of course, *LIFE* has done a cover story on "respectable" middle-class pot smokers, and news items on the subject are common in the newsweeklies. The phenomenon is by no means confined to the science fiction world. We merely echo it.

I don't think fiction has dealt too fairly with marijuana; it has been treated sensationalistically in most cases. And the old myths die hard. (It is not true that you can tell a person is high on the stuff by looking at his eyes, for instance. Pot smokers have neither "glassy eyes" nor dilated pupils.) Yet, I think sf has been more honest with drugs in general than have other types of fiction. We at least haven't seen LSD used (fictionally) as a means of seduction and the ruin of innocent young girls (a commonplace in mysteries and the mainstream these days). And since sf deals with extrapolation, if anything sf writers have been conservative in their projections of future drug use.

It strikes me as an area worth probing. Certainly drugs will be with us in the future: we are already nearly two decades into the era of mass-produced synthetic drugs for the mind. Already we can see the abuses as well as the legal inequities. A new generation of kids have cropped up who have no interest in "getting smashed" on beer, but will down any pill in sight. (I think some of them have even forgotten that perenial adolescent fixation, sex.) What will the next generation be like? What will the world be like when drugs supply much of the everyday reality of life for most of the population? Are drugs the answer to the leisure problem that is dawning with automation? I'm reminded of James Gunn's *The Joy Makers*.

It's been said that sf has been deficient in foreseeing the manifest possibilities in today's communications and transportation networks. Will we overlook the potential revolution in cultural mores that the drugs are offering us? What next? New ethical questions are opening up; new mores are developing. Will the legalization of pot save the unhappy tobacco industry (which already has taken out trademarks on some of the common names for varieties of marijuana)? Will a legal joint of pot become simply the social equivalent of a martini—with all the implicit banality that implies?

These and many other questions must be asked—and answers attempted. And where better than in science fiction?

—Donald K. Arbogast

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5)

Within a week or two, the typesetter begins returning the stories set in type. These arrive, invariably, by Special Delivery, at about 8:30 in the morning, or four or five hours after the editor has gone to bed. He rarely enjoys an undisturbed "night" 's sleep. The type is arranged in long columns on legal length sheets called galleys. The type is "cold-set," or photo-set from punched paper tape. The galleys are xerox copies of the master (or reproduction) prints. They are invariably grey and hard to read. The editor (or, most recently, the new Assistant Editor, who will grow to hate it in time) must read these galleys word by word, looking for typographical errors, dropped words or lines, etc. He usually finds them. He indicates them on the galleys, and then returns the galleys to the typesetter. The typesetter then, presumably, corrects all the errors indicated and pastes the corrected columns of type up into pages. This is the point at which it is possible for a paragraph or more of type to become lost or misplaced. When the pages have been made up, new xerox copies are sent (by Special Delivery) to the editor, along with the galleys bearing his corrections. He spends several hours checking galleys against page-proofs, to see that all the errors have been corrected. Sometimes they have not. He does not usually reread every story in the page-proofs—by then he is exhausted with them—and sometimes errors like misplaced paragraphs go unnoticed by him. But he has caught several. When he finds an error on the page proofs he marks it and returns the proofs by mail to the typesetter again. They are now out of his hands and he can only hope those errors will be corrected. Sometimes hopes are not enough.

At that point two months have passed and it is time to be picking the stories for his next pair of issues, the cycle repeating itself endlessly.

But other tasks fit themselves in among these major cyclical ones: manuscripts come in regularly from agents and authors. These must be read and either purchased or rejected. Sometimes they are read on the day of receipt. Often they are not, owing to more pressing demands on the editor's time—such as that overdue editorial which must be written, the galleys on the novel which the typesetter wanted back last week, or something else entirely, like the sudden and total malfunction of the toilet, the air conditioner, the washing machine, or some other indispensable appliance, which the editor will himself fix, picking up whatever parts are required at a local wholesaler's. The editor also selects the artists who will illustrate the stories. Sometimes he picks up their artwork directly, because the deadline is too close to trust the mails. He also designs the covers (on the most recent issues), which entails setting the type (he uses pressure-sensitive type because of its greater flexibility) at his basement drafting table, going into Manhattan for photostats, and returning to his drafting table to do the pasteup for the mechanical. The work varies from day to day, but usually occupies half a working day at the least (and does not observe weekends). Mixed in to this will be necessary correspondence (the editor is a lousy correspondent) and the hours necessary to write the editorials, type up the letter columns, and write whatever other material (such as book reviews) he may contribute to any given issue.

