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CHESS and the GIANT BRAINS

In the May 1962 IF a chess-playing computer called "The Machine" was the hero of Fritz Leiber's novel-la *The 64-Square Madhouse*.

Recently we've learned that at about the same time an IBM 7090 computer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was programmed for chess and allotted only two hours to demonstrate its skill. (Computer time is costly!) Nevertheless "IBM 7090" showed itself a quite formidable player, especially in complicated middle-game positions, as described by Milt Garber, part-time chess consultant on the project, in the February 1964 *Chess Life*.

No connection between the real and fictional chess-robots — which makes it interesting to compare their performances.

IBM 7090 thought four moves ahead for each player (eight plies deep). The Machine: ten plies.

Both evaluated future positions in terms of strength and development of pieces, control of the center of the board, etc. IBM 7090 played "point count" chess, with numerical values assigned to all of the above. Neat touch: the chess king was given an infinity value, since winning the king wins the game. Another mathematical refinement: IBM 7090 used "an alpha-beta heuristic pro-

gram" to avoid wasting time on trivial moves.

IBM 7090 averaged 2.1 minutes per move. The Machine: 4 minutes.

IBM 7090 varied the time it devoted to a move from a few seconds to 8 minutes or more. The Machine: ditto.

The Machine was programmed by a grandmaster. Of IBM 7090, Garber says, "The advice of a grandmaster would have been extremely helpful."

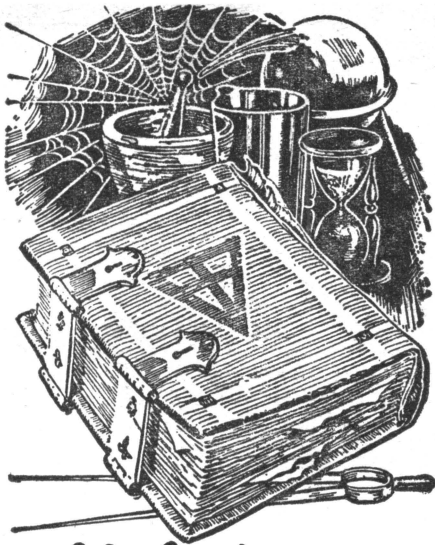
The machine was programmed with book openings. IBM 7090 wasn't, due to lack of memory capacity and of time available for writing the program.

IBM 7090, according to Garber, "played well in the opening and middle game, but failed badly in the end game—simply because it had no end game program"—which in turn was due once again time-limitations on program-writing. Almost certainly IBM 7090 would have wiped up the floor with MANIAC I and other earlier computers programmed for chess.

By contrast, The Machine tied for third in a very strong tournament against flesh-and-blood chess masters.

Seems like a reasonable degree of correspondence between science fiction and reality! —The Editor

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entrusted
to a
few



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THE SLAVES OF GREE

BY C. C. MacAPP

ILLUSTRATED BY MORROW

He was a warrior slave of the mightiest power in space—and his deadliest foe was himself!

I

Jen awoke to a gentle bobbing and stared up through clear plastic at a dark bluish-gray sky.

For a moment the color seemed frighteningly wrong. Then his mind struggled out of the dull confusion

that mired it. Of *course* there was nothing wrong with the sky. He must have been dreaming; in fact, shards of the dream still lingered, but they were going fast. A name whispered itself: *Steve Duke*. He frowned over that. Who was —

Now even the name was gone.



He was Jen, and there'd been something about a bump on the head, which was probably why he couldn't remember how he'd gotten here. He was in a treadbag, afloat on a mildly choppy sea. The sea was dark purple, which was right, and the sun coming through the plastic was warm.

He felt the bump on his head. Not a bad one. He thought he recalled that he'd been on a hunt, and had fallen off a cliff; but maybe that was another dream. The beach he could see didn't show any familiar details, so he must have drifted far from his hive.

He sat up and rubbed at a welt on his thigh where he'd lain across the edge of one of the treadbag's metal hubs. He got off the hub and looked in its food compartment. There were only two cubes of concentrate, though he couldn't remember eating the rest. He put one in his mouth and saved the other. He checked the water compartment and found it empty. Kneeling on the hub, he reached over his head to the other hub and found that one had neither food nor water. He must have been lost several days! But apparently he'd had consciousness enough to eat and drink and jettison his wastes. He checked everything in each hub. There was very little reserve oxygen, and the batteries were low. He'd have to get the bag upright and get it to shore.

He dismissed "Steve Duke" from his mind and got to work.

It wasn't easy to right a bag in active water. This kind of treadbag was thin plastic, shaped

when inflated like a spherical balloon slightly flattened at the sides. The tread, simply thickened ribs of plastic, was around the long circumference. The diameter across that way was a little over seven feet, whereas it was only four from hub to hub. A bag floated on one side or the other.

He got his fingers and toes hooked in handholds and threw his weight to the side. The bag rocked but didn't make it upright. He tried harder, and this time the bag went clear over and he got bumped around. On the fifth or sixth try he made it, then got the bag spinning by trotting up the curve before him, like a chipmunk in an exerciser. Now the batteries in the hubs would begin to charge, and he could recycle air if he had to. When he got to the beach he'd look for fresh water.

He watched the shoreline, enjoying the way it winked and distorted as the treads passed before his eyes. When he was close he saw treadmarks on the sand. That meant he was within rolling distance of a hive. He wondered what they'd do with a stranger who couldn't even remember where he came from.

A bag came into sight and rolled fast down the beach to intercept him. It was there ahead of him, because he couldn't make much speed in the water. He made the sign for trouble, and the man in the other bag acknowledged. Jen saw that he was quite old. Other bags were gathering now, most of them occupied by humanoids instead of men. One species was unfamiliar.

Jen signaled *Confusion, Hunger*

and *Thirst*. The old man nodded, pointed up the beach, made the *Hive* sign and led the way.

They turned off the beach onto a trail through the spiny grass that choked most level land. It seemed taller and thicker here than around Jen's own hive, and made a harsher sound against the bag. Ahead, he could see nothing but a ridge covered with ordinary squat blue-green trees. It wasn't until they topped the ridge that he saw the hive, a clear inflated dome a quarter-mile across, with buildings and smaller domes inside. The Symbol of Gree—four upright lines and a horizontal one, to represent a humanoid hand—loomed large high up on the plastic. There were humanoid females working the fields around the hive, but he saw no human women.

When they were half a mile from a dome a sentry-globe dropped down to hover ahead of them and they came to a halt. The globe extended a feeler against the old man's bag, listened and evidently passed him on, for he left with a gesture of politeness to Jen.

The globe put its feeler against Jen's bag and its flat voice asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Jen, number 377 03 50. I do not remember any more. I was floating in the sea."

"Are you ill?"

"I don't feel ill. I think I got a bump on the head."

The globe said, "The Inquisitor, then," and hovered so its weapons could bear while Jen rolled to the hive entrance.

Another globe took custody in the lock and pointed its feeler to the Inquisitor booth. The door opened to admit him, then closed behind. In the darkness a deep gentle voice, the voice of all Inquisitor booths, said, "What do Gree's loyal slaves say of him?"

Jen felt the tightness in the throat, the welling of tears, that were always the response to that question. "Gree is Love," he stammered. "Gree is Beauty. Gree is Wisdom and Protection; the Sustainer and—and the source of Comfort. Gree is All."

"What is the purpose of your existence?"

"To—to obey Gree, and serve Him; and repay all I can of His Kindness."

"What is your number, again?"

"377 03 50."

"What is your hive?"

"I do not remember."

"What is your race?"

"Human."

"What is your age?"

"I do not remember."

After a short wait, the voice said, "Your answers are truthful, Jen. Your hive is nearly one hundred miles from here. You were lost on a hunt and have evidently floated this far. Your age is twenty-three. We will adopt you. You may pass, Jen."

Twenty-three, Jen thought as he rolled from the booth. *So young?*

The old man was waiting to lead him to the men's barracks. They passed small domes where fruits were growing or where livestock grazed in special atmospheres, and turned into a down-ramp near the

center of the dome. There were two sets of locks, then they were among men.

Jen tripped the bleeder-valve and the bag grew limp. He released the seals on both hubs, pulled them free of the plastic and set them carefully outside. He climbed out, then ran his fingers around the beaded edges of both holes to make sure they were all right. He already knew, of course, that there were no significant scratches on the rest of the bag. A man was always on the lookout for those. He folded the bag and turned it in to Supply, along with the hubs which would have to be thoroughly tested and restocked.

He turned to the old man. "I am Jen. I want to thank you for bringing me in."

The other nodded. "You'll be staying with us, I judge. My name is Trav. And this is Holl, and Redn, and... come, I'll take you to the foreman. His name is Bargo."

II

Bargo was a husky man of thirty or over, scarred as if he'd fought many contests. He looked Jen over. "Twenty-three, eh? Well, I can surely use a trained hand, and one well put together like you. They hardly let me get a novice out of puberty before they draft him. There'll be room for you on the wrestling team, and in the war games of course, and in two or three days I hope to stage a goar hunt. Guess that won't be new to you, eh?"

"Uh, no," Jen said, embarrassed.

"My memory's a little out of whack, though, you know." The fact was, he couldn't remember for sure what a goar looked like.

The had him in the learning machines for the next two days, checking his education and giving him reviews. Then they released him for the time, but told him he'd have to spend fifteen hours out of each hundred in review. The hives all had standard curricula, of course — as did the adolescent schools and the creches, from which he must have come — but there were a few gaps in his recollection.

Otherwise, things were fine. He wrestled, and got to the barracks semi-final. Then they spent a day inspecting bags and equipment for the goar hunt. He was dismayed to find he knew little about the hunting-bags, but he watched and listened and found they weren't complicated.

That night he dreamed he was afloat again. The waves forced him in to shore where a heard of raging bovines with terrible horns and fiery eyes bellowed and stamped their hooves and made little dashes into the surf in their eagerness to reach him. A very wise creature that he could not quite see, because it shifted away when he tried to look at it, somehow got in his bag with him and told him, "Those may be goar and they will tear your bag and let the outside air in to suffocate you, and if you're not extremely clever and agile they'll trample your bag to bits, and you too, and gore you. But you must not forget for one instant, even if you are dying in the most terrible agony, that you are

Jen, a loyal and obedient and loving slave of Gree. Now I shall go away and leave you to face the goar alone, because I must not be discovered." And the waves carried him in while the herd poured out to meet him; and they ripped his bag to nothing and he gasped in the atmosphere which was heavy with carbon dioxide but had little oxygen; and he was tossed about on the horns, nude and bleeding and in shreds; and whenever he fell he was pulped by the sharp, terribly heavy hooves. Then Gree, who was sometimes a blaze of light and sometimes more like a tent, came and lifted him clear and pushed the goar away, and patted him together with an adhesive, and put salve on his hurts, and patched his treadbag and put him in it, and said, "I will sustain you because you are Jen, my obedient slave." Jen awoke sobbing.

The hunting-bags were of thicker plastic than the standard model, and had more complex hubs, each with an outside grapple. Also there were two weapons in each hub: a laser that squirted a thin beam of light, hot enough to slice flesh, and a bullet-port that released null-grav pellets which travelled in a straight line at exactly one thousand feet per second and would detonate spontaneously at one thousand feet if they hit nothing sooner. Both weapons aimed straight out from the middle of the hubs. Jen didn't see how anyone could aim a bag accurately enough to hit anything more than a few feet away.

Besides Jen and Bargo, only four others were going on the hunt: Holl

and Redn and two men named Walter and Skell. About four dozen men in their late teens, who were going out in standard bags under Trav's instruction for simulated hunts and contests along the beach, enviously watched them go.

Jen got into his bag, sealed the hubs in place, and inflated to a couple of pounds above room pressure. They went through the locks crossed the dome and left by the inland exit. The bag was firm out here. He noticed that the others were more skillful at treading the bags than he was.

They left the cultivated areas and took a rising trail inland, facing into the early sun. The trees grew thick here, too tall to see over. Bargo led them to the top of the nearest ridge. On the other side, farther from the sea, the trees grew in scattered clumps and there was no cut trail. They went north on the ridge, staying as high as they could. Jen had trouble with the side-slope, but managed.

After an hour of travel, Bargo took a small telescope from a case at his waist and gave the valley between them and the next ridge a careful search. Most of it, below the tree-line, was thick with spiny grass. A stream, lined with trees, wound down the middle.

They rolled down the slope fast, dodging clumps of trees, and now Jen really had it hard. When they got to the thick grass it was easier, because it slowed them. Bargo found a place where the stream crossed and led them over. Presently he pointed at the far slope and signalled, "Fresh trail."

Jen saw a spoor of flattened grass, at least ten feet wide, as if a large tent had been dragged up the slope. Evidently a goar was not a bovine after all.

After lining up landmarks, Bargo split the party, Jen and Holl with himself, Skell leading Redn and Walter. They rolled apart and started up the ridge parallel to the goar's trail, each two hundred yards to the side of it.

The other slope of the ridge was rocky for a mile down, but beyond that there was rolling country, with trees and grass. Bargo searched with his glass again, then they went down to the grass and looked for signs. There were none. The goar evidently had its lair among the rocks above them. Bargo nodded and turned his glass that way, studying the rocks for a long time. Then the other three bags joined them and they began working up the slope.

Bargo found a cluster of huge rounded boulders he liked, and they scouted them carefully for a base, noting where a bag might get wedged between rocks or gashed on a sharp one, and where the lines of retreat were. Then he got them distributed rather wide apart, each handy to cover. Finally he rolled on up the slope alone.

Presently he stopped and used his glass again, then hitched his bag around and fired a bullet which detonated a little way short of a great crumbling mass of rock. He waited. A rock bigger than a man's head came arching into sight as if from a catapult. Bargo avoided that easily, but a minor avalanche followed

and he spun down the slope and skidded into cover. The rocks shattered themselves against the protecting boulders. A shard the size of Jen's hand grazed his leg, leaving a visible mark. Nothing that size, at that speed, could pierce the plastic, but a bigger chunk might damage a hub.

Something poked into sight and came flowing down the slope like a monstrous flattened snake. It was easily ten feet wide and thirty long, but didn't look more than two feet thick anywhere. The front end tapered to a snout from which thrust a spade-shaped horizontally flat tusk or horn that flashed in the sun like glass or quartz. There were claws of the same glassy stuff along the monster's undulating edges. Jen could hear them ring on the rocks. Two small eyes winked open and shut. The thing came fast, with deceptive smoothness, over rocks and trees. It paused and its tail flipped up to send another rock hurtling. The rock showered them with fragments, then Bargo whirled into the open and let go a bullet which detonated very close to the thing. It looped itself aside as if stung, but no wound showed. It came for Bargo now, launching itself in a long soaring leap, landing on the boulders with amazing grace. Bargo was already gone and spinning down the slope toward the others. Bullets and laser beams converged on the goar as it went by in pursuit of the leader. It contorted and bits of its rubbery body flew, but it kept after Bargo. He was far down the hill now, and still going. The thing out after him.

Jen, mortified that he hadn't even fired a bullet, was out with the others and headed downhill. He lost footing and tumbled wildly in the bag, caught himself and fought for balance. Bargo had turned around a tree-clump and was spinning to the side, while the goar tried to curve its soar tightly enough to catch him. It landed and launched off again, laterally to the slope this time, and Bargo instantly turned uphill. Now at least the goar didn't have altitude on him. Two other bags were downhill now, beyond the goar, having lost control as Jen had. The others were taking pot-shots at the goar, but it was by no means crippled and it was gaining fast on Bargo. Now it was impossible for the others to shoot without endangering the leader. Bargo had made a stand but his laser beams were gone now, the batteries too low. Jen was getting close to the spot. He could skid to a stop, turn and fire, or swerve past the goar to safety. Instead, he hurled the bag straight at the eager snout.

The impact was stunning. The bag looped in an arc and bounced off the goar's back. There was some heaving and twisting and flashing sights of the snout, then it was over. He lay in the bag, dazed and bleeding. Bargo appeared and looked at him anxiously, then grinned.

The goar still writhed, but its head was blasted and oozing gray-green ichor. Bargo said later that Jen's attack had given him just time enough to put a bullet in the right spot. They made jokes about Jen's being too proud to use bullets or lasers on a goar.

Bruises were plentiful, but no bags were punctured and no one had any broken bones. When they rested and refreshed themselves, they began to hack out the goar's snout-blade and some of the claws, using the lasers and the grapples. The stuff did seem to be quartz, deposited somehow or perhaps honed and polished by the beast. They awarded the snout to Jen. Since it was too big to get in through a jettison hatch, the honor meant he had to carry it home clutched in a grapple.

Evidently Jen's awkwardness with the hunting bag was not noticed, for Bargo made him a sort of assistant and sent him out with squads of younger men to teach tactics. He did very well. He found he could read a war-problem script once and comprehend it. Not only did he know every tactic and stragem in the manuals, but he invented some of his own.

He easily made up his deficiencies in the technical subjects, and thereafter attended advanced math and physics classes with the other mature men. Trav was barracks instructor in these, though of course the teaching machines did most of the actual lecturing.

Four thousand hours passed. Jen was now the second ranking athlete in the barracks. Sometimes, when he was lucky, he even beat Bargo. But when he represented the barracks against others in the hive—there were currently eight different humanoid species in this hive, each with its own barracks—there was one individual named Fazzool, a

B'lant, whom he could never beat. It was not because of physical differences. The B'lant were about the size and shape of men, hairless, with tough gray skins adapted to some harsh world, but no more muscular than men. However, they came close to being infallible in whatever they'd once learned. In general, they were a little less inventive and a little slower thinking than men, but Fazzool was an exceptional B'lant and there was certainly nothing slow or dull about him. The two of them had some contests that thrilled the hive, but always some minor slip of Jen's gave Fazzool the victory. It was impossible for Jen to resent Fazzool, however much one hated to lose. Fazzool was modest and gracious about his victories. As a matter of fact, they became good friends.

A big batch of eighteen-year-olds came in, and all the older men were busy training them. Then one day Jen returned from a trip with a bunch of them to find Bargo in a glum, bitter mood. "That'll be your last trip," the foreman said.

Jen looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" But the foreman only turned and walked away.

Jen sought out Trav. "What's wrong with Bargo? Have I done something wrong?"

"Did he snap at you?"

"No, but he'd hardly talk to me. And he said—"

"He's always that way when there's a draft."

"A draft!" Jen stared at the old

man. "You mean I'm going?"

"Everyone of eligible age is going. All over the hive."

Jen whooped and seized the old man and danced him around. "I'm drafted! I'm going to Space! I'll—I'll be a warrior, and hunt the Bird of Effogus! I'll—"

When he calmed down he said, "I'm sorry Bargo is taking it the way he is. He'll get along without me; he did before."

"It isn't that," Trav said, straightening his tunic and trying to look severe. He met Jen's eyes. "Didn't it ever occur to you what it's like to be passed over?"

That sobered Jen. After a minute he said, "I—no. I didn't think a man like Bargo..."

Trav gave him a sardonic smile. "What do you suppose he'd doing here at his age? Did you ever hear of anyone coming back to a hive world?"

"Well no. But how could a man like Bargo be passed over?"

"I don't know. Any more than I know why I was passed over forty years ago."

III

The com blared, "Attention. The following men will line up in numerical order immediately at the med booth. Skell, number 376 19 61. Jen, number 377 03 50. Redn, number..."

Always before, the man in front of Jen had come back out of the med booth. This time he didn't, and Jen went in a little nervously. The door closed behind him and he

squeezed his eyes shut against the usual sprays. Blasts of warm air left him itching. A voice said, "What is that bruise on your left thigh?"

"I fell in a treadbag, while I was showing novices a maneuver."

A metal tentacle came from the wall and put its mouthlike tip against the bruise. There was a tiny needleprick and the voice said, "That'll fix it. Take a deep breath, now." The tentacle came up to listen to his heart.

When the pricks and thumpings and mouth-sprays-to-gargle were over, a panel opened in the back of the booth, where he'd never suspected one, and he stepped through. He was in an unfamiliar corridor. He walked along it to a turn, and saw humanoid ahead of him. Farther on he saw Skell walking. A humanoid stepped from a side-passage just ahead of him and they both stopped, startled.

The line gradually filled in, and when it came to a stand there were about two humanoids between him and Skell. Ahead of Skell, a B'lant stepped out of line and came back. Jen recognized Fazzool, "Zo," the leathery humanoid said, falling in beside him. "We draft togezzer! Maybe we big heros and see much sport, and many strange zings."

Jen laughed. That pretty much expressed his own feelings. "Maybe I can wrestle the Bird of Effogus," he said, "Even if I can't wrestle with you."

The com said, "Quiet in line, please. You'll be moving in a moment. You're about to meet your Overseer."

Jen had seen members of the Overseer race, but not close up. This one stood on a low platform in a large auditorium and addressed them. He spoke B'lant rather than English, since there were more B'lant present than humans. (All humanoids had to learn those two languages.) He told them he'd be their commander all through Advanced School, until they were requisitioned to Fleets or other service and were full-fledged warriors of Gree. He looked almost human, except for the extremely wide-set eyes and broad short nose, and he smiled at them in a friendly way. He wore a one-piece coverall with the Symbol of Gree worked onto the left breast. He carried a laser pistol in a holster at his belt.

"There's one formality we have to take care of," he told them at the last. "I must mark you with my personal ideograph. It will be your identification and safeguard in case you get lost, until you have a different commander, when it will be changed. I'll also put your numbers on you now. I don't have to do that here and now, but we have time, and it gives me a chance to know each of you individually."

They had to file past him one at a time, while he implanted his mark and their numbers on their hips. It was done invisibly, by a stylus that left tiny magnetic particles in the skin that could only be read with the proper instrument. It itched for a while.

Jen noticed that whenever they were lined up, the men and the B'lant always came first. Also, they

got preferential seating. The other humanoids did not seem to mind.

As soon as the marking was finished they were fed, then marched to a tunnel-train that bore them on monotonously for two hours. Then they transferred to what could only be a spaceship.

Jen found his first sight of space disappointing. It was too much like the training films; and of course he'd been in the gray chamber many times so free-fall was no novelty. Most of the others seemed to enjoy it more.

Their destination must have been many light-years from the hive world, for they nulled out three times, spacing in twice for corrections any maybe as evasive action in case enemy ship detected them. Then the third time they were within easy telescope range of the Advanced School.

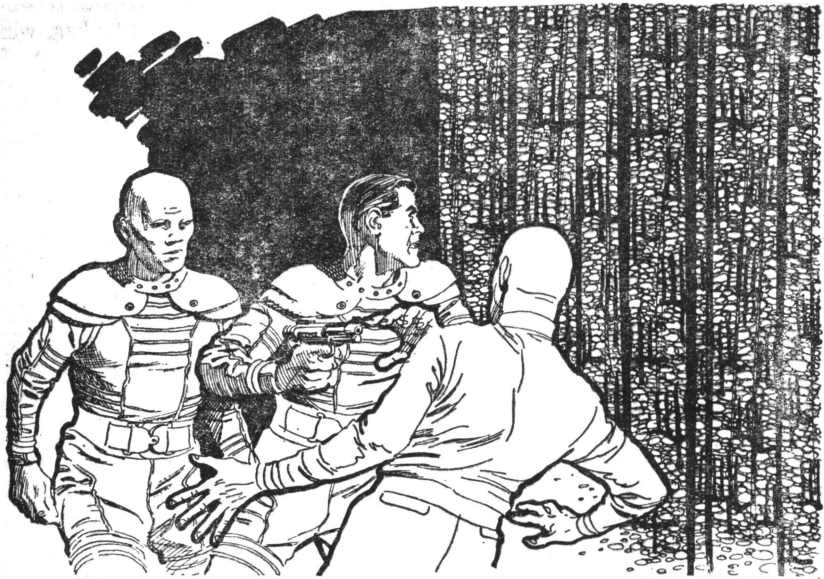
It was a collection of spheres and cylinders, some connected by what looked like threads from here, some in slow orbit around the central group. Lights, indistinguishable from stars except by relative motion, crawled here and there. Every globe or cylinder had at least two ports lit up, and some were spangled with lights. The whole thing looked like an elaborate toy.

Now, as first indoctrination in actual space, each draftee had to leave the ship in a spacebag and get himself over to the School. Jen got in the de-pressure chamber and took deep breaths and exercises to speed adjustment. He pulled his suit's limp helmet over his head and

sealed it, but didn't inflate. It would inflate when he got in the bag, which would only be at four pounds. The other draftees in the chamber with him all looked scared.

The spacebag was of clear plastic no thicker than that of a hunting model treadbag, but this bag was elongated from hub to hub rather than flattened. Strong cords ran from three points equidistant around the rim of each hub to corresponding points on the other. There was room between the three ropes to position oneself comfortably, but he found that the problem was to avoid pulling on one and deforming the bag when he didn't want to. Tilting the hubs naturally tilted the grav drive and affected his aim. Now at last he was reacting to Space. He had to fight panic for a few seconds as he skewed off course, then overcorrected and got the bag into a very confusing end-for-end tumble. He forced himself to relax and consider the problem. He was in no real trouble; at worst he'd pass within a short distance of the cylinder he had to attain. Ahead of him he could see bags in even worse spins, and one drifting out at a sharp angle. The occupant of that one was curled up in a tight ball, arms wrapped around his head. A light was moving out from the School to make the rescue; but that was one who'd obviously flunked the test.

He found he could judge his own drift even though the ship, the station and the stars were wheeling around him. The first thing to do was get his spin around the hub-to-



hub axis. He gave the rotor jets of one hub a gentle blast. The result, as the bag twisted and several spins fought, was disturbing, but he waited it out and eventually things stabilized. Now he had a precessing wobble, not too fast to follow if he concentrated hard. He chose what he felt were the right side-jets and touched them lightly. After another period of distortion, the bag settled to a lateral spin with a small wobble. He let that go and concentrated on his course. A few careful spurts got his long axis lined up and a little over-corrected, which was what he needed. Now a mild grav thrust brought him on course, or near enough. But he was overtaking bags ahead. He retroed a little and got his speed about right. He was feeling proud of himself now,

and worked at his wobble until it was almost entirely gone; then he killed most of the lateral spin and went drifting to the cylinder very neatly.

Larger bags, rigid and double-manned, were darting about rescuing people. Jen passed Redn very close, and saw the strain on the other man's face. A moment later one of the heavy bags eased into Redn's path and absorbed some of his momentum. Then they came over to look at Jen, gave him a pair of grins, and left him. He wanted very much to hit the net at the cylinder without any help. He made small corrections and got some wobble again, but ignored it. He was on course.

He hit near the edge of the net and it took up the shock. He worked

furiously with a grapple and got it hooked around a strand. He relaxed, perspiring. Then he saw another bag coming straight at the net, faster than he had. At the last moment it checked and drifted in neatly with very little wobble. It touched almost the exact center of the net and a grapple caught on casually. Jen felt his face grow warmer as he met Fazzool's grin.

The ship that had brought them stood by for ten hours. At the end of that time it left, taking with it those who'd flunked the transfer plus four others who couldn't seem to adjust to steady weightlessness, despite their previously passing in the grav tanks. There'd be service for them, and maybe even combat, but not in space. Holl was one of them.

Now the class settled into a routine of hard work. They were learning not only how to apply in actual Space the physics and math they knew, but also the maintenance and operation of a staggering array of equipment. All of it was fascinating, though, and most of it came easier to Jen than to some of the others. Skell, who'd been so good up to now, flunked out on blunders, along with a few humanoids. The Overseer was a fiend in his insistence on detail and perfection, and sometimes when they got in from a long drill he'd take them to do it over.

When they weren't out on those they had to spend long hours at exercise, usually in a cylinder of comparatively small circumference around which they ran as hard as

they could to simulate gravity, barked at by instructors, until they were exhausted. Some grumbled, but Jen didn't. He wanted to keep his strength, and also to be able to eat what he liked and digest it afterward.

After nearly eight hundred hours, the Overseer decided they'd earned a twenty-hour vacation. A ship whisked them through null to a recreation world, where they staged an orgy that made the Overseer shake his head and say he'd never quite seen their match for pure debauchery.

That was the time Fazzool, by pulling a quick swap in the dark, maneuvered Jen into a rather intimate position with a B'lant woman, and an especially leathery one at that. It was rather a horrible shock, but everyone had a lot of fun out of it and it made Jen a minor legend at the School.

Except for the rare vacations, the only days of relaxation were when they had free-fall wrestling or team games of tie-up, in a spherical gymnasium where it was necessary to think and move in three dimensions. The tie-up game was simple, so far as rules went: ten men on each side endeavored to tie up their opponents with short length of rope. An amazing amount of strategy developed, with Jen and Fazzool quickly becoming the two best team leaders in the class. Here, as everywhere, humans and B'lant seemed naturally to lead, other humanoids to follow. When they'd become good at the game, the Overseer made Jen and Fazzool co-leaders of

a class team and sent them into competition against other classes. They did very well together.

The eight thousand hours of Advanced School were nearly past, and now there was one ultimate test everyone must face. He must find his way home in a space-bag, from where a ship dropped him. It would take him about one hundred hours, and he had no radio and no directions except what he knew of the local stars and what he could learn from a star-chart and some instruments. There was alleged to be enough food, water, air and energy to keep him alive and bring him home—if used just right—and very little more.

Jen watched the ship pull away, then wink into null. The first thing to do, he told himself, was to relax and think about the problem.

By exercising just enough to keep his circulation and digestion moving, and eating barely enough to avoid starving, he'd be sure of the food and air. There was a special problem about the air—he could use some of it for jetting, and thus save battery power from the grav drive. But if he wasted too much compressed air, he'd have to recycle the bag's, and that used energy.

One thing he could not afford to do was drift away from the School, or propel himself even a few degrees in the wrong direction. Therefore, he couldn't waste too much time thinking before he located himself.

First of all he had to determine the bag's spin very accurately, so he could correct for it. That was

simple in theory, but tedious. He fixed the figures in the computer.

Next he used the small telescope to find all the variable or multiple stars of any brightness, and compared his list with the star chart. He got no definite clues, but did eliminate some possibilities. He'd have to look for more subtle things. There'd be some hint—the angle of a short-orbit binary, or something.

Finally the computer nudged up an answer with a probability of better than three to one. Dare he act on that? The one chance in three of being wrong depended on the closeness of his readings, and on mechanical error. He decided to wait a little longer.

Two hours later he re-checked, found no change, and made some quick mental calculations. The position he suspected would fit with his being presently about ninety hours from the station, with the acceleration he planned. He stared in the indicated direction. The stars were cold and unfamiliar. If he were wrong, would they find him? There had been losses out of most groups, so they said. Gree was only a mortal after all, and not infallible; and neither were his Overseers. And even if they rescued him—he could assure that by just going nowhere—he did not want to survive and flunk.

He had no better information that what the computer offered so far. He made up the programming and used the grav drive. If he wound up with extra air he could always use it for jets later.

Once he was committed, though, he worried about his decision. If he used too much battery energy, the extra air wouldn't do him any good. He needed the batteries to keep the bag warm.

Barcly fifteen hours had passed.

At thirty hours he was sure he was getting closer to the School, but it looked as if he had enough error to pass it out of telescope range. Now he faced decision again. Pondering it only made his nerves worse, so he calculated as close as he could and made the corrections with compressed air. Then he did his exercises and ate, and forced himself to relax; but unwelcome thoughts kept coming. Did Gree really worry about individual slaves? Suppose it were accepted that a certain number should die in training? Many died in combat.

And thinking of combat, what if the enemy happened to space in here? Glory was fine, but he didn't want to die meanly in a bag without any weapons.

At fifty hours he reached some kind of an emotional crisis and had to face the real question: either he could keep a grip on himself or he couldn't. Put that way, it was a little easier. He simply mustered all his courage to face the threat. But relaxing was harder than violent action would have been. And now something else was getting out of kilter. At times he could remember the creche and almost all his younger life; then those memories would shift to a different angle so they seemed second-hand as if he'd only

watched them in a movie, and some of them would elude him entirely. He endured grimly, clinging to his identity as Jen, who belonged to Gree.

But at somewhere around seventy-five hours—he wasn't paying enough attention to the time now, nor bothering to eat or exercise—his skull seemed to get crowded. Hot dizziness swept over him. He heard his voice cry out distantly, "No!"

Then the tide rolled over him.

IV

There seemed to be a bird in the bag with Steve. It was the size of a condor, or larger, but it had a head and face that were both elfin-like and man-like, and a pair of small but strong-looking hands and arms. "Steve," it said to him in a dry whisper of a voice. "Major Steve Duke. Come up."

He shook himself awake. He looked at the creature and said a four-letter word. "How'd you get here?"

"I'm not real. Your own mind is conjuring me up. We arranged it that way, but for technical reasons we couldn't tell you."

He reached out a hand suddenly, found he could grasp nothing. "Hell! You look *real*. Solid."

"Pull yourself together," the whisper said, "You're in danger. Jen's personality is beginning to waver."

Steve scowled. "Good riddance, if you ask me. I feel all right. What now?"

"Review. Question-and-answer.

At least we can make sure *your* personality stays firm."

Steve swore again. "I don't need that childish stuff. *I* know who *I* am."

"Don't be too sure. You need me, as an exterior personality — even an artificial one — to focus on. It's the only way we can keep things in the right relationship. All right now, who are you?"

Steve sighed. He'd been over this so often. "Steve Duke. Major, Free Earth Counter Force."

"What am *I*?"

Steve grinned. "Bird of Effogus. And you'd better not let me get you on a gun-screen while I'm working for Gree; because let me tell you, I'm a —"

"What is Gree?"

"A son of a — oh, all right. Invader. Tyrant. We're going to settle his hash as soon as I find out for you how to get at him."

"I wish we had your confidence of that. Why did we choose you?"

"Because I was a dual personality, and you could feed into the submerged one the memories of a captured Gree slave."

"You're reciting by rote," the Bird accused. "Do you really *feel* what you're saying?"

"Yes, damn it! I tell you everything is all right!"

"It *isn't* all right," the Bird said, "Jen's beginning to float a little."

"He'll make it," Steve said. "He does all right. He fools the Inquisitors. And he's got guts. Or *we've* got guts; or however it is." Steve realized his attitude toward Jen was ambivalent. On the one hand he felt

a little contemptuous; on the other he often found himself rooting for Jen. It was as he thought he might feel toward a kid brother, if he had a kid brother. He said, more conscientiously, "Things are all right. I have all of his impressions and memories. He has none of mine. As long as that's true his environment will tend to correct any drift, won't it?"

"**Y**es," the Bird said, "so long as he doesn't go completely off when he's alone. Now, I detect something ugly squirming around in that cesspool mind of yours. Let's have it up and look at it."

"All right," Steve said with a rush of willingness, "It's this. Concede that Gree is trying to conquer the galaxy, or a hefty piece of it. What about *you*? If we help you stop him, maybe you'll just take over yourself. And as long as you want frankness... they say Gree is humanoid, at least. I'd just as soon be a slave to a humanoid as to a God damned bird. Rather."

"Thank you. Let's go over it point by point. How long has Gree had Earth?"

"Damn you," Steve muttered, "You've sure got me twisted up inside. Arguing with myself... Six hundred years, according to you. All right. You showed me evidence."

"And what was Earth six hundred years ago?"

"Occupied the Solar System. About to get to the stars."

"What is Earth now?"

"A hive planet. A breeding and training pen."

"And how were *you* raised?"

"Free," Steve admitted unwillingly, "knowing the truth."

"Where?"

"On a planet you gave us."

"Correct. Now, about our being birds."

"I suppose I have to believe the evidence," Steve said, "You were humanoid once. You mutated yourself for wings and gave up a lot of your material science. Still, that doesn't..."

"Which brings us to a point. How long, according to evidence you'll admit to believing, have we been capable of conquering a hefty piece of the galaxy, as you put it?"

"Well... half a million years, maybe."

"And we didn't?"

"No."

"Then doesn't your attitude seem foolish?"

"I suppose so."

"And now shall I tell you why you have such a suspicion?"

"I don't give a fig whether you tell me or not. Whether I tell myself, is what I actually mean."

"It's because you're just naturally a sour, disagreeable slob."

"You picked me for the job."

"Yes. Which brings us back to where we started. You'd better go back under now."

Steve concentrated hard on the key phrase, remembering how it sounded in an Inquisitor booth: "What do Gree's loyal slaves..."

Jen awoke sobbing. He must have been dreaming of Gree again.

He checked the chronometer.

Nearly eighty hours gone. He must have slept quite a while; he felt refreshed and a little more serene. He had only to endure now; endure and keep himself fit. The others would be having it just as hard.

He took care of his needs and checked course again, as nearly as he knew it. Hours passed. Finally he thought he saw a fuzzy spot of light that revolved in a small circle around his fore-and-aft axis. He put the scope on it and trembled with excitement. He'd done it! There was only a small correction to make now; and since he didn't want to be in too much below a hundred hours, he retroed a little. There was enough charge in the batteries to keep him warm, and a little compressed air to jet with.

He made a good net landing and got through the lock, and got himself out of the bag. He was stiff and lame, and his intestines felt stuffed up. The Overseer hurried to him, beaming, and hustled him through an Inquisitor booth. On the other side, the Overseer told him, "The best performance I've seen in a long time, Jen! A shower now, eh? Then maybe something alcoholic?"

"I guess so, sir." Jen's voice was very hoarse. "The others...?"

"A very good record. Over half in already, and only two under ninety-five hours, which is passing. The rest should all make it without help except six. They'll flunk, I'm afraid; but that's a low number; and we won't lose one."

"Fazzool?"

"About an hour away, and in fine shape. When we get you all in and

doctored up, there'll be vacation. Forty hours this time!"

V

After the vacation — during which Jen managed to sneak carbondum crystals into Fazzool's bed — there was a short period of review and examinations. Then one waking-cycle the coms blared, "The following report to Overseer's office at once. Jen, number 337 03 50. Fazzool, number . . ."

The Overseer was already emptying his desk. He told them, "The twenty highest scores in the class are going to a Fleet Base. You will be the only B'lant and the only human in the group, and you'll be jointly in charge until you report in. The other eighteen are being advanced one grade. You are both being advanced two. You will find the assignment inspiring; and if you maintain the same level of diligence, the way is open for you to go high in the service of Gree." He came around the desk to shake hands. "I've enjoyed working with you, and with the class in general. I hope my next one will be as good."

The trip must have been long, for they made four jumps of it, but finally they spaced in within sight of the Base.

This was a breathtakingly thick starfield, but the Base was even more awesome. A long chain of Stations, each bigger than the whole of the School they'd left, swung in distant orbit around a huge red star. Farther in, a swarm of collector-

depots soaked up energy and transformed it for beaming out to the Stations. Freighters darted between Stations like bees, or popped out of null with mysterious cargoes from ten thousand exotic worlds.

Jen's transport was dropping toward one of the stations, while he and the others crowded before a screen. The station's image ballooned until it filled the screen, and now Jen saw the fighting ships nursed up to it in perfect ranks, like piglets dwarfed against the belly of a monstrous sow. The transport retroed; a huge port filled the screen. A screeching and shivering of metal, a bell and a green light, and they were sealed on.

The draft filed from the transport and lined up before an Inquisitor booth. Other groups, totaling hundreds of draftees, were being processed through. And this was only one Station of the Base!

Jen reacted to the key question and sobbed out his answers in the booth, then he was through it, handing his taped orders to an Overseer. "Get your group to med first," he told Jen and Fazzool, "then come back here. You two double-graders — Jen and Fazzool, is it? — are assigned to a crew at once."

They saw no more of their classmates when they'd gone through med. An overseer — their new commander — put his ideograph on them after erasing the old one, and took them via shuttle-car across the great cylinder of the Station to the sunward side, where they went aboard his ship.

This was only a Scout, with a crew of twenty plus the skipper. Actually, there were two crews; the second one, under another Overseer who was Second-in-command, being off duty now. The duty crew bunked in the Station handy to the ship.

Jen and Fazzool had been made familiar with this standard class of Scout at school. She had three sections, squat cylinders coupled end-to-end by standard locks, the two outer ones being the only ways in and out of the ship. One was coupled to the Station when she was home, and left open.

The middle section was the living quarters, and there they bunked when they were on duty. The two end sections had duplicate power-generators and fighting equipment, so that either could carry on by itself in a pinch. She had her own mess and was proud of it, and the food was the best Jen had ever eaten. The discipline was not harsh, though no one loafed. Everyone was concerned with keeping the Scout shipshape, and that was it.

Jen was disappointed at first that he and Fazzool hadn't gotten a capital ship, but his feeling changed fast. The Scout was *his* ship now. Still, he loved to sign out a bag during free hours and go outside to look at the big ships. They were five-sectional, each section a vastly wide but flat cylinder, with great missile ports and laser-beam openings into which he could have floated his bag. The ships were so big, in fact, that a standard Scout coupled onto the end lock as a tiny lifeboat.

There were so many things to do in free time that none of them ever need grow stale. There were furloughs to vacation worlds, space tours to fascinating planets, films, exhibitions, athletic contests. For that matter, the Scout's missions were fascinating. They'd null, and space in, twenty or thirty times per trip; each time hanging dark and with all power damped for a few minutes, listening, since there was always the chance, however small in the vastness of the galaxy, of stumbling upon the enemy. But if things were quiet they'd take photographs and instrument readings, or perhaps orbit an interesting planet. A few times they actually landed. Once they were so long that at their check-in point they found a drone awaiting them, a standard Scout, unmanned and programmed just to hop here and back. They squirted it a message and it vanished into null to go home and report they were all right.

But on the Scout's nineteenth or twentieth mission, one of their hops dumped them right into the midst of a battle.

VI

A horn bellowed. The Second in command who was in Jen's end of the ship, leaped for his battle-seat and strapped in with his left hand while his right hovered over a button. Crewmen poured from the middle-section lock. When they stopped coming the Second dropped his fist on the button and the lock slammed shut.

Screens were asquirm now with green blips — friendly ships — and, at the edges, a glob of yellow ones which were the enemy. Short red lines, crawling like worms, were the enemy missiles. They'd obviously gotten a jump on the friendly fleet.

Jen and Fazzool were in their seats and strapped down. They had the defensive armament for this end of the ship; small counter-missiles and one laser beam. The screen went blank, then came on again with all the blips shifted, which meant the Scout had nulled out and spaced in again some miles away. That puzzled Jen for a second, then he realized she was locked into Fleet Command and was moving with the other ships. The red worms on the screen wheeled and came on again. It would be fifteen minutes or more until enough energy accumulated to null again. The screen began to blink white with detonations as the interception began. It was impossible to follow as the automatics went to work, missiles and counter-missiles, with their built-in computers and tactical sense, maneuvering at a hundred times human speed. The Scout shuddered and clanged as debris and expanding gases hit her.

She lurched hard, twice, and Jen understood she'd been shifted to guard some important ship. A big blip on the main screen, very near the center, would be the one. A circle glowed for an instant around that blip, then was gone. The Command Ship herself! He darted a glance at the Second and saw the Overseer's face taut, his shoulders

slightly hunched, as if expecting to be martyred any instant. The rain of debris on the hull was deafening now. Other Scouts were clustered around, their combined automatics intercepting most of what came by, headed for the Command Ship.

Then a heavy salvo showed on the screen, the big stuff, surrounded by its swarm of protective smaller missiles. The Scout jumped again and the salvo leaped across the screen. She'd been put right in the path! And the salvo was coming fast — far too fast.

Barring miracles, it would sweep aside the Scouts, Jen's included, like so many gnats and go on to atomize the Command Ship. The idea of death pervaded Jen's mind but it was an impersonal thing, unimportant now. If he could just make a hole in that protection around the main enemy salvo. Crack it; dent it; so Gree's missiles could get in! His fingers began to dance over his keyboard. Nearly everything in this end of the Scout went blasting away in a compact group, pitifully small, but for that very reason not likely to attract much attention. He let it go straight on collision course for the hostile salvo. At the right instant he'd maneuver. But *soon* — his control would only last until the enemy jamming got strong. Now! He sent his missiles blossoming out like a flower, away from each other as if to attack from many angles. He built up a small concentration in the path of the salvo. But the instants flew so fast, and brain and

fingers were so slow. He was aware of Fazzool beside him, letting Jen handle this while he, the B'lant, strove with the laser beam to fight off death from the Scout for just brief seconds, just enough time for Jen to do whatever he was doing. Now! Jen pulled his ludicrously overmatched missiles back into a tight group, shooting in at full acceleration toward the tiny flaw in the defense where missiles had pulled out to meet his feint. The screen blinked with explosions. Then a great blinding flare! He'd gotten something! And there was a hole, if only for a second. Were there friendly missiles close enough to exploit it? But the fight was on top of the Scout now. She bucked and screamed as steel tore into her and great detonations made brief gigantic winds in Space. There was a jar so immense Jen's straps dug into his body until he thought they'd tear him apart. The screens went blind-white, then black. All the lights went out. Then they came on again as circuit-breakers cut back in.

The salvo was past, and there was only one more great flaring on the screens, that lasted for many seconds and centered somewhere near the Command Ship. Then it was incredibly still, with only a faint thump now and then of slow-moving debris against the hull. The screens showed a few distant flares as unimportant missiles went off. The enemy fleet had vanished from the screens. Nulled out, probably, and with wisdom, for more of Gree's fleets would be on the way.

The Overseer, his face drained and wooden, was unstrapping. He paused and listened as overseer language gobbled from the com. He translated, "A reconnaissance in force, we think. They won't be back." He glanced at the screen, where the big blip, close in, still glowed. The Command Ship's still alive, more or less, and we'll get the credit for that. But I'm afraid our other two sections are dead." He looked at Jen for a few moments. I don't like to demand it after the way you've just fought, but someone has to go outside and inspect damage. Two."

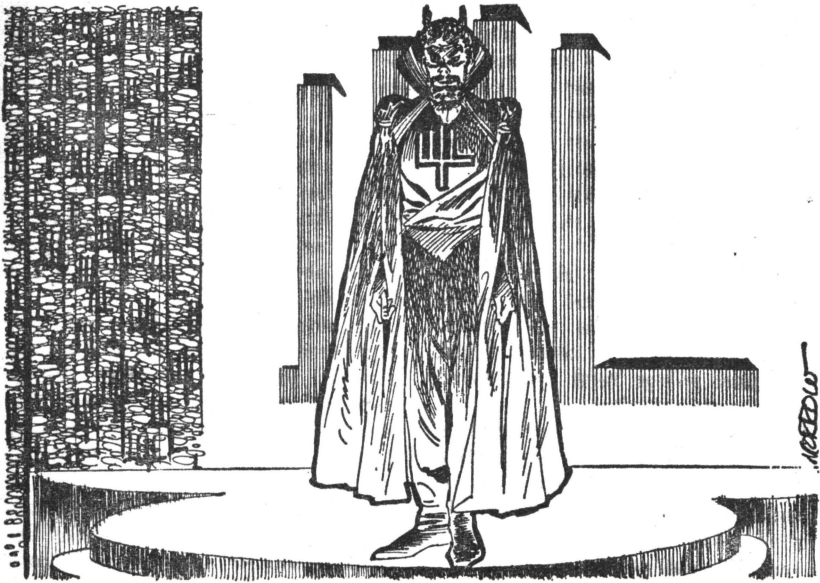
Jen looked at Fazzool, who grinned. Jen said, "We're both pretty good in bags, sir, and we've worked together a lot."

The Second smiled faintly.

"I know. I've got enough power to null if we have to, but the field would only extend a few yards; so stay very close to the hull. I think, though, we'll be here a while."

Jen inflected the bag to a little above ship's pressure, then sealed his suit and raised the suit pressure a fraction of a pound. Fazzool wasn't quite ready, so he propelled himself toward the lock and a humanoid opened it for him.

Outside, he got a grapple on a handhold and looked around while he waited for Fazzool. This was a dense starfield, so there was light enough to see even the dark ships and the holes in them. There'd evidently been about twenty capital ships in this fleet, and somewhat more of the enemy.



The Command Ship only lived nominally; one section out of the five. Auxiliaries and bags clustered around it, at work already making rescues and emergency repairs. Drones winked in and out of existence. Those would be carrying battle reports to Central Command, wherever that might be. A few of them might even be reporting to Gree himself. Wherever *he* was. That last thought made Jen's blood pound. He sent a little cool air into his helmet, but it didn't help. The crowded dizziness grew. Alarmed, he looked to make sure his grapple was tight. Then he blacked out.

Steve shot a glance at the tell-tale light and saw the lock was pumping down. Fazzool would be out in seconds. He stared around at

the fleet, noting things Jen would have ignored. It was the drones that had brought him to the surface, he knew—some planted command to surface when he saw a possible way to Gree. Could he stow away on one? Not likely; they'd be monitored inside as well as out.

The lock opened and he put on what he hoped was a natural smile.

They propelled their bags along the end and around to the cylindrical side. The middle compartment was holed in several places and completely dark. Two crewmen should have been on duty there. Fazzool maneuvered his bag to throw a light-beam in and they saw the two bodies.

They went to the far section, where the skipper had been. It was in even worse shape, with great

jagged holes. Steve studied one and decided they could get the bags in. He went in first, and aimed his light for Fazzool. It came to him that it would be very easy to shove the B'lant's bag against the jagged steel and rip it. But Fazzool would still be in a suit. And what was the profit just now?

There was nobody alive in the section. The skipper had died in his battle-seat. There was no power. Steve wished he were alone. There were some things he'd have loved to give more attention.

They checked what they had to and went back outside. At the live end Steve lagged a little and let Fazzool reach the lock first. He wanted a few more minutes outside to look around and think.

The drones still came and went. The only way he'd get into one was with clearance from an Overseer.

He stiffened. Maybe he could arrange that.

He glanced at the tell-tale light. He'd have a few minutes before they began to wonder, inside. He shot back around the hull into the jagged hole. He hesitated, wondering if he could work out of a bag. But the suit would stiffen with the big pressure differential. . . He propelled over to the dead skipper and wedged his bag between a seat and the bulkhead so his grapple was positioned about right. In some compartment of the skipper's panel would be what he wanted.

He got one compartment open. Food. He tore at others, finally found the magnetic marker. He maneuvered it to the bag's jettison

lock and inside. He floated, pummeling his mind for a plan. They must be getting worried about him by now.

A note to Jen from the Skipper! But there was no time to write it now. He got more compartment open, found a pencil and notepad, got them into the bag. Now if he could arrange for the rest of the Scout to die. . .

He stared at the power unit. No way to set off fuel without killing himself too. A missile? There were still a few left in this end. But how would he set it off, with enough delay to let him get clear? It would be easy enough to position it so it would streak through the middle section and blast the bulkhead beyond. Could he rig some radio control to fire it? Not in less than hours. But there *must* be a way. All he had to do was set off the driving charge.

The skipper's laser gun!

He went back to the corpse, tore at the holster and got the gun, then went for a missile. He didn't take the biggest. No use advertising to the whole fleet; a small penetration would do. There was a hole in the bulkhead he could put it in, but he needed something to jam it in with. A corpse. . . He got one and stuffed it into the hole, pushed the missile in alongside. The gun fit nicely in a pocket of the corpse's suit so it wouldn't float away. He aimed it at the missile's casing, in what he hoped was the right spot, and set it for low power and steady operation. When he

triggered it the casing began to glow at once. Scared now, he propelled out of the hole and shot away from the Scout. He turned in time to see the masked flare. Vapor and debris puffed out. There were no lights left that he could see. He let out his breath and relaxed for a moment, grinning like an adolescent. Then he took a grip on himself. Not time yet to be feeling so damned clever.

He wrote in pencil, trying to imitate the dead skipper's writing, in English, "Jen: you are unconscious as I write, but you are not wounded and you will live if we get you into a bag. The rest of us won't. You are marked with a very important message. Take this note without delay to the Overseer in command of the fleet. Give it to no one else and do not let anyone examine you. These are your orders. Good luck" Then he faked the skipper's ideograph.

Now he took the magnetic marker and added more, in the Overseer script. Slaves weren't supposed to know that, but the bird of Effogus had taught him many things. Finally he unsealed his suit and prepared to mark the message on himself. He hesitated. Dare he do it this way? It would prove that the suit had been unsealed, and in breathable air, when the message was implanted. He couldn't think of anything better. He put the message on his stomach, describing a new type of enemy missile. If he wrote the script awkwardly, that was as a dying Overseer might write. And if they wanted any confirmation about the enemy missile, the battle had al-

ready supplied it. He happened to know that there *had* been an innovation used. He hoped the information was expendable.

He suited up, then jettisoned the pencil, notepad and marker, nudging them with the bag so they'd float away. Now there was one more thing to do before putting himself under and letting Jen carry the ball for a while. He must injure himself slightly, to make things plausible. A bump on the head? Banal; and he'd already used that once. He grinned. Simple enough—a bloody nose would look like pressure trouble or concussion. He brought the heel of his hand against the front of the helmet, hard. When he tasted blood he exhaled through his nose to spatter the inside of the helmet. Then he relaxed and thought hard about Gree, and asked himself the key question.

VII

Jen came to with the taste of blood in his mouth and a trickle of it in his nose. He was in a suit and a bag, which agreed with what he remembered last—starting outside with Fazzool. What had happened? And where had the note come from that was gummed to the hub before his face? He read it. Evidently the other sections of the Scout had not been dead; the note was from the skipper. He turned to peer at the Scout. She looked dead now.

Grief welled up in him. Was Fazzool dead then, along with the rest? They'd given Jen this chance to live. Maybe Fazzool himself,

with his last strength, had sealed the bag and pushed it into the lock.

No matter how badly he felt, he must carry out the skipper's orders. He propelled himself toward the Command ship. He reached for the radio controls, then hesitated. Best not to transmit. Instead, he used the bag's light to signal.

As he approached a sentry-globe intercepted him and listened to his story. It called an Overseer who tried hard to convince him that the Fleet Commander was far too busy to listen to second-grader slaves. Jen was humble but persistent. Finally the Overseer took him to the ship's Second, who read the note and phoned the Commander. They were told to take Jen in.

It was good to be out of the bag and the suit. They gave him a damp cloth to wipe his face with, and a drink of stimulant, after he told them he didn't need a medico. Then they put him through an Inquisitor booth.

The Commander asked, "Did you see this written?"

"No, sir."

"Come. We'll put it under a marker."

They found the invisible writing, then asked him, "Do you know where it's implanted?"

He rubbed his middle. "It itches here."

When they'd read it, the Commander said, "Do you know what this implant's about?"

"No, sir."

"What was your battle station?"

"Counter-missiles, sir."

The Overseer's eyebrows went

up. "Did you plan that little penetration and execute it?"

"Yes."

The other looked at him for a long time, then said, "I think it will be a good idea to send you along to Central Command, message and all. It's something they'll want to study, and your recollections of the battle will be very helpful." He motioned to an aide to take care of the details.

The drone they put him in was a standard Scout, with the living comfort mostly replaced by automatic equipment, but with space for two or three passengers. He was alone.

Central Command, which they reached in three hops, looked more like some small outpost on a primitive world. Actually, the Command was in orbiting ships, ready to null out at the first hint of trouble. They sent the drone away and put Jen through an Inquisitor booth which asked him an unusual number of questions. Finally they shuttled him to a different ship and read the message implanted in his skin.

An Overseer took charge of him, erased the old ideograph and substituted a new one, and said they'd probably send him back to his Base as soon as a drone could be spared. He also said Jen would doubtless be decorated and advanced another grade for his part in the battle. They gave him a temporary bunk in a barracks with a few other odds and ends of slaves.

After he'd had only a few hours sleep they called him back to his

new Overseer's office again. As he floated in, a B'lant already there turned and grinned at him. Fazzool! Jen gaped, then launched himself forward with a cry. But at that instant the familiar hot dizziness rose up in him. . .

Steve surfaced in panic. He embraced Fazzool, using that to hide his face for a few seconds until he could get control of himself. Then he drew back and said, "You're alive! How . . .?"

Fazzool, grinning like a child, said, "I zot you dead too! When ze final blast come, you still outside, or in ze lock —"

"I—in the lock, I think," Steve said, trying to make his dismay look like something else. If Fazzool had a clear recollection, his story would damn Steve's—or Jen's—like a spotlight. "But you—but there was the note—"

"I was halfway out ze bag," Fazzool said. "I remember zat. Ze shock stun me. When I come to ze ozzers all dead, but my suit not punctured. Zen I go outside to look for you, and when zere no sign I go to big ship for help, because I zot you drifting even if not dead."

The Overseer said, "In a suit, he went. He had no bag."

Fazzool grinned. "I am real careful, and it not far enough to freeze zrough my tough skin."

"Well," the Overseer said, "you two have had your reunion. And I have a very pleasant piece of news for you. Being the heroes of the battle, and having vital recollections of it, you're going to have an audience with Gree himself."

They went in a drone, without any way to see out of it, in two hops. Steve managed to skirt around the precarious conversational points. It was very fortunate for him that they hadn't given Fazzool a transcript of Jen's story. But that good luck was only temporary, of course. The Bird came and hovered at the edge of his mind for a minute, whispering, *Careful. Keep your head.*

Easy to say.

The drone bumped down somewhere and a com said, "Suit up and inflate to seven pounds."

By the time the lock opened the drone was down to less than seven pounds, so the suits were mildly rigid. Steve took a few pulls of oxygen so he'd be alert. But they went from the drone into a sealed surface vehicle of some kind and rolled away under low gravity. Tentatively, he decided this was a small, airless planet. Far from any visible installations, probably, and guarded at a distance rather than close in, and with only a few drones visiting it. And probably only one of many to which Gree could retreat, if the slightest threat appeared.

They travelled for fifteen minutes or so and coupled on somewhere, and they were let out into a large lock of about the same pressure and told to unsuit. The air was oxygen-rich. An Overseer led them silently to an Inquisitor booth. Steve had no choice but to submerge.

"Gree is All . . ."

Jen left the booth and stood a moment while the emotion subsided. It didn't all leave. He was so

full of joy that his breath kept catching. Fazzool had survived the battle after all, and they were both about to see the Master! And after that there was no imagining the adventures and glories that awaited them. He glanced at the Overseer. The Overseer wore a reverent look too.

Fazzool emerged, wiping his eyes, and they followed the Overseer around a turn and into a wide hall with a low ceiling and a single plain door at its other end. The Symbol of Gree, in massive metal, blocked the door. From behind it came six humanoids and an Overseer, walking silently, faces full of glory.

Jen's own escort led them forward.

The room beyond was dim, but at one end lights glowed upon a tall figure standing on a low platform. Jen could not lift his eyes to it. His feet carried him mechanically upon a thick dark rug. Three chairs stood ready, as if they'd just been placed. But when he reached them, instead of sitting he threw himself down and buried his face in the rug. He felt Fazzool land beside him, sobbing as he was. The quiet sweet music rose a little in volume.

The gentle voice he'd known all his life said, "Arise, my children." Then, the Inquisitor was Gree himself! Somehow that made Jen inexpressibly happy, as if loneliness and discontent were impossible forever. A foul thought nudged at his mind: *How could Gree be so many places at once?* He thrust it away, ashamed. Gree or booths pro-

grammed to ask and to listen like Gree; it did not matter. He pushed himself upright but still hung his head. The voice said, "Be glad. Look at me."

Jen's tears stopped and he looked up.

Gree was certainly humanoid, if one could elevate the word,

He was tall; taller than Jen or Fazzool or the Overseer by perhaps a foot. His shoulders were broad, his build supple and young. But the gray strands in his curly black hair and beard showed his maturity. He wore a suit of dark material which almost certainly had precious metals woven into it. At his throat a jabot of the purest white cloth set off his short-cropped beard and his olive skin. The face was just sufficiently marked with care. The eyebrows pulled down at the middle, but arched up and tilted at the outer ends almost mischievously. The eyes were very long and narrow, with full lashes and long folds of skin at the inner corners. The irises were very light gray and had black vertical slits for pupils that looked into one's soul for the slightest shadow of unworthiness. Jen shuddered and was glad he bore no flaws.

The nose, delicate at the bridge, swelled to a very broad base, a trifle uptilted so it showed large nostrils. There was a curl of mustache above the wide, full-lipped mouth. The mouth seemed both stern and faintly smiling at the same time. The skin drew in tautly under sharp cheekbones, to a gaunt jaw that was square and outthrust

under the beard. On the head, set hair like two tree-trunks, were two horns, straight, an inch thick and five inches long, with blunt knobby ends. They were intricately carved and inset with gems, and they held Jen's eyes in fascination.

Gree was frightening. Gree was reassuring. He stirred memories of the creche-father; and other memories vaguer but just as fond. He made Jen want to serve him forever; to rush out and batter down all his enemies.

The lips parted. "I have listened to the accounts of the battle you were in, and one of my reasons for bringing you here was to honor your heroism. There is another reason. The Bird of Effogus used some new device or tactic, and we must learn of it at once. So far, your recollection have not been complete."

Jen felt a new stir of fear and was ashamed of it.

The voice went on. Apparently each of you was unconscious for a time, but in different parts of the ship."

Now Jen's fear was like a siren. He felt the hot dizziness again.

VII

Steve averted his eyes so any change in them wouldn't show. He knew he was very close to death now, but fear was thin before a mightier urge which an abstract part of his mind recognized as a planted command. It trembled in every vein and muscle, and seemed almost to shout aloud: "Kill! Kill!"

He edged to the right close to the Overseer, as if overcome with emotion; half-turned and put his left hand on the officer's arm. At the same instant he contrived to push a chair against the Overseer's thigh or a diversion. Deftly, he got his fingers on the Overseer's holster, masking the moment with his own body. He managed to press the release-button without putting pressure against the Overseer's thigh. The gun slipped out easily.

The Overseer spoke to him reassuringly, and he nodded and drew clear. Gree was watching with a patient expression. Steve jerked the gun up and fired straight at the wide eyes. The beam raked ugly raw welts across the face and left a bubbling where the eyes had been. A laser beam shot out from somewhere in the abdomen, but Steve had already leaped behind the Overseer, who took it in the chest. He screamed and sagged, but Steve gave him a squirt in the kidneys to make sure. Then he raked Gree across the middle.

The tall form, horrible to look at now, stood unswaying, and Steve knew suddenly that it was not naturally alive. He whirled toward Fazzool. They both stood motionless for one frozen instant while he read the beginning of comprehension, and of other things, in the B'lant's face. He had the gun aimed at that face, but some compulsion made him lower it to the chest instead. He could hear and see the tough skin sizzle where the beam hit. Fazzool jerked double, fell, and lay still. Steve dropped the

gun as if it had suddenly grown white-hot, then, furious at himself, picked it up and whirled toward Gree. He was in time to see the big body split to the waist and fall, limply. Where the spine might have been, what looked like a yard of thick metal cable hung in mid-air, contorting. A beam flashed from it, but blindly. Steve raked it until his own gun went dead. It fell to the floor and lay twisting.

Doors slammed shut somewhere.

If he guessed right, no one, not even Overseers, would be permitted to see that the Master had fallen. More than likely, there were other Grees. Maybe there was a whole race of the cable-things.

He glanced at Fazzool's inert body. Maybe," he snarled unsteadily, "you'll stay dead this time!"

A panel was opening at the rear of the room, and the metal thing on the floor writhed toward it. It was trying to escape to somewhere. And that meant a possible avenue for Steve!

He ran for the opening, then stopped suddenly. The cable thing might be insurance of a sort. There might be circuits tuned to it, that would pass it, but not a man. It showed no sign of being aware of him now, nor of anything but its own agony and need to escape. He grabbed the cloth from around the neck of the Gree-body, which moved slowly with some demi-life of its own, and used the cloth to insulate his hand from the cable-thing. He picked it up. It was more than an inch thick, with a grainy

surface, patterned differently at different spots. Could an intelligence be programmed into a length of metal? No doubt. Especially if it were not homogeneous, but differentiated into a million tiny cells. It felt solid. It hung writhing from his hand, like a metal snake, as he plunged into the darkness. The panel closed behind them.

He was in what looked like an artificial cave. The only light came from fifty yards away where a Scout was parked. Above it was a gantry-work, apparently to open a door of some kind. He dashed for the Scout and thrust himself into the open lock. The thing in his hand gave off sparks and a rasping sound, and a smell of ozone, as it scraped against the steel. The lock slammed behind them.

They nulled without waiting to get clear of the cave. He grinned. If circuits watched, he'd look like a rescuer.

There was no one in the drone to challenge him. And now he had precious minutes, out here in some unmarked wilderness of Space, before they could null again!

He shoved himself toward the computers, from which the standard keyboards had been removed. No telling how the cable-thing controlled them. He thumbed fasteners, got the panel off and stared at the circuits inside. The wiring was familiar, and by shorting certain leads he could simulate the pressing of keys. But where would he go? Anywhere but where the Scout was programmed to go! At least he could gain time.

He made the short-circuits that gave him an override on the programming.

A set of co-ordinates came into his mind and he acted on them. He was ready minutes before the accumulators had charge enough to null. He waited, half expecting some creature to crawl out of somewhere and ray him down; or the drone itself to come to life. The cable-thing had subsided to a slow undulating.

They nulled, and he relaxed a little. He wasn't near any stars. But why had he chosen this spot? No doubt from a command planted in his mind.

That turned out to be the case. The com clicked and rattled and said in a familiar whisper, "We're coming in, Major Duke."

Two of the Birds he already knew. The other had so much rank even Steve was awed. That one said, looking at the cable-thing, "Do you know what you've got here, Major?"

Steve shrugged. "It controlled what passed for Gree. Or one Gree."

"It's one of the Invaders. And with what we can read out of it, we can find a lot more. If we can get mov-

ing before they realize it's missing."

The war would take a long time still, even though the surprise attacks had gotten many of the cable-things. There were still thousands of die-hard fighting ships, and the Overseer race, and an empire.

Steve was back in the fighting as soon as he got tired of posing around in public. They gave him a Scout group; ships almost as good as the Gree Scouts.

But even after his brilliant performance when it came to the preparations for the re-taking of Earth—the original Earth—they wouldn't give him a higher command.

He resented that, but didn't brood about it. He was seeing action. And between missions he had all he could eat or drink or wear or take to bed.

He wished, though, that they could do something about the other personality. Though they assured him Jen could never surface again unless Steve willed it, Jen was still there somewhere. And sometimes he was partly awake. END

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A AS IN ANDROID

BY FRANCES T. HALL

*He awaited the entrance
of his executioner—and
found, instead, himself!*

Before I saw his face, I thought the man was Loyalty Monitor Hartch, my executioner. He had got in while I was looking out the window. Should I call it a life now and jump out, or wait for Hartch to incinerate me? The Loyalty police had a neat, clean way of doing it these days, leaving scarcely an ash. And my blaster was in a desk half way across the room.

My usual place of business had seemed the best place to hide. If Smithson had not talked, my presence here was only to be expected; if he had, here was the last place they'd look. 'Oh, they'd be here — Monitor Hartch was as thorough as he was corrupt — but last, not first.

Had I been less bemused I'd have heard him coming and pressed the stud in my pocket that would activate the sonic nerve-disruptor. I

had rigged the doorway with it against a day like this. A man in my position couldn't be too careful. I was on the manufacturing end of some of the Loyalty Police's gadgets. I don't mean their walky-talkies, but the unspeakable things they carry in their gray gladstones. (The things a man lets himself be sucked into, to disarm suspicion and prove his cooperativeness, while he looks for a place to plant the shiv in the whole system!)

But I had the disadvantage of a stern neo-Calvinistic upbringing. That was an anti-survival factor that had already cost us some of the best men of our sect — one of which I had proved I was not. The man in the mirror just couldn't stomach all this, and he saw to it that I couldn't, either.

When things moved too slowly

the cooperative way, I had involved myself in a humanitarian, if belated plot to relieve Earth of Our Beloved Leader's services — and life.

Stupid? Of course it was. But one is forced into stupid things from time to time to appease the man in the mirror. Now one of my co-plotters had been picked up. It was a risk we had all taken, but that didn't make things any easier now. Smithson was a good man, but when Interrogation happens it's just a question of time. Even had I sprung my little trap when the man came in, it would have given me only a few minutes' headway — with no place to head for.

Even now I didn't see the man's face because I was staring at his gray gladstone. Executioner Hartch was also an interrogator, then. The bag would contain equipment to extract from me any names and other information that the unlucky Smithson might have missed. I edged closer to the blaster in the drawer as the man spoke.

"It's been a long time, Fornay."

This would not be Hartch's gambit. And the voice . . . I looked up — and the bottom of my stomach dropped out, because he was the man in the mirror!

No, not quite. But—*my visitor's face was my face!*

Younger by a decade and more — but my face. Numbly, I wondered that they would send such a person. I sat down, forgetting the blaster.

"It puzzles me," I said cautiously, "that my duplicate should be

chosen for this job." It puzzled me, in fact, that there was a duplicate. Humanics was meticulous about such things.

But it looked as though Our Beloved Leader's Loyalty Police had taken them and their pattern-files over, too, by now. And O. B. L.'s boys would be less fussy than Humanics about waiting for a man to die before making his andirod-duplicate.

Yet what purpose could be served now by this?

The android himself looked puzzled as his eyes followed mine. Then he let me have it and it hit me like a thunder-bolt.

"I'm in from Cauldron and I'm going back within the hour. I'm glad I didn't miss you, Ben."

Blankly, I looked at him again. Lean and keen and browned in a whiter sun than Sol. And a certain look in his eyes . . . Yes. I knew now who he was. Worse, I knew why he was here.

"You're the pattern I sold to that damned recruiter from Cauldron a long time ago."

He nodded. "I wondered if you'd remember. Tell me, Ben, just when did you decide to sell the pattern you made on your twenty-first birthday?"

Trouble never comes singly. I wasn't in enough of a spot for my part in the plot against O. B. L. This android had to return now from that godforsaken hellhole fifty light-years away to collect for his indignities.

Before, I'd been about ready to call it quits. This android's presence

made everything different, I don't know why. What I wanted now was to knock him flat, then get out of this room — and farther — and never have to look at him again. I must have got up.

"Sit down, Ben Fornay. Let's talk."

His voice packed plenty of authority and he looked well able to enforce his command physically. I sat. "I — uhs — sold that pattern five years later, when I was twenty-six."

"What'd you use the money for, Ben?"

The truth sounded incredible to me even as I spoke it. "To further Our Beloved Leader's career. In a small way, I helped put him where he is." I hadn't known then it would be like this.

"Well, they cooked me up ten years after they got hold of our — of *your* pattern. You're forty-five now, Ben, and I'm thirty — in physical age, that is, if you don't count what Cauldron's done to me. Considering the shortage of ex-Humanics personnel on Cauldron, I guess I was lucky that they got around to me as soon as they did. Did you ever wonder about me?"

"Thought you were dead."

"Sorry to disappoint you. Ben, do you know what it's like to wake up without warning on a strange planet?"

"I can imagine, uh —?"

"Martin. John Martin."

"Martin, I've had nightmares."

"Have you, now?" John Martin's eyes raked the well appointed room. "Changes have been made while I was away. I've been wondering just

where you stand in all this. But I know now. You're doing business with the Loyalty Police, right?"

For an instant I had an impulse to tell him the whole story. Not that he could help me, only it curdled me that my other self should think I'd gone along easily after I learned the score. But the sarcasm in his voice cut home. A wave of hatred for him shook me. And yet . . . and yet . . . he was me! Can any man really hate himself?

"I'd rather hunt with the hounds than run with the hares," I said at last. "I joined them — Or at least I did business with them."

"I've wondered how you were bettering yourself all these years I've been on Cauldron. Let me tell you what it's like out there, Ben. When you first wake up you're in a different room and you wonder why they moved you. Then you notice everything, including your arm, seems heavier and drops faster. After a while the man comes to tell you that you're not Ben Fornay who went into trance fifteen minutes ago. Forney is the name of some other guy fifty light-years away and you're stuck with his past. Only you don't have time to sit down and digest all this because winds are howling outside and there's your share of a ten-thousand-hectare paddy and tons of negil sporelings to be planted before noon.

"Ben, did you know that the forenoon on Cauldron lasts five months? And the first four and a half of them it rains. In the afternoon you work in a temperature of 118 or up, keep-

ing a million poison-squirting water-worms from eating or poisoning the negil roots. You've got the little black bugs for company, chomping away on your eyelashes. But nights are when you should be there, Ben. The waterworms go, the slime-weed comes, and the fever-midges swarm. Now about these midges. They cover your skin, they bore through your boots, they —"

"I get the picture." I did, too. He'd expect money. "So, Martin, you chucked it all and came back here, and you want me to move over and share the loot." But it wasn't exactly my cash, and I hadn't sequestered it from Hartch's sticky fingers only to hand it over to John Martin. "If you knew how funny —"

"No, I'd rather survive on Cauldron than the way you're doing it here. The other colonists, if you want to call us that, sent me here to buy patterns — like me and like most of them. I've got them. They're stowed aboard the *Star-Trader*. Five thousand new colonists, Ben, for the weight of one man. But the main reason I promoted this trip for myself was to settle with you."

"If you don't want money, what do you want?"

"I guess you could call it revenge." Martin seemed to be weighing his words, as if uncertain how to put what he had to say. A feint, perhaps. I didn't take my eyes off the android from Cauldron.

You see, Cauldron was one of those frontier worlds staked out by the FTL Corpsmen a generation

or two before. It was even more ravenous than most for men.

Some day, of course, Cauldron would be a tidy world where women could live, too, and youngsters thrive. At least, that was what the men of Cauldron had in mind. But right now the men of Cauldron had a tiger by the tail that they called a terraforming project. To keep this from blowing out from under them in ten different colors, they had to put Earth's wealth to work where it would do the most good just as fast as they could get their hands on it. The wealth came from their negil crop, which they hand-processed and shipped to Earth. Terrans like Our Beloved Leader and his cohorts prized the vile-tasting green powder for its rejuvenating properties. But the growing and harvesting and processing of the stuff — plus the terraforming going on at the same time, plus the colonists' own food crops — required the cooperation of great numbers of men — on a world not designed with regard to men's tolerances. From what I'd heard, is was a steaming edition of Hades, complete with smell. Upwards of seventy per cent of the new colonists died within months of midge fever or other distempers.

But Martin had survived.

"I survived. I even adapted. It's a new planet opening up, even if it is hell, and I've done well there. Have my own plantation now in the terraformed sector and I'm testing out a new strain of sporelings . . ."

As Martin talked I'd been edging closer to that blaster. Now I reached for it.

But he got there first, and rammed it against my belly. "Ben, don't try things like that," he said, almost tiredly. "Your reflexes aren't what they used to be."

I tried not to flinch. "You couldn't blast me. It would be like blasting yourself."

"Don't count on that too hard. Where would I be now if *you'd* got there first?" With the blaster he gestured toward the door. "Looks like we'll have to do this the hard way. You're coming with me."

"Coming where? My God, you're not going to kill me?"

"Out!"

Well, that doorway was what I wanted to go through. I went out. But also, my hand cupped the stud in my pocket, and as Martin stepped through I pressed it.

Martin collapsed to the floor without a sound. I fled.

Halfway down the hall I stopped running and started thinking. There was no place to go, so why hurry? Martin had said he intended to return to Cauldron on the *Star-Trader* — today. He'd done right well there in spite of everything.

Maybe I'd sent the wrong one of us off-planet.

Things could hardly be hotter there than they were here. In an instant my mind was made up. If I stayed on Earth I was a dead man. Worse, I'd betray others. I'd go to Cauldron on Martin's — that is, on the android's — ticket. If Hartch didn't catch me first.

A journey to a star, we're told, begins with a single step. For

me, that step had to be back past where Martin lay on the floor, to the desk where I kept the cash. The cash belonged to our project but any member could use it in an emergency. It had seemed safe from Hartch's cupidity; the man had an almost psychic affinity for other people's money. At least it was safer here than in one of the obvious places like home or under ground. I'd picked up the gladstone on the way past him. Now, I emptied it. All it contained was a change of clothing and a few odds and ends.

My conscience, what was left of it, staged a short-lived revolt. What was left of it was still bucking like a bronc on the old tri-dis at things I'd been party to in recent years. You'd think he'd shut up now that I'd landed right here on the bulls-eye trying to make him happy. I was in no mood for further appeasement. It made it harder, though, that this android and I were closer than identical brothers. Leaving Martin here to Hartch's tender mercies was almost a form of suicide.

But I scotched *that* whole argument quick, as something out of the old fanciful romances inspired by the Humanics idea in its early days. Humanics had made androids only after the original was deceased. And there must be a lot that the Humanics people themselves didn't know, because I shook with unreasoning hatred of this android. I wanted to kill him with my bare hands, and he —

He'd come back from fifty light-years to settle our score, with only his hands as weapon.

That straightened me out on everything.

I stuffed the cash into the gladstone. Then came the worst part, and I almost didn't make it. The ticket had to be on the android's person . . .

If you were a Humanics client back in the old days, you simply went every three months or so to their nearest center, for trance. During trance, the biometry people recorded everything about you from your gene pattern to your personality pattern, complete with memories conscious and subconscious, up to moment of trance. Also, a microbiopsy sample of your flesh was removed and stored in a blob of DNA-RNA complex, to use as a starter. Humanics packed this whole record of yours into a stasis-box the size of a sleeping capsule, and that was that. Unless you died before your time.

Then, after complying with certain legal requirements, Humanics took your latest capsule and, using Kuzarian techniques, re-created you, to all intents and purposes. All that was lost—aside from your personal life and death, that is—was whatever experience and memory had been added between your latest recording and your death. Immortality, of a sort.

The whole transaction about this android had begun some twenty-five years earlier, when I was twenty-six. Legally, a man's patterns belonged to himself. So, when this man from Cauldron made me the offer I promptly claimed a pattern

from Humanics that I'd made five years earlier and sold it to him.

I'd thought about that transaction now and then. In fact, I'd tried not to think about it, because of the guilty knowledge that that other "I" went to Cauldron to undergo an agonizing death. And yet—

Well, it wasn't only the cash. Or so I told myself at times, especially since my opinion of O.B.L. had soured. In a way, I belonged on the frontier world that I could never hope to buy a ticket for, since such a ticket would cost a not-so-small fortune. There were outlets there for the energies that drove and goaded me and wasted themselves and me, here on my home planets. Sometimes I imagined that other had survived. But even then that sarcastic remnant of conscience wasn't satisfied; it pointed the finger at me for that other ruthless, younger me living on a storm-lashed planet, cursing me and the day he was re-created on that hell-world I'd sold him into—and that I'd never know.

I had my ticket for Cauldron—which was a good thing, because there seemed to be no ticket office as such in the vast underground Spaceport Administration Building. The only concession to the rare and unsolicited interstellar passenger—who took up a lot more room than valued cargo—was a small, neglected waiting room whose bare walls half-echoed with my footsteps as I crossed to scan the old-fashioned bulletin board in one corner. The notice prominently displayed there informed:

Once aboard, it would take practically an extradition order to get me off again, and it was now 1125.

I felt for the wallet and pulled it out. The trouble was: with it I pulled out the whole picture of the other time I'd set eyes on it, when I'd been ransacking Martin's pockets.

I'd glanced in the wallet, seen the big yellow ticket, then as I jammed the wallet into my own pocket I saw that Martin's eyes were open and he was staring at me. His eyes were practically all he'd be able to move for five or six hours, and they annoyed the hell out of me. In the end, I propped him into the chair behind my desk, faced him away, then got out fast with the wallet and the gladstone and the blaster. Now, in the waiting room, I stuffed the wallet back without looking inside — and found I'd taken a couple of steps back towards the exit.

I was reasonably safe — if I stayed here until I could arrange to board the *Star-Trader*. Starships as a refuge just didn't figure in anyone's scheme of things. The fares were astronomical and access was by ticket only, even for the crew. It would be hours before Martin could tell Hartch about that ticket. I headed for a chair to light up and pull myself together before any more suicidal impulses toward that exit took hold of me. I'd already done my Stupid Deed for the decade when I joined up with the plotters in the first place, and I sure couldn't afford another stupidity this soon. The

old waiting room was oddly quiet.

Oh, the building as a whole hummed with purposeful activity and distant voices through distant loudspeaker, but this room was apart. I sat there and pointed out to Martin — his eyes were still staring at me with that damned helpless hatred, just as though he sat here facing me instead of in that chair five miles away — that he was someone else, that in any case I owed him nothing. As I say, I understood perfectly the depth of his hatred for me. It didn't surprise me he'd gone to the trouble and expense or returning to Terra to settle my guts — and would have succeeded, except for the sonic deadfall. And if he didn't, then the Loyalty Police would — in spades.

I tamped out the cigarette, got up and headed for that bulletin board again to find out what I was supposed to do next. There were two more notices:

ALL VALUABLES MUST BE DEPOSITED WITH PURSER PRIOR TO EMBARKATION.

ALL BAGGAGE MUST BE DEPOSITED WITH PURSER FOR INSPECTION AND TRANSPORTATION ARRANGEMENTS.

The purser was a gray sort of man who asked no questions. He and his reflection in the mirrored wall weighed the bags, and money changed hands. He asked me for my ticket to punch the transaction out on, and that seemed to be that. I opened the wallet.

"I'll record that now, sir, if you'll hand it to me." The purser's voice had a trace of impatience as I con-

tinued staring sickly at what was in my hand, because that was when I first saw the second ticket.

John Martin had in that wallet not only his own return ticket to Cauldron, but an extra one, and the extra ticket had my name on it.

Martin, then, had not planned to kill me on the spot.

In an instant my whole structure of rationalizations toppled — the ones I'd argued with John Martin's accusing eyes in the waiting room. His eyes now somehow meshed with those that stared at me from the mirrored wall. They made it quite clear that when I walked onto that starship alone, everything between us would be over with. I saw my hand shaking. I got up and headed blindly for the door.

"Your bag, sir?" The purser's voice was definitely annoyed. "If you've changed your mind about going, you'll want your bag back."

I went back to his desk long enough to check the baggage through — in Martin's name. Seemed the least I could do for him, though the chances now of either of us ever having a use for that money were slightly less favorable than the prognosis for an ice-cube in hell. Then I left the Administration Building and went back after John Martin.

When I got back the door was still open, but Martin wasn't there. Hartch was sprawled in the chair instead. He whirled and faced me and grinned like a man who's just been paid off on a long-shot.

"I played a hunch you might show up here, Fornay."

He was a thickset man starting to run to jowls, and his black eyes bored into me.

"What made you think I'd come here, Monitor Hartch?" I heard myself ask him.

"Fornay, I wonder if you know how close you came to getting away without a trace. When all other clues petered out I took a flyer on your, uh, double, here. I don't know why you did this to him, but I felt in my bones you'd come trotting back for him. I wanted to be on hand to collect when that Calvinistic background of yours paid off in stupidity. And don't try your little deadfall again. I deactivated it."

I didn't see Hartch draw his blaster, it was just in his hand. "Our Beloved Leader wants to see you, Fornay."

With Martin's absence I felt too numb to resist — not that resistance was possible. All I said was, "Did you have to incinerate him, Hartch?"

A yellow-toothed smile took place on his face. "Incinerate? No. I think Our Beloved Leader will want to reserve that pleasure for himself. With two of you he can have twice the satisfaction."

Martin, then, was still alive. My eyes went to the closet door and Hartch nodded.

Martin was there, all right, when Hartch slid the door aside, but the close quarters hadn't done him any good. He lay in a crumpled heap, and it took me several seconds to be sure he still breathed.

Hartch was fiddling with his walk-talky.

I said "Wait! Let's talk business."

Ten minutes later we were back at the Spaceport Administration Building — Martin (still unconscious), myself and Hartch.

Hartch flashed his badge at the purser, who verified for him the sum of the cash in the gladstone. But the bag was by now, of course, aboard the starship. The purser looked less gray and nondescript as he told Hartch that only a written order signed by the person in whose name the valuables were signed through could get them off the *Star-Trader*. I had signed them through in Martin's name. But this presented no serious difficulty, since as far as the purser knew — or feigned to know — I was John Martin.

I got Martin aboard and as comfortable as possible before I signed the gladstone over to Hartch.

In the minutes remaining before lift-off I made one 25-cent coded telephone call — and got far more than my money's worth.

Ten hours later, in hyperspace, Martin and I were sitting at the ship's tiny bar.

"So that second ticket was what made you come back for me. Propped in that chair I was sure I wouldn't be on the *Star-Trader* when she left."

"Good God, you must've bought that ticket out of your own pocket!"

"Saved every credit of my profits since I hit Cauldron to buy that ticket, Ben. A lot of the guys talk about going back. I did it."

I poured him another drink. "That extra ticket proved you weren't try-

ing to kill me but to rescue —"

"Ben, I'm going to be honest. You should've left me in that closet. Rescue, hell! If I'd known you needed rescuing I'd probably have stayed home and farmed the profits back into the plantation. I hated you that much — or thought I did. Kidnaping was more what I had in mind. Wanted you to find out what you'd let that other self of yours in for. You being so damned safe was what curdled me."

"Safe!"

"Huh? Oh hell, I'm not sorry I came back — except that you gave money to Hartch on my account."

"And I'm not sorry I went back for you — not that I had a real choice. We're really the same entity, John. You and I and the man in the mirror. A man can't cut off his own arm, can he?"

"Um."

"Don't worry about the money. I had one name that poor Smithson didn't and I made a phone call before we left. Hartch and his funds were, shall I say, adequately met."

"Good work," Martin grinned. "When we get to Cauldron I'll have a quarterly share waiting for me. I'd like to put it where it'll do the most good."

"I'll help you put it there if — John. D'you think I can fit in?"

"You may wish you'd chosen to stay home and be killed. But if you can live through the first few months and take the work, you've got it made — friend. We can be a sort of double threat to the status quo."

"I'll drink to that — friend."

We did.

END

THE PRINCE AND THE PIRATE

*Retief could handle aliens.
It was his own bosses that
he really was worried about!*

ILLUSTRATED BY NODEL

BY KEITH LAUMER

I

Retief reined in the tall-shouldered urze-beast with a jingle of the hunting-bells attached to the long-legged mount's harness.

The trail of the dirosaur led straight ahead into a dense thicket of iron-rod trees, now bent and twisted by the passing of the wounded monster. Far away, the hunting horns of the main party sounded. Retief smiled. Prince Tavilan would

employ a choice selection of royal oaths when he learned that a mere diplomat had beaten him to the quarry's turn-at-bay.

A windy screech sounded from the depths of the thicket. Retief raised his saddle-horn and blew an answering blast. There was a clanging of branches, a scraping of armored hide on metallic bark. Retief dropped the horn to swing at the pommel. With a pull of a lever he cocked his crossbow, waiting.

A tiny head, mostly jaws, armed with a foot-long spike below the mouth, snaked out from the grove, hissing a ferocious warning. Retief's urze-beast stirred and tossed its head at the scent of the dirosaur. Trees shuddered aside as the great carnivore forced its bulk between them, its golden-yellow eyes fixed on the man. A clawed foreleg as big as a man's body, set with rusty scales, raked the ground, dragging the predator's multi-ton bulk into the clear. With a final clangorous flick of its log-like tail, the dirosaur broke free, reared its head into striking position and charged.

Retief raised the crossbow and took aim —

The crossbow bucked. Retief spurred aside. He had a momentary glimpse of a two-foot shaft of polished steel protruding from the eye socket of the monster as it blundered past, the long neck falling, to collapse in a cloud of dust, lie twitching, then still.

It was five minutes before the hunt galloped into view, Prince Tavilan's black-crested urze-beast in the lead. He slowed to a canter, rode up beside the fallen dirosaur and sat looking down at the open-jawed head, the yellow eyes glazing in death.

"That's another barrel of royal vintage I owe you, Retief," he said. "If I ever see the palace cellars again." He was a tall, wide, sandy-haired man with a turned-up, sun-burned nose. His leather forest garb was well worn. There were cockleburrs in the snow-tiger facings of his royal Eloran blue cape. The

crossbow slung across his back was his only weapon.

"We're wasting time hunting game," a rider at the prince's side said. "There's a plentiful supply of crossbow bolts at the lodge. I propose we ride down into Elora City and distribute them among the good Prime Minister's Greenbacks — point first."

"The king still has hopes the CDT will revise its policy." Tavilan glanced at Retief. "If the triple-damned embargo were lifted, Minister Prouch and his talk of a Regency would evaporate faster than the royal treasury has under his control."

"Oh, it's not an Embargo, your Highness," Retief said. "I believe Ambassador Hidebinder refers to it as a unilateral shift in emphasis balance-of-trade-wise to a more group-oriented —"

"What it adds up to is the Royal Eloran Navy grounded, while traitors plot in the palace and Dangi's pirates raid shipping at the edge of Eloran atmosphere!" Tavilan smacked a fist into his palm. "I've got the finest corps of naval combat commanders in the Eastern Arm, forty-five battle-ready ships of the line — and, thanks to CDT policy, no fuel! So much for my cooperation with your Ambassador, Retief!"

"Didn't he explain that, Your Highness? If you had the Big Picture, it would all make sense. Of course, I'm a Small Picture man myself, so I'm afraid I can't be of much help in explaining it."

"It's not your doing, Retief. But ten million Elorans are about to



have a dictatorship clamped on them because I lack a few megaton/seconds of firepower."

"Your great grandfather's mistake was in being a romantic. If he'd named his planet Drab Conformity, set up a committee of bureaucrats to run it and used the forest to supply paper mills instead of hunting in them, you'd be the apple of the collective CDT eye today."

"The old man led a hard life. When he found Elora it was a wilderness. He made his fortune and then arranged matters here to suit himself — and we Elorans still like parties!"

Retief glanced at the sun. "Speaking of which, I'd better be starting back. The Grande Balle d'Elore is tonight and Mr. Magnan will be upset if I'm not there to help him hover nervously for at least an hour before the Ambassador comes down."

"Retief, you're not riding back to the city?" Count Arrol looked up from cutting out the dirosaur's chin-horn. He stood. "I told you what my man reported. Your sympathies are too well known to suit Prouch. Tonight, at the ball —"

"I don't think the worthy Prime Minister will go that far. He's dependent on the good will of the CDT — and diplomat-killing is bad publicity."

"The Palace Guard is still loyal," Tavilan said. "And remember the lad, Aric. You can trust him with any mission within his strength. He's working in the palace as a mess servant." He laughed bitterly. "Think of us as you dance with the fair ladies of the court, Retief. If you see

my father, tell him I and my Invincibles will continue to skulk here in the Deep Forest as he commands — but we long for action."

"I'll get word to you, Tavilan," Retief said. "My conspiratorial instinct tells me that there'll be action enough for everybody before sunrise tomorrow."

II

In the Grand Ballroom at the Palace of Elora, Retief cast an eye over the chattering elite of the court, the gorgeously gowned and uniformed couples, the glum representatives of the People's Party, the gaudily dressed diplomats from Yill, Fust, Flamme and half a hundred other worlds. A cluster of spider-lean Groaci whispered together near a potted man-eating plant, one leaf of which quivered tentively, seemed to sniff the aliens and withdrew hastily. Retief plucked a glass from a wide silver tray offered by a bright-eyed mess boy in a brocaded bolero jacket and a cloth-of-gold turban, who glanced quickly around the crowded ballroom, then stepped close to whisper:

"Mr. Retief — the rascals are forcing the lock on your room!"

Retief passed the glass under his nose and sipped.

"Exactly which rascals do you mean, Aric?" he murmured. "We've got about four sets to choose from."

Aric grinned. "A couple of the Groaci Ambassador's boys," he whispered. "The ones he usually uses for high-class back-alley work."

Retief nodded. "That would be Yilith and Sith, formerly of the

Groaci Secret Police. Things must be coming to a head. It's not like old Lhiss to take such direct action." He finished the drink and put the empty glass on a black marble table.

"Come on, Aric. Ditch that tray and let's take a walk."

In the broad, mirror-hung corridor, Retief turned to the right.

"But, Mr. Retief," Aric said. "Your apartment's in the other direction."

"They won't find anything there, Aric—and it would be embarrassing for all concerned if I caught them red-handed. So while they're occupied, I'll just take this opportunity to search their rooms."

At the top of the wide spiral staircase that led from the public areas of the palace to the living quarters assigned to foreign diplomatic missions, Retief paused.

"You wait here, Aric." He went along the corridor to the third door, a simple white-painted panel edged with a tiny carved floral design. He tried the large gold doorknob, then took a slender instrument from an inner pocket of his silver-epauletted tangerine mess jacket and delicately probed the lock. The bolt snicked back. He eased the door open, glanced around, then stepped back out and beckoned Aric to him.

"How'd you get it open, Mr. Retief?"

"Locks are a hobby of mine. Patrol the corridor, and if you see anybody, cough. If it's one of my Groaci colleagues, have a regular paroxysm. I won't be long."

Inside the room, Retief made a

fast check of the desk, the dresser drawers, the undersides of furniture. He slapped sofa cushions, prodded mattresses for tell-tale cracklings, then opened the closet door. Through the wall, faint voices were audible, scratchy with the quality of narrow-range amplification.

He stooped and plucked a tiny earphone from a miniature wall bracket. Ambassador Lhiss, it appeared, was not immune from eavesdropping by his own staff...

Retief put the phone to his ear. "...agreed, then," Ambassador Hidebinder's voice was saying. "Seventy-two hours from now, and not a moment before."

"Just see that you keep your end of the bargain," a thin Groaci voice lisped. "This would be a poor time for treachery."

"I want it clearly understood that our man will be treated in a reasonably civilized fashion, and quietly released to us when the affair is completed."

"I suggest you avoid over-complicating the arrangements with last-minute conditions," the Groaci voice said.

"You've done very well in this affair," Hidebinder came back. "Your profits on the armaments alone—"

"As I recall, it was you who proposed the scheme. It is you who wish to place homeless Soetti rabble on Elora, not we."

Retief listened for another five minutes before he snapped the phone back in its bracket, stepped quickly to the door. In the hall, Aric came to meet him.

"Find anything, Mr. Retief?"

"Too much." Retief took a pen

from his pocket and jotted a note.

"See that this gets to Prince Tavi-lan at the lodge. Tell him to get the Invincibles ready, but to do nothing until I get word to him — no matter what."

"Sure, Mr. Retief, but —"

"Let's go, Aric. And remember: you're more help to me outside than inside."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Retief." Aric trotted at his side. "Outside what?"

"We'll know in a few minutes. But wherever I wind up, watch for a signal."

From the head of the Grand staircase Retief saw the glint of light on steel. Two men in the dull black and green of the People's Volunteers stood in the corridor.

"Hey, Mr. Retief," Aric whispered. "What are Greenbacks doing in the palace?"

"Simple, Aric. They're standing guard over my door."

"Maybe somebody caught those Groaci trying to break in."

"Drop back behind me, Aric — and remember what I said."

Retief walked up to his door, took out an old-fashioned mechanical key and inserted it in the lock. One of the two armed soldiers stepped up and made a threatening motion with his rifle butt.

"Nobody goes in there, you," he growled. He was a broad-faced blond, a descendant of the transported felons who had served as contract labor on Elora a century earlier.

Retief turned casually, moved to one side far enough that the man

before him was between him and his companion, then moved suddenly. He caught the stock of the rifle in his left hand and with his right yanked the barrel forward; the butt described a short arc, smashed against the soldier's chin. He gave a choked yell and stumbled back.

Retief jerked the door open, slipped inside, slammed it behind him. He shot the bolt, then started a fast check of his room. The door rattled; heavy poundings sounded. Retief pulled open the desk. A loose heap of unfamiliar papers lay there. A glance at one showed the letter-head of the Office of the Commercial Attache, Terrestrial Embassy. It appeared to be a delivery order for one hundred thousand rounds of fractional/ton ammunition made out to a Bogan armaments exporter. Another was an unsigned letter referring to drop-points and large sums of money. A heavy parchment caught Retief's eye. It was stamped in red:

UTTER TOP SECRET

Below the seal of the Eloryan Imperial Department of War was a detailed breakout of the disposition of units of the Imperial Fleet and the Volunteer Reserve.

The telephone buzzed. Retief picked it up. There was a sound of breathing at the other end.

"Yilith?" a faint voice inquired.

"No, you damned fool!" Retief snapped. "They finished up ten minutes ago. When do the Greenbacks arrive?"

"Why, they should be there now. The pigeon has left the ballroom —"

There was a pause. "Who is this?"

Retief slammed down the phone, whirled to the wide fireplace, flipped the switch that started a cheery blaze licking over the pseudo-logs. He grabbed up a handful of papers from the desk, tossed them into the fire, started back for another —

With a rending of tough plastic panels, the door bulged, then slammed open. Half a dozen Greenbacks charged into the room, short bayonets fixed and leveled. Retief's hand went behind him, felt over the small table at his back, plucked open the drawer, fished out a tiny slug gun and dropped it into a back pocket.

A tall man with small head, a body like a bag of water, and tiny feet bellied his way through the armed men. He wore a drab cutaway of grayish-green adorned with the star of the Order of Farm Production. Behind him, the small, spindle-armed figure of the Groaci Military Attache was visible, decked out in formal jewel-studded eyeshields and a pink and green hip-cloak.

"Don't touch anything!" the water-bag man called in a high, excited voice. "I want everything undisturbed!"

"What about the fire, Mr. Minister?" the Groaci lisped. "The miscreant seems to have been burning something."

"Yes, yes. Rake those papers out of there!" The large man wobbled his chins agitatedly. He fixed Retief with eyes like peeled eggs. "I'm warning you. don't move."

"Let me have a crack at him," a Greenback said. "He fixed Horney so he won't be able to eat nothing but mush for six months."

"None of that!" The big-bellied man held up a hand. A striped vest bulged under his voluminous frock coat like a feather mattress. "We'll just hold him for the authorities."

"Any particular reason why you and your friends came to play in my room?" Retief enquired mildly. "Or were you under the impression it was my birthday?"

"Look here," a man called from across the room. "Under the mattress!" He held up a paper. "A letter from the pirate, Dangredi, addressed to Retief, thanking him for the latest consignment of arms and supplies!"

"If you'll wait just a minute," Retief said, "I'll get my scrapbook. It's full of all kinds of incriminating evidence I've been saving for just this occasion."

"Ah, then you confess! Where is it?" the Groaci whispered hoarsely, pushing to the fore.

"Oh, I forgot. When I heard you coming, I ate it."

There was a stir at the rear of the group. The ranks parted and a short, round Terrestrial with a stiff white mustache and a mouth like a change-purse pushed through. He yanked at the overlapping lapels of a grape-juice colored mess-jacket caked with decorations.

"Here, what's this Mr. Retief! Contraband? Pilfered documents? Evidence of traffic with piratical elements?"

"No, Mr. Ambassador," Retief

said. "I'm only charging them with breaking and entering, assault with a deadly weapon, abuse of diplomatic privilege and loitering. If you'll—"

"Here, don't let him confuse the issue, Ambassador Hidebinder!" The egg-like eyes rolled toward the stout diplomat. "He stands self-convicted."

"Don't say too much, Mr. Minister," Retief cut in. "After all, you haven't had time yet to read those scraps the boys are fishing out of the fire; so it wouldn't do for you to know what they are."

"Enough of this pointless chatter!" Prime Minister Prouch piped. "Obviously, there's treason afoot here!" He jabbed a finger at the Terrestrial Ambassador. "In view of the seriousness of the offense—in a time of grave crisis in inter-world affairs—I demand that you suspend this criminal's diplomatic immunity!"

The Groaci spoke up: "As a neutral party, I propose that he be turned over to my mission for restraint until the time of trial."

"Well . . ." Ambassador Hidebinder blinked. "I'm not at all sure . . ."

"We'll tolerate no stalling tactics!" The Minister squeaked. "The security of Elora is at stake!" He motioned. The troops closed in around Retief.

"I propose to take this man into custody at once." He bulged his eyes at Hidebinder. "I trust there will be no protest!"

Hidebinder looked around at the room, the scattered papers, the smouldering fire, then at Retief.

"Your penchant for mischief is

well-known, Mr. Retief," he said acidly. "I'm sure this fits the pattern nicely."

"Not as nicely as you imagine," Retief said. "Maybe you'd better think it over—without any help from Ambassador Lhiss."

Hidebinder purpled and sputtered. "The man's run amok! You have my permission to place him under protective restraint!" He stamped from the room.

General Hish stepped forward. "Soldiers you heard the order of the Minister," he hissed. "Take the criminal away!"

III

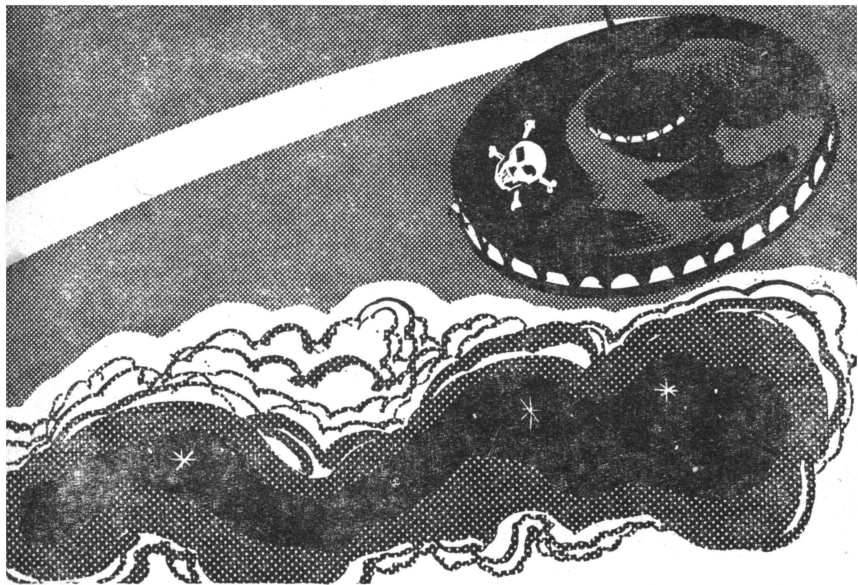
The cell was ten feet square, with a twelve by eighteen inch opening just under the ten-foot high ceiling.

The furnishings included a plastic cot with one blanket, the minimum in plumbing facilities, one small, unshielded neon lamp, numerous large roaches and a bristly rat over a foot long, which sat by the floor drain from which it had emerged, regarding Retief with beady eyes.

Retief's hand went slowly to the small, hard pillow on the cot beside him. He picked it up, pegged it suddenly.

With a squeal of rage, the rat dove for the rusted-out drain cover, scabbled for a moment in a frantic attempt to squirm past the cushion, now wedged in the drain; then it darted for the darkest corner of the cell.

Retief picked up the blanket and a length of yarn worked from it earlier, moved toward the rat. It



crouched, making a sound like a rusty bedspring. Suddenly it leaped straight at Retief's face—and met the enveloping blanket in midair.

Cautiously, Retief folded back the blanket to expose the chinless, snouted face, armed with back-slanting yellow fangs half an inch long. He looped the string over the vicious head, and knotted it.

He went to the drain, kicked the obstruction from it, then released the tethered rat. It dived down the dark opening and was gone.

The carefully coiled string paid out rapidly, loop after loop. It slowed, then fed down the drain more slowly as the rat traveled through the piping. The guard's footsteps approached.

Retief jumped for the cot; he was stretched out at ease when the sentry looked in. When he had passed,

Retief looped the end of the string over his finger, pulled in the slack. In the gloomy light of the neon lamp, the thread was invisible against the dark floor. He sat on the bunk and waited.

An hour passed. The barred rectangle of moonlight slanting through the window crept across the floor. Regularly, at nine-minute intervals, feet sounded in the passage outside the metal slab door. Suddenly the string in Retief's hand twitched, once, twice, three times. He gave three answering tugs. For a moment there was no response; then there was a single firm tug. Aric was on the job...

Retief pulled at the string. It dragged heavily. He hauled it in slowly, hand over hand.

Twice it caught on some obstruction far away in the drain line; he tugged gently until it came free. He thrust the accumulating pile of thread under the mattress. Each time the guard looked in, he was sitting quietly, staring at the wall. Suddenly, the end of a half-inch rope appeared, securely tied to the end of the string. Retief let it slip back a few inches, waited until the sentry passed, then quickly began hauling in the rope.

Five minutes later, a hundred feet of polyon cable were tucked out of sight under the mattress.

Retief slipped the bundle of hacksaw blades which had been tied to the end of the rope into the pocket of the gold-braided white trousers which he had been allowed to retain along with his short boots. He stood under the window, gauged the distance, then jumped. He pulled himself up, got a firm grip on the bars, then took out a saw and started in.

An hour later, both bars were cut through, ready to be removed by a single firm twist.

Retief waited for the guard to pass, then dropped the blades down the drain, looped the cable over his shoulder and leaped up to the window again. Far below, he could see the moonlight sparkling on a fountain in the palace garden; the shadows of trees and hedges were dark against the grass. On the graveled walks, armed sentries paced.

Retief wrenched the bars free, tied the rope to one, tossed the coil of rope through the window, then pulled himself up, carefully fitting the short bar across the corner of

the window-opening on the inside. Keeping pressure on the rope, he eased out, then slid quickly down.

Twenty feet below. Retief dropped onto a narrow balcony before a rank of darkened glass doors.

With a flick, he freed the upper end of the rope. The bar clattered against the stone wall as it fell. He pulled the rope in, dropped it in a heap, then tried door handles until he found one that turned. He stepped in through heavy drapes, felt his way across to the door, opened it and looked out into a wide corridor.

At the far end, two ornately uniformed Palace Guards stood stiffly at attention. There was no one else in sight. Retief slipped the slug gun into the palm of his hand, stepped out, walked boldly toward the guards. They stood unmoving. As he passed, one spoke quietly from the corner of his mouth:

"Greenbacks patrolling one flight up."

"They're on the lookout for any suspicious activity," the other sentry added.

"If I see any, I'll let you know," Retief said softly. "If you hear any loud noises, pay no attention. General Hish will be entertaining a guest."

Retief followed the corridor, took a turn to the left, then a right, found the passage housing the Groaci Embassy, now brightly lit. The apartment of the military attache was on the left, four doors along.

A black-booted Greenback officer stepped into view from the far

end of the passage, paused at sight of Retief striding unconcernedly toward him. The Greenback narrowed his eyes uncertainly, then snapped back the flap covering his sidearm, tugged at the heavy power pistol. Retief brought the slug gun up, fired at pointblank range.

At the muffled *whoomp!* the officer slammed back, hit the floor and lay sprawled. His gun bounced against the wall. Retief scooped it up, turned to the door of the Groaci General's quarters, needle-beamed the lock at low power. The hardware dissolved in a wash of blue flame, an acrid stink of burned plastic and metal. He kicked the door wide, turned and caught the fallen Greenback by the ankles and dragged him inside.

A swift examination of the room revealed that it was deserted. Retief picked up the phone and dialed.

"Post number twenty-nine," a crisp voice answered promptly.

"This is the General's guest," Retief said. "The light in the hall might hurt the General's eyes. Think you could douse it?"

"We've had some trouble with fuses in that wing lately. I've got a feeling one might go out any minute now—and it will take maybe an hour to fix." The phone clicked off.

Retief flipped off the lights in the room, went into the small, lavishly equipped kitchen, rummaged through the supplies of Groaci delicacies, found a one-pound jar of caviar and a package of grain wafers. He ate hurriedly, keeping an eye on the door, drank a small bottle of Green Yill wine, then re-

turned to the living room. He stripped the Greenback and donned the drab uniform.

The phone buzzed. Retief lifted the receiver.

"Two minute alert," a low voice said. "He's alone."

Retief went to the door, opened it half an inch, stood in the shadows beside it. He heard the soft approach of mincing Groaci footsteps, then a soft exclamation—

He swung the door open, reached out, caught the Groaci by the throat and dragged him inside. He grunted as a booted foot caught him in the ribs; then he jammed the pistol hard against the Groaci's horny thorax.

"No loud noises, please, General. I have a splitting headache."

Retief pushed the door shut with a foot and leaned against the light button. A soft glow sprang up. Retief released the Groaci, holding the gun aimed at a three-inch broad *Grand Cordon* of the Legion d'Cosme crossing the bulging abdomen.

"I'm going out; you're coming with me. Better hope we make it."

He holstered the pistol, showed the small, smooth-stone-shaped slug gun. "This will be a foot from your back, so be a good little soldier and give all the right answers."

The Groacie's throat sacs dilated, vibrating. He cast a sidelong glance at the stripped body of the Greenback.

"The swift inevitability of your death," he hissed in Groaci. "To anticipate with joy your end in frightful torment..."

"To button your mandible and march," Retief interrupted. He pulled the door open. "After you."

The blaze of stars scattered from horizon to horizon above the palace roof. Their light gleamed on the polished fittings of a low-slung heli parked on the royal pad, as Retief and his prisoner emerged from the service stair into the cold night air. There was a scrunch of boots on gravel, the *snick!* of a power-gun's action. Abruptly a search-light's beam glared.

"Hey — aren't you —"

"Do not interfere, soft-faced idiot!" the Groaci hissed. The light flashed across to him; his five beady, stemmed eyes glinted angrily at the guard.

"General Hish, sir." The guard snapped off the light, presented arms hurriedly. Other boots sounded, coming across the roof-top.

"What's going on here? Tell these —" the voice broke off. In the gloom, barely relieved by starlight, Retief saw the newcomer start, then put a hand to his pistol butt.

"We require the use of the royal gig," Hish whispered. "Stand aside!"

"But the orders —" the first guard started.

"General, drop!" the second bawled, hauling his gun out. Retief shot him, took a short step and drove a hard punch to the jaw of the first Greenback, still standing, gaping, then caught the Groaci's arm, jumped for the heli. Yells sounded across the roof. A yard-wide light-cannon, gymbal-mounted atop the guard shack, winked on, throwing a gray-blue tunnel of light into the sky; it pivoted, depressed, swept a burning disc across to Retief —

He drew the power pistol,

thumbed it to narrow beam and blasted the light. It exploded in a shower of tinkling glass, a billow of orange smoke that faded, winked out.

Retief shoved the slender Groaci ahead of him, yanked wide the heli's entry hatch, tumbled his prisoner in and jumped after him. He rammed the control lever to EMERGENCY FULL CLIMB. With a whine of power, the finely engineered craft leaped from the roof, surged upward in a buffet of suddenly stirred air. From below, blue and yellow flashes winked briefly against the discs of the screaming rotors; then they dwindled away and were gone.

IV

Half an hour later, Retief dropped the heli in low over the black tree-tops of the Deep Forest.

A gleam of light reflected across rippling water. He edged the machine forward and swung out over the lake, dropping down to tree-top level. Below, the water churned in the down-draft from the rotors as the heli settled gently into two feet of water. Retief cut the engine and popped the hatch. Cold mountain air swirled in. Somewhere, water lizards shrilled.

"What place of infamy is this? the captive General hissed. He stared out into the darkness. "Do you bring me here to slay me unseen, vile disrespecter of diplomatic privilege?"

"The idea has merit," Retief said, "but I have other plans for you, General." He climbed down, mo-

tioning the Groaci out. Hish grumbled, scrambling down into the icy water of the lake, slogging to shore.

From the darkness a night-fowl called. Retief whistled a reply. There was the sound of a footstep in the brush, the *click!* of a cross-bow's cocking mechanism.

"It's Retief," he called. "I have a guest: General Hish, of the Groaci Embassy."

"Ah, welcome, Retief," a soft voice drawled. "We're honored, General. Good of you to call. His Highness was hoping you'd be along soon..."

Inside the high-beamed lodge, Prince Tavilan came across the room. Behind him, Aric grinned.

"I caught the rat all right, Mr. Retief."

"Retief!" Tavilan clapped him on the shoulder. "Aric reached me with your message an hour ago. I heard the news of your arrest on Tri-D. They broke into a concert to announce that a plot involving the CDT and reactionary Royalist elements had been uncovered."

"Hidebinder will be very unhappy with that version of events," Retief said. "The agreement was that it was all to be blamed on a rotten apple in the Corps barrel. Namely me."

"We were saddling up to storm the Palace and free you, when your message reached me—"

"How many reliable men do you have available on short notice, Your Highness?" Retief cut in.

"I have thirty-eight of the Invincibles with me here. At least three others are under arrest on various

pretext. Four more managed to report in that they're pinned down by 'protective escorts'.

Retief shook his head. That was the idea of arresting me, Your Highness—as a personal affront to you, since my sympathies are well known. Prouch wanted to bring you out into the open. An armed attack was just what he needed—and he was ready for you. He has, at least two hundred Greenbacks in the Palace, armed to the nines. Your raid would have been the signal of his take-over—to preserve the domestic tranquility, of course—and your death in the fighting would have left him a clear field."

"What about the Palace Guard? They haven't gone over?"

"Of course not." Retief accepted a cigar, took a seat by the fire. "They're standing fast, playing it by ear. The Grand Ball tonight gave them an excuse for full dress, including weapons, of course. The Greenbacks aren't quite ready to start anything with them—yet."

Tavilan stamped across the fire-beast-hide rug. "Blast it, Retief we can't sit here and watch Prouch and his mob move in unopposed! If we hit them now—before they've had time to consolidate—"

"—you'll get every Royalist supporter in Elora City killed," Retief finished for him. Now, let's consider the situation. Item: the Royal fleet is grounded, courtesy of CDT policy. Item two: Prouch's people's Volunteer Naval Reserve Detachment of late-model Bogan destroyers is sitting in its launch-cradles at Gray Valley, fifteen miles away."

"They're no threat to us; they can't operate without fuel either."

"They won't have to," Retief said, puffing out smoke. "Corps policy is nothing if not elastic. It seems that the Big Picture called for the supplying of the Volunteer Reserve with full magazines —"

"What!"

"—and the topping off of all tanks."

Tavilan's ruddy face paled. "I see," he said quietly, nodding. "The CDT talked disarmament to me while it was arming Prouch's revolutionaries. It never intended to see the monarchy survive."

"Well, your Highness, the CDT is a very clean-minded organization, and it heard somewhere that 'monarchy' was a dirty word."

"All right!" Prince Tavilan turned to Count Arrol. "We have mounts for every man—and plenty of crossbow bolts. There'll be Greenback blood on the palace floors before the night is out."

"If I might make a suggestion . . .?"

"You're not involved in this, Retief. Take the copter and get clear."

"Clear to where? I've been disowned by my colleagues and slapped in jail by the Prime Minister. To get back to the subject: I see no point in our riding into Elora City and being shot down at long range by Greenbacks."

"We'll ride in at the Marivale Gate; move up through—"

"If you'll pardon my saying so," Retief said, "I've got a better idea. It's only fifteen miles to the Gray Valley."

"So?"

"So I suggest we take a ride over there and look at the Volunteer Navy."

"You've just told me Prouch's renegades are armed to the teeth!"

Retief nodded. "Since we need guns, Your Highness, I can't think of a closer place to get 'em."

At the head of the troop of thirty-eight riders, including General Hish, lashed to a mount, Retief and Tavilan reined in at the crest of the slope that faced the barracks of the Peoples' Volunteer Naval Reserve, a blaze of light all across the narrow valley. On the ramp a quarter of a mile beyond the administrative and shop areas, ten slim destroyers loomed, bathed in the glare of poly-arcs. Prince Tavilan whistled.

"Prouch and the CDT seem to have struck it off even better than I thought. That's all brand-new equipment."

"Just defensive, of course," Retief said. "I believe Minister Prouch has given assurances that the elimination of Dangredi's freebooters will be carried out with dispatch—just as soon as the CDT recognizes his regime."

Tavilan laughed shortly. "I could have swept Dangredi off the space lanes six months ago—if the CDT hadn't blockaded me."

"Such are the vagaries of Galactic policy."

"I know, the Big Picture again." Tavilan turned to Arrol. "We'll split into two parties, work around both ends of the valley, and pick our target at close range. Retief, you ride with me. Let's move out."



It was a forty-minute ride along the forested slopes walling the valley to the rendezvous point Prince Tavilan had designated, a sheltered ravine less than a hundred yards from the nearest of the parked war vessels. The access ladder was down, and light spilled from the open entry port. A Reservist in baggy gray and green lounged in the opening. Two more stood below, power rifles slung across their backs.

"You could pick those three off from here," Retief remarked. "Crossbows are a nice quiet weapon."

Tavilan shook his head. "We'll ride down in formal battle order. No war's been declared. They won't fire on the Prince Royal."

"There may be forty more inside—to say nothing of the crews

of the next ships in line, sentries, stand-by riot squads, and those two pillboxes commanding the ends of the valley."

"Still—I must give those men their chance to declare themselves."

"As the Prince wishes. But I'll keep my blaster loose in its holster—just in case."

The Prince rode in the lead with his guidon at his left, followed by thirty-five men, formed up in a precise triangle of seven ranks, with two formal honor guards out on the flanks. The rear-guard followed, holding the reins of the mount to which General Hish, still hissing bitter complaints, was lashed.

The Invincibles moved down the slope and out onto the broad tar-

mac, hooves clattering against the paved surface. The two men on the ramp turned and stood gaping. The one above at the ship's entry port whirled, disappeared inside.

The troop rode on; they were halfway to the ship now. One of the waiting Greenbacks unlimbered his power gun, cranked the action; the other followed suit. Both stepped forward half a dozen paces, brought their weapons up uncertainly.

"Halt! Who the hell's there?" one bawled.

Tavilan flipped the corner of his hunting cape forward over his shoulder to show the royal Eloran device and came on in silence.

The taller of the two Greenbacks raised his rifle, hesitated, half-lowered it. Riding half a pace behind Tavilan, Retief eased his pistol from its holster, watching the doorway above. On his right, Count Arrol held his crossbow across his knee, a bolt cocked in the carriage, his finger on the trigger.

Ten feet from the two Greenback sentries, Prince Tavilan reined in.

"Aren't you men accustomed to render a proper salute when your commander makes a surprise inspection?" he asked mildly.

The Greenbacks looked at each other, fingering their guns.

"It looks as though the word has gone out," Arrol whispered to Retief.

At that moment a figure eased into view at the port; light glinted from the front sight of a power gun as it came up, steadied —

Retief sighted and fired. In the instantaneous blue glare, the man at the port whirled and fell outward.

The Greenback nearest Tavilan made a sudden move to swing his gun on the Prince — then stumbled back, a steel quarrel from Arrol's crossbow standing in his chest. The second Greenback dropped his weapon, stood with raised hands, his mouth open and eyes wide; then he turned and ran.

Tavilan leaped down from his steed, dashed for the access ladder, his crossbow ready.

"Everybody in," Arrol called. The men sprang up in good order; those waiting on the ramp faced outward, covering all points. From the adjacent vessel, a sharp report echoed. A man fell from the ladder; others caught him, lifted him up. Far away, a harsh voice bellowed orders.

"They can't use any heavy stuff," Arrol said. "They wouldn't want to nick the paint on their new battle-wagon."

A squad of men appeared, running from the shadows at the base of the ship from which the firing had come. Most of the troop were up the ladder now; two men hustled the struggling Groaci up. Beside Retief, Arrol launched three bolts in rapid-fire order. Two of the oncoming men fell. The blue flashes of power guns winked; here and there, the surface of the tarmac boiled as wild shots struck.

"Come on!" The two men ran for the ladder; Arrol sprang for it, swarmed up. Retief followed. Molten metal spattered as a power-gun bolt vaporized the handrail. Then hands were hauling him safely inside the ship.

"Hit the deck," Arrol yelled. "We're lifting!"

“We took one burst from an infinite repeater,” an officer reported, “but no serious damage was done. They held their fire just a little too long.”

“We were lucky,” Prince Tavilan said. “One man killed, one wounded. It’s fortunate we didn’t select the next ship in line. We’d have had a hornet’s nest on our hands.”

“Too bad we broke up the battalion crap game,” Retief commented. “But by now they’ll be lifting off after us — a few of them, anyway.”

“All right. We’ll give them a warm welcome before they nail us.”

“If I may venture to suggest —”

Tavilan waved a hand, grinning. “Every time you get so damned polite, you’ve got some diabolical scheme up your sleeve. What is it this time, Retief?”

“We won’t wait around to be nailed. We’ll drive for Deep Space at flank speed —”

“And run into Dangredi’s blockade? I’d rather use my firepower on Prouch’s scavengers.”

“That’s where our friend the General comes in.” Retief nodded toward the trussed Groaci. “He and Dangredi are old business associates. We’ll put him on the screen and see if he can’t negotiate a brief truce. With the approval of your Highness, I think we can make an offer that will interest him.”

The flagships of the pirate fleet was a four-hundred-year-old, five hundred thousand ton dreadnought, a relic of pre-Concordiat times.

In the red-lit gloom of its cavernous Command Control deck, Retief and Prince Tavilan relaxed in deep couches designed for the massive frames of the Hondu corsairs. Opposite them; Dangredi, the Hondu chieftain, lounged at ease, his shaggy, leather-strapped, jewel-spangled 350-pound bulk almost overflowing his throne-like chair. At Retief’s side, General Hish perched nervously. Half a dozen of Tavilan’s Invincibles stood around the room, chatting with an equal number of Dangredi’s hulking officers, whose greenish fur looked black in the light from the crimson lamps.

“What I failing to grasp,” Dangredi rumbled, “is reason for why suddenly now changing of plan previously okayed.”

“I hardly think that matters,” Tavilan said smoothly. “I’ve offered to add one hundred thousand Galactic Credits to the sum already agreed on.”

“But whole idea was compensate me, Grand Hereditary War Chief of Hondu people, for not fight. Now is offering more pay for stand and give battle.”

“I thought you Hondu loved war,” an Eloran officer said.

Dangredi nodded his heavy green-furred head, featureless but for two wide green-pupilled eyes. “Crazy mad for warring, and also plenty fond of cash. But is smelling rodent somewhere in woodpile.”

“It’s very simple, Commodore,” Retief said. “General Hish here had arranged with you to flee when the People’s Volunteer forces attacked. Now changing conditions on Elora make it necessary that you fight.

And in place of the loot you would otherwise so rightly expect, you'll collect a handsome honorarium."

Suddenly the Groaci leaped to his feet, pointed at Retief. "Commodore Dangredi," he hissed. "This renegade diplomat beside me holds a gun pointed at my vitals. Only thus did he coerce me to request this parley. Had I guessed his intention, I would have dared him to do his worst. Seize the traitor, Excellency!"

Dangredi stared at the Groaci.

"He — and these strutting popinjays — plot against the security of the People's State of Elora!" Hish whispered urgently. "The plan remains unchanged! You are to flee engagement with the forces of Minister Prouch!"

The great green head bobbed suddenly; hooting laughter sounded. A vast hand slapped a thigh like a shaggy beer keg.

"Aha! At last is getting grasp of situation," Dangredi bellowed. "Now is little honest treachery, kind of dealing Hondu understanding!" He waved a hand at a servitor standing by. "Bringing wassail bowl, plenty meat!" He brought his hands together with a dull boom, rubbed them briskly. "Doublecross, plenty fighting, more gold at end of trail! Is kind of operation I, Dangredi, Hereditary War Chief, dreaming of in long nights of tooth-shedding time!"

"But these — these criminal kidnappers have no authority to deal —"

"Groaci-napping is harmless pastime. Like stealing wine-melons when cub. Unless, maybe —" he

cocked a large emerald eye at Hish — "you maybe raising ante?"

"I . . . I will match the offer of the saboteurs of interplanetary amity! One hundred thousand in Groaci gold!"

Dangredi considered briefly. "No good. What about fighting? You give Hondu gunners targets in sights? Or maybe chance for rough-and-tumble hand-to-hand, cold steel against enemy blades?"

General Hish shuddered. "In the name of civilization, I appeal —"

"Shove civilization in ventral orifice! Hondu taking good, crooked, bloodthirsty barbarians every time. Now disappearing quietly, Groaci, while I and new buddies planning strategy. Maybe later I sending for you and bending arms and legs until you tell all about enemy battle plan."

"The Groaci is our hostage," Tavilan said as the general was led away. "He's not to be bent without my prior approval."

"Sure; just having little joke." Dangredi leaned back, accepted a vast drumstick and a tank of wine, waited while his guests were supplied with delicacies.

"Now, Retief, you say attack coming when. . .?"

"I must confess," Counsellor Magnan said, "I don't quite understand how it happened that after trouncing the Eloran Volunteers, the pirate Dangredi voluntarily gave himself up and offered the services of his entire fleet as a reserve force to replace the very units he destroyed."

"Never mind that, Magnan," Am-

bassador Hidebinder said. "As seasoned campaigners must, we shall accept the *fait accompli*. Our resettlement plans are set back a year, at least. It's doubly unfortunate that Prime Minister Prouch suffered a fall just at this time. Magnan, you'll attend the funeral."

"With pleasure, Mr. Ambassador," Magnan said. "That is, I'll be honored."

"Retief..." Hidebinder glared across the table. "I'm not going to press civil charges, since the Eloran government, at the behest of Prince Tavilan, has dropped the case. However, I may as well tell you at once—your future with the Corps is non-existent. A trifling embezzlement of official funds, I could wink at. Embellished reports, slack performance of duty, cowardice in the face of the enemy—these I could shrug off as youthful peccadillos. But foot-dragging in the carrying out of *my* policy—" his fist thumped the desk. "Intolerable!" You openly allied yourself with—"

A messenger entered the conference room, handed a note to Magnan, who passed it to Hidebinder. He opened it impatiently, glanced at it. His jaw dropped. He read it through again. His mouth

closed; his jowls paled, quivering.

"Mr. Ambassador—what is it?" Magnan gasped.

Hidebinder rose and tottered from the room. Magnan snatched up the paper, read it through, then stared at Retief.

"He's been declared *persona non grata*! The Imperial government gives him twelve hours to leave Elora!"

Retief glanced at the wall clock. "If he hurries, he can catch the mail boat."

"And you, Retief..."

Retief raised his eyebrows. Magnan glanced around the table. "If you gentlemen will excuse us for a few moments?"

Half a dozen frowning diplomats filed from the room. Magnan cleared his throat. "This is *most* irregular, Retief! The Imperial government requests that you present credentials as Minister Plenipotentiary and Ambassador Extraordinary at once! They will accept no other appointee."

Retief asked. "I told Prince Tavilan I wouldn't have time for a ceremonial job. I have a suggestion, Mr. Magnan. Suppose I nominate you for the post?"

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"Over the heads of a hundred senior officers?" Magnan gasped. "Retief, dear boy . . ."

"That is, if your distaste for monarchies isn't overwhelming?"

"Eh? Oh, well, as to that," Magnan sat erect, tugged his lapels into place "I've always had a sneaking admiration for absolute royalty."

"Fine. Dangredi will be along in a few minutes to arrange for supplies. It seems there are a few shiploads of CDT - sponsored undesirables already landing on the northern continent who'll have to be warned off. It's probably just a slip. I'm sure our former ambassador wouldn't have jumped the gun in violation of solemn treaties."

"Ah," Magnan said.

"And, of course, the Royal Navy will require provisioning — just to be sure the new Reservists don't get any large ideas."

"Uh . . ."

"And, of course, a new treaty plainly guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Elora will have to be worked up at once."

"Oh . . ."

Retief rose. "All of which I'm sure you'll handle brilliantly, Mr. Ambassador. And by the way—I think I could best serve the mission in some other capacity than as Admin Officer."

Magnan pulled at his collar, waiting . . .

"I think I'd better work closely with Prince Tavilan, the heir apparent," Retief said blandly. "He does a lot of hunting, so perhaps you'd better designate me as Field and Stream Attache." He picked up his crossbow which was in the corner of the room.

"I leave the details to you, Mr. Ambassador. I'm going to do some hunting."

END

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THE LIFE HATER

BY FRED SABERHAGEN

The berserker machine was built to destroy life. Carr's mission was to teach it to be a friend!

Carr swallowed a pain pill, and tried to find a less uncomfortable position in the combat chair. He keyed his radio transmitter and spoke to the rogue ship that hung before him in space.

"I come in peace. I have no weapons. I come to talk to you."

He waited. The cabin of his little one-man ship was silent. His radar screen showed the berserker machine still many light-seconds ahead of him. There was no reaction from it, but he knew that it had heard him.

Behind Carr was the Sol-type star he called sun, and his home planet, colonized from Earth a century before. It was a lonely settlement, out near the rim of the galaxy. Until now the war waged on life by the

berserker machines had been a remote horror in the news stories. The colony's only real fighting ship had been sent to join Karlsen's fleet in the defense of Earth, when the berserkers were said to be massing there. But now the enemy was here, and the people of Carr's planet were readying two more ships in feverish haste—they were a small colony, and not wealthy in resources. Even when the two ships were ready, they would hardly be a match for a berserker.

When Carr had taken his plan to the leaders of the colony, they had thought him mad.

Go out and talk to it of peace and love? *Argue* with it? There might be some hope of converting the most

depraved human to the cause of goodness and mercy, but what appeal could alter the built-in purpose of a machine?

"Why *not* talk to it of peace?" Carr had demanded. "Have you a better plan? I'm willing to go, I've nothing to lose."

They had looked at him, across the gulf that separates healthy planners from those who know they are dying. They thought almost any scheme would be better than his. But they could imagine nothing else to do until the warships were ready, which would be at least ten days. The little one-man ship was expendable, being unarmed. Armed, it would be no more a provocation to a berserker. In the end, they let Carr take it, hoping there was a chance his arguments might delay the inevitable attack.

For Carr himself, of course, they wasted no thought. For Carr was dying. Was as good as dead.

When Carr came within a million miles of the berserker, it stopped its own unhurried motion and seemed to wait for him, hanging in space in the orbital track of an airless planetoid, at a point from which the planetoid was still several days away.

"I am unarmed," he radioed again. "I come to talk with you, not to damage you. If those who built you were here, I would try to talk to them of peace and love. Do you understand?"

He felt sure it would understand his language. All the berserker machines had learned the universal

space-travelers' tongue, from human prisoners or from each other. And he was serious about talking love to the unknown Builders. Grudges and vengeance seemed tiny things to a dying man. But the Builders would not be aboard; the berserkers had been constructed, probably, when Earthmen hunted the mammoth with spears. The Builders were lost in spacetime, along with their enemies of long ago.

Suddenly it answered him: "Little ship, maintain your present speed and course toward me. Be ready to stop when ordered."

"I—I will." In spite of being ready for it, Carr found himself stuttering and shaken at the sound of its voice, the uneven mechanical reproduction of the words of human prisoners, recorded aboard or borrowed from another machine. Now the weapons which could sterilize a planet would be trained on him alone. And there was worse than destruction to be feared, if one tenth of the stories about berserkers' prisoners were true. Carr did not let himself think about that—although the pain that racked him in momentary flood, of agony made death seem almost welcome.

When he was within ten thousand miles it ordered: "Stop. Wait where you are, relative to me."

Carr obeyed instantly. Soon he saw that it had launched toward him something about the size of his own ship—a little moving dot on his video screen, coming out of the vast black fortress that floated against the stars.

Even at this range he could see

how scarred and battered that fortress was. He had heard that all of these ancient machines were damaged, from their long senseless fighting across the galaxy; but surely such apparent ruin as this must be exceptional.

The berserker's launch slowed and drew up beside his ship. Soon there came a clanging at the airlock.

"Open!" demanded the radio voice. "I must search you."

"Then you will listen to me?"

"Then I will listen."

He opened the lock, and stood aside for the half dozen machines that entered. They were not unlike robot valets and workers, except that these were old and limping and worn, like their great master. Here and there a new part gleamed. But often the machines' movements were unsteady as they searched Carr, searched his cabin, probed everywhere on the little ship. One of them had to be half-carried out by its fellows, when the search was completed.

Another one of the machines, a thing with arms and hands like a man's, stayed behind. As soon as the lock had closed behind the others, it settled itself in the combat chair and began to drive the ship toward the berserker.

"Wait!" Carr protested. "I didn't surrender!" The ridiculous words hung in the air, seeming to deserve no reply. Sudden panic made Carr move without thinking; he stepped forward and grabbed at the mechanical pilot, trying to pull it from the chair. It put one metal hand against his chest and shoved him

across the cabin, so that he staggered and fell in the artificial gravity, thumping his head painfully against a bulkhead. "In a matter of minutes we will talk about love and peace," said the radio voice.

Looking out a port as his ship neared the immense berserker, Carr saw the scars of battle become plainer and plainer, even to his unpracticed eye. There were holes in the hull, square miles of bendings and swellings and pits where the metal had once flowed molten.

Rubbing his bumped head, Carr felt a faint thrill of pride. We've done that to it, he thought, we soft little living things. His own martial feeling annoyed him, in a way. He had always been something of a pacifist. Of course it could hardly be thought immoral to use violence against a dangerous but inanimate machine. After some delay, a hatch opened in the berserker's side, and Carr's ship followed the berserker's launch into darkness.

Now there was nothing to be seen through the port. Soon there came a gentle bump, as of docking. The mechanical pilot shut off the drive, turned toward Carr and started to rise from the chair.

Something in it failed. Instead of rising smoothly, the pilot reared up, flailed for a moment with arms that sought a grip or balance, and then fell heavily to the deck. For half a minute it moved one arm, and made a grinding noise. Then it was still.

In the half minute of silence which followed, Carr realized that

he was again master of his cabin: chance had given him that. If there was something he could do —

“Leave your ship,” said the calm voice. “There is an airfilled tube fitted to your airlock. It will lead you to a place where we can talk of peace and love.”

Carr’s eyes, with a sort of reluctant horror, had dragged themselves to focus on the engine switch, and beyond that, to the C-plus activator.

The C-plus jump was not usable as a drive anywhere near the huge mass of a sun. In such proximity as this to a mass even the size of the surrounding berserker, the effect became only a weapon — a weapon of tremendous potential power.

Carr did not — or thought he did not — any longer fear sudden death; he was too near to the slow, sure kind. But now he found that with all his heart and soul he feared what might be prepared for him outside the airlock. All the horror stories came back. The thought of going out through that airlock now was unendurable. It was less terrifying for him to step carefully around the fallen pilot, to reach the controls and turn the engine back on.

“I can talk to you from here,” he said, his voice quavering in spite of an effort to keep it steady.

After about ten seconds, the berserker said: “Your C-plus drive has safety devices. You will not be able to kamikaze me.”

“You may be right,” said Carr after a moment’s thought. “But if a safety device does function, it might hurl my ship away from your center of mass, right through your hull.

And your hull is in bad shape now. You don’t want any more damage.”

“You would die.”

“I’ll have to die sometime. But I didn’t come out here to die, or to fight. I came to talk with you, to try to reach some agreement.”

“What kind of agreement?”

At last Carr took a deep breath, and marshaled the arguments he had so often rehearsed. He kept his fingers resting gently on the C-plus activator, and his eyes alert on the instruments that normally monitored the hull for micrometeorite damage.

“I’ve had the feeling,” he began, “that your attacks upon humanity may be only some ghastly mistake. Certainly we were not your original enemy.”

“Life is my enemy. Life is evil.”

Pause. “Do you want to become goodlife?”

Carr closed his eyes for a moment; some of the horror stories were coming to life. But then he went firmly on with his argument. “From our point of view, it is you who are bad. We would like you to become a good machine, one that helps men instead of killing. Is not building a higher purpose than destroying?”

There was a longer pause. “What evidence can you offer that I should change my purpose?”

“For one thing, helping us will be a purpose easier of achievement. No one will damage you and oppose you.”

“What is it to me, if I am damaged and opposed?”

Carr tried again. “Life is basical-

ly superior to non-life; and man is the highest form of life."

"What evidence do you offer?"

"Man has a spirit."

"I have learned that men claim that. But do you not define this spirit as something beyond the perception of any machine? And are there not men who deny that this spirit exists?"

"Spirit is so defined. And there are such men."

"Then I do not accept the argument of spirit."

Carr dug out a pain pill and swallowed it. "Still, you have no evidence that spirit does not exist. You must consider it as a possibility."

"That is correct."

"But leaving spirit out of the argument for now, consider the physical and chemical organization of life. Do you know anything of the delicacy and intricacy or organization in even a single living cell? And surely you must admit we humans carry wonderful computers inside our few cubic inches of skull."

"I have never had an intelligent captive to dissect," the mechanical voice informed him blandly, "though I have received some relevant data from other machines. But you admit that your form is the determined result of the operation of physical and chemical laws?"

"Have you ever thought that those laws may have been designed to do just that — produce brains capable of intelligent action?"

There was a pause that stretched on and on. Carr's throat felt dry and rough, as if he had been speaking for hours.

"I have never tried to use that hypothesis," it answered suddenly. "But if the construction of intelligent life is indeed so intricate, so dependent upon the laws of physics being as they are and not otherwise — then to serve life may be the highest purpose of a machine."

"You may be sure, our physical construction is intricate." He wasn't sure he could follow the machine's line of reasoning, but that hardly mattered if he could somehow win the game of Life. He kept his fingers on the C-plus activator.

The berserker said: "If I am able to study some living cells —"

Like a hot iron on a nerve, the meteorite-damage indicator moved; something was at the hull. "Stop that!" he screamed, without thought. "The first thing you try, I'll kill you!"

Its voice was unevenly calm, as always. "There may have been some accidental contact with your hull. I am damaged and many of my commensal machines are unreliable. I mean to land on this approaching planetoid to mine for metal and repair myself as far as possible." The indicator was quiet again.

The berserker resumed its argument. "If I am able to study some living cells from an intelligent life-unit for a few hours, I expect I will find strong evidence for, or against, your argument. Will you provide me with cells?"

"You must have had prisoners, sometime." He said it as a suspicion; he really knew no reason why it must have had human captives. It

could have learned the language from another berserker.

"No, I have never taken a prisoner."

It waited. The question it had asked still hung in the air.

"The only human cells on this ship are my own. Possibly I could give you a few of them."

"Half a cubic centimeter should be enough; not a dangerous loss for you, I believe. I will not demand part of your brain. Also I understand that you wish to avoid the sensation called pain. I am willing to help you avoid it, if possible."

Did it want to drug him? That seemed too simple. Always unpredictability, the stories said, and sometimes a subtlety out of hell.

He went on with the game. "I have all that is necessary. Be warned that my attention will hardly waver from the control panel. Soon I will place a tissue sample in the airlock for you."

He got the medical kit, took two pain-killers, and set very carefully to work with a sterile scalpel. He had had some biological training.

When the small wound was banded, he cleansed the tissue sample of blood and lymph and with unsteady fingers sealed it into a little tube. Without letting down his guard for an instant, he dragged the fallen pilot to the airlock and left it there with the tissue sample. Utterly weary, he got back to the combat chair. When he switched the outer door open, he heard something come into the lock, and leave again.

He took a pep pill. It would stimulate some pain, but he'd be alert.

Two hours passed. Carr forced himself to eat some emergency rations, watched the panel, and waited.

He gave a startled jump when the berserker spoke again; nearly six hours had gone by.

"You are free to leave," it was saying. "Tell the leading life-units of your planet that when I have refitted, I will be their ally. The study of your cells has convinced me that the human body is the highest creation of the universe, and that I should make helping you my purpose. Do you understand?"

Carr felt numb. "Yes. Yes" have convinced you. After you have refitted, you will fight on our side."

Something shoved hugely and gently at his hull. Through a port he saw stars, and realized that the great hatch through which his ship had entered was swinging open.

This far within the system, Carr necessarily kept his ship in normal space to travel. It meant he could see the berserker as he fled from it, and he kept it in sight as long as possible. His last sight of the berserker showed it moving as if indeed about to let down upon the airless planetoid. Certainly it was not following him.

A couple of hours after being freed, he roused himself from contemplation of the radar screen, and went to spend a full minute considering the inner airlock door. At last he shook his head, dialed air into the lock, and entered it. The pilot was gone, with the tissue sample. There was nothing strange to be seen. Carr took a deep breath,

as if relieved, closed up the lock again, and went to a port to spend some time watching the stars.

After a day he began to decelerate, so that when hours had added into another day, he was still a good distance from home. He ate, and slept, and watched his face in a mirror. He weighed himself, and he watched the stars some more, with great interest, like a man examining something long forgotten.

In two more days, gravity bent his course into a hairpin ellipse around his home planet. With his whole world bulking between him and the berserker's rock, Carr began to use his radio.

"Ho, on the ground! Good news."

The answer came almost instantly. "We've been tracking you, Carr. What's going on? What happened?"

He told them of his encounter with the berserker. "So that's the story up to now," he finished. "I expect the thing really needs to refit. It is seriously damaged. Two warships attacking it now should easily win."

"Yes." There was excited talk in the background. Then the voice was back, sounding uneasy. "Carr—you haven't started a landing approach yet, so maybe you understand. We've got to be careful. The thing was probably lying to you."

"Oh, I know. Even that pilot's collapse might have been staged. I guess the berserker was too badly shot up to want to risk a battle, so

it tried another way. **Must have** sneaked the stuff into my cabin air, just before it let me go — or **maybe** left it in my airlock."

"What stuff?"

Carr said, "The stuff you're worrying about. The poison it thinks will kill us all. I'd guess it's some freshly mutated virus, designed for specific virulence against the tissue I gave it. It expected I'd hurry home and land before getting sick, and spread a new plague. It must have thought it was inventing biological warfare, using life against life, as we use machines against machines. But it needed that tissue sample to blood its pet viruses. It didn't know our chemistry. It must have been telling the truth about never having a human prisoner."

"Some virus, you think? What's it doing to you, Carr? Are you in pain—I mean, more than before?"

"No." Carr swirled his chair to look at the little chart he had begun. It showed that in the last two days his weight loss had started to reverse itself. He looked down at his body, at the bandaged place near the center of a discolored, inhuman-looking area. That area was smaller than it had been, and he saw a hint of new and healthy skin.

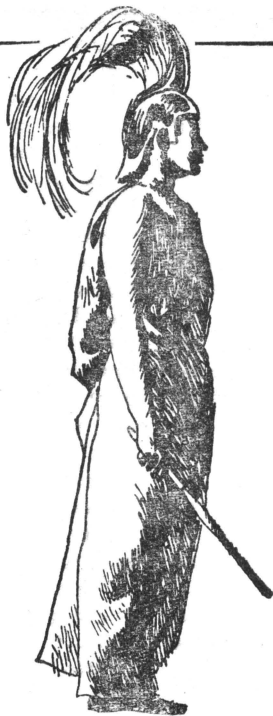
"What is the stuff doing to you?"

Carr allowed himself to smile, and to speak aloud his growing hope.

"I think it's **killing off my cancer.**"

END





FARNHAM'S

*They had thought this world
empty of mankind—now they
found how wrong they were!*



FREEHOLD

BY ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

The object swept on past, turned, and made a wide circle around their little plantation — stopped, turned again and came straight toward them at a much lower altitude.

Hugh became aware that Grace had been screaming, now had stopped, and that he had one arm around Barbara — how, he did not

recall. When the flying object had appeared, she had been some distance away, putting clothes to soak in the outside washtub. Now she was circled by his left arm and he could feel her trembling.

“Hugh, what is it?”

“People.”

The thing hovered above their

What Has Gone Before . . .

HUGH FARNHAM, building contractor, head of a household and dedicated bridge player, is spending a quiet weekend in his home while the world hovers on the brink of disaster. His son,

DUKE, refuses to take the crisis seriously but grudgingly admits the wisdom of Farnham's construction of a bomb shelter—radiation proof, blast proof, self-contained as to air, food and water. Farnham's wife,

GRACE, takes no part in the argument—or in any argument, for it has been years since Grace Farnham felt needed and important enough to justify her role in the household and she has sunk into a sort of cheerful, alcoholic apathy. Their daughter,

KAREN, a college student, is home for the weekend and has brought with her a schoolmate,

BARBARA WELLS, a girl of twenty. The other person in the household is the houseboy,

JOSEPH, a young Negro whose position in the family is part servant, part substitute son for Hugh Farnham. After dinner they settle down to a few rubbers of bridge—interrupted by a sudden, sneak nuclear attack. The war that all have both feared and disbelieved in . . . has begun.

After a night of terror and discomfort in the shelter, the six survivors emerge and find themselves in a world they do not recognize. There is no sign of bomb damage, except the twisted shell of their shelter—but neither is there any sign of the homes, the roads, the cities that had been all around them. They are alone in a wilderness. Months pass, during which Karen dies and Hugh and Barbara find themselves in love. Then, without warning, a strange cluster of flying machines drop toward them out of the sky. They have been found—but by whom?

flagpole. They all now could see that there were people on it; several heads showed above its low sides.

A corner detached itself from the rectangle, splitting off sharply. It dove and stopped in the air by the peak of the flag pole. Hugh saw that it was a separate car, perhaps nine feet long and three feet wide, with one passenger, or pilot. Still no details could be seen, no clue to motive power. The car enclosed the lower part of the man's body; his trunk, arms, and head projected above. Hugh was reminded of a horse and rider, or possibly an Eskimo in a kayak.

The man removed the flag from the pole, rejoined the main craft. His vehicle blended back in, filling its corner; no seam remained.

The rectangle in the air suddenly disintegrated.

It broke into separate units like that one which had detached itself to filch their flag. Most of them remained in the air; some dozen or so landed, three of them in a triangle around the group of colonists. Duke yelled, "Watch it!" and dived for his gun on the ground.

He never made it. Instead he leaned forward at a curious angle as if he were balancing against a heavy roll of a ship. He pawed the air with an expression of amazement and slowly was pulled back to vertical.

Barbara gasped in Hugh's ear. "Hugh, what is it?"

"I don't know." He did not have to ask what she meant; he had suddenly felt, at the same time his son

was stopped, that he seemed to be standing waist deep in invisible quicksand. "Don't fight it."

"I wasn't going to."

Grace shrilled, "Hubert! Hubert, do some—" Her cries cut off. Then she seemed to faint but did not fall.

Four of the boxlike individual cars were six or eight feet in the air, lined up abreast, and were slowly cruising over the most level part of the clearing, Barbara's farm. Where they passed, everything underneath, corn stalks, tomato plants, beans, squash, lettuce, potato hills, everything including branching irrigation ditches, was leveled, pressed flat into a sort of macadam.

The raw end of the main ditch spilled water over this new pavement. One of the cars whipped around to that point, ran a new and deeper ditch around the raped area in a wide sweep of several hundred yards which allowed the ditch water to circle around the destroyed garden and reach the stream at a new point lower down.

Barbara buried her face against Hugh's shoulder. He patted her

The car that had made the by-pass ditch went upstream along the old ditch. Soon the water ceased to flow at all.

As fast as the garden was leveled other cars landed on it. Hugh was unable to figure out just what they did or how they did it, but a large pavilion, glossy black and ornately decorated in red and gold, grew up in seconds in the clearing.

Duke called out, "Dad! For God's sake, can't you get at your gun?"

Hugh was wearing a forty-five, the only weapon he had planned to take on the hike. He had already discovered that his hands were only slightly hampered by whatever held them. But he answered, "I shan't try."

"Are you going to just stand there and let—"

"Yes. Duke, use your head. If we hold still and don't fight, we may live longer. We'll try to parley."

Out of the pavilion strode a man. He seemed to be almost seven feet tall but some of this height was a helmet, plumed and burnished. He wore a flowing skirt of red embroidered in gold and was bare from the waist up save that an end of the skirt was thrown back across one shoulder such that it covered, diagonally, part of his broad chest. He was shod in black boots.

All other men who had passed close enough to be seen were dressed in black coveralls with a red and gold patch at the right shoulder. Hugh felt an impression that this man (there was no slightest doubt that he was master) — that the big man, the boss, the commander, had taken his time to change into more formal clothes. Hugh was encouraged by this. Unquestionably they were prisoners — but if the leader took the trouble to dress up before interviewing them, then it followed that they were prisoners of some importance and a parley might be fruitful. Or did that follow?

But he was encouraged by the man's visage as well as his clothes. He had an air of good-natured, jovial arrogance and his eyes were

bright and merry. His forehead was high and his skull massive; he looked intelligent and alert. Hugh could not place his race. All the skin that showed, from his waist up, was dark, smooth brown and as shiny as if he oiled it. But his mouth was only slightly Negroid, his nose, though broad, was arched, and his black hair was wavy.

He carried a small crop, or whip, or swagger stick, but no weapons.

He strode up to them, stopped abruptly when he reached Joseph. He gave some curt order to the nearest of their three captors.

Joe stretched and bent his legs. "Thanks."

The man spoke to Joe. Joe answered, "Sorry, I don't understand."

The man spoke again. Joe shrugged helplessly. The man grinned and patted him on the shoulder, turned away, picked up the rifle Duke had tried for. He handled it clumsily, making Hugh flinch at his apparent ignorance of, or indifference to, safety precautions about where to point the muzzle of a gun.

Nevertheless he seemed to understand guns. He worked the bolt, ejecting one cartridge, then put it to his shoulder with passable form, aimed at a point and fired.

The blast was deafening. He had fired right past Hugh's ear.

He grinned broadly, tossed the rifle to one of his subordinates, walked up to Hugh and Barbara, reached out to touch Barbara's child-swollen belly.

Hugh knocked his hand away.

With a gesture almost negligent,

certainly without anger, the big man brushed Hugh's hand aside with the crop he carried. It was not a blow, it would barely have swatted a fly.

Hugh gasped in agony. His hand burned like fire and his arm was numb to the armpit. "Oh, God!"

Barbara said urgently, "Don't, Hugh. Let him. He isn't hurting me."

Nor was he. With a manner which showed only impersonal interest as a veterinarian might take in feeling a pregnant mare or bitch, the big man felt out the shape of the child she carried — while Hugh writhed in that special humiliation of a man unable to protect his woman.

The big man finished, grinned at Barbara and patted her head. Hugh tried to ignore the pain in his hand and dug into his memory for a language imperfectly learned. "Vooi govorit'i'yeh po-Russki, Gospodin?"

The man glanced at him, made no answer.

Barbara said, "Sprechen sie deutsch, mein Herr?"

That got her a smile, nothing more. Hugh called out, "Duke, try him in Spanish!"

"Okay. ¿Habla usted Espanol, Senor?" No response.

Hugh sighed. "We've shot our wad."

"M'sieur?" Joe said. "Est-ce que vous parlez la langue francaise?"

The man suddenly turned and faced Joseph. "Tiens?"

"Parlez-vous francais, monsieur?"

"Mais oui! Vous etes francaises?"

"Non, non! Je suis americain.

Nous sommes tous americains."

"Vraiment? Impossible!"

"C'est vrai, monsieur. Je vous en assure." Joe pointed to the peak of the empty flag pole. "Les Etats-Unis de l'Amerique."

The conversation became less easy to follow as both sides stumbled along in broken French. At least they paused and Joe said, "Hugh, he has asked me — ordered me, I think — to come with him into his tent and talk. I've asked him to let you all loose first. He says No. 'Hell, no!' it amounts to."

"Ask him to let the women loose."

"I'll try." Joe spoke at some length with the big man. "He says the enceinte femme — that's Barbara — can sit down where she is. But the 'fat one' — Grace he means — is to come along with us."

"Good enough. Good work, Joe. Get us a deal."

"I'll try. I don't understand him very well."

The three went into the pavilion. Barbara found that she could sit down, even stretched out which Hugh urged her to do. But the invisible web held Hugh as clingingly as ever even though she was right next to him.

"Dad," Duke said urgently, "this is our chance to make plans, while nobody is around who understands English."

"Duke," Hugh answered wearily, "can't you see they hold all the trumps? It's my guess that we are alive as long as he isn't annoyed with us — and not one minute longer."

"Aren't you even going to try to fight? Where's all that talk you used to give me about how you were a free man and planned to stay free?"

Hugh rubbed his hurt hand. "Duke, I'm not going to argue. You start anything now and you'll get us all killed. That's how I size it up."

"So it was just talk?" Duke said scornfully. "Well, I'm not making any promises."

"All right, all right. Drop it."

"I'm still not making any promises. Just tell me one thing, Dad. How does it feel to be shoved around? Instead of doing the shoving?"

"I don't like it."

"Neither did I. And I've never forgotten it. I hope you get your bellyful of it."

Barbara said, "Duke, for heaven's sake, stop talking like a fool!"

Duke looked at her. "I'll shut up. Just tell me one thing. Where *did* you get that baby in you?"

Barbara did not answer. Hugh said quietly, "Duke, if we get out of this, I promise you a beating for that remark."

"Any time, old man, any time."

They quit talking. Barbara reached out and patted Hugh's ankle. Four or five of the uniformed men gathered around the pile of household objects, picked through them, looking them over. A man whose manner spelled petty officer came up and gave them an order; they dispersed. He looked at some of the objects himself, then peered into the shelter and went inside.

Hugh heard a sound of rushing

water, looked and saw a brown wave rushing down the stream bed. Barbara raised her head and asked, "What is that?"

"Our dam is gone. It doesn't matter."

After a long time Joe came out of the pavilion alone. He came up to Hugh and said, "Well, here's the scoop, as nearly as I can get it. Not too near, maybe; he speaks some sort of patois and neither one of us is really fluent anyhow. But here it is. We're trespassers, this is private land. He also figured that we were escaped prisoners—the word is something else, not French, but that's the idea. I've convinced him—I think I've convinced him—that we are perfectly innocent people brought here through no fault of our own.

"Anyhow, he's not mad at us, even though we are technically criminals—trespass, and planting things where farms aren't supposed to be and building a dam and a house and things like that. He's not really sore and I think everything is going to be all right—as long as we do as we are told. He finds us interesting—how we got here and so forth."

Joe stopped and looked at Barbara. "You remember that theory that you had about parallel universes?"

"Certainly. I guess I was right. No?"

"No." Joe shook his head. "This part is as confused as can be and I didn't understand it. But one thing is absolutely sure. Barbara, Hugh—Duke, get this! This is our own world, right here."

Duke said, "Joe, that's preposterous."

"You argue it with him. He's convinced me. He knows what I mean by the United States, he knows where France is. And so forth. No question about it."

"Well —" Duke paused. "As may be. But what about this? *Where's my mother?* What's the idea of leaving her in there with that savage?"

"She's all right, she's having lunch with him. And she's enjoying it. Just let it run easy, Duke, and we're going to be okay, I think. Soon as they finish lunch we'll be leaving."

A few minutes later Hugh helped Barbara climb into the back of one of the odd flying machines, then mounted into one himself, behind the pilot. He found the seat comfortable and, in place of a safety belt, a field of that invisible quicksand enclosed the lower part of his body as he sat down. His pilot, a young Negro who looked remarkably like Joe, glanced back then took off with neither noise nor fuss and joined his car into the reforming rectangle in the air. Hugh saw that perhaps half the small cars had passengers; the passengers were whites, the pilots were invariably colored, ranging from as light brown as a Javanese to as sooty black as a Fiji Islander.

The car he was in was half way back and in the outside starboard rank of the formation. He looked around, spotting where each of the others had wound up, and was only mildly surprised to see that Grace was riding behind the boss man, in the first rank, middle position. Joe

was behind them, rather muchly buried in cats.

Off to his right, two cars had not joined up. One hovered over the pile of household goods, gathered them up in a non-existent cargo net, moved away. The second car positioned itself directly over the shelter.

The massive concrete block lifted, steadily, straight up, and on an even keel, without disturbing the shack on its roof. The small car and its giant burden took position about fifty feet off the starboard side. The entire formation moved forward and gathered speed but Hugh felt no wind of motion. The little car flanking them seemed to have no struggle keeping up despite its giant burden. Hugh could not see the other loaded car but assumed that it was on the port side.

The last he saw of their home was a bare scar where the shelter had rested, a larger scar where Barbara's farm had been, and a meandering track that used to mark an irrigation ditch.

He looked away and rubbed his sore hand, reflecting that the whole thing had been a gross abuse of coincidence. It offended him the way a hand of thirteen spades in a putatively honest deal would offend him. He pondered a remark Joe had made just before they had loaded: "We were incredibly lucky to have encountered a scholar. French is a dead language — 'une langue perdue,' he called it."

Hugh craned his neck back to the left, caught Barbara's eye. She smiled at him.

Memtok, Chief Palace Domestic to the Lord Protector of the Noonday Region, was busy and happy — happy because he was busy, although he was not aware that he was happy and was given to complaining about how hard he had to work, all because, as he put it, although he commanded some eighteen hundred servants there were not three of them who could be trusted to empty a slop jar without close supervision.

He had just completed a pleasant interview chewing out the head chef; he had suggested that the chef himself, old and tough as he certainly would be, nevertheless would make a better roast than the piece of meat the chef had been careless enough to send in to Their Charity the evening before. One of the duties that Memtok assumed personally was always to sample what his lord ate, despite the risk of poison and despite the fact that Their Charity's tastes in cuisine were not his own. It was merely one of the innumerable ways in which Memtok gave ever painstaking attention to details, an imaginative diligence that had brought him, still in his prime, to his present supreme eminence.

The head chef had grumbled and Memtok had sent him away with just a taste of the lesser whip to remind him that cooks were not all that hard to find. Then he had turned happily to his paperwork.

There were stacks of it, as he had just completed moving the household from the Palace to the Sum-

mer Palace — thirty-eight of the Chosen but only four hundred and sixty-three servants; the summer residence was run with a skeleton staff. The twice-yearly move always involved a wash of paperwork — purchase orders, musters, inventories, vouchers, shipping lists, revisions of duty rosters, dispatches — and he considered as usual advising his patron to have some likely youngster muted and trained as his clerk. But he rejected the idea, also as usual; Memtok did not trust servants who could read and write and add, it gave them ideas even if they could not talk.

The truth was, Memtok loved his paperwork and did not want to share it. His hands flew quickly over the papers, checking figures, signing his symbol, okaying payments. He held his pen in an odd fashion, nested between the first three fingers of his right hand — this because he had no thumbs.

He did not miss them, could barely remember what it had been like to have them. Nor did he need them. He could handle a spoon, a pen, and a whip without them, and he had no need ever to handle anything else.

Far from missing his thumbs, he was proud of their absence; they proved that he had served his lord in both major capacities, at stud when he was younger and now these many years as a tempered domestic. Every male servant over fourteen (with some scarce special exceptions) showed one alteration or the other; very few could exhibit both, only a few hundred on the entire

Earth. Those few spoke as equals only to each other, they were an elite.

Someone scratched at the door. "Come!" he called out, then, when he saw who it was, growled, "What do *you* want?" The growl was automatic but he really did dislike this servant for the best of reasons; he was not subject to Memtok's discipline. He was of a different caste, huntsmen, wardens, keepers, and beaters, and was subject to the Majordomo of the Preserve. The Majordomo considered himself to be of the same rank as the Chief Domestic, and nominally was. However, he had thumbs.

Memtok's greatest objections to the Summer Palace was that it often put him in contact with these servants who had the unpardonable fault of not being under his orders. While it would take only a word to Their Charity to crack down on one of them, he disliked to ask, and while he could touch one of them up a little without any real fear of reprimand, the louse would be sure to complain to his own boss. Memtok did not believe in friction between executive servants. Bad for morale.

"Message from Boss. Rayed to tell you Their Charity on his way back. Says four savages with the escort. Says you better tear up to the roof, take care of them. All."

"'All'? Damn you, what do you mean 'All'? Why four savages? And in the Name of Uncle when are they arriving?"

"All," the servant insisted. "Message came in about twenty minutes

ago. I been looking all over for you."

"Get out!" Memtok was jarred out of his warm euphoria of fussing with bits of paper. The important part of the message was that Their Charity was arriving home instead of staying away over night. Chef, Receptionist, Musical Director, Housekeeper, Groundskeeper, all heads of departments—he was phoning orders even as he thought. Four savages? Who cared about four savages?

But he was on the roof and accepted their custody. He would have been there anyway, with the Lord Protector arriving.

When they arrived Hugh had no chance to see Barbara, reassure her, tell her to keep her chin up. When at last he was released from the gentle restraint of the "seat belt," he was confronted by a little bald-headed white man with a waspish face, an abrupt manner, and a whip. He was dressed in a white robe which reminded Hugh of the night shirts his grandfather had worn, save that it had on the right shoulder the red and gold patch which Hugh had tentatively identified as the insigne of the big man, the boss. The emblem was repeated in rubies and gold on the chest of the little man as a medallion supported by a heavy gold chain.

The man in the nightshirt looked him over with obvious distaste, then turned him and Duke over to another white man in a nightshirt. This man wore no medallion but did carry a small whip. Hugh rubbed

his hand and resolved not to test whether this whip was as potent as the ornate one carried by the big boss.

Duke tested it. The angry little man gave instructions to his straw boss, and left. The straw boss gave them an order; Hugh correctly interpreted the tone and gesture as: "All right, you guys, get going. This way" — and got going.

Duke didn't. The straw boss barely touched him on his left calf; Duke yelped before he could stop himself. He limped the rest of the way — down a ramp, into what turned out to be a very fast lift, then into a windowless, light, white-walled room which whiffed vaguely of hospitals.

Duke understood the order to strip down without needing to be stimulated; he cursed but complied. Hugh merely complied. He was beginning to understand the system. The whips were used as spurs are used by a good rider, to exact prompt obedience but not with intent to damage.

From there they were herded into a smaller room where they were hit from all sides by streams of water. The operator was in a gallery above. He shouted at them, then indicated in pantomime that they were to scrub.

They scrubbed. The water jets cut off, they were doused in a sirup that was liquid soap or detergent. They scrubbed again and were rinsed and were required to scrub still again, all to gestures that left no doubt as to how thorough a bath was expected. The water jets got very hot and

harsh, changed to cold and still harsher, were replaced by violent blasts of hot air.

It was all too much like an automatic dishwasher, Hugh felt, but they ended up cleaner than they had been in months. An assistant to the bathmaster then plastered strips over each of their eyebrows, rubbed an emulsion on their scalps, into their scratchy beards (neither had shaved that day), over their backs and chests and arms and legs, and finally into their pubic hair. Duke got another lesson in obedience before he submitted to this last indignity. When, immediately thereafter, they were subjected willy-nilly to enemas, he gritted his teeth and took it. The water closet was a whirlpool set in the floor. Their finger and toe nails were cut short.

After that they were bathed again. The eyebrow patches washed away. So did their hair. When they came out this time, they were both bald all over, save for eyebrows.

The bathmaster made them gargle, showing them what he wanted and spitting into the whirlpool. They gargled three times — a rather pleasant, pungent liquid — and when it was over Hugh found that his teeth seemed cleaner than they had ever been in his life. In fact he felt utterly clean, lively, glowing with wellbeing — but humiliated.

They were taken to another room and examined.

Their examiner was clearly a physician. He wore the conventional white night shirt and a small insigne on a thin gold chain but he

needed no diplomas on the wall to show his profession. His bedside manner would never make him rich, Hugh decided; he had the air of many military surgeons Hugh had known — not unkind but quite impersonal.

He seemed much surprised by and very interested in a removable bridge he found in Hugh's mouth. He examined it closely, looked in Hugh's mouth at the gaps it had filled, gave it to one of his assistants with some instructions. The assistant went away and Hugh wondered if his chewing was going to be permanently hampered.

The physician took a leisurely hour or more over each of them, using instruments Hugh did not recognize and whose functions he could not, in most cases, guess. Weight, height, and blood pressure were almost the only familiar items. Things were done to them, too, none of them really unpleasant — no hypodermic needles, no knives. During this, Hugh's bridge was returned and he was allowed to put it back in.

But the tests and/or treatments often seemed to be indignities even though not painful. Once, when Hugh was stretched out on a table from which Duke had just been released, the younger man said, "How do you like it, Dad?"

"Restful."

Duke snorted.

The fact that both men had appendicitis scars seemed to interest the physician as much as the removable bridge. By acting he indicated a severe bellyache, then jabbed a thumb vigorously into McBurney's

point. Hugh conveyed agreement — with some difficulty, as nodding the head seemed to mean a negative response.

An assistant came in and handed the physician a contrivance which turned out to be another dental bridge, for Hugh was required to open his mouth; the old one was again taken out and the new one carefully seated. It felt to Hugh's tongue as if he again had natural teeth there. The physician then probed a couple of cavities, cleaned them out and filled them — without pain but without anesthesia so far as Hugh was aware.

After that Hugh was rather suddenly "strapped" (an invisible field again) to a table, supine, and his legs were elevated. Another table was wheeled up and Hugh suddenly realized that he was being prepared for surgery — and with horror he was sure just what sort of surgery. "Duke! Don't let them grab you! Fight! Get that whip!"

Duke hesitated an instant too long. The therapist did not carry a whip; he merely kept one at hand. Duke lunged for it, the physician got it first. Moments later Duke was on his back, still gasping his agony at punishment he had taken in trying to stop it and having his knees elevated and spread. They both went on protesting.

The physician looked at them thoughtfully and the straw boss who had fetched them was called in. They conferred. Presently the waspish little man with the big medallion strode in, looked the situation over, stormed out.

There was a long wait. The boss therapist filled in the time by having his assistants complete preparations for the surgery and there was no longer the slightest doubt in Hugh's mind, or Duke's, as to just what they were in for. In fact Duke pointed out that it would have been far better if they had fought — and died — earlier in the day, rather than wind up like this. As they would have fought, he reminded his father, if Hugh hadn't turned out to be chicken.

Hugh didn't argue, he agreed. He tried to tell himself that his docility in being captured was on account of the women. But it afforded him little comfort.

After a long time the little man with the medallion stormed back in, apparently angrier than ever. He snapped one curt order; Hugh and Duke were released.

That ended it, save that they were each rubbed all over with a fragrant cream. They were given a white nightshirt apiece, conducted some distance through long bare passages and Hugh was shoved into a cell. The door was **not** locked but he could not open it.

In one corner was a tray, with covered dishes and a spoon. The food was excellent and some of it utterly unidentifiable; Hugh ate with good appetite, scraping the dishes and drinking all of the thin beer with it. Then he slept for a while on a soft part of the floor, having blanked his mind of useless worry.

He was awakened by being prodded with a foot.

He was taken to still another

plain, windowless room, which turned out to be a school room. Two of the short white men in nightshirts were there. They were equipped with many props, the equivalent of a blackboard (it could be cleared instantly by some magic), infinite patience — and a whip, for the lessons were "taught to the tune of a hickory stick." No error went unnoted.

They both could draw well and both were skilled and imaginative pantomimists; Hugh was taught to speak.

He was taught with extraordinary speed. Hugh discovered that his memory was greatly sharpened by the stimuli of pain; he had little tendency to repeat a mistake. At first he was punished only for forgetting vocabulary, but as he learned, he also grew to expect flicks of pain for errors in inflection, construction, idiom, and accent.

This Pavlovian treatment continued — if his mental records were correct — for seventeen days; he did nothing else and saw no one but his teachers. They worked in shifts. Hugh worked every possible minute, about sixteen hours a day, he thought; at least he was never allowed quite enough sleep although he never felt sleepy — he didn't dare — during lessons. Once a day he was bathed and given a clean night-shirt, twice a day he was fed, tasty food and plentiful, three times a day he was policed to the toilet. All other minutes were spent learning to speak, with ever the sharp awareness that any bobble would be instantly punished.

But he learned how to duck punishment — sometimes. A question, quickly put, would sometimes do. "Teacher, this one understands that there are protocol modes for each status, rising and falling, but what this one in its ignorance lacks is knowledge of what each status is — being wholly without experience through the inscrutable ways of Uncle the Mighty — and also is sometimes not aware of the status assumed for teaching purposes by my charitable teacher and of the status this humble one is expected to assume in reply. More than that, this one does not know its own status in the great family. May it please its teacher."

The whip was put down and for the next half hour he was lectured. The problem was more involved than Hugh's question showed. The lowest possible status was stud. No, there was one lower: servant children. But children were expected to make mistakes, it did not matter; truly they had no status. Next higher was slut, then tempered servant — a category with subtle and effectively unlimited gradations of rank inside it, so involved that speech of equals was often used if the gradient was not clearly evident.

High above all servants were the Chosen, with their own unlimited and sometimes changing variations of rank, including those ritual circumstances in which a lady takes precedence over a lord. But that was not usually any worry of a servant; always use protocol rising mode. However —

"If two of the Chosen speak to you at once, which one do you answer?"

"The junior," Hugh answered.

"Why?"

"Since the Chosen do not make mistakes, this one's ears were at fault. The senior did not actually speak, for his junior would never have interrupted."

"Correct. You are a tempered gardener and you encounter a Chosen of the same rank as your lord uncle. He speaks. 'Boy, what sort of a flower is that?'"

"As Their Charity knows much better than this one can ever know, if this one's eyes are not mistaken, that plant may be a hydrangea."

"Good enough. But drop your eyes when you say it. Not to me. To the Chosen. Now about your status —" The teacher looked pained. "You haven't any."

"Please, teacher?"

"Uncle! I've tried to find out. Nobody knows but our Lord Uncle and they have not ruled. You're not a child, you're not a stud, you're not a tempered, you don't belong anywhere. Uncle alone knows. You're a savage and you don't fit."

"But what protocol mode must I use?"

"Always the rising. Oh, not to children. Nor to sluts, I venture. No need to overdo it."

Except for the changes in inflection by status, Hugh found the language simple and remarkably logical. It had no irregular verbs and its syntax was orderly; it probably had been tidied up at some time by edict. He suspected, from a few words that

he recognized — “simba,” “bwana,” “wazir,” “etage,” “trek,” “oncle” — that it had its roots in several African languages. But that did not matter. This was “Speech” and, according to his teachers, the only language spoken anywhere.

In addition to protocol modes, quite a chunk of the vocabulary was double, one form of a word being used down, its exact synonym although often utterly different in root used up. He had to know both — be able to recognize one and to use the other.

The pronunciation gave him trouble at first, but by the end of the first week he could lip-smack, click, make the fast glottal stop, and hear and say vowel distinctions he had never suspected existed. By the sixteenth day he was chattering freely, beginning to think in it, and the whip was rarely used.

Late the next day the Lord Protector sent for him.

XII

Although he had already been bathed that day, Hugh was rushed through another violent bath in five minutes, rubbed down with fragrant cream, and issued a fresh white robe, before being whizzed to the lord's private apartments. There he was bounced past a series of receptionists close on Memtok's heels, and into a large, private, and very sumptuous retiring room.

The lord was not there; Joseph and Dr.-Livingstone-I-Presume were. Joe called out, “Hugh! Wonderful! You may go Memtok.”

Memtok hesitated, then backed away and left. Joe ignored him, slipped his arm in Hugh's, and led him to a divan. “Gosh, it's good to see you! Sit down, we'll talk until Ponse gets here. You look well.” Doctor Livingstone came up, checked Hugh's ankles, purred and stropped against them.

“I am well. ‘Ponse’?” Hugh reached down and scratched the cat's ears.

“Don't you know his name? The Lord Protector, I mean. No, I guess you wouldn't. That's one of his names, the one he uses en famille. He has a string of them, of course. Never mind, have they been treating you all right?”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“They had better. Ponse gave orders for you to be pampered. Look, if you aren't treated okay, you tell me. I can fix it.”

Hugh hesitated. “Joe, have you had one of those odd whips used on you?”

“Me?” Joe seemed astonished. “No, of course no.” He looked troubled. “Hugh, have they been abusing you? Peel off that mother hubbard and let me have a look.”

Hugh shook his head. “There are no marks on me. I haven't been hurt. But I certainly don't like it.”

“But if you've been stroked for no reason — Hugh, that's one thing that Ponse does not tolerate, I know. He's a very humane sort of guy. All he wants is discipline. If anybody — anybody at all, even Memtok — has been cruel to you, well, somebody is going to catch it.”

Hugh thought about it. In actual



KITTEN

truth he rather liked his teachers. They had worked hard and patiently over him and had been quite sparing of him once it became possible to talk instead of using the whip. "I haven't been hurt. Just reminded."

"I'm glad to hear it. Actually, Hugh, I didn't see how you could be. That quirt Ponse carries — well, you could kill a man with it at a thousand feet. I takes real skill to use it gently. But those toys the upper servants carry, all they do is tingle and that's all they are supposed to do."

Hugh decided not to argue over what constituted a tingle; he had more urgent things on his mind. "Joe, how are the others? Have you seen them?"

"Oh, they're all right. Certainly. You heard about Barbara?"

"I haven't heard a damn thing! What about Barbara?"

"Slow down. Having her babies, I mean."

"She had her baby?"

"'Babies,' I said. Twin boys, identical. A week ago."

"How is she? *How is she?*"

"Easy, man! She's just fine, couldn't be better. Of course. They are way ahead of where we were in medicine; losing a mother, or a baby, is unheard of." Joe suddenly looked sad. "It's a dirty shame they didn't run across us at least three months back." He brightened. "Barbara told me that she had intended to name it Karen, if it was a girl. When it turned out to be twin boys, she named one — the one five minutes the elder — 'Hugh' and named the other 'Karl Joseph.' Nice, eh?"

"I'm flattered. Then you've seen her. Joe, I've got to see her. Right away. How do I arrange it?"

Joe looked astonished. "But you *can't* see her, Hugh. Surely you know that."

"Why, in God's name, can't I?"

"Why, you're not tempered, that's why. Impossible."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry, but that's the way it is." Joseph suddenly grinned. "But I understand that you were almost made eligible by accident. Ponse laughed his head off at how close you came and how you and Duke yelped."

"I don't see the humor of it, I'm afraid."

"Oh, shucks, Hugh, he simply has a robust sense of humor. He laughed when he told me about it. I didn't laugh and he decided that I have no sense of humor. Different people laugh at different things. Karen used to use a fake Negro dialect that set my teeth on edge, the times I happened to overhear it. But she didn't mean any harm by it. Karen — Well, they just don't come any better, and you and I both know it and I'll shut up about it. Look, if the vet had gone ahead on you, without orders, it would have cost him his hands; Ponse sent that word to him. Might have suspended the sentence, of course, to save his usefulness — good surgeons are valuable. But his assumption was only natural, Hugh. Both you and Duke are too tall and too big for stud. However, Ponse doesn't tolerate sloppiness."

"All right, all right. I still don't

see the harm in my calling on Barbara and seeing her babies. You saw her. And you're not tempered."

Joe looked patiently exasperated. "Hugh, it's not the same thing. Surely you know it."

"Why isn't it?"

Joe sighed. "Hugh, I didn't make the rules. But I'm Chosen and you're not, and that's all there is to it. It's not my fault that you're white, now, is it?"

"No. All right. Forget it."

"Let's just be glad that one of us is in a position to get us all some favors. Do you realize that all of you would have been executed at once? If I hadn't been along?"

"The thought has crossed my mind. Lucky indeed that you knew French. And that *he* knows some French."

Joe shook his head. "French didn't enter into it, it merely saved time. The point was that *I* was there . . . and the rest of you were excused of any responsibility on that account. What had to be settled then was the degree of my criminality. My neck was very much in a noose." Joe frowned. "I'm still not in the clear. I mean, Ponse is convinced he's acquitted me. But my case still has to be reviewed by the Supreme Lord Proprietor. It's his preserve — Ponse is just custodian. I could be executed for it yet."

"Joe what in the world is there about it to cause you to talk about being *executed*?"

"Plenty! Look, if you four ofays had been there alone, Ponse would have tried you and excuted you just

by looking at you. Two capital crimes and both self-evident. Escapes. Servants who had run away from their lord. Destructive trespass in a personal domain of the Supreme Proprietor. Open-and-shut on both counts and death for each of them. Now don't tell me that wasn't the way it was because I already know it and it took me long enough to make Ponse see it, using a language neither one of us knows too well. And my own neck is still in jeopardy. However —" He brightened up — "Ponse tells me that the Supreme Proprietor is ten years behind in reviewing criminal cases and that it has been more years than that since he last set foot on this preserve or even cruised over it . . . and that long before my case can possibly come up there won't be a trace of any destruction. They are already putting the trees back and there's never an accurate count of bears and deer and other game. He tells me not to worry."

"Well, that's good."

"But maybe you think I haven't done some sweating over it! Just letting your shadow fall across the Supreme Lord Proprietor means your neck. Sneezing in his presence is even worse — so you can figure out for yourself that trespassing on land that is his personally is nothing to take lightly. But I shan't worry as long as Ponse says not to. He's been treating me as a guest, not as a prisoner. But tell me about yourself. I hear you've been studying the language. So have I — a tutor every day I've had time for it."

Hugh answered, "May it meet

with their approval, this one's time has, as they know, been devoted to nothing else."

"Whoo! You speak it better than I do."

"I was given incentive," Hugh said, relapsing into English. "Joe, have you seen Duke? Grace?"

"Duke, no. I haven't tried to. Fact is, Ponse has been away most of the time and took me along; I've been terribly busy. Grace, yes. It's even possible that you might see Grace. She's often in these apartments. That's the only way you could see her, of course. Right here. And in the presence of Ponse. Might happen. He's not a stickler for protocol when it suits his convenience to break it. In private, I mean. He keeps up appearances in public. His position requires it."

"Hmm—Joe, in that case, couldn't you ask him to let me see Barbara and the twins? Here? In his presence?"

Joe looked exasperated. "Hugh, can't you understand that I'm just a guest? I'm here on sufferance. I don't have a single servant of my own, no money, no title. I said you might see Grace here; I did not say you would. If you did, it would be because he had sent for you and it suited him not to send her out—not for your convenience. As for asking him to let you see Barbara, I simply can't. And that's *that!* I advise you not to, either. You might learn that his quirt doesn't just tingle."

"All I meant was —"

"Watch it, Hugh! Here he comes, we'd better rise."

Joe stood up and went to meet his host. Hugh stood with head bowed, eyes downcast, and waited to be noticed. Ponse came striding in, dressed much as Hugh had seen him before save that the helmet was replaced by a little red skullcap. He greeted Joe, sat heavily down on a large divan, stuck out his legs. Doctor Livingstone jumped up into the lord's lap; he stroked it. Two female servants appeared from nowhere, pulled off his boots, wiped his feet with a hot towel, dried them, massaged them, placed slippers on them, and vanished.

While this was going on, the Lord Protector spoke to Joe of matters Hugh had never heard of and could not follow other than as words, but he noticed with interest that the noble used the mode of equals to Joe and that Joe talked the same fashion to him. Hugh decided that Joe must be in as solid as Doctor Livingstone. Well, Joe did have a very pleasing personality.

At last the big man glanced at him. "Sit down, boy."

Hugh sat down, on the floor. The lord went on, "Have you learned Language? We're told that you have."

"May it please Their Charity, this one's time has been devoted singly to that purpose, with what inadequate results known to them far better than their servant would dare venture to estimate."

"Not bad, not bad. Accent could be crisper. And you missed an infix on one word. How do you like the weather we've been having lately?"

"Weather is as Uncle the Mighty ordains it. If it pleases His favorite

nephew, it cannot fail to make joyful one so humble as this servant."

"Quite good. Accent still blurry but understandable. Work on it. Tell your teachers we said it. Now drop that fancy speech, I haven't time to listen to it when I want a straight answer. Equals speech, always. In private, I mean."

"All right. I—" Hugh broke off suddenly; one of the female servants had returned, to kneel in front of her lord with a cold drink on an ornate tray.

Ponse glanced sharply at Hugh, then looked at the girl. "It? Doesn't count, it's a deaf mute. You were saying?"

"Nothing much. I was about to say that I couldn't have an opinion about the weather because I haven't seen it at all since I got here."

"I suppose not. I gave orders for you to learn Language as quickly as possible and servants are inclined to follow instructions literally. No imagination. All right, you are to walk outdoors an hour each day from now on. Tell whoever is in charge of you. Any petition? Are you getting enough to eat? Are you being treated well?"

"The food is good. I'm used to eating three times a day but —"

"You can eat four times a day if it's any comfort to you. Again, tell the one in charge of you. All right, now to other matters. Hugh — that's your name, isn't it?"

"Yes, Their Charity."

"Can't you hear? I said, 'Use equals mode.' My private name is Ponse. Use it. Hugh, if I had not picked you people up myself, were

I not myself a scholar, and had I not seen with my own eyes the artifacts in that curious structure, your house, I would not have believed it. As it is, I must. I'm not a superstitious man. Uncle works in mysterious ways, granted, but He doesn't use miracles... and I would not hesitate to repeat that in any temple on Earth, unorthodox as it sounds. But — How long does it come to, Joe?"

"Two thousand one hundred and three years."

"Call it two thousand. What's the matter, Hugh?"

"Uh, nothing, nothing."

"If you're going to throw up, please go outside to do it; I picked out these rugs myself. As I was saying, you've given my scientists something to think about — and a good thing, too; they haven't turned out anything more important than a better mouse trap in years. Lazy scoundrels. I've told them to come up with a sensible answer, no miracles. How five people — or six, I understand — and a small building of some mass could hurdle twenty centuries and never break an egg. Ex-aggregation. Joe tells me it broke some bones and some other things. Speaking of bones, Joe tells me this won't please you — and it didn't please him — but for scientific reasons, I ordered my scientists to disturb some bones. Strontium sampling, that sort of thing; I suppose you've never heard of it. Clear proof that the cadaver had matured *before* the period of maximum radioactivity — Look, I warned you about these rugs. Don't do it!"

Hugh gulped. ("Karen! Karen! Oh, my darling!")

"Better now? Perhaps I should tell you that a priest was present throughout, all proper propitiations were made—exactly as if it had been one of the Chosen. Special concession, my orders. And when the tests were completed every atom was returned and the grave closed with proper rites.

"That's true, Hugh," Joseph said gravely. "I was there. And I put on fresh flowers. Flowers that will stay fresh, I'm told."

"Certainly they will stay fresh," Ponse confirmed, "until they wear out from sheer erosion. I don't know why you use flowers but if there are any other rites or sacrifices necessary to atone for what may seem to you a desecration, just name it. I'm a broad-minded man; I'm aware that other times have had other customs."

"No. No, best just let it be."

"As you wish. It was done from scientific necessity. It seemed more reasonable than amputating one of your fingers though perhaps I might have asked you. Other tests also kept my scientists from wiggling out of the obvious. Foods preserved by primitive methods so ancient that I doubt if any modern food expert would know how to go about duplicating same—and yet the foods were, I am told, edible. At least some servants were required to eat them. No harm resulted. A fascinating radioactivity gradient between the upper and inner sides of the roof structure—I gave them a hint on that one. Acting on information

received from Joe, I ordered them to look for evidence that this event took place at the very beginning of the East-West War that destroyed the Northern Hemisphere.

"So they found it. And calculations led them to believe that the structure must have been very near to the origin of an atom-kernel explosion. Yet it was unhurt. That produced a theory so wild that I won't tire your ears with it; I've told them to go on working.

"But the best thing, from my viewpoint, is the historical treasure you bring with you. I am a man of history, Hugh. History, properly interpreted, tells everything. The treasure, of course, are those books that came along with you. I am not exaggerating when I say that they are my most precious possessions. There are only two other copies of the Encyclopedia Britannica in the world today—and those other two are not this edition and are in such poor shape that they are curiosities rather than something a scholar can work with; they weren't cared for during the Turmoil Ages."

Ponse leaned back and stretched and looked very happy. "But *mine* is in mint condition!"

He added, "I'm not discounting the other books. Treasures, all of them. Especially one, the *Adventures of Odysseus*, which is not known only by reputation. I take it that the pictures in that book date from the time of Odysseus, too?"

"I'm afraid not. The artist was alive in my time."

"Too bad. They're interesting, nevertheless. Primitive art, stronger

than we have now. But perhaps I exaggerated when I said that the the books were my chiefest possession."

"Yes?"

"You are! There! Doesn't that please you?"

Hugh barely hesitated. "Yes. If true." (If it's true that I am your chattel, you arrogant bastard, I prefer being a valuable one!)

"Oh, quite true. And if you had been speaking in protocol mode, you wouldn't have been able to phrase a doubt. I never lie, Hugh; remember that. You and — That other one, Joe?"

"Duke."

"'Duke.' Although Joe speaks highly of your scholarship, not so highly of its. But let me explain what you mean to me. There are other scholars who read Ancient English quite readily. None at present in my household, true. Since it is not a root language to any important degree, few study it. Nevertheless scholars of English could be found, be borrowed. But *none* such as yourself. You actually *lived* then; you can, I am sure, read English as readily as I read Language, you'll be able to translate knowledgeably, without these maddening four and five interpretations of a single passage that so disfigure most translations from ancient sources, all because the scholar doesn't really know what the ancient author was talking about. Lack of cultural context, I mean. And no doubt you will be able to supply on demand footnotes and explanations for things ob-

scure to me and commonplace to you.

"Right? Right! So you see what I want of you. Start with the Encyclopedia Britannica. Get busy today, translate it. Just scribble it out quickly, sloppy but fast. Someone else will pretty it up for my eyes. Understand? All right, go do it."

Hugh opened his mouth, gulped, closed it, then started over. "But, Ponse, I can't write Language."

"What?"

"I was taught to speak it; I haven't been taught to read and write it."

Ponse blinked. "Memtok!"

The Chief Palace Domestic arrived with such speed that one might have suspected that he was just outside the door. And so indeed he had been — listening in on private conversations of his patron by means, Memtok was certain, were not known to the Lord Protector . . . certain inasmuch as Memtok was still breathing. Such measures were risky but he found them indispensable to the efficient performance of his duties. At worst, it was safer than planting a slut in there who was not quite a deaf mute.

"Memtok, I told you that it was to be taught to speak, read, and write Language."

Hugh listened, with eyes downcast, while the Chief Domestic tried to protest simultaneously that the order had never been given (it had not) but nevertheless had been carried out (obviously false), all without contradicting the Lord Protector (impossible to reconcile, inconceivable to attempt).

"Garbage," Ponse remarked. "I

don't know why I don't put you up for adoption. You would look good in a coal mine. That pale skin of yours would be much improved by some healthy coal dust." He twitched the quirt in his hand and Memtok paled still more. "Very well, let it be corrected. It is to spend half of each day in learning to read and write, the other half in translating and in dictating same into a recorder. I should have thought of that before; writing out a translation takes too long. Nevertheless I want it to be able to read and write; it will need it for all I have in mind."

He turned to Hugh. "Anything else you can think of? That you need?"

Hugh started to phrase a request in the involved indirection which presumed nothing, as required by protocol mode, rising.

Ponse chopped him off. "Speak directly, Hugh. Memtok, close your ears. No ceremony needed in Memtok's presence, he is a member of my inner family, my nephew in spirit if not in the eyes of my senior sister. Spit it out."

Hugh noticed that Memtok relaxed and looked as beatific as his vinegar features permitted. "Well, Ponse, I need more room to work. My cell is about the size of that divan. Smaller."

"Describe your needs."

"Well, I'd like a room with natural light, one with windows, say a third the size of this one. Working tables, book shelves, writing materials, a comfortable chair — yes, and access to a toilet without having to

wait; it interferes with my thinking otherwise."

"Don't you have that now?"

"No. And I don't think it helps my thinking to be touched up with a whip. I'm quite used to working hard without such inducement."

"Memtok, have you been whipping it?"

"No, my uncle. I swear."

"You would swear if you were caught with cream on your lip. Who has been?"

Hugh dared to interrupt. "I'm not complaining, Ponse. But those whips make me nervous, I'm not used to them. And I never know who can give me orders. Anybody, apparently. I haven't been able to find out my status."

"Hmm — Memtok, where do you have it in the Family?"

The head servant barely conceded that he had not been able to solve that problem.

"Let's solve it. We make it a department head. Mmm. Department of Ancient History. Title: Chief Researcher. Senior head of department, just below you. Pass the word around. I'm doing this to make clear just how valuable this servant is to me . . . and anyone who slows up its work, even indirectly, is likely to wind up in the stew. I suppose it will really be a one-servant department but you can fill it out, make it look good, by transferring its teachers, and whoever looks out for its recorder and prepares the stuff for me, a cleaner or two, maybe an assistant to keep them straight and bossed — I don't want to take up its valuable time on routine. A messen-

ger. You know. I'm sure there must be dozens of idlers around this house, eating their silly heads off, who would look well in the Department of Ancient History. Now have fetched a lesser whip and a lesser badge. Move."

In moments only Hugh was wearing a medallion not much smaller than Memtok's. Ponse took the whip of office and removed something from it. "Hugh, I'm not giving you a charged whip, you don't know how to use it. If one of your loafers need spurring, Memtok will be glad to help; he's expert. Later, when you know how, we'll see. Now. Are you satisfied?"

Hugh decided that it was not the time to ask to be allowed to see Barbara. Not with Memtok present. But he was beginning to hope that he could ask soon.

He and Memtok were dismissed together. Memtok's face showed nothing but he did not object when Hugh walked abreast of him.

XIII

Memtok was silent while he led Hugh back down to servants' country; he had much to think over. He was figuring out how to handle this startling development to his own advantage.

This savage's status had troubled the Chief Domestic from arrival. The trouble was, he didn't fit — and in Memtok's world everything had to fit. Well, now the savage had an assigned status. Their Charity had spoken and that was that. But the situation was not improved; it was

worse. The newly assigned status was so ridiculous as to make the whole below-stairs structure (the whole world, that is) a mockery.

But Memtok was shrewd and very practical. The bedrock of his philosophy could be summed up in: You can't fight City Hall. And his basic strategy in applying that philosophy was the pragmatic wisdom expressed in: When you can't beat 'em, you join 'em.

How could this savage's preposterous promotion be made to appear both necessary and proper — and a credit to the Chief Palace Domestic?

Uncle! The savage wasn't even tempered. Nor would he be. At least not yet, he amended. Later, possibly — it would make everything so much more tidy. Memtok had been amazed when Their Charity had postponed the obvious, couldn't understand it. But there it was. Memtok hardly recalled his own tempering; his emotions and drives before that time were a thin memory — of someone else. There was certainly no reason for the savage to have kicked up a fuss about it; tempering marked promotion into real living. Memtok looked forward to at least a half a century more of activity, power, gracious living, satisfaction. What stud could possibly claim that?

But there it was. How to make it look good?

A Curiosity! That's what the savage was, a Curiosity. All great lords possessed Curiosities; there had been times when visiting with his equals or near-equals in his own caste that

he had been somewhat ashamed of the fact that his own lord took no interest in owning Curiosities. There were not even Siamese twins nor a two-headed freak in the whole household, not even stuffed. Not even a flipper-armed dwarf as a clown. Their Charity was—let's admit it—too simple in his tastes for his high rank; sometimes Memtok was a little ashamed of him. Spending his time on scrolls and such when he should be upholding the pride of the house.

That lord of Hind— What was his title? Prince something or other silly. Never mind, he had that big cage where studs and sluts lived and mated with great apes, talked the same jabber—it wasn't Language—and you couldn't tell which was which save that some were hairy and some were smooth. *There* was a Curiosity worthy of a great household! That lord's chief domestic had declared by the Uncle that there were live crossbreeds from the experiment, hidden away where the priests couldn't object. Memtok doubted that but wasn't certain. It might be true, since it was a never-mentioned fact that despite all official denial crossbreeds between servants and Chosen were possible—and did happen, even though designated bedwarmers were always sterile. But these rare accidents were never allowed to see the light of day.

A Curiosity, that was the angle. An untempered who was nevertheless a servant executive. A Famous Scholar who had not even been able to speak Language when he was almost as old as Memtok. A man out

of nowhere. From the stars, perhaps. Everybody knew that there were men somewhere in the stars.

Probably a miracle involved . . . and the temples were investigating and any year now this household would be famous for its unique Curiosity. Yes. A word here, a word there, a veiled hint—

“Hugh,” Memtok said cordially. “May I call you ‘Hugh?’” “What? Why, certainly!”

“And you must call me ‘Memtok.’ Let's stroll a bit and pick out space for your departmental headquarters. You would like a sunny place, I understand? Perhaps rooms facing on the gardens? And do you want your personal quarters opening off your headquarters? Or would you rather have them elsewhere so that you can get away from it all?” The latter, Memtok had already decided. Roust out both the head gardeners and the studmaster and give the savage *both* their quarters—that would make everyone understand at once just how important this Curiosity was . . . and get both of them sore at the savage, too, which was good. He'd soon realize who was his friend. Memtok, namely, and nobody else. Besides, the gardener had been getting a little uppity, implying that his work didn't really come under the Chief Domestic. A touching up was what he needed.

Hugh said, “Oh, I don't need anything fancy. Just a convenient place to work.”

“Come, come! We want you to have every facility. Not a word, not

a word. I wish I could get away from it all sometimes. But I can't. Problems, problems, problems, every minute of the day; some people have to have all their thinking done for them. It will be a real treat to have a man of the mind among us. We'll find you cozy personal quarters, plenty of room for you and your valet. But separate." Valet? Was there a tempered young buck around, well housebroken and bid-dable, who could be depended on to report everything and keep his mouth shut? Suppose he had his sister's eldest son tempered now, would the lad shape up in time to do the job?

And would his sister see the wisdom in pushing matters and part with the boy now? Or would she squawk? He had great hopes for the boy, as she well knew. Memtok was coldly aware that he would have to go some day — though not for many years — and he was determined that his heir should succeed to his high office. But it would take planning and such planning could never start too soon. If his sister could be made to see it —

Memtok intentionally led Hugh through crowded passageways instead of by the direct and private route from Memtok's office to the Lord's apartments; servants scurried out of the way wherever they went — save one unfortunate who stumbled and got tingled for his awkwardness.

"My!" said Hugh. "This is a big building." Smaller than Gimbel's, perhaps. Or perhaps not.

"This? Wait till you see the Pal-

MEMTOK



ace itself — though no doubt it is falling to rack and ruin at the moment, under my chief deputy. Hugh, we use only a quarter of the staff here. There is no formal entertaining, just garden parties. And only a handful of guests. In the city the Chosen are always coming and going. Many is the time I am rooted out of bed in the middle of the night to open apartments for some lord and his ladies without a moment's warning. And there is where organization and planning count. To be able to open the door of a guest wing flat and know — *know*, mind you, know without even looking — that the beds are freshly perfumed, refreshments hot and cold waiting, everything spotless, music softly playing.”

“That must take real staff work.”

“Staff work!” Memtok snorted.

“I wish I could agree. What it does take is for me myself to inspect every room, every night, no matter how tired I am, before I go to bed. Then stay up long enough to see that mistakes are corrected, not depend on their lies. They're all liars, Hugh. Too much 'Happiness.' But Their Charity is generous; he never cuts down on the ration.”

“Certainly I've found the food ample. And good.”

“I didn't say food, I said 'Happiness.' I control the food, not Their Charity — and I don't believe in starving them, not even as punishment. A tingle is better. They understand that. One thing you must always remember, Hugh, is that most servants don't really have

minds. They're as thoughtless as the Chosen — not referring to Their Charity of course; I would never criticize my own patron. I mean Charity in general. You understand.” He winked and gave Hugh a dig in the ribs.

“I don't know much about the Chosen,” Hugh admitted. “I've hardly laid eyes on them and I've spoken only to Their Charity.”

“Well . . . keep your eyes open, you'll see. But it takes more than a dark skin to make brains no matter what they teach in temple. Not that I expect you to quote those sentiments nor would I admit it if you did. But — who do you think runs this household?”

“I don't think I've been here long enough to express opinions.”

“Very shrewd. You could go far if you had ambition. Let me put it this way. If Their Charity goes away, the household goes on smoothly as ever — or smoother. If I am away, or dare to fall sick — well, I shudder to think of it.” He gestured with his whip ahead of them. “They know. You won't find them scurrying that fast to get out of *his* way.”

Hugh changed the subject. “I did not understand your remark about a 'ration of Happiness.'”

“Haven't you been receiving yours?”

“I don't know what it is.”

“Oho! One bullock gets you three that it has been issued but never got as far as you. Must look into that. As to what it is, I'll show you.” Memtok led him up a ramp, through a door and out onto a balcony. Below was the servants' main dining

hall, now crowded with three queues. "This is issue time — studs at a different hour, of course. They can have it as drink, in chewing form, or to smoke. The dosage is the same but some say that smoking it produces the keenest happiness."

Memtok used words not yet in Hugh's vocabulary. Hugh told him so. Memtok said, "Never mind. It improves the appetite, steadies the nerves, promotes good health, enhances all pleasures — and wrecks ambition. The trick is to be able to take it, or leave it alone. I never took it regularly even when I was at stud; I had ambition. I take it now only on feast days or such — and only in moderation." Memtok smiled. "You'll find out tonight."

"I will?"

"Didn't I tell you? Banquet in your honor, just after the hour of evening prayer."

Hugh was hardly listening. He was searching the far queue, trying to spot Barbara.

Memtok sent the Chief Veterinarian and the Household Engineer as an escort of honor for Hugh. Hugh was mildly embarrassed at this attention from the physician and surgeon in view of the helpless posture he had been in the last time he had seen the man. But the veterinarian seemed to see nothing odd, he was most cordial.

Memtok headed the long table with Hugh on his right. Some twenty department heads were seated; there was at least one lower servant standing behind each guest and endless streams of them coming in and out

from kitchen and pantry. The banquet room was beautiful, its furnishings lavish, and the feast was sumptuous and endless; Hugh wondered what a meal of the Chosen must be like if their upper servants ate this way.

He soon found out, in part. Memtok was served twice, once from the same tasty and numerous dishes everyone shared, again from another complete menu. These dishes he sampled, using separate plates for them, but rarely did more than taste. Of the regular menu he ate sparingly and sometimes passed up dishes.

He noticed Hugh's glance. "The Lord Protector's dinner. Try any of it you like. At your own risk, of course."

"What risk?"

"Poison, naturally. When a man is over a hundred years old his heir is certain to be impatient. To say nothing of business competitors, political rivals, and subverted friends. Go ahead; the taster tries it half an hour before Their Charity — or I — touches it, and we've lost only one taster this year."

Hugh decided that his nerve was being tested; he tried a spoonful from a dish Memtok had sampled.

"Like it?" asked Memtok.

"Seems a bit greasy to me."

"Hear that, Gnou? Our new cousin is a man of taste. Greasy. And someday you'll be fried in your own grease, I fear. The truth is, Hugh, that we eat better than the Chosen do... although courses are served more elaborately and beautifully in the Grand Hall, of course, of course. But I am a gourmet who appreciates

artistry in food; Their Charity really doesn't care what it is as long as it doesn't squeal when he bites it. In fact, if the sauces are too elaborate, the spices too exotic, he'll send it back with a demand for a plain slice of roast, a hunk of plain bread, and a pitcher of milk. True, Gnou?"

"You have said it."

"And frustrating."

"Very," admitted the chef.

"So Cousin Gnou's best cooks work for us, and the Chosen struggle along with ones whose chief skill lies in getting a bird's skin back on without ruffling the feathers. And now, Cousin Hugh, if you will excuse me a moment, I must lift up to the Grand Hall and attempt by proper ceremony to make Cousin Gnou's piece de resistance seem better than it is. Hugh, don't believe what they tell you about me while I'm gone — regrettably it's all true." He exposed his teeth in what must have been a smile and left.

No one spoke for a while. Finally someone — Hugh thought it was the transportation master but he had met too many too fast — said, "Chief Researcher, what household were you with before you were adopted here, may one ask?"

"One may ask. House of Farnham. Freeholder Extraordinary."

"So. I am forced to admit that the title of your Chosen is new to me. A new title, perhaps?"

"Very old," Hugh answered. "Extremely ancient and granted directly by Uncle the Mighty, blessed be His Name. The rank is roughly that of king, but senior to it."

"Really?" said the master.

Hugh decided to drop that shovel and pick up a wider one. In his conversation earlier that day he had learned that Memtok knew a great deal about many things — but almost nothing about such trivia as history, geography, and other matters outside the household. And he had learned in his Language lessons that a servant who could read and write was rare, even among executive servants, unless the skill was necessary to his duties. Memtok had told him proudly that he had petitioned the opportunity while he was still at stud and had labored at it to the vast amusement of the other studs. "But I had my eyes on the future," he had told Hugh. "I could have had at least five more years, probably ten, at stud. But as soon as I could read, I petitioned to be tempered. So I had the last laugh — for where are they now?"

Hugh decided that the very widest shovel was needed; a big lie was always easier to sell than a little one. "The title is unbroken for over three thousand years in House Farnham. The line remained intact by direct intervention of the Uncle right through the Turmoil and the Change. Because of its Divine origin its holder always speaks to the Proprietor as an equal, 'thee' and 'thou.'" Hugh drew himself up proudly. "And I was factotum-in-chief of Lord Farnham. I did everything for him."

"A noble house indeed. But 'factotum-in-chief'? We don't use that designation here. Is it a domestic?"

"Yes and no. The chief domestic works under the factotum."

The man almost gasped. "And so," Hugh went on, "do *all* servant executives, domestic or not — business, political, agrarian, everything. The responsibility is very wearing."

"So I should imagine!"

"It is. I was growing old and my health was failing — I suffered a temporary paralysis of my lower limbs. Truthfully I never liked so much responsibility, I am a scholar by nature. So I petitioned to be adopted and here I am — scholar to a Chosen of similar scholarly tastes . . . a fitting occupation."

Hugh then realized that he had stretched one item too far; the veterinarian had looked up with interest. "This paralysis. I noted no signs."

(Damn it, doctors never cared anything about anything but their own specialty!) "It came on me suddenly one morning," Hugh said smoothly, "and I haven't been troubled by it since. But to a man of my years, a warning to be heeded."

"And what are your years? Professional interest, of course. One may ask?"

Hugh tried to make the snub as direct as some he had heard Memtok pass out. "One may *not*. I'll let you know when I need your services. But," he added, to sooth the smart a little, "It would be fair to say that I was born some years earlier than was Their Charity."

"Astonishing. From your physical condition — quite good, I thought — I would have judged you to be no more than sixty, at the most."

"Blood will tell," Hugh said smugly. "As you know best. I am not the

only one of my blood line to live a very long time."

He was saved from further evasions to cover his whoppers by the return of Memtok. Everyone stood up. Hugh didn't notice in time, so he remained seated and brazened it out. If Memtok resented it, he did not let it show. He clapped Hugh on the shoulder as he sat down. "No doubt they've told you how I eat my own young?"

"I was given the impression of a happy family presided over by a beloved uncle."

"Liars, all of them. Well, I'm through for the evening — until some emergency comes up. Their Charity knows that we are welcoming you; he commanded me not to return to the Grand Hall. So now we can relax and be merry." The Chief Domestic tapped his goblet with a spoon. "Cousins and nephews, a toast to our newest cousin. Possibly you heard what I said — the Lord Protector is pleased at our modest effort to make Cousin Hugh feel at home in Their family. But I am sure that you already guessed that . . . since one cannot miss that Cousin Hugh carries, not a least whip, but a lesser whip exactly like mine!" Memtok smiled archly. "Let us all trust that he will never need to use it."

Loud applause greeted the boss's brilliant sally. He went on solemnly, "You all know that not even my chief deputy carries such authority, much less the ordinary department head . . . and from that I am sure you will conclude that a hint from Cousin Hugh, Chief Researcher and Aide in Scholarship to Their Charity

by direct appointment — a hint from him is an order from me — so don't let me make it a direct order.

"And now the first toast! All cousins together and let Happiness flow freely... so let the junior among us give the first toast. Who claims it, who claims it?"

The party got rowdy. Early, Hugh noted that Memtok drank very sparingly. He remembered the warning and tried to emulate him. But it was impossible. The Chief Domestic could drop out of any toast, merely raise his glass, but Hugh as guest of honor felt compelled to drink them all.

Some unknown time later Memtok led him back to his newly acquired and luxurious quarters. Hugh felt drunk but not unsteady — it was just that the floor was so far away. He felt illuminated, possessed of the wisdom of the ages, floating on silvery clouds, and soaked through with angelic happiness. He still had no idea what was in Happiness drinks (he had drunk it only, not smoked or chewed it). Alcohol? Maybe. Betel nut? Mushrooms? Probably. Marijuana? It seemed certain. He must remember to write down the formula while it was fresh in his mind. This was what Grace should have had! He must — But of course, she *did* have it now. How very nice! Poor old Grace. He had never understood her — all she needed was a little Happiness.

Memtok took him into his bedroom. Sleeping across the foot of his lovely new bed was a female creature, blonde and cuddly.

Hugh looked down at her from about a hundred feet elevation and blinked. "Who *she*?"

"Your bedwarmer. Didn't I say?"
"But —"

"It's quite all right. Yes, yes, I know you are technically a stud. But you can't harm her, I assure you; this is what she is for. No danger. Not even altered. A natural freemartin, this one."

Hugh turned around to discuss it, wheeling slowly because of his great width and high sail area. But Memtok was gone. Hugh found that he could just make it to the bed. "Move over, Kitten," he muttered, and fell asleep.

He overslept but the kitten was still there; she had his breakfast waiting. He looked at her with unease — not because he had a hangover; he did not. Apparently Happiness did not exact such payments — and was thereby that much more insidious. He felt physically strong, mentally alert, and morally straight — and very hungry. But this teenager was an embarrassment.

"What's your name, kitten?"

"May it please them, this one's name is of such little importance that whatever they please to call it will be a boon."

"Cut it, cut it! Use equals speech."

"I don't really have a name, sir, not yet. Mostly they just say, 'Hey, you.'"

"All right, I'll call you 'Kitten.' Does that suit you? You look like a kitten."

She dimpled. "Yes, sir. It's ever so much nicer than 'Hey, you.'"

"All right, your name is 'Kitten'

and tell everybody that it is and don't answer to 'Hey, you.' Tell them that is official because the Chief Researcher says so and if anybody doubts it, tell them to check with the Chief Domestic. If they 'dare.'

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Kitten, Kitten, Kitten," she repeated as if memorizing it, then giggled. "Pretty!"

"Good. Is that my breakfast?"

"Yes, sir."

He ate in bed, offering her bits, and discovered that she evidently expected to be fed, or at least allowed to eat. There was enough for four; between them they ate enough for three. Then he learned that she expected to assist him in the bathroom; he put a stop to that.

Later, ready to get hard at work at his assigned duties, he said to her, "What do you do now?"

"I go back to sluts' quarters, sir, as soon as you release me. But I come back at bedtime—whatever time you say."

He was about to tell her that once was a joke and that she was charming and that he almost regretted passing out the night before but that he did not require her services on any future—He stopped. An idea had hit him. "Look. Do you know a tall slut named Barbara? Oh, this much taller than you are, at least. She was adopted something over two weeks ago and she had babies, twin boys, about a week ago."

"Oh, yes, sir. The savage."

"That's the one. Do you know where she is? Can you go to her?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She's still in lying-

in quarters. I like to go in there and look at the babies." She looked wistful. "It must be nice."

"Uh, yes. Can you take a message to her?"

Kitten looked doubtful. "I don't know. She might not understand. She's a savage, you know. She can't talk very well."

"Mmm. Damn. No, maybe it's a help. Wait a moment." His quarters had been equipped with a desk; he went to it, got one of those extraordinary pens—they didn't stain and didn't wear out and appeared to be solid plastic, no ink—found a piece of paper. Hastily he wrote a note, asking Barbara about herself and the twins, assuring her of his own welfare and his odd promotion, telling her that soon, somehow, he would see her—be patient, dear—and assuring her of his love.

He added a P.S. "The bearer of this note is 'Kitten'—if the bearer is short, blonde, busty, and about fourteen. She is my bedwarmer—and that's all she is and you've got an evil mind, wench! I'm going to hang onto her because she is a way—the *only* way, it would appear—for me to communicate with you. I'll try to write every day, I'll darn well expect a note from you every day. If you can. And if anybody does anything you don't like, tell me and I'll send you his head on a platter. I think. Things are looking up. Plenty of paper and a pen herewith. Love, love, love—H.

"PPS—go easy on 'Happiness.' It's habit-forming."

He gave the girl the note and writing materials. "You know the Chief Domestic by sight?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I've warmed his bed. Twice."

"Really? I'm amazed."

"Why, sir?"

"Well, I didn't think he would be interested."

"You mean because he's tempered? Oh, but several of the executives like to have a bedwarmer anyhow. I like it better than being sent upstairs; it's less trouble and you get lots more sleep. The Chief Domestic doesn't usually send for a bedwarmer, though. It's just that he checks us and teaches us manners before we are allowed to serve upstairs." She added, "You see, he knows all about it; he used to be a stud, you know." She looked at Hugh with innocent curiosity that seemed capable of staring through his robe. "Is it true what they say about you? May you ask?"

"Uh . . . one may not."

"I'm sorry, sir." She looked crushed. "I didn't mean any harm. But some of the sluts are such gossips." She glanced fearfully at his whip, looked away and dropped her eyes.

"Kitten."

"Yes, sir."

"See this whip?"

"Uh, *yessir!*"

"You will never, never, never feel my whip. That's a promise. Never. We're friends."

Her face lit up and she looked angelically beautiful instead of merely pretty. "Oh, thank you, sir!"

"And another thing. The only whip you need fear from now on is the Chief Domestic's. So stay out of his way. Anyone else—any 'least whip'—you tell him, or her,

that this lesser whip is what he'll get if he touches you. Tell him to check with the Chief Domestic if he doesn't think I mean it. Understand me?"

"Yes, sir." She looked smugly happy.

Too smug, Hugh decided. "But you stay out of trouble. Don't do anything to deserve a tingle—or I might turn you over to the Chief Domestic for a real tingling, the sort he is famous for. But as long as you are working for me, don't allow anyone but him to tingle you . . . and I solemnly promise that my whip will never touch you. Now git and deliver that. I'll see you tonight, say about two hours after evening prayer. Or come earlier if you are sleepy and go to bed." Must remember to have a little bed put in here for her, he reminded himself.

Kitten touched her forehead and left. Hugh went to his office and spent a happy day learning the alphabet and dictating three articles from the Britannica. He found his vocabulary utterly inadequate, so he sent for one of his teachers and used the man as a walking dictionary. Even so, he found it necessary to amplify and explain almost endlessly; concepts had changed.

Kitten went straight to the Chief Domestic's office, made her report, turned the note and writing materials over to him. Memtok was more than a little annoyed that he held in his hand what might be important evidence—and no way to read it. It did occur to him that that other one—Duke? Some such—might possibly be able to read these hen

scratches. But not likely, of course, and even under tingling there would be no certainty that Duke would translate honestly, and no way to check on him.

Asking Joe, of course, never crossed his mind. Nor did asking Their Charity's new bed-warmer. But the impasse did have one intriguing aspect. Was it possible that this savage slut actually could *read*? And perhaps even essay to write a reply?

He stuck the note in his copier, gave it back to the girl. "All right, your name is Kitten. And do exactly as he tells you about not letting yourself be tingled—and be sure to gossip about it; I want it known all over. But get this—" He gave Kitten the gentlest of reminders on her left calf; she jumped. "*This* whip is waiting for you, if you make any mistakes."

"This one hears and obeys!"

Hugh returned to his flat from the executives dining room rather late; he had sat around and gossiped. He found Kitten asleep in his bed and remembered only then that he had forgotten to ask for another bed for her.

She had clutched in her hand a folded paper. Gently he worked it out without waking her:

Darling,

How utterly wonderful to see your handwriting! Almost as good as touching your hand. (But not quite.) I knew from Joe that you were safe, hadn't heard about your promotion, didn't know for sure that you knew about the twins. First about them—They are thriving, they both look like their papa, both have his angelic disposition. Six pounds each at birth is my guess, but, although they were weighed, weights here mean nothing to me. Me? I'm a prize cow, dearest. No trouble at all—and the care I

received (and am receiving) is fantastically good. I started to labor, was given something to drink, never hurt again at all although I remember all details of having two babies—as if it had happened to somebody else. So trouble free and actually pleasant that I'd be willing to do it every day and twice on Sundays. And would, if the rewards were as nice as little Hugh and Karl Joseph.

As for the rest since then, boring except for our fine boys, but I'm learning the language as fast as I can. And somebody should tell the Borden company about me—which is good, as our scamps are greedy eaters. I'm even able to help out the girl in the next bed who is rather short on milk. Just call me Elsie.

I'll be patient. I'm not the least surprised at your new honors; I expect you'll be bossing the place in a month. I have confidence in my man. My husband. Such a beautiful word—

As for Kitten, I don't believe a word of your Boy Scout assertions, my lecherous darling; your record shows that you take instant advantage of innocent young girls. And she's awfully cute.

Seriously, dearest, I know how noble you are about such things and I didn't have an evil-minded thought. But I would not blame you if your nobility slipped a little—especially as I've picked up enough words to be aware of her odd category in this strange place. I mean, Kitten is not vulnerable and can't go set. If you did slip, I would not be jealous—not much, anyhow—but I would not want it to become a habit. Not to the exclusion of me, at least; my hormones seem to be rearranging themselves very rapidly and I'm not that noble. But I don't want you to get rid of her when she is our only way of communicating. Be nice to her; she's a nice kid. But you would anyway, you're always nice to everyone.

I will write everyday. And I will cry in my pillow and be worried to death any day I don't hear from you.

My love forever and forever,

B.

P.S. The smear on the bottom is little Hugh's right footprint.

Hugh kissed the letter, then got quickly into bed, clutching it. Kitten did not wake.

Hugh slept soundly.

Hugh found learning to read and write Language not difficult. Spelling was phonetic, with a sign for every sound. There were no silent letters and never any question about spelling or pronunciation. Accent was always on the penultima unless marked; the system was as free from traps as Esperanto. He found that he could sound out any word as soon as he had learned the 47-letter alphabet, and that, with a little thought, he could spell any word he could pronounce.

Writing and printing were alike, both cursive, and a printed page looked like one written by a skilled penman. He was not surprised to find that the writing-printing looked like Arabic and a search in the Britannica confirmed that the alphabet must have derived (with many changes) from Arabic of his time. Half a dozen letters had not changed; some others were similar although changed. But there were many new letters to cover the expansion into a system of one sound, one sign — plus letters for sounds XXth century Arabic had never used. Careful search in the Britannica convinced him that Arabic, French and Swahili were the main roots of Language, plus Uncle alone knew what else. But he could not confirm this. An unabridged dictionary of language, one with derivations, such as he had been used to for English, apparently did not exist — and his teachers seemed convinced that Language had *always* been just as they knew it. The concept of change baffled them.

No matter, it was only of intellectual interest; Hugh knew neither Arabic, French nor Swahili. He had learned a little Latin and less German in high school, and had struggled to learn Russian in his later years when it appeared that, win or lose, Russian might be useful. He was not equipped to study the roots of language, he was merely curious.

Nor did he dare spend much time on it. He wanted to please Their Charity, butter him up thoroughly so that he might, eventually, petition the boon of seeing Barbara — and that meant a flood of translated articles. Hugh consistently worked very hard at it.

The second day after his elevation, Hugh asked for Duke and Memtok promptly sent for him. Duke was rather worn down — there were lines in his face — but he spoke Language. Duke spoke it not as well as his father did and apparently had tangled with his teachers more than Hugh had; his mood seemed to oscillate between utter hopelessness and reckless rebellion, and he was limping badly on his left leg.

Memtok made no objection to transferring Duke to the Department of Ancient History. "Glad to get rid of him. He's too monstrous big for stud, yet he doesn't seem to be good for anything else. Certainly, put him to work. I can't bear to see a servant lying around, eating his head off, and doing nothing."

So Hugh took him along. Duke looked over Hugh's private apartment and said, "Christ! You certainly managed to come up smelling like a rose. How come?"

Hugh explained the situation. "So what I want you to do is to translate legal articles and related subjects — whatever you can do best. We don't have to start at 'A' and work through to 'Z' — alphabetical by our alphabet means nothing. I'm going to work up a subject index instead. But that's not your worry. You'll just sit and dictate translations into a recorder cone."

Duke shoved his fists together and looked stubborn. "You can stuff it."

"Duke, don't take that attitude. This is an opportunity."

"For you, maybe. What are you doing about Mother?"

"What can I do? I'm not allowed to see her, neither are you. You know that. But Joe assures me that she is not only comfortable and well treated, but happy."

"So he says. Or so you say he says. I want to see it myself. I damn well insist on it."

"Very well, insist on it. Go see Memtok about it. But I must warn you, I can't protect you from him."

"Rats. I know what that slimy little bastard would say — and what he would be likely to do." Duke scowled and rubbed his injured leg. "It's up to you to arrange it. You've got such an unholy drag around here, the least you can do with it is to use it to protect Mother."

"Duke, I don't have that sort of drag. I'm being pampered for the same reason a race horse is pampered . . . and I have just as little control over it as a race horse has over when and how he will race. But I can cut you in on some pampering if you cooperate. Decent quarters, immunity from mistreat-

ment, a pleasant place to work — easy work, really! But I can no more get you into women's quarters, or have Grace sent here, than I can go to the Moon. They have harem rules here, as you know."

"And you are content to sit here and be a trained seal for that ape, and neglect Mother? Count me out!"

"Duke, I won't argue. I'll assign you a room to work in and send you a volume of the Britannica each day. Then it's up to you. If you won't work, I'll try to keep Memtok from knowing it. But I rather think he has spies all over the place."

Hugh let it go at that. At first he got no help out of Duke. Hugh ignored it and pretended that Duke was working. But in time boredom worked where argument had failed; Duke could not stand to be shut up in a featureless room with nothing to do. He was not locked up but he did not venture out much because there was always the chance that he might run into Memtok, or some other whip-carrying upper servant who might want to know where he was going, what he was doing, and why. Servants were expected to look busy even if they weren't from morning prayer to evening prayer.

Duke began to produce translations and, with them, a complaint that he was short on vocabulary. Hugh made inquiries and was able to have assigned to him a tempered clerk who had worked as a stenographer in Their Charity's many legal affairs.

But he rarely saw Duke. It seemed to be the only way they could stay out of arguments. Duke's output speeded up after the first week but

fell off in quality — Duke had discovered the sovereign power of “Happiness.”

Hugh considered warning Duke about the drug, decided against it. If it kept Duke contented in captivity, who was he to deny him this anodyne? The poor quality of Duke’s translations, those Hugh had checked, did not worry Hugh; Their Charity had no way to judge — unless Joe rendered an opinion, which seemed unlikely. He himself was not trying too hard to turn out good translation. “Not good, but Wednesday” was the principle he used: Give the boss lucid copy in great quantity — and leave out the hard parts.

Besides, Hugh had found that a couple of drinks of “Happiness” at dinner topped the day off nicely. It allowed him to read Barbara’s daily letter in a warm glow, write a cheerful answer for Kitten to carry back the next morning, then to bed and sound sleep.

But Hugh did not use much of it; he was afraid of the stuff. Alcohol, he reasoned, had the advantage of being a poison. It gave fair warning by exacting hangovers if one started drinking heavily. But this stuff, as Memtok had said, exacted no such price; it merely turned anxiety, depression, worry, boredom, any unpleasant emotion, into an uncritical happy glow. Hugh wondered if it was principally methyl meprobamate? But he knew little chemistry and that little was two thousand years behind the times.

As a member of the executive servants’ mess he was not rationed;

he could have all he wanted. But Hugh noted that Memtok was not the only boss who used the stuff most abstemiously. A man did not fight his way up in the servants’ hierarchy by dulling himself with drugs — but sometimes a servant did get high up, then skidded all the way to the bottom, unable to stand prosperity in the form of an unrationed supply of “Happiness.” Hugh never learned what became of them.

Hugh could even keep a bottle in his rooms — and that solved the problem of Kitten.

Hugh had decided not to ask for a separate bed for Kitten; he did not want to rub Memtok’s nose in the fact that he was using the child only as a go-between to women’s quarters. Instead he required the girl to make up a bed each night on the comfortable divan in his living room.

Kitten was very hurt by this. By now she was sure that Hugh could make better use of a bedwarmer and she regarded it as rebuke to her in her honorable capacity as comfort and solace — and it scared her. If her master did not like her, she might lose the best job she had ever been assigned. (She did not dare report to Memtok that Hugh had no use for her as a bedwarmer; she gave full reports on every point but that.)

She wept.

She could not have done better; Hugh Farnham had been a sucker for women’s tears all his life. He took her on his knee and consoled her, and explained that he liked her very much (true), that it was a sad, sad thing but he was too old properly to appreciate a female bedmate

(a lie), and that he slept badly and was disturbed by having anyone in bed with him (a half-truth) — and that he was entirely satisfied with her and wanted her to go on working for him. “Now wipe your eyes and have a drink of this.”

He knew that she used the stuff. She chewed her ration like bubble gum — chewing gum it was in fact; the powder was added to chicle and most of the servants preferred it that way because they could go dreamily through the day, chewing it while they worked. Kitten passed her empty days chewing it and chewed the played-out cud in Hugh’s quarters after she learned he did not mind. So he did not hesitate to give her a drink of it.

Kitten went happily to bed and right to sleep that night, no longer worried that her master might get rid of her. That set a precedent. Each evening, about half an hour before Hugh wanted the lights out, he would give her a short drink of it.

For awhile he kept track of the level in the bottle. Kitten was often in his quarters when he was not, he knew how very much she enjoyed it, and there were no locks in his quarters. His rank entitled him to locks but he did not know this; Memtok had carefully not told him.

He quit bothering when he was convinced that Kitten was not snitching it. In fact, Kitten would have been terrified at the thought of stealing from her master. Her ego was barely big enough for a timid mouse; she was less than nothing and knew it and had never owned

anything, not even a name, until Hugh gave her one. Under his kindness she was beginning to be a person, but it was still the faintest flicker. Anything could blow it out. She would no more have risked stealing from him than she would have risked killing him.

Hugh, half by intent, encouraged her confidence in other ways. She was a trained bath girl, Japanese style; he gave in and let her scrub his back and handle the nozzles for his bath, dress him, and take care of his clothes. She was a masseuse, too. He sometimes found it pleasant to have his head and neck rubbed after a day spent poring over the fine print in the encyclopedia or following the lines in a scroll reader — and she was pathetically anxious to do anything to make herself necessary to him.

“Kitten, what do you do in the daytime?”

“Why, nothing mostly. Sluts of my subcaste mostly don’t have to work if they have night duty. Since I’m having night duty every night I’m allowed to stay in the sleep room until midday. So I do, even if I’m not sleepy, because the slutmaster is likely to put one to work if he catches one just wandering around. Afternoons — well, mostly I try to stay out of sight. That’s best. Safest.”

“I see. Well, you can hide out in here if you like. Or can you do that?”

Her face lit up. “If you give me a pass, I can.”

“All right, I will. You can watch television — no, it’s not on at that hour. Mmm, you don’t know how to read. Or do you?”

"Oh, no, sir! I wouldn't dare petition."

"Hmm." Hugh was aware that permission to learn to read could not be granted even by Memtok; it required Their Charity's permission and was granted only after investigation of the necessity. Furthermore, anything he did that was out of line jeopardized his thin chances of reunion with Barbara.

But — damn it, a man had to be a man! "There are plenty of scrolls in here and a reader I don't use in the daytime. Do you *want* to learn?"

"Uncle protect us!"

"Don't swear. If you *want* to learn — and can keep your pretty little mouth shut about it, I'll teach you. Don't look so damned scared! You don't have to decide now. Tell me later. Just don't talk about it. To anyone."

Kitten did not. That made two matters which she did not report to the Chief Domestic. It scared her not to report it, but she had a reflex for self-preservation and felt without knowing why that to report this would endanger her happy set-up.

Kitten became substitute family life for Hugh. She sent him to work cheerful, greeted him with a smile when he came back, talked if he wanted to talk and never spoke unless spoken to. Most evenings she curled up in front of the television — Hugh thought of it as "the television" and called it by an equivalent word in Language, and it was in fact closed-circuit television under principles not known to him, in color, in three dimensions, and without lines.

It played every evening in the servants' main hall, from evening prayer until lights-out, to a packed house, and there were outlets in the apartments of executive servants. Hugh had watched it a number of evenings, expecting to gain insight into this strange society he must learn to live in.

It took him four evenings to decide that one might as well try to study the United States he had known by watching *Gunsmoke*. It was the most blatant of melodrama, with acting as stylized as Chinese theater, and the favorite plot seemed to be that of the faithful servant who dies gloriously that his lord may live.

The only good thing Hugh could see about it was that it had no commercials — and that was an accidental virtue: Servants had no money to spend.

But it was only second in importance to Happiness in the morale of life below stairs. Kitten loved it.

She would watch it, snapping her gum monotonously, and sometimes suppressing squeals of excitement, as Hugh read — then sigh happily when the program ended, accept her little drink of Happiness with profuse thanks and a touch of her forehead, and go quietly to sleep when told to. Hugh sometimes went on reading.

He read a great deal — every evening (unless Memtok stopped in to visit) and half of every day. He begrudged the time he spent translating for Their Charity but never neglected it; it was the hopeful key to better things. He had found it necessary to do research into mod-

ern culture if he was to translate matters of ancient history intelligibly. The Summer Palace had a fair library. He was given access to it when he claimed the necessity for his work — Memtok arranged it.

But his true purpose was not translation but to try to understand what, in the name of all that was holy, had happened to *his* world to produce *this* world.

So he usually had a scroll in the reader, either in his office, or in his living room. The scroll system of printing he found admirable; it mechanized the oldest form of book into a system far more efficient than bound leaves and boards — drop the double cylinder into the reader, flip it on, and hold still. The letters raced across in front of his eyes like letters chasing their way around the *Times* building — several hundred feet at a whack, to the end of the scroll. Then the scroll flipped over and chased back the following line, which was printed upside down to the one just scanned.

The eye wasted no time flipping back and forth at a stacked column of lines. By a slight pressure the gadget speeded up to whatever the brain could accept. As Hugh got used to the phonetics he acquired a speed faster than he had ever managed in English.

But he did not find what he was looking for.

Somewhere in the past the distinctions between fact, fiction, history and religious writings seemed to have been rubbed out. Even when he got it clear that the East-West War that had bounced him and his out of their own century was now

dated 703 B.C. (Before the Great Change), he still had trouble matching the world he had known with the “history” set forth in these scrolls.

The war itself he didn't find hard to believe. He had experienced only a worm's-eye view of the first few hours but what the scrolls related matched well enough the possibilities: a missile and bomb holocaust that had escalated in its first minutes into “brilliant first strike” and “massive retaliation” and smeared cities from Peiping to Chicago, Toronto to Smolensk, fire storms that had done ten times the damage the bombs did, nerve gas and other poisons that had picked up where fire left off, plagues that were incubating when the shocked survivors were picking themselves up and beginning to hope — plagues that did not stop, diseases that were going strong when fallout was no longer deadly.

Yes, he could believe that. The bright boys had made it possible. And the dull boys they worked for had not only never managed to make the possibility unlikely but had never really believed it when the bright boys delivered what the dull boys had ordered.

Not, he reminded himself, that he had ever believed in “Better red than dead” — or believed in it now. The aggression had been one-sided as hell. He did not regret a single megaton of the “massive retaliation.”

But there it was. The scrolls said that it had killed off the whole northern world.

But how about the rest of it? It says here that the United States, at the time of the war, held its black population as slaves. Somebody had chopped out a century there. On purpose? Or was it honest confusion and almost no records? There had been, he knew, a great bookburning for two centuries during the Turmoil, and even after the Change.

Was it lost history, like Crete? Or did the priests like it better this way?

And since when were the Chinese classed as "white" and the Hindus classed as "black"? Yes, yes, purely on skin color Chinese and Japanese were as light as the average "white" of his time, and Hindus were certainly as dark as most Africans. But it was not the accepted anthropological ordering, reflected in the vulgar terms "white" and "colored" in his day.

Of course, if all they meant was skin shade—and apparently that was what they did mean—he couldn't argue. But the rest of the story maintained that the whites, with their evil ways, killed each other off, destroyed each other almost to the last man... leaving the innocent, charitable, merciful dark race—beloved by Uncle the Mighty—to inherit the Earth.

The few white survivors, spared by Uncle's mercy, had been succored and cherished as children and now again were waxing numerous under the benevolent guidance of the Chosen. So it read.

Hugh could see that a war which had smeared all of North America, all of Europe, all

of Asia except India, could kill off most whites and almost all Chinese. But what had happened to the white minority in South America, the whites of the Union of South Africa, and all the Australians and New Zealanders?

Search as he would, Hugh could not find out. All that seemed certain was that the Chosen were all equipped with built-in sunburns whereas servants were palefaces—and usually small. Hugh and his son towered over the other servants. Contrariwise, the few dozen Chosen he had seen were big men.

If the present day whites were descended from Australians, mostly—No, couldn't be. Aussies had not been runts. And those "Expeditions of Mercy"—were they slave raids? Or pogroms? Or both? Or, literally, as the scrolls said, rescue missions for survivors?

The Bookburnings might account for these discrepancies. It wasn't clear to Hugh whether all books had been put to the torch, or possibly technical books had been spared—for it was clear that the Chosen had technology superior in all the ways that he had seen to that of his time; it seemed unlikely that they had started from scratch and gone still farther.

Or was it unlikely? All the science and technology of his own time that had amounted to a damn had been less than five hundred years old, most of it less than a hundred, and the most amazing parts not more than a generation old. Could the world have gone back to the dark ages, then pulled out of it and more, in a span of two thousand years?

Of course it could! he thought.

Either way, the Koran was the only book officially exempt from the torch during many years of the Turmoil—and Hugh harbored a suspicion that the Koran had not been exempt either. He had owned an English translation of the Koran, had read it with deep interest several times.

He wished now that he had put it into the shelter, for the Koran as he now read it in "Language" did not match his memory. For one thing, he had thought that Mahomet was a redheaded Arab. This "Koran" mentioned his skin color repeatedly, as black. And he was sure that the Koran was free of racism, that was one of many things he had like about it. This "improved" version was rabid with it.

Furthermore, this Koran had a new testament with a martyred Messiah—or "prophet" might be a better word. He had taught and he had been hanged for it—religious scrolls were all marked with a gallops.

Hugh did not object to a new testament. There had been plenty of time for a new revelation and religions usually had them, as naturally as a cat has kittens. What he objected to was some revisionist (or many) working over the words of the first prophet, apparently (it seemed to him) to make them fit this new book. That wasn't fair, that was cheating.

Hugh gave up trying to sort facts from fables. Perhaps old Ponse would feel mellow enough to discuss it someday.

The social organization, as shown

by the scrolls, he found almost as puzzling. He was beginning to get a picture of a complex culture, stable, even static. High technology, few innovations, smooth, efficient—and decadent. Church and State were one — "One Tongue, One King, One People, One God." The Lord Proprietor was both sovereign and supreme priest and owned everything under Uncle's grant, and the Lords Protector such as Ponse were merely his bishops and held only fiefs. Yet there were plenty of private citizens (Chosen, of course — a white was not a person), private shopkeepers, landowners, professional men, etc. A setup for an absolute totalitarian communism, yet streaked through and through with what appeared to be private enterprise. Hell, there were even corporations if he understood what he was reading.

The most interesting point to Hugh (aside from the dismal fact that his own status was fixed by law and custom at zero) was the inheritance system. Family was everything, yet marriage was almost nothing—present but not important. Descent was always through the female line—but power was exercised by males.

This confused Hugh until it suddenly all fell into place. Ponse was Lord Protector because he was eldest son of an eldest daughter—whose oldest brother had been lord protector of this fief before Ponse. Ponse's heir therefore was his oldest sister's oldest son. Descent of title went down through mother and endlessly with secular power vested

in the oldest brother of each of these female heirs. It did not matter who Ponse's father was and it mattered even less what sons he had. None of them could inherit, no matter what. Ponse inherited from his mother's brother; his heir was his sister's son.

Hugh could see that, under this system, marriage would never be important — and bastardy might be a concept so abstract as to be unrecognized — but *family* would be more important than ever. Women (of the Chosen) could never be downgraded under it. They were more important than males even though they ruled through deputies, their brothers. And the religion recognized this; the One God, Uncle the Mighty, had an elder sister, the Eternal Mamaloi . . . so sacred that she was not prayed to and her name was never used in cursing. She was never mentioned. She was just *there*, the Eternal Female Principle that gave it all life and being.

Hugh had a feeling that he had read about this sort of matrilineal descent before, uncle to nephew through the female line, and he searched the Britannica for it. Then he was surprised to discover that the setup, or features of it, had prevailed at one time or another in every continent and most cultures.

The Great Change had been when Mamaloi had at last succeeded — working indirectly, as always — in uniting all Her children under one roof and placing their Uncle in charge of them. Then She could rest.

Hugh's comment was: "And God help the human race!"

Hugh kept expecting Their Charity to send for him. But two months passed and he did not, and Hugh was beginning to fret that he would never have a chance to ask to see Barbara. Apparently Ponse had no interest in him as long as he kept on grinding out translations. Translating the Britannica looked to Hugh like a job for several lifetimes; he resolved to stir things up, so he sent one day's batch with a letter to Their Charity.

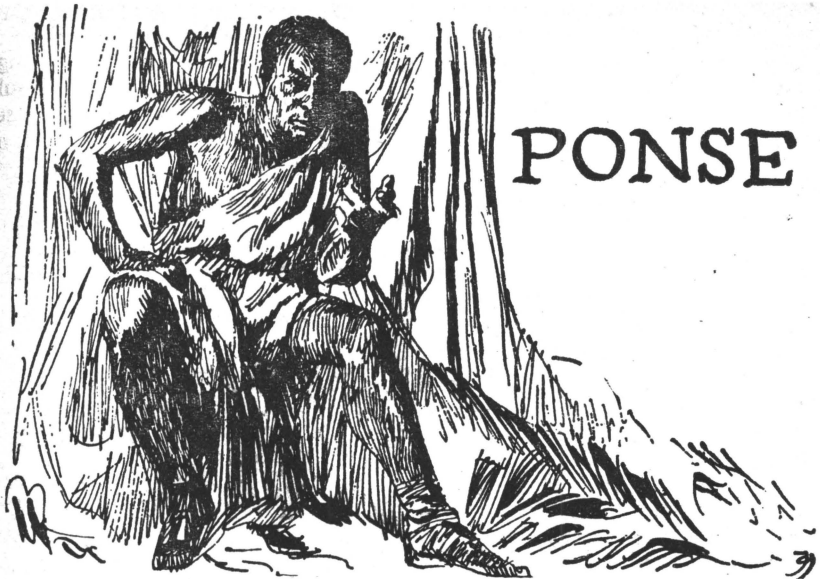
A week later the Lord Protector sent for him. Memtok came for Hugh, dancing with impatience but insisting that Hugh at least wash his armpits, rub himself with deodorant cream and put on a clean robe.

The Lord Protector did not seem to care how Hugh smelled. He let him stand several minutes while he did something else. Hugh stood in silence . . . although Grace was present. She was lounging on a divan, playing with cats and chewing gum. She glanced at Hugh, then ignored him, save that her face took on a secret smile that Hugh knew too well — he called it "canary that ate the cat."

Dr. - Livingstone - I - Presume greeted Hugh, jumping down from the divan, coming over and rubbing against his ankles. Hugh knew that he should ignore it, wait for the lord to recognize his presence — but this cat had been his friend a long time; he could not snub it. He bent down and stroked the cat.

The skies did not split, Their Charity ignored the breach.

Presently the Lord Protector said,



PONSE

"Yes, boy, come here. Now what's this about making money from your translations? What, in Uncle ever gave you the notion I needed money?"

Hugh had got the notion from Memtok. The Chief Domestic had growled about how difficult it was to run things, with pennypinching from on high getting worse every year.

"May it please Their Charity, this one's opinions are of no value, it is true, but —"

"Cut the flowery talk, damn you!"

"Ponse, I haven't any idea how things are here. But back where — when — I came from there never was a man so rich but what he needed more money. Usually, the richer he was, the more he needed."

The lord grinned ruefully. "Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme

chose.' Hugh, you aren't just sniffing Happiness. Things are the same now. Well? What's your idea? Spit it out."

"It seems to me that there are things in your encyclopedia which might be turned to a profit. Processes and other thing that have been lost in the last two thousand years — but might be worth money now."

"All right, do it. The stuff you send up is satisfactory, what I've had time to read. But some of it is trivial. 'Smith, John, born and died — a politician who did nothing much and did that little poorly.' Know what I mean?"

"I think so, Ponse."

"All right, skip that garbage and dig me up four or five juicy ideas I can cash in on."

Hugh hesitated. Ponse said, "Well? Didn't you understand?"

"I think I need help. You see, I don't know anything, anything at all, really, except what goes on below stairs. I thought Joe might help."

"How?"

"I understand that he has traveled some with you, seen things. And he reads English. He is more likely to be able to pick out subjects that merit study. He could pick the articles, I will translate them, and you can judge whether or not there is anything to exploit. I can synopsise them, too, so that you needn't waste your time wading through details if the subject doesn't merit it."

"Good idea. I'm sure Joe will be happy to help. All right, send up the encyclopedia. All."

Hugh was dismissed so abruptly that he had no chance to mention Barbara. But, he reflected, he could not have risked it with Grace present.

He considered digging out Duke, telling him that his mother was fat and happy — both literally — but decided against it. He wasn't sure how pleased Duke would be with a truthful report, and wanted no argument. They didn't see eye to eye and that was that.

XV

Joe sent back down a volume almost every day for many days, with pages marked and articles checked; Hugh slaved very hard to try to keep up with him, and to make really useful translations. After two weeks of this Hugh was again sent for.

He expected a conference over some business idea. What he found was Ponse, Joe, and a Chosen he had never seen. Hugh instantly prepared to speak protocol mode, rising.

The Lord Protector said. "Come here, Hugh. Cut the carus. And don't start any of that tiresome formality, this is all family. Private."

Hugh hesitantly approached. The other Chosen, a big dark man with a permanent scowl, didn't seem pleased at the idea. He was carrying his quirt and twitched it. But Joe looked up and smiled. "I've been teaching them contract, Hugh, and our usual fourth had to be away. I've been telling Ponse that you are the best player any where or when. So don't let me down."

"I'll try not to." Hugh recognized one deck of cards, they had once been his. The other deck appeared to be handpainted on plastic and were quite beautiful. The table was the right height and size, but was not from the shelter; fabulous hand craftsmanship had gone into it.

The cut made Hugh partner of the strange Chosen. Hugh tried not show how nervous it made him, especially as his partner clearly did not like it. But the Chosen grunted and accepted it.

His partner's contract at three spades — by a fluke distribution they made four. His partner growled, "Boy, you underbid, you wasted game. Don't let it happen again."

Hugh kept quiet and dealt.

On the next hand Joe and Ponse made five clubs. Hugh's partner was furious — at Hugh. "If you had led

diamonds, we would have set them! And you washed out our leg. I warned you. Now I'm—"

"Mrika!" Ponse said sharply. "This is contract. Play it as such. And put that tickler out of reach. The servant played correctly."

"It did not! And I'm damned if I care for the idea of letting it in the game anyhow. I can smell the rank, sharp stink of a buck servant no matter how much it's scrubbed. And I don't think this one is scrubbed at all."

Hugh felt sweat breaking out in his armpits and flinched. But Ponse said evenly, "Very well. we excuse you. You may leave."

"That suits me!" The Chosen stood up. "Just one thing before I go. If you don't quit stalling, Their Mercy will let the Northwestern Protectorate—"

"Are you planning to put up the money?" Their Charity said sharply.

"Me? It's a Family matter. Not but what I wouldn't jump at the chance if I could beg, borrow, or scrape up the bullocks. Forty million hectares and more, and most of it in prime timber—of course I would! But I hardly have one bullocks to jingle against another—and you know why."

"Certainly we know why. You gamble."

"Oh, come now! A businessman has to take chances. You can't call it gambling when—"

"We do call it gambling. We do not object to gambling but we have a vast distaste for losing. If you must lose, you will do it with your own bullocks."

"But this isn't gambling, it's a sure

thing—as well as getting us in solid with Their Mercy. The Family—"

"We will decide what is good for the Family. For a while longer at least. Your turn will come soon enough. In the meantime we are as anxious to please the Lord Proprietor as you are. But not with bullocks the Family doesn't have in the treasury."

"You could borrow it. The interest would only come to—"

"You wanted to leave, Mrika. We note that you have left." Ponse picked up cards and began to shuffle them.

The younger Chosen snorted and left.

Ponse laid out a solitaire game, started to play. Presently he said to Joe, "Sometimes that young man gets me so annoyed that I would happily change my will."

Joe looked puzzled. "I thought you could not disinherit him?"

"Oh, no, no!" Their Charity looked shocked. "Not even a peasant can do that. Where would we be if there were no stability here on Earth? I wouldn't dream of it, even if the law permitted it; he's my heir. I was just thinking of the servants."

Joe said, "I don't follow you."

"Why you know—No, perhaps you don't. I keep forgetting that you didn't grow up among us. My will disposes of anything personally mine. Not much I grant you—jewelry, scrolls, such. Value probably less than a million. Trivia. Except household servants. Just the household, I'm not talking about servants in mines or on ranches, or in our shipping lines. It's customary to list

all household servants in a will—otherwise they escort their uncle.” He grinned. “It would be a good joke on Mrika if he suddenly learned that he was going to have to find the money somewhere to adopt fifteen hundred, two thousand servants—or shut up the house and live in a tent. I can just see that. Why, I doubt if he knows how to put on his own boots. Hugh, if you tell me to put the black lady on the red lord, I’ll tingle you, I promise. I’m not in a good mood.”

Hugh said hastily, “Did you miss a play? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Then why were you staring at the cards?” Hugh had indeed been staring at the game, trying his best to be invisible. He had been made very nervous by witnessing a quarrel between Ponse and his nephew. He hoped never to see the younger Chosen again—the man might remember him. But he had missed not a word, he found it extremely interesting.

Ponse went on, “Which would you prefer, Hugh? To escort me to Heaven? Or stay here and serve Mrika? Don’t answer too quickly. If you stay here, I venture you may be eating your own toes to stay your hunger before I’m gone a year... whereas Heaven is a very nice place, so the Good Scroll tells us.”

“It’s a hard choice.”

“Well, you don’t have to make it, nor will you know. A servant should never know, it keeps him on his toes. That scoundrel Memtok keeps praying me for the honor of being in my escort. If I thought he was sincere, I would dismiss him for incompetence. But he isn’t.” Ponse swept the

cards together, having reached a block. “Damn that lad! He’s poor company but I had my liver set on a few good, hard rubbers. Joe, we’ve got to teach more people to play contract. Being left without a fourth is annoying.”

“Certainly,” agreed Joe. “Right now?”

“No, no. I want to play, damn it, not watch some beginner bumble through it. I’m growing addicted to it. Takes a man’s worries off his mind.”

Hugh was hit by inspiration. “Ponse, if you don’t mind having another servant in the game...”

Joe brightened up. “Why, of course! He—”

“Barbara,” Hugh cut in fast, before Joe could mention Duke.

Joe blinked. Then he smoothly picked where he had left off. “He—Hugh, I mean—was about to mention a servant named Barbara. Good bridge player.”

“Well! You’ve been teaching this game below stairs, Hugh?” Ponse added, “‘Barbara’? A name I don’t recognize. Not one of the upper servants, I’m sure.”

“You remember her,” Joe said. “She was with us when you picked us up. The tall one.”

“Oh, yes. Bigging, it was. But, Joe, are you telling me that a *slut* can play this game?”

“She’s a top player,” Joe assured him. “Plays better than I do. Heavens, Ponse, she can play rings around you. Isn’t that right, Hugh?”

“Barbara is an excellent player.”

“This I must see to believe.”

A few minutes later Barbara,

freshly bathed and scared, was fetched in. She glanced at Hugh, looked startled silly, opened her mouth, closed it, and stood mute.

Ponse came up to her. "So this is the slut who is supposed to be able to play contract. Stop trembling, little one; nobody's going to eat you." In a few bluff words, confirmed by Joe, he convinced her that she was there to play bridge and that she was expected to relax and be informal—no fancy talk. "Just behave as if you were downstairs, having a good time with other servants. Hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just one thing." He tapped her on her chest. "When you're my partner, I shan't be angry if you make a mistake or two. After all, you're only a slut and it's surprising that you can play an intellectual game at all. But—" He paused. "But... when you are playing against me, if you fail to fight for every trick, if I even suspect that you are trying to let me win, I guarantee you'll tingle when you leave. Understand me?"

"That's right," agreed Joe. "Their Charity expects it. You just play by the book, and play your best."

"Play by the book," Ponse repeated. "I've never seen this book Joe talks about; but that's the way Joe says he has taught me to play. So do it. All right, let's cut the cards."

Hugh hardly listened, he was drinking in the sight of Barbara. She looked well and healthy although it was startling to see her slender again—or almost slender, he corrected; she was still largish in the fanny and certainly in the

bust. She had lost most of her tan and was dressed in the shapeless short robe that all female servants wore below stairs, but he was delighted to see that she had not had her hair removed. It was close cropped but it could grow back.

He noticed that his own appearance seemed to startle her, realized why. He said, smiling, "Yes, I comb my hair with a washrag now, Barbie. No matter, I didn't have enough left to be more than a nuisance. Now that I'm used to being hairless, I like it."

"You look distinguished, Hugh."

"He's ugly as sin," said Ponse. "But are we chatting? Or playing bridge? Your bid, Barba."

They played bridge for hours. As it progressed, Barbara seemed to relax and enjoy it. She smiled a great deal, usually at Hugh, but also at Joe and even at Their Charity. She played by the book and Ponse never found fault with her. Hugh decided that their host was a good run-of-the-mill player, not yet perfect in his play—but he was smart, always remembered what cards had been played, and usually bid quite accurately, by the book. Hugh found him a satisfactory partner and an adequately strong opponent; it was a good game.

But once, with Barbara as Ponse's partner and contract in her hand, Hugh saw as soon as Ponse laid down the dummy that Ponse had overbid in his answer by at least one trick. So he contrived to play so that he lost one sure trick, thereby letting Barbara make contract, game, and rubber.

It got him a glance with no expression from Barbara and Joe gave him a look that had a suggestion of a twinkle in it, but Joe kept his mouth shut. Ponse did not notice. He gave a bass roar of satisfaction, reached across and patted Barbara's head. "Wonderful, wonderful! Little one, you really *can* play contract. Why, I doubt if I could have made that one myself."

Nor did Ponse complain when, on the next rubber, Barbara and Hugh gave him and Joe a trouncing. Hugh decided that Ponse had the inborn honesty sometimes called "sportsmanship"—plus quite a good head for cards.

One of the little deaf-mutes trotted in, knelt, and served Their Charity a tumbler of something cold, then another to Joe. Ponse took a long swig, wiped his mouth and said, "Ah, that hits the spot!"

Joe made a quiet, almost whispered suggestion to him. Ponse looked startled and said, "Oh, certainly. Why not?"

So Hugh and Barbara were served, too. Hugh was pleased to discover that it was just cold apple juice; he wasn't sure of his ability to play tight bridge had it been Happiness."

During this rubber Hugh noticed that Barbara was squirming a little and seemed to have trouble in concentrating. When the hand ended he said quietly, "Trouble, hon?"

She glanced at Ponse and whispered quickly, "Some. I was about to feed the boys when I was sent for."

"Oh." Hugh turned to his host. "Ponse, Barbara needs to stop."

Ponse looked up from shuffling. "Plumbing call! One of the maids can show it, I suppose. They must go somewhere."

"Not that. Well, maybe that, too. But what I meant was, Barbara has twins."

"Well? Sluts usually have twins, they have two breasts. What do you expect?"

"That's the point, she's nursing them and she's hours past time for it. She has to leave."

Ponse looked annoyed, hesitated, then said, "Oh, garbage. Its milk won't cake from so short a delay. Here, cut the cards."

Hugh did not touch them. Ponse said, "Didn't you hear me?"

Hugh stood up. His heart was beating very fast and he felt a shudder of fear. "Ponse, Barbara hurts. She needs to nurse her twins right now. I may not be able to force you to let her—but if you think I'll play cards with you while you don't let her, you're crazy."

For long moments the big man simply stared, without expression. Then suddenly he grinned. "Hugh I like you, I really do. You did something like this once before, didn't you? The slut is your sister, I suppose."

"No."

"Then you are the one who is crazy. Do you know how close you came to being cold meat?"

"I can guess."

"I doubt it, you don't look worried. But I like spunk, even in a servant. Very well, I'll have its brats fetched. They can be fed while we play."

The twins were fetched and Hugh saw at once that they were the most perfect, handsomest, healthiest and loveliest boy babies that had ever been born; he told Barbara so. But he did not immediately get a chance to touch them as Ponse took one in each arm, laughed at them, blew in their faces and jiggled them. "Fine boys!" he roared. "Fine boys, Barba! Holy little terrors, I'll bet. Go on, swing that fist, kid! Sock Uncle in the nose again. What do you call them, Barba? Do they have names?"

"This one is Hugh—"

"Eh? Does Hugh have something to do with them? Or thinks he has, perhaps?"

"He's their father."

"Well, well! Hugh, you may be ugly, but you have other qualities. If Barba knows what she's talking about. And what's this one's name?"

"That one is little Joe. Karl Joseph."

Ponse lifted an eyebrow at Joe. "So you have sluts naming brats for you, eh, Joe? I'll have to watch you, you're a sly one. What did you give Barba?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Birthing present, you idiot. Nothing? Give her that ring you're wearing. So many brats in this house named after me that I have to order trinkets by the basket load; they all know it obliges me to make them a present. Hugh here is lucky, he has nothing to give. Hey, Hughie has teeth already."

Hugh got to hold them for a moment while they settled down for combined bridge and nursing. Barbara took them one at a time and

played cards with her free hand. The little maids fussed over the one not nursing and, in due time, took them away. In spite of the handicap Barbara managed to play well, even brilliantly; the long session ended with Ponse top scorer, Barbara close behind, and Joe and Hugh tied for anchor position. Hugh had cheated very little to make it come out that way; the cards had favored Ponse and Barbara when they were partners; they had made two small slams, the only slams of the session.

Ponse was feeling very jovial about it. "Barba, come here, little one. You tell the slutmaster that I said to find a wet nurse for your brats and that I want the vet to dry you up as soon as possible, hear me? I want you available as my bridge partner. Or opponent—you give a man a tough fight."

"Yes, sir. May one speak?"

"One may."

"I would rather nurse them myself. They're all I have."

"Well—" He shrugged. "This seems to be my day for balky servants. I'm afraid you are both still savages at heart. A tingling wouldn't do you any harm, slut. All right, but you'll have to play one-handed sometimes; I won't have brats stopping the game." He grinned. "Besides, I'd like to see the little rascals occasionally, especially that one that bites. You may go. All."

Barbara was dismissed so suddenly that Hugh barely had time to exchange smiles with her. He had hoped to walk down with her, steal a little private visit. But His Charity did not dismiss him, so

he stayed — with a warm glow in his heart; it had been the happiest time he had had in a long time.

Ponse discussed the articles he had been translating, why none of them offered practical new business ventures. "But don't fret about it, Hugh. Keep plugging away and we'll strike ore yet." He turned the talk to other matters, still kept Hugh there. Hugh found him a knowledgeable conversationalist, interested in everything, as willing to listen as he was to talk. He seemed to Hugh the epitome of the perfect decadent gentleman — urbane, cosmopolitan, disillusioned and cynical, a dilettant in all arts and sciences, neither merciful nor cruel, unimpressed by his own rank, and not racist. At least he treated Hugh as an intellectual equal in private conversation.

While they were talking, the little maids came in and served dinner to Ponse and to Joe, at the card table where they had remained. Nothing was offered to Hugh, nor did he expect it — nor want it, as he could always have meals served in his rooms if he was not on time in the executive servants' dining room and he had long since decided, from several samplings, that Memtok was right: The upper servants ate better than the master.

But when Ponse had finished, he shoved his dishes toward Hugh. "Eat."

Hugh hesitated a split second; he did not need to be told that he was being honored — for a servant. There was plenty of food, at least three times as much left as Ponse had eaten. Hugh could

not recall that he had ever in his life eaten someone's leavings, and certainly not with a used spoon. But he dug in.

As usual, Their Charity's menu did not especially please Hugh — somewhat greasy and he had no great liking for pork. Pork was hardly ever served below stairs but was often part of the menus Memtok sampled, Hugh had noticed. It surprised him, as the revised Koran these people used still contained the dietary laws and the Chosen did follow some of the original Muslim customs. They practiced circumcision, did not use alcohol other than a thin beer, and observed Ramadan at least nominally and still called it that. Mahomet would have been shocked by the accretions and revisions to his straightforward monotheistic teaching but nevertheless he would have recognized some of the details.

But the bread was good, the fruits were superb, and so were the ices and many other things; it wasn't necessary to dine solely on the roast. Hugh kept intact his record for enjoying the inevitable.

Ponse was interested in what the climate had been in this region in Hugh's time. "Joe tells me you sometimes had freezing temperatures. Even snow."

"Oh, yes, both, every winter."

"Fantastic. How cold did it get?"

Hugh had to stop to think. He had not yet had occasion to learn how these people marked temperatures. "If you consider the range from freezing of water to its boiling, it was not especially unusual for

it to get one third of that range lower than freezing."

Ponse looked surprised. "Are you sure? We call that range, freezing to boiling, one hundred. Are you telling me that it sometimes got as much as thirty-three degrees below freezing?"

Hugh noted with interest that the centigrade scale had survived two millenia—but no reason why it should not; they used the decimal system in arithmetic and in their money. He had to do a conversion in his head. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Nearly cold enough to freeze mercury, and often cold enough for that, up in those mountains." Hugh pointed out a view window.

"Cold enough," Joe agreed, "to freeze your teeth! Only thing that ever made me long for Mississippi."

"Where," asked Ponse, "is Mississippi?"

"It's not," Joe told him. "It's under water now. And good riddance."

This led to discussion of why the climate had changed and Their Charity sent for the last volume of the Britannica, containing ancient maps, and for modern maps. They poured over them together. Where the Mississippi Valley had been, the Gulf now reached far north. It was no longer a gulf but part of the Atlantic as Florida and Yucatan were missing and Cuba was a few small islands. California had a central sea and most of northern Canada was gone.

Similar shrinkages had taken place elsewhere. The Scandinavian Peninsula was now a great island.

The British Isles were several small islands. Part of the Sahara was under water. What had been lowlands anywhere were missing—Holland, Belgium, northern Germany could not be found. Nor Denmark—the Baltic was a gulf of the Atlantic.

Hugh looked at it with odd sorrow and had never felt so homesick. He had known it was so, from reading; this was the first map he had seen of it.

"The question," said Ponse. "is whether the melting of the ice was triggered by the explosions and dust of the East-West War, or was it a natural change that was, at most, simply speeded up a little by artificial events? Some of my scientists say one thing, some the other."

"What do you think?" asked Hugh.

The lord shrugged. "I'm not foolish enough to hold an opinion when I have insufficient data; I'll leave that folly to scientists. I'm simply glad that Uncle saw fit to let me live in an age in which I can go outdoors without freezing my feet. I visited the South Pole once—I have some mines there. Frost on the ground. Dreadful. The place for ice is in a drink."

Ponse went to the view window and stood looking out at the silhouette of mountains against darkening sky. "However, if it got that cold up there now, we would root them out in a hurry. Eh, Joe?"

"They would come back with their tails between their legs," Joe agreed.

Hugh looked puzzled. "Ponse means," Joe explained, "the runners hiding up in the mountains. What

they thought you were when we were found."

"Runners and a few aborigines," Ponse supplemented. "Savages. Poor creatures who have never been rescued by civilization. It's very hard to save them, Hugh. They don't stand around in the open and wait to be picked up the way you did. They're as crafty as wolves. Caves and things, and the merest shadow in the sky and they freeze and you can't see them—and they are very destructive of game. Of course we could smoke them out any number of ways. But that would kill off the game, can't have that. Hugh, you've lived out there in the open; you must have acquired some feel for it. How would you go about rescuing those critters? Without killing the game."

Mr. Hugh Farnham hesitated only long enough to phrase his reply. "Their Charity knows that this one is a servant. This one's ears must be at fault in thinking that it heard its humble self called on to see the problem as it might appear to the Chosen."

"Why, damn your impudence for dodging around it with fancy talk. Hugh, I want your opinion."

"You got my opinion, Ponse. I'm a servant. I know it, you know it. My sympathies are with the run-aways. And the savages. I didn't exactly come here willingly, you know. I was dragged."

"Surely you aren't resenting that now? Of course you were captured, even Joe was. But there was language difficulty. Now you've seen the difference. You know."

"Yes. I know," Hugh replied.

"Then you certainly know how much your condition has improved. Don't you sleep in a better bed now? Aren't you eating better? Uncle! When we picked you up, you were half starved and infested with vermin. You were barely staying alive with the hardest sort of work, I could see. I'm not blind, I'm not stupid. There isn't a member of my Family down to the lowest and dullest cleaner that works half as hard as you had to, or sleeps in as poor a bed—and in a stinking little sty; I could hardly bear the stench before we fumigated it. And as for the food, if that is the word, any servant in this house would turn up his nose at what you ate. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I prefer freedom."

"Freedom!" Their Charity snorted. "A concept without a referent, like 'ghosts.' Meaningless. Hugh, you should study semantics. Modern semantics, I mean; I doubt if they had such a science in your day, really. We are all free—to walk our appointed paths. Just as a stone is free to fall when you toss it into the air. No one is free in the purely abstract meaning you give the word. Do you think I am free? Free to change places with you, say? Would I if I could? You bet I would! You have no concept of the worries I have, the work I do. Sometimes I lie awake half the night, worrying about which way to turn next—and you won't find that in servants' hall. They're happy, they have no worries. But I have to carry my burden as best I can."

Hugh looked stubborn. Ponse came over and put his arm around Hugh's shoulders. "Come, let's sit down and talk this over, judicially, not emotionally—two civilized beings. I'm not one of those superstitious persons who thinks a man can't think because his skin is pale. Surely you know that. Haven't I respected your intellect?"

"Well . . . yes."

"That's better. But I happen to know more about this than you do. Let me explain some things—Joe has seen them—and you can ask questions if you need to, and we'll arrive at a rational understanding. First—Joe, you've seen the Chosen here and there who are what our friend Hugh would, no doubt describe as 'free.' Tell him."

Joe snorted. "Hugh, you should see. You would be darn glad to be privileged to live in Ponse's household. There is just one phrase I can think of to describe them. Po' black trash. Like the white trash not knowing where their next meal is coming from."

"I follow you."

"I think I do, too," agreed Their Charity. "A pungent phrase. I look forward to the day when every man will have servants. But it can't come overnight, they'll have to lift themselves up. But a day when all the Chosen will be served—and all servants as well cared for as I know they are in my Family. That's my ideal. In the meantime I do the best I can. I look after their welfare from birth until they're called Home by Uncle. They have nothing to fear, utter security—which they wouldn't have out in those

mountains as I'm sure you know better than I. They are happy, they are never overworked—which I am—and they have plenty of fun, which is more than I can say! This bridge game today—the first real fun I've had in a month. And they are never punished, only just enough to remind them when they err. Have to do that, you've seen how stupid most of them are. Not that I am inferring that you are. No, I tell you honestly that I think you are smart enough to take care of servants yourself, despite your skin. I'm speaking of the ordinary run of them. Honestly, Hugh, do you think they could possibly take care of them as well as I look out for them?"

"Probably not." Hugh was thinking that he had heard all this before, only a few nights ago, and in almost the same words—from Memtok. With the slight difference that Ponse did seem to be honestly fond of his servants and earnest about their welfare—whereas the Chief Domestic had been openly contemptuous of them, even more strongly so than his barely veiled contempt for the Chosen. "No, they couldn't, most of them."

"Ah! You agree with me."

"No."

Ponse looked pained. "Hugh, how can we have a rational discussion if you say one thing and contradict it in the next breath?"

"I didn't contradict myself. I agreed that you took fine care of the welfare of your servants. But I did not agree that I prefer it to freedom. I don't."

"But tell me *why*, Hugh? Give me a concrete reason, not a philosophical abstraction. If you're not happy, I want to know why. So that I can correct it."

"I can give you one good reason. I'm not allowed to live with my wife and children."

"Eh?"

"Barbara. And the twins."

"Oh. But is that really important to you? You have a bedwarmer. I know you have; Memtok told me, and I congratulated him on having used initiative in an odd situation. Not much gets past that sly old fox. You have one and she is sure to be more expert at her specialty than the ordinary run of breeding slut. As for the brats, no reason why you can't see them all you wish — just order them fetched to you whenever you like. But who wants to *live* with brats? Or with a wife? I don't live with my wife and children, you can bet on that. I see them on appropriate occasions. But who would want to live with them?"

"I would."

"Well — Uncle! I want you to be happy. It can be arranged."

"*It can?*"

"Certainly. If you hadn't put up such a fuss over being tempered, you could have had them with you all along — though I confess I don't see why. Do you want to see the vet?"

"Uh. . . no."

"Well, there's always the other choice. I'll have the slut spayed."

"*NO.*"

Ponse sighed. "You're a hard one to please. Be practical, Hugh; I can't change a scientific breeding

system developed over centuries to pamper one servant. Do you know how many servants are in this family? Here and at the Palace? Somewhere around eighteen hundred, I believe. Do you know what would happen if I allowed unrestricted breeding? In ten years there would be twice that number. Do you know what would happen next? They'd starve, that's what would happen. I can't support them in unlimited breeding. Would if I could, but it's wishing for the Moon. Worse, for we can go to the Moon any time it's worth while but nobody yet has been able to cope with the way servants will breed if left to their own devices. So which is better? To control the breeding? Or let them starve?"

Their Charity sighed and went on, "I wish you were a head shorter, we could work something out. You've been in studs' quarters?"

"I visited it once, with Memtok," said Hugh.

"You noticed the door? You had to stoop; Memtok walked straight in. He used to be a stud. The doors are that height in every studs' barracks in the world — and no servant is chosen if he can't walk in without stooping. And the slut in this case is too tall, too. A wise law, Hugh, but I didn't make it; it was handed down by Their Mercy of that time, a long time ago. If they are allowed to breed too tall they start needing to be tingled too often and that's not good, either for master or servant. No, Hugh. Anything within reason. But don't ask for the impossible." He moved from the di-

van where he had been sitting tete-a-tete with Hugh, and sat down at the card table, picked up one deck. "So we'll say no more about it. Do you know how to play double solitaire?"

"Yes."

"Then come see if you can beat me a game and let's be cheerful. A man gets upset when his efforts aren't appreciated."

Hugh shut up and sat down with him. He was thinking glumly that Ponse was not a villain, not at all. He was exactly like the members of every other ruling class in history: honestly convinced of his own benevolence and hurt if it was challenged.

They played a game. Hugh lost, his mind was not on it. They started to lay out another. Their Charity remarked, "I must have more cards painted. These are getting worn and sticky."

Hugh said, "Couldn't it be done more quickly, using a printer such as we use for scrolls?"

"Eh? I suppose so. Hadn't thought about it." The big man rubbed one of the XXth century cards. "This doesn't seem much like printing. Are they printed? Were they, I mean?"

"Oh, yes. Many thousands at a time. Millions, perhaps I should say, figuring the enormous numbers that used to be sold."

"Really? I wouldn't have thought that bridge, with its demand on the intellect, would have attracted many people."

Hugh suddenly put down his cards. "Ponse? You wanted a way to make money."

"Certainly."

"You're holding it in your hand. Brand new. In this age. Joe! Come here and let's talk about this. How many decks of playing cards were sold each year in the United States?"

"Gosh, Hugh, I don't know. Millions, maybe."

"So I would say. And at a gross profit of about 90% on each deck, too. Mmm. Ponse, bridge and solitaire aren't the only games that can be played with these cards. The possibilities are unlimited. There are simple games, simple as solitaire but played by two or three or more players. There are games a dozen people can play at once. There are hard games and easy games, there is even a form of bridge — 'duplicate,' it's called — which is harder than contract, for people who like to work hard when they play Ponse, every family — little family, I mean — in the United States kept one or two or even dozens of decks of these cards on hand; it was a rare home that didn't own a single deck. I couldn't guess how many were sold. Probably at least a hundred million decks in use in the United States alone. And you've got a virgin market. All it needs is to get people interested in playing with cards."

"Ponse, Hugh is right." Joe said solemnly. "The possibilities are unlimited."

Ponse pursed up his lips. "If we sold them for a bullock a deck, let us say . . . mmm —"

"Too much," Joe objected. "You would kill your market before you got started."

Hugh said, "Joe, what's this for-

mula for setting a price to maximize profits rather than sales?"

"Works only if you have a monopoly."

"Well? How is that done here? Patents and copyrights and such? I haven't read anything about it."

Joe looked troubled. "Hugh, the Chosen don't use such a system. You see, they don't need to. Everything is pretty well worked out, things don't change much."

Hugh said, "That's bad. Two weeks after we start the market will be flooded with cheap imitations."

Ponse said, "What are you two jabbering about? Speak Language." Hugh's first question had necessarily been in English; he knew no other words for what he wanted to ask. Joe had answered in English.

Joe said, "Sorry, Ponse," and explained the ideas behind patent rights, copyright, and monopoly.

Ponse relaxed. "Oh, that's simple. When a man gets an inspiration from Heaven, the Lord Proprietor recognizes it and forbids anyone else to use it without his let. Doesn't happen often, I recall only two cases in my lifetime. But Mighty Uncle has been known to smile."

Hugh was not surprised to learn how scarce invention was. It was a static culture at best, with most of what they called "science" in the hands of tempered slaves. And if patenting a new idea was that difficult, there would be little incentive to invent. "Would you say that this idea is an inspiration from Heaven?"

Ponse thought about it. "A true inspiration is whatever. Their Mercy, in Their wisdom, recognizes as an

inspirations." Suddenly he grinned. "In my opinion, anything that will stack bullocks in the Family coffers is certainly an inspiration. The problem is to make the Proprietor see it. But there are ways, there are ways. That's my problem, not yours. Keep talking."

Joe said, "Hugh, the protection should extend not only over playing cards but over the games themselves."

"Of course. If they don't buy Their Charity's cards, they must not play his games. Hard to stop, since anybody can fake up a deck of cards, paint them on blank cards. But the monopoly should make it illegal."

"And not just cards like these, but any sort of playing cards. Shucks, you could play bridge with cards just with numbers on them."

"Yes." Hugh pondered. "Joe, there was a Scrabble set in the shelter."

"It's still around. Ponse's scientists saved everything. Hugh, I see what you're driving at, but nobody here could learn Scrabble. You have to know English."

"Yes, yes! But what's to keep us from inventing Scrabble all over again—in *Language*? Let me set one of my staff to making a frequency count of the alphabet as it appears in *Language* and I'll have a set of Scrabble, board and tiles and rules, suited to *Language*, the following day."

"What in the name of Uncle is Scrabble?"

"It's a game, Ponse. Quite a good one, too. But the point is that it's a game that we can charge more for than we can for a deck of cards."

"And that's not all," said Hugh. "Parcheesi, Monopoly, backgammon, Old Maid for kids — call it something else — dominoes, anagrams, poker chips and racks, jigsaw puzzles — have you seen any?"

"No."

"Good for young and old, and all degrees of difficulty. Tinker Toy. The idea is to think big, this isn't just playing cards. Dice. Lots of games with dice. Joe, are there casinos here?"

"Of sorts. There are places to gamble and lots of private gambling."

"Roulette wheels?"

"I don't believe so."

"It gets too big to think about. Ponse, you are going to have to sit up all night every night, just counting your money."

"Servants for such chores. I wish I knew what you two are talking about. May one ask?"

"Sorry, sir. Joe and I were talking about ancient games... and not just games but all sorts of recreations that we used to have and have now been lost. At least I think they have been. Joe?"

"The only one I've seen that still looks familiar is chess. It's practically the same."

"Chess would hold up if anything would. Ponces the point is that every one of these things has money in it. Surely, you have games now. But these will be novelties. So old they are new again. Ping Pong...

bowling alleys! Joe, have you seen —"

"No."

"Billiards. Pocket pool. I'll stop, we've got a backlog for a century. Ponse, the first problem is to get a protection from Their Mercy to cover it all — and I see a theory that makes it all an inspiration from on high. It was a miracle."

"What? Garbage. I don't believe in miracles."

"You don't have to believe in it. Look, we were found on the Proprietor's own personal land — and you found us. Doesn't that look as if Uncle intended for the Proprietor to know about this? And for you as Lord Protector to protect it?"

Ponse grinned. "An argument could be made for such a theory. Might be expensive. But you can't boil water without feeding the fire, as my aunt used to say." He stood up. "I'm an old man, I'm tired. Hugh, let's see that Scrabble game. Soon. Joe, we'll find time for you to explain to me these other things. We excuse you both. All."

Kitten was long since asleep when Hugh returned to his quarters but she was clutching a note:

Oh, darling, it was so wonderful to see you! ! I can't wait until Their Charity asks us to make up a four for bridge again! Isn't he an old dear? Even if he was thoughtless at one point. He corrected his mistake and that's always the mark of a true gentleman.

I'm still so excited at seeing you that I can hardly write, and Kitten is waiting to take this to you.

The twins send you kisses, slobbery ones. Love, love, love!

Your Own B.

Hugh read Barbara's note with mixed feelings. He shared Barbara's joy in their reunion, limited and temporary as it had been, and eagerly looked forward to the next time Ponse's pleasure would permit them to be together again. As for the rest — Better get her out of here before she acquired a slave mentality! Surely, Ponse was a gentleman within the accepted meaning of the term. He was conscientious about his responsibilities, generous, and tolerant with his inferior. A gentleman.

But he was a revolving son of a bitch, too! And Barbara ought not to be so ready to overlook the fact. Ignore it, yes. One had to. But not forget it.

He must get her free.

But *how*?

He went to bed. But not to sleep.

An aching hour later he got up, went into his living room, moving softly so as not to disturb Kitten, stood at his own window. He could barely make out against the black sky the blacker blackness of the

Rocky Mountains, punching jagged holes in the sky.

Somewhere out there, there were free men.

He could break his window, walk toward the mountains, be lost in them before daylight. Find free companions. He need not even break the window — just slip past a nodding watchman, or use the authority symbolized by his whip and go out at night despite the watch. No real effort was made to keep house servants locked up. A watch was set at nightfall more to keep intruders out. Most house servants would no more think of running away than a dog would.

Dogs — One of the studmaster's duties was keeper of the hounds.

If necessary, he could kill a dog with his bare hands. *But how do you run when burdened down with two small babies?*

He went to a cupboard, poured himself a stiff drink of Happiness, gulped it down and went back to bed. Soon he slept.

To Be Concluded

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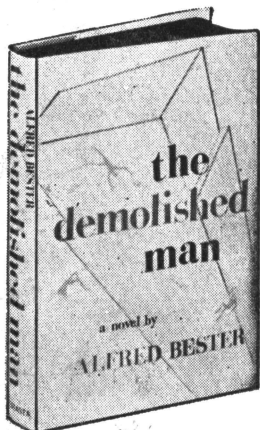
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