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The CASTLE of LIGHT

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Retief knew the Groaci were trying to steal this world—trouble was, the world didn't seem to mind a bit!

I

Retief scaled his pale burgundy afternoon informal beret across the office, narrowly missing the clothes tree, and dumped the heavy carton he was carrying on his desk. A shapely brunette with a turned-up nose appeared at the connecting door to the next office.

"Miss Braswell," he said before she could speak. "I have here two handsome half-liter wine glasses which I'm about to field-test. Will you join me?"

She made a shushing motion, rolling her eyes toward the inner office. A narrow, agitated face appeared over her shoulder.

"Retief!" Consul-General Mag-

nan burst out. "I've been at wit's end! How does it happen that every time catastrophe strikes you're out of the office?"

"It's merely a matter of timing," Retief said soothingly, stripping paper from the package. He pulled out a tulip-shaped goblet which seemed to be made of coils of jewel-colored glass welded together in an intricate pattern. He held it up to the light.

"Pretty, eh? And barely cool from the glass-blower."

"While you idled about the bazaar," Magnan snapped, his face an angry pink above a wide, stiff collar of yellow plastiweave, "I've been coping single-handed with disaster! I suggest you put aside your baubles; I'm calling a formal Emergency Staff Meeting in two minutes!"

"That means you, me and Miss Braswell, I take it, since the rest of the staff is off crater-viewing —"

"Just you and I." Magnan mopped at his face with a vast floral-patterned tissue. "This is a highly classified emergency."

"Oh, goody. I'll take the rest of the afternoon off and watch the festivities." Miss Braswell winked at Retief, extended the tip of her tongue in salute to the Consul-General's back, and was gone.

Retief plucked a bottle from his desk drawer and followed Magnan into the inner office. The senior officer yanked at his stiff collar, now wilting with perspiration.

"Why this couldn't have waited until Minister Barnshingle's return, I don't know," he said. "He's already a day overdue. I've tried to contact

him, to no avail. This primitive line-of-sight local telescreen system —" He broke off. "Retief, kindly defer your tipping until after the crisis!"

"Oh, this isn't tipping, Mr. Magnan. I'm doing a commodity analysis for my next report. You fobbed the detail of Commercial Attache off on me, if you recall."

"As Charge d'affaire in the absence of the Minister, I forbid drinking on duty!" Magnan roared.

"Surely you jest, Mr. Magnan! It would mean the end of diplomacy as we know it."

"Well, not until after lunch, at least. And I hereby authorize you to postpone market research until further notice; we're facing a possible holocaust in a matter of hours!"

"What's it all about?"

Magnan plucked a sheet of yellow paper from his desk and handed it to Retief. "This came in over the autotyper forty minutes ago."

UNIDENTIFIED CONVOY COMPRISING
FIFTY UHLAN CLASS VESSELS SIGHTED
ON COURSE FOR YALC III ETA 1500
GST 33 OCT GSC. SIGNED POMFROY,
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"Uhlans," Retief said. "Those are thousand-man transports. And oh-nine-hundred on the thirty-third is just about two hours from now."

"This could be an invasion, Retief! A major breach of the peace! Can you imagine how it would look in my record if the planet were invaded under my very nose!"

"Tough on the natives, too," Retief commented. "What action have you taken so far?"



CASTLE OF LIGHT

"Action? Why, I've canceled this afternoon's social engagements, checked out-going passenger schedules . . . and sharpened a number of pencils."

"Have you tried contacting this Ensign Pomfroy for a little more detail?"

"There's no one on duty in the Message Center but a local Code Clerk. He's trying to raise him now." Magnan depressed a button on his desk. "Oo-Gilitit, have you met with any success?"

"Pomfroy-Tic all same have organ cluster up ventral orifice —"

"Gilitit, I've warned you to watch your language!" Magnan roared. "It's no habit for a communications man to get into!" He clicked off. "Confounded locals! It's hopeless, of course. Our equipment was never designed for pinpointing moving patrol boats at four A-U's."

"How do the Yalcan's feel about the situation?" asked Retief, playing with the goblet still in his hand.

Magnan blinked. "Why, as to that, I — ah — was just going to call Oo-Rilikuk." Magnan punched keys, tuned in a bland yellow and blue face with eyes like gold pinheads, and vertically-hinged jaws busy with an oily drumstick.

"Ah, there, Magnan," a voice like an uncoiled wheel said. "Just finishing up my lunch. Roast haunch of giant locust. Delicious." A tongue like a length of green silken rope flicked a tidbit from a corner of the lipless mouth.

"Oo-Rilikuk, do you know anything of a large convoy due here today?"

Rilikuk dabbed at his chin with a gossamer napkin. "I seem to recall issuing a number of visas to Groaci nationals in recent weeks."

"Groaci? Fifty shiploads of them?"

"Something like that," the Yalcan said carelessly. "By the way, if you haven't already made arrangements, perhaps you'd care to join my Bachelor's Group for the upcoming festivities —"

"You're not concerned? Perhaps you're not aware of the insidious reputation the Groaci enjoy!"

"I don't mind saying I've exercised a trifle of influence to procure a choice mud pocket. The rich, oleaginous kind, you know. And there'll be no shortage of nubile females along — though you're not organized to appreciate the latter, it's true —"

"May I ask the state of the planetary defenses, Rilikuk? I'm warning you, Groaci can't be trusted!"

"Planetary defenses?" Rilikuk issued a chirrup of amusement. "As confirmed pacifists, we've never felt the need for such an extravagance. Now, I'll be leaving the office in a few minutes. Suppose I drop by for you. We'll go on to my place for dinner, then off to the bog —"

"You're leaving the Foreign Office at a moment like this?" Magnan yelped. "They'll be landing in a matter of minutes!"

"I fear I'll have no time to devote to tourism this week, Magnan," Rilikuk said. "They'll just have to manage alone. After all, Voom Festival comes but once in ninety-four standard years."

Magnan rang off with a snort. "We'll receive scant help from that quarter." He swiveled to gaze out the unglazed window across the gay tiles of the plaza, lined with squat, one-story shops of embossed and colored ceramic brick, to the glittering minarets of the mile-distant temple complex.

"If these idlers invested less energy in shard-sorting and more in foreign affairs, I wouldn't be faced with this contremeps."

"If the CDT would talk Groac into selling them a few thousand tons of sand, they wouldn't have to sort shards."

"There are better uses for CDT bottoms than hauling sand, Retief . . . though I notice the local scrap pile is about depleted. Possibly now they'll turn to more profitable pursuits than lavishing the artistry of generations on tenantless shrines." He indicated the cluster of glass towers sparkling in the sun. "They might even consent to export a reasonable volume of glassware in place of the present token amounts."

"Rarity keeps the price up; and they say they can't afford to let much glass off-world. It all goes back in the scrap piles when it's broken, for reuse."

Magnan stared across the plain, where the white plumes of small geysers puffed into brief life, while the pale smoke rising from the fumaroles rose straight up in the still air. Far above, a point of blue light twinkled.

"Odd," Magnan said, frowning. "I've never seen one of the moons in broad daylight before."

Retief came to the window.

"You still haven't. Apparently our Groaci friends are ahead of schedule. That's an ion drive, and it's not over twenty miles out."

II

Magnan bounded to his feet. "Get your hat, Retief! We'll confront these interlopers the moment they set foot on Yalcan soil! The Corps isn't letting this sort of thing pass without comment!"

"The Corps is always a fast group with a comment." Retief said. "I'll give it that."

Outside, the plaza was a-bustle with shopkeepers glittering in holiday glass jewelry, busily closing up their stalls, erecting intricate decorations resembling inverted chandeliers before the shuttered shops, and exchanging shouted greetings. A long-bodied pink-and-red-faced Yalcan in a white apron leaning in the open door of a shop waved a jointed forearm.

"Retief-Tic! Do me honor of to drop in for last Voom cup before I lock up. Your friend, too!"

"Sorry, Oo-Plif; duty calls."

"I see you've established your usual contacts among the undesirable element," Magnan muttered, signalling a boat-shaped taxi edging through the press on fat pneumatic wheels. "Look at these lackwits! Completely engrossed in their frivolity, while disaster descends scarcely a mile away."

Retief eyed the descending ship as it settled in behind the glittering spires of the temple-city.

"I wonder why they're landing there, instead of at the port," Retief wondered.

"They've probably mistaken the shrine for the town," Magnan snapped. "One must admit that it makes a far more impressive display than this collection of mud huts!"

"Not the Groaci. They do their homework carefully before they start anything."

The cab pulled up and Magnan barked directions at the driver, who waved his forearms in the Yalcan equivalent of a shrug.

"Speak to this fellow, Retief!" Magnan snapped. "Obscure dialects are a hobby of yours, I believe."

Retief gave the driver instructions in the local patois and leaned back against the floppy cushions. Magnan perched on the edge of the seat and nipped at a hangnail. The car cleared the square, racketed down a side street streaming with locals headed for the bog, gunned out across the hard-baked mud-flat, swerving violently around the bubbling devil's cauldrons of hot mud that dotted the way. A small geyser erupted with a *whoosh!* and splattered the open vehicle with hot droplets. A whiff of rotten-egg smoke blew past. Off to the left, the sunlight glinted from the wide surface of the swamp, thickly scattered with exotic lily-like flowers. Here and there, tree-ferns grew in graceful clumps from the shallow water. Along the shore, bright-colored tents had been erected, and local celebrants clustered in groups among them, weaving to and fro and waving their multiple arms.

"It's disgraceful," Magnan sniffed. "They're already staggering and their infernal festival's hardly begun!"

"It's a native dance," Retief said. "Very cultural."

"What's the occasion for this idiotic celebration? It seems to have completely paralyzed whatever elementary sense of responsibility these flibertigibbets possess."

"It's related in some way to the conjunction of the four moons," Retief said. "But there's more to it than that. It seems to have an important religious significance. The dances are symbolic of death and rebirth, or something of the sort."

"Hmmp! I see the dancers are now falling flat on their faces! Religious ecstasy, no doubt!"

As they swept past the reeling locals, the driver made cabalistic signs in the air and grabbed the steering bar just in time to swerve past a steam-jet that snored from a cleft boulder. Ahead, a cloud of dust was rolling out from the landing spot where the Groaci ship had settled in, a scant hundred yards from an outlying shrine, a sparkling fifty-foot tower of red, yellow and green glass.

"They're coming perilously close to violating the native holy place," Magnan observed as the taxi pulled up beside the ship. "There may be mob violence at any moment."

A pair of locals, emerging from one of the many fanciful glass arches adorning the entrances to the shrine complex, cast no more than a casual glance at the vessel as a port opened in its side and a spindle-

legged Groaci in golfing knickers and loud socks appeared.

Magnan climbed hurriedly from the cab. "I want you to note my handling of this, Retief," he said behind his hand. "A firm word now may avert an incident."

"I'd better say a firm word to the driver, or we'll be walking back."

"Look, Mac-Tic, I got a reserved slot in a hot pocket of mud waiting for me," the driver called as he wheeled the car around. "Five minutes, okay?"

Retief handed the cabbie a ten credit token and followed Magnan across the scorched ground to the landing ladder. The Groaci descended, all five eye-stalks canted in different directions — One on Magnan.

"Minister Barnshingle," he said in his faint Groac voice before Magnan could speak. "I am Fiss, Tour Director for Groac Planetary Tours, Incorporated. I assume you've come to assist in clearing my little flock through the Customs and Immigration formalities. Now—"

"Tour Director, did you say, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan cut in. "Fifty shiploads of tourists?"

"Quite correct. I can assure you that passports and visas are all in order, and immunization records are up-to-date. Since we Groaci have no diplomatic mission to Yalc, it is most kind of the CDT to extend its good office."

"Just a minute, Mr. Fiss! How long are your tourists planning to stay on Yalc? Just during the Voom Festival, I assume?"

"I believe our visas read . . . ah . . . indefinite, Mr. Minister."

"I'm Magnan, Charge in the absence of the Minister," Magnan said.

Fiss waved his eyes. "The Minister is not here?"

"No, he's off mountain climbing. Very keen on sports. Now, ah, may I ask where your other forty-nine vessels might be?"

"Just where is the Minister to be found?" Fiss enquired.

"I really can't say," Magnan sniffed. "We've had no word for two days. Now, about your other ships," Magnan persisted.

"There are, I believe, forty-nine cities here on this charming little world," Fiss said smoothly. "One transport is calling at each."

"Curious way to conduct a tour." Magnan broke off as a cargo port rumbled open and a heavy six-wheeled vehicle churned out. Rows of multi-eyed Groaci heads peered over open sides, on which the words GROAC PLANETARY TOURS, INC. had been hastily lettered. A second vehicle followed the first, and a third and fourth. Magnan gaped as the emerging carriers took up positions in an orderly double file.

"Here, what's this, Fiss?" he blurted. "These are tourists?"

"Of course? What else? Please not the presence of ladies and also a number of lovable Groaci grubs. Yes, innocent, fun-loving tourists all."

"Why are they in armored cars?" Magnan watched as the vehicles moved off in the direction of the towering glass temples. "Here, where are they going?"

"Since the entire populace is fully occupied with Voom festival activities," Fiss hissed blandly, "Groac Tours has thoughtfully arranged to occupy available unused housing."

"Why, that's the local Holy of Holies," Magnan expostulated. "You can't go in there!"

"The structures are not in use," Fiss whispered. "And I see no objection on the part of the aborigines." He indicated the cab driver who was watching indifferently as the first tractor moved under a graceful crystalline arch into the sparkling glass-bricked avenue.

"Hey, Mac-Tic," the driver called to Retief in Yalc. "Time's up. I wanna get there before the mud cools!"

"Are you out of your mind, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan demanded. "You're deliberately precipitating an incident! I'm warning you, I'll refer this to Sector HQ and call for a squadron of Peace Enforcers!"

"What need for Peace Enforcers, my dear fellow?" Fiss murmured. "Peace reigns! We are unarmed. No act of violence is contemplated."

"We'll see about this!" Magnan fumed. He turned and stamped toward the waiting taxi.

"So thoughtful of you to welcome us," Fiss's faint voice followed him. "I shall be calling at the Legation later to arrange a number of formalities. All quite legal, I assure you."

"It's worse than I thought," Magnan groaned to Retief as he climbed into the cab. "When a Groaci starts citing statutes, you can be sure there's mischief afoot!"

"This is incredible!" Magnan barked at the screen where Oo-Rilikuk's multi-colored visage nodded blandly against a background of sinously moving Yalc dancing-wenches. "You calmly admit that these foreigners are occupying every pagoda on the planet, strewing dope-stick butts and —"

"This is Voom season, Mr. Magnan," Rilikuk said reasonably. "What could be more fitting?"

"Your concept of propriety confounds me. There are fifty thousand of these fellows—and I have the distinct impression they're planning an extended stay!"

"Very likely," Rilikuk agreed, twitching in time to the music in the background. "And now, if you'll excuse me . . ." The screen blanked.

Magnan threw up his hands. "I don't like it, Retief. There's an aspect of this we're missing."

A chime sounded. The door opened and the Groaci Fiss bustled in, breathing noisily under the weight of a heavy briefcase.

"Ah, Mr. Magnan! So good of you to await me. I have the papers here." He hoisted the case onto the desk and undid stout straps. "I'm sure you'll find all in order: Territorial claims, governmental charter, application for League membership —"

"What's this?" Magnan scanned the heavy documents. "What are you saying sir? That Yalc — that the Groaci — that you —"

"Quite right," Fiss nodded. "This world is now Groaci property."

There was a loud crash from the direction of the now deserted street. Magnan swiveled, stared out at a band of businesslike Groaci, hard at work on a shuttered shop with pry-bars.

"What are they doing?" he yelled. "Mr. Fiss, order those vandals away at once! The situation is getting out of hand!"

"Not at all. Those chaps are merely following my instructions. And now if you have any belongings you wish to take along —"

"Eh? Belongings? I'm not going anywhere."

"Permit me to contradict you," Fiss hissed softly, prodding a paper with a damp-looking finger. "This is the eviction order. I find that this humble structure will adequately fulfill my requirement for a field-office here in the village."

"F-field office?"

"I expect we shall be busy here for a few days," Fiss said. "Transferring useful items to our quarters." He waved airily toward the sparkling towers beyond the swamp.

"You're violating the Legation?" Magnan's eyes bulged.

"There has been a change of status quo since my arrival," Fiss pointed out. "No formal relations exist between my government and the CDT. Therefore this is merely an office, and you are unregistered aliens."

"This is an outrage!" Magnan sputtered. "I'm not leaving!"

"So?" Fiss murmured. He stepped to the door, opened it, waved in a quartet of bigger-than-average Groaci.

"To intimidate the soft ones," he hissed in Groaci. "To make threatening gestures."

Two of the newcomers stepped to Retief. He took them casually by their thin necks, escorted them to the window and tumbled them out. The second pair jumped at him in time to meet a stiff-arm which slammed both of them onto their backs. Fiss emitted a weak but impassioned bleat.

"Unhand them, brute! These are lawfully appointed bailiffs!"

Retief helped the stunned Groaci after their fellows and took a step toward Fiss. The Tour Director squeaked and darted through the door.

"Retief!" Magnan yelled. "Stop! After all, these papers —"

Retief gathered in the parchments, tossed them after the intruders. The outraged face of Tour Director Fiss appeared at the opening.

"Ruffians! Bandits! Our legal and just claim —"

"— isn't worth the plastic it's printed on," Retief stated. "And if any more tourists wander into the Legation I won't be so polite with them."

Fiss turned and made frantic gestures to the foraging crew. "To enter and evict the madmen!" he hissed. "To cast them forth bodily!"

The several dozen Groaci who had gathered moved in a body toward the Legation door.

"I'm disappointed in you, Fiss," Retief said, shaking his head sadly. "I thought you were going to pretend that this was all perfectly legal,

and here you are about to violate a diplomatic mission in broad daylight."

Fiss hesitated, then hissed an order to his men. They halted.

"Very well, Soft One," he whispered. "What need of force? Unlike the higher races, you require water at frequent intervals, I believe. Since, alas, I cannot authorize further deliveries through the village mains, you will soon emerge to seek it. We will be waiting."

Magnan tottered to Retief's side. "Mr. Fiss," he croaked. "This is madness! You can't possibly hope to justify this outrageous seizure."

"On the contrary, Mr. Magnan," Fiss waved a fistful of paper. "If you will re-read you Colonial Code, Title Three, Section XI, paragraph 9b, you will find that, and I quote, 'any planetary body lacking an indigenous culture may be considered as available for homesteading by any Power covenant to these articles.'"

"Surely, Fiss, you don't imply that Yalc is uninhabited! Great Heavens, the world is known throughout the Sector for the beauty of its glass and ceramic work."

"I refer further to paragraph 12d, *ibidem*," Fiss bored on, "which provides the following criteria for determination of cultural level within the meaning of the Code (a) an active, organized government competent to represent native interests; (b) a degree of social organization characterized by cities of at least one thousand inhabitants; and (c) individual or group I.Q., (as applicable) averaging .8 "standard" as

evidenced by GST Test scores."

"Have you lost your wits?" Magnan cut in. "You're standing in the midst of a Yalc City! I deal daily with representatives of the Yalc government! As for intelligence —"

"Inhabited city, Mr. Magnan, permit me to remind you. Minimum population. one thousand individuals." Fiss waved a hand at the empty street. "I see no individuals here."

"But they're all away participating in a festival!"

"As for government," Fiss continued blandly, "I have been totally unsuccessful in discovering any *active* organization. I confess I have been unable to secure a specimen of the local fauna for I.Q. Testing, but I feel sure any such effort would be unrewarding."

"You deliberately timed this coup to take advantage of local customs!" Magnan said in a shocked tone. "The code will be amended, Fiss!"

The Groaci vibrated his throat sac, a contemptuous gesture. "*Ex post facto* legal manipulations can hardly be expected to affect the present situation retroactively, my dear Magnan."

Magnan clutched at the edge of the window. "Retief," he gasped weakly. "This is insane, but I have a sudden, awful conviction that he's legally on firm ground."

"Of course," Fiss went on, "article 68 of the Code expressly prohibits occupation by force of any world, cultured or otherwise. However, since our arrival was carried out in complete tranquility, this is hardly germane."

"The festival will be over tomorrow," Magnan burst out. "What then?"

"Now that we have established legal possession of this planet," Fiss whispered, "it will, of course, be necessary to enforce the just laws which are even now being enacted. To this end, certain arms are of course necessary." He spat rapid Groacian at a trio of newcomers in black hipcloaks, who silently produced heavy particle-guns from sequined holsters strapped to their thighs.

"You aren't planning — violence?" Magnan gasped. "Not against us!"

"As to that," Fiss whispered, "I was about to point out that naturally, a formal request for diplomatic status addressed to the present regime would, of course, receive consideration."

"Tour Director Fiss —" Magnan gulped.

"Planetary Coordinator Pro-Tem Fiss, if you please," the Groaci hissed. "It is unfortunate that the large Soft