Between 5:30 and 6:00 pm (depending on how the subways have been running), the editor's wife returns home from her

Manhattan office job, usually dead exhausted from the rush hour struggle. Either he or she (depending on mood and physical state) will cook the dinner, although he has the nasty habit of leaving the dishes for her to wash.

The early evening is about the only time the editor has to see his wife, so we will not dwell upon it. However, after she retires for the night he returns to his office (in the front room) where he sits down at the typewriter for several hours to be spent on the next chapter of his newest novel, or a draft of a new short story (this less often). He will work until somewhere between 2:00 and 4:00 am, depending on his mood and his energy. He will consume several bottles of Pepsi in the process.

Not every day will follow this exact pattern, although most will. There are occasional appointments with people in Manhattan—other editors, authors, interviewers, etc.—and he drives twenty miles to the Queens office-home of his publisher several times a month, usually in time for lunch in a pleasant nearby restaurant. There are also those days when the afternoon is taken up with errands of varying natures, and the evening—normally reserved for writing—must be used for magazine business. There are even those evenings when the editor sees very little of his wife, a fact she will bitterly resent. And there are those evenings when friends drop over, to talk and listen to records, or propose a jaunt to a party in progress elsewhere.

The editor's job with the magazines is officially a part-time job, and requires of him that he augment his income by writing. (He took the job in hopes it would augment his writing income.) His agent feels it has cut sharply into his writing (he has managed to finish only two books this last year). His wife wishes he made enough money that she could stay home and keep house properly rather than working. His cats expect him to feed them upon every possible occasion. When letters arrive with suggestions for new and time-consuming schemes, he sometimes reads them with exasperation. But he keeps right on adding tasks to his already crowded schedule, for obscure reasons he cannot himself define.

Perhaps as we stand here, silent and unobserved, watching the man paw through an untidy stack of papers on his desk for a vital piece of correspondence, we may feel a twinge of sympathy for him, even as we counsel ourselves to sternness; it is after all a life of his own choosing, and he would not have it any other way.

Beginning this issue we have a new addition to our staff. Alan Shaw, as our new Assistant Editor, will be responsible for proofreading the galleys of our magazines. I am profoundly grateful for this assistance, and I hope the onerous nature of this task will not wear too quickly on Mr. Shaw. He says he enjoys it, and inasmuch as he has not read everything at least twice before, perhaps he will continue to for some time. I hope so.

Also new in this issue is Alexei Panshin's new column, *Science Fiction in Dimension.* The fact that Fritz Leiber's *Fantasy Books* column is absent should not be considered more than a coincidence. Unfortunately, Fritz missed his deadline. He'll be back with us next issue.

Next issue will also contain another new feature: a four-page illustrated feature by Jay Kinney. Jay is a contributor to *Bijou Comics* and *The Gothic Blimp Works* (both "underground

comix" publications) as well as a sf fan. You may recall my mention, last issue, that we hoped to have something new and fresh in the way of graphic art here in these pages soon. The fact of the matter is, we had made arrangements with Vaughn Bode, the young Hugo-winning artist who has gained considerable national prominance for himself with his illustrated feature in *Cavalier*. One of our competitors, however, upon hearing of this decided (after previously exiling his art from their pages) he must now be the vogue, and stole him from us. Our loss is their gain, to be sure, but I hope to present in these pages fresh and different graphic art features by the best new "underground" artists available, and perhaps in the long run our loss will also be our own gain.

It is my conviction that the potentialities of the graphic art medium has hardly been explored by conventional comics and comic strips—since these are by necessity limited by the age of their presumed audience—and that the new generation of so-called "underground" artists, like R. Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, Skip Williamson, Jay Lynch, Jay Kinney, Steve Stiles, et al, have the most to offer in terms of freshness of invention. (Stiles, in fact, can be found illustrating "The Prince of New York" in this issue—but his work extends well beyond the range implied by that illustration.) Their work is usually humorous, but offers as much thought and insight into the world of now and tomorrow as does most sf. I'll be looking forward to your reactions to their efforts in our issues to come.

—Ted White

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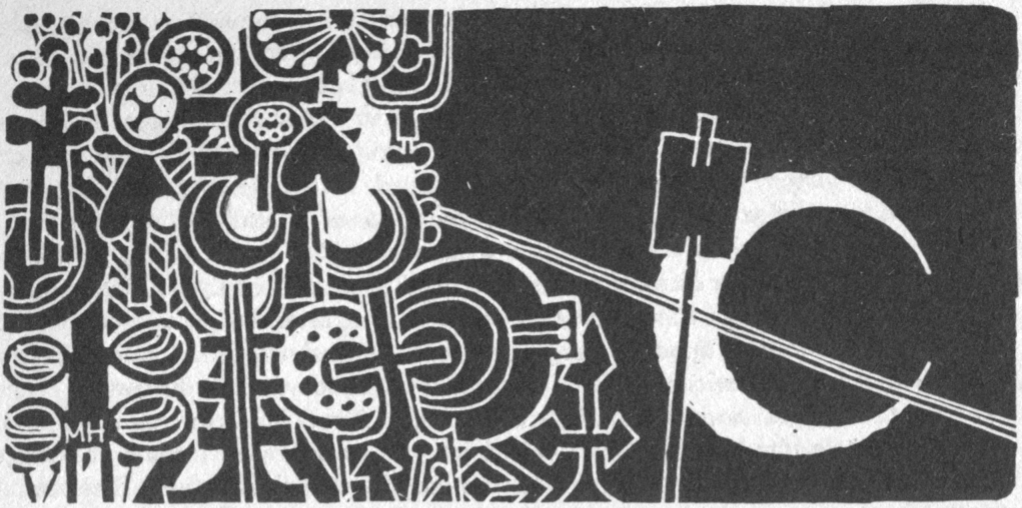

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Letters intended for publication should be addressed to According to You, *c/o P.O. Box 72, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232.*

My query in the February issue about a possible title change has provoked a strong—if quite varied—response from you. Therefore, before getting into the more general comments, the following survey of opinion:

Dear Mr. White,

Now that you mention it, FANTASTIC is a bit on the "abrupt" side, but for heaven's sake don't change it to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. It would be far worse than the present title. FANTASTIC TALES is about the best you could change it to.

J. Collinson
9707, 79 Avenue
Edmonton 63, Alberta, Canada

Dear Ted:

Why bother about a title change? First priority would seem to be more attractive covers. I realize you are working hard at breaking resistance to the "old reprint" FANTASTIC image, but—really! The new issue (Feb.) has "New" splashed over it as if you had discovered a new word. And what in the world has happened to the word "all"? All new stories—plus a classic! "A classic what?" one might be tempted to ask. It turned out to be a story, of course, and not a bad one, either. Perhaps you meant that of the stories that *are* new, they are *all* new. I doubt it.

Gary H. Labowitz
1100 Betzwood Dr.
Norristown, Pa., 19401

I'll admit the semantics are confused; the problem is to convey to the bulk of our readers (and perhaps less regular readers) that there has *been a policy change on reprints—without misrepresenting the fact that one classic reprint remains. The solution was not mine. In any case, I hope*

you'll agree with me that, beginning with our April issue, the covers have become more attractive. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

As to your idea of a new name for FANTASTIC, I would suggest either *NEW* FANTASTIC STORIES or *NEW* FANTASTIC ADVENTURES since you are emphasizing the word "NEW" so much lately! Did you realize that on the January 1970 issue of AMAZING and the February 1970 issue of FANTASTIC the word "NEW" appeared *six* (count 'em) *six* times on the cover of *each* magazine? Now really, that's *too* much NEW!!!

Bob Snow
P.O. Box 550
San Bernardino, Calif., 92402

Dear Mr. White:

The name FANTASTIC ADVENTURES has a special meaning to me, it being my introduction into this realm, 19 years ago, from the *Masked Rider Western* bag that I was then into. However, I feel that to revive the FA title could only be construed as a conscious attempt at camp. It is too obviously dated.

Richard Connolly
19 Lagunita Ct.
Martinez, Calif., 94553

Ted White—

As to the proposed title change: I'm against it and I daresay most readers will be. FANTASTIC ADVENTURES stinks too much of pulp, however good a representative of content it might be. The only sfzine that has an accurate title representing its contents is *F&SF*. If all the other prozines do not have to have accurate names, why should FANTASTIC? If you really want a name for the magazine that is truthful, you'll have to call it FANTASY & SCIENCE FANTASY.

Alex Krislov
3694 Strandhill
Shaker Heights, Ohio, 44122

Dear Mr. White:

In response to your request for comments on changing FANTASTIC to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, I vote a resounding *yes!* Any connotation of the old pulp FA would not be unpleasant to me, for I enjoyed that magazine from its birth as a bed-sheet-size pulp till its lamented demise in '52. Bring back the old masthead!

M. E. Taylor
Box 2534
OL 1603, USAF PAC PCR
APO, San Francisco, 96273

Dear Ted,

I rather like FANTASTIC as a title, but I won't go into screaming fits (as I did when JWC changed *ASTOUNDING* to *ANALOG*) if you want to experiment to find an improvement. FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, though, does make mental images of the stories in the old title, which for the most part were below the quality of the fiction you're printing now. Actually, I liked your title and logo under Cele Goldsmith's editorship—FANTASTIC Stories of Imagination. Couldn't you switch back to that? (At least as an interim measure until you think of something better.) Another objection to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is that it suggests a policy of *nothing but* action of the barbarian-vs.-magic type, when in actuality you publish many fine mood pieces without much real action to them.

Fred Patten

11863 W. Jefferson Blvd.
Culver City, Calif., 90230

Dear Mr. White:

If you do decide to change the title I would prefer you retain the word FANTASTIC and add ADVENTURES or something of that nature.

Chris Hoth, 378546125
C Co., 6th Bn. 2nd Bde.
Cl. #20-70
Fort Knox, Kentucky, 40121

Dear Mr. White,

As usual, the first thing I did when I bought the Feb. issue of FANTASTIC was to start reading your editorial. When I read the part about you wanting a change of names for FANTASTIC and asking what we thought about it, I immediately began this letter. Changing the name to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is not a bad choice, but to me it's only second best. What I would like to see FANTASTIC change to is FANTASTIC: STORIES OF IMAGINATION. I think this title aptly describes the type of material found inside this magazine. Imaginative. Written by authors with mind brilliant enough to write a story of imagination. Unfortunately, my letter alone will not change the name of FANTASTIC. It will take many letters, and not all the letters will share my opinion. But I assure you, Mr. White, that no matter what you change FANTASTIC's title to (if you even do) I will still read FANTASTIC. And in my mind's eye the title will be FANTASTIC: STORIES OF IMAGINATION, for this is what it has always been to me.

John Strong
1618 Boyce
Hastings, Nebr., 68901

Dear Mr. White,

I am a recent subscriber. I received my first mailed copy (Feb.) today, and I was very happy. When I read the letters, however, I became apprehensive about the amount of changes (often contradictory) advised by enthusiastic readers. It seems to me that your magazine is already better than any other sf magazine (except, possibly, *F&SF*). And there's no real contest—it's not as if other magazines come close. (When I think of the trash I have waded through—!)

Re the title: I dislike the title FANTASTIC. It is sensationalistic, cheap. I want to "escape" in fantasy, yes, but not in a superficial, clicheed dream world (which is what the title connotes). *(Oddly enough, DREAM WORLD was the title of a short-lived companion to FANTASTIC, back in the late '50's. From its lack of success, I gather most readers shared your feelings. —TW)* FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is just as stupid (pardon me). Two words in the title give it slightly greater complexity, yes, but ADVENTURES again connotes escapism and reminds me of child literature. Can't you pick a title that is simple to say and remember (for purposes of recommending to friends), unique (to distinguish it from other mags), identifiable as fantasy sf (so you don't attract people who won't be interested or fail to attract those who are) and intelligent? Do you have to have FANTASTIC in the title?

Diana Cook
625 Park Ave.
New York, N.Y., 10021

PS: Why do mags continue stories on other pages? I hate "turn to p. 34." I never finish news stories if they are continued on other pages.

Yes, FANTASTIC must, for various reasons, remain the root of this magazine's title. As for the last query, continuations are used in order to fit more material into a magazine. Otherwise, when stories ended on the top third or quarter of a page, the remainder of the page would require a filler, and if this occurred several times in an issue, several pages—enough for a short story—would be wasted. —TW

Dear Ted—

Keep FANTASTIC's name. I agree that it isn't all that great, but FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is horrible. And I'd be disturbed to read things like "What's Your Excuse" in a mag with ADVENTURES in its title. One word titles are best, anyway.

Jeffrey D. Smith
7205 Barlow Court
Baltimore, Md., 21207

Dear Ted,

First, the name business. *Any* change from what you have now would be to my liking. Ten years ago, when I was in high school, I was embarrassed to buy magazines with such juvenile titles. And that's what the prospective purchaser goes by; he doesn't have time to read a sample story to see what the contents actually are. You are trying to do something with these magazines, and so long as that something is not intended to pander only to juveniles, you are crippled by these two titles.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES would at least de-emphasize "fantastic", *if* both words appeared in equal size, and I think this would be a workable title for the contents you are shooting for. It's only an improvement, however. A completely new title would be better yet.

David B. Williams
15A Lee St.
Clayton, Mo., 63105

Dear Ted,

The main reason for this letter is to make a suggestion for a new title for FANTASTIC that you mentioned in your editorial. First of all, I don't like FANTASTIC ADVENTURES too much. I've seen some of the older ones and perhaps the connotations would be too great. FANTASTIC TALES, etc., are all likewise unsatisfactory to me. May I suggest FANTASTIC VISIONS for your consideration? This title seems to fit the mood of the times and the mood of fandom at the moment. More importantly, it seems to fit the mood of what you are trying to do with FANTASTIC. The word "visions" also opens up "the wide horizons implicit in the stories." In fact, it does so better than "adventures" in my opinion. After all, vision and vista come from the same root word.

Well, that's my idea. What do you think?

George Inzer
116 Cox St.
Auburn, Alabama, 36830

Well actually, George, I kind of like it. The question is, what do the rest of you think? Opinion seems fairly strongly opposed to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES (over 50% of you disliked it strongly while less than 25% of you had any liking for it at all), but at the same time would appear to favor some change. A return to the "Stories of Imagination" subtitle has been suggested most frequently among alternative title changes, but I will admit that George Inzer's suggestion intrigues me more. In the meantime, "Stories" has been added

to our cover logo, for the sake of consistency. You can rest assured you'll see no sudden title changes without warning; your reaction to the above discussion is now solicited. —TW

How do you do Mr. Ted;

I've read your publication for several centuries, but never have I encountered anything so revolutionary, so fantastically surreal as "Man Swings SF". Only a twisted mind or perhaps a mentally deficient IBM computer. Perchance you may know of further sources of this wonderful mind food; if so I would accept correspondence in a brown wrapper; or a pleasant rap in your printed media would more than suffice.

Sincerely yours,
Cousin Sophie Glutz

Since you omitted your address, "Cousin Sophie," I guess this will have to suffice. I'd suggest planting your seeds. Failing that, perhaps the return of Ova Hamlet with "Music In The Air," a Cornelius Jerry yarn, in our next issue will do the trick. —TW

Dear Ted:

Congratulations to Piers Anthony on having finally written a good novel—"Hasan." I'll be glad to give my recommendation—for whatever it's worth—to any of the publishers who previously considered the piece unworthy of book publication. *(A recent letter from Piers states in part, "I have sold 'Hasan' to Berkley Books . . . though you'd appreciate knowing the next—and, I trust, final—chapter in the marketing of that novel . . ." I don't know whether its publication here played any part in editor Don Bensen's decision to buy it, but it would be pleasant to think so.—TW)*

I understand that Piers is upset at me for not appreciating his more Significant works. And I have to admit, I found all that twaddle about astrology in *Macroscope* hard to swallow. But I suggest he may simply be more talented at writing an "unclassifiable" Arabian Nights fantasy—after all, Conan Doyle wanted to be recognized as a historical novelist, but Sherlock Holmes was what made him immortal, his vehement protests notwithstanding. *(Without taking a stand on the relative merits of his other works, I will admit that I'd enjoy seeing another fantasy of the "Hasan" type from Piers. In the meantime, his new novel, "Orn," a sequel to his* Omnivore, *begins in the July issue of AMAZING STORIES, out next month. —TW)*

"Hasan" reminded me a little of the sort of thing deCamp does these days, but it had a flavor all its own. Piers seems to have achieved the right balance of humor, adventure, myth, history and sex. That's no mean achievement; it takes as much skill as a Paris chef creating a new recipe. And I was quite interested in the account of his researches into the Arabian Nights saga itself—if $45 weren't too steep for me, I'd be tempted to run out and buy the Burton edition right this minute.

The question of changing the name of your magazine back to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES seems bound up with "Hasan," in my opinion. There used to be a number of broad-based "adventure" pulps that would print anything "off trail." Categories were less rigid in those days. Perhaps the demise of such pulps has left a vacuum you could fill—by all means, restore FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Maybe you could make it a modern equivalent of *ARGOSY* or *BLUEBOOK*.

Congratulations to you too, Ted—first editor I've seen who had the guts to

criticize Spinrad's polemics. Such New Wave-Thing attacks are usually labeled "spectacular" (that's how one major critic labeled an article insinuating a major editor was paid by the CIA to re-issue an old Buck Rogers story). *(Who said that? And where did such an article appear? —TW)* Of course, the PERIHELION crowd calling you "comic stripped idiots" shows to go you that taking a middle-of-the-road position isn't safe. Oh, well . . .

John J. Pierce
275 McMane Ave.
Berkeley Heights, N.J., 07922

Oddly enough, before my editorial comments on his article came out, Norman Spinrad offered me the article in question for our Fantasy Fandom *department, and seemed surprised when I told him that I regarded it as a dishonest attack. Inasmuch as fanzine comment on the piece has been surprisingly favorable, perhaps I am alone in my opinion of it. But since most of those who agree with Spinrad lack much knowledge of the professional sf scene, and since Spinrad has hitched his own wagon so firmly to the forces of "progress" that criticism of Spinrad or his own works is mistakenly identified as a "reactionary" attitude in general, I must persist in my opposition to his blatent misrepresentation of the facts. —TW*

Dear Ted:

On page 134 of the February FANTASTIC I find (at last; I was getting worried!) a statement by you that I disagree with enough to come out of my customary lethargy (inherited from the late Dr. E.E. Smith) to write and tell you so. I quote:

"(Protestantism has never been as rigid nor as repressive as Roman Catholicism)"

This leads me to suspect that you aren't awfully conversant with ecclesiastical history, even within the context of the United States, which limitation to your parenthetical statement might be inferred. Without going into tiresome examples, and without demeaning the Church of Rome's impressive record for rigidity and repression, and again without pretending to vast authority on the subject, still my own reading has shown that the various Protestant churches and communities, at times, have managed to exceed Roman Catholicism on these two matters.

Of course, we have a spectrum within Roman Catholicism, so that its most liberal face in times and places makes it appear like the pinnacle of permissiveness as opposed to the orthodox church of New England in the 17th century. And it is really very difficult to say anything on the subject about Protestantism as a whole, since there has never been anything like the unity or uniformity that can be found within Roman Catholicism at times and in places. (With other times and places, the variations in RC can be so great that a Roman Catholic going from one place to another would hardly recognize his faith at all in the practices of the local church—and very possibly fear that this was a total not only liberalization but paganization, too!)

The main point behind the difference is that, for all the excesses, etc., the structure of the Roman Catholic Church has been such so that a possibility for redress of excess has been there, however minute—even sub-atomic—it might have appeared to be at a given place or time. But few, even the very worst, popes ever had the total, all-embracing power over members of their congregations that

many Protestant ministers within the numberless sects, etc., have had, and in some instances right down to relatively recent times; and against these self-appointed authorities (even were they originally elected by a congregation) there was no appeal at all. In a number of the Protestant churches, the local congregation was entirely autonomous.

Incidentally, I agree with you on the likelihood of an alliance between Communism and Roman Catholicism which might result in a synthesis of the two—extremely small likelihood. But it could make a very interesting basis for a speculative novel—one which I can't say I'm entirely eager to read soon.

Carl Groener
Weehawken, N.J., 07030

Since the original point of my remarks was within the context of Mr. Spring's fear of a Communist/Catholic political takeover, I think you've misinterpreted me. My meaning was in reference to political repression; not the dictates of a tiny sect upon its own members. I will grant you my parenthetical remark was too broad, but I believe that history would show Roman Catholicism has earned top marks among the religious movements of Western Civilization for rigidity and repression. As a practicing agnostic, I view religious intolerance with a quite jaundiced eye, however, no matter what label or -ism is attached. It seems a shame that movements founded on the highest ethical principles all too often degenerate into arenas for power struggles; and that piety and faith are so often subverted into bigotry and intolerance. But this seems to be a basic fact of human nature. —TW

Dear Mr. White,

I read an article by Piers Anthony in a recent ish of SF REVIEW, and it tells how he couldn't sell "Hasan" to anyone. My God, is this for real? "Hasan" is easily one of the best novels I've ever read. How could anyone refuse something like this? The whole thing is so intriguing, with its factual background, that I'm shocked at its rejection by publishers. Oh well, I enjoyed it, and thought I'd say so. I think you should have more stuff like that. It's good to see a new Fafhrd novel coming up too.

Thomas J. Mullen, Jr.
Mullencrest Oldwick Rd.
P.O. Box 409, Whitehouse Sta., N.J., 08889

One of the most discouraging things in the world is to write a novel which one firmly believes to be good, only to find no publisher agrees. Fortunately, since our publication of "Hasan," and Piers Anthony's article on the subject in SF REVIEW, Berkley Books has purchased the novel. —TW

This concludes our letters department for this issue, but all those letters (or portions thereof) not published here will be forwarded to the authors discussed as a part of our regular Reader Feedback program. See you next issue! —Ted White

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 124)

watching him. He left without saying a word.

The next week Eliot got a good job and found a girl. His oboe playing improved. He never saw Marvin again, or the rhododendron. But the day after he got his first paycheck he bought a divan with white cushions and beat it to pieces.

—Greg Benford and
Laurence Littenberg

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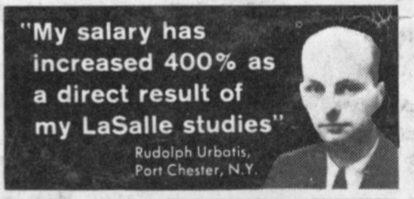

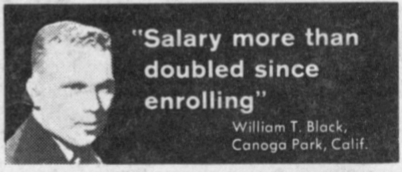

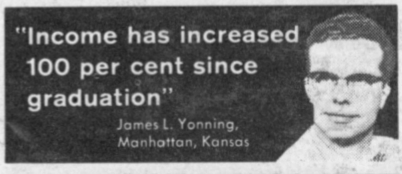

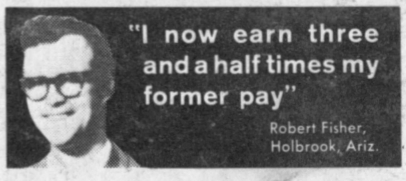

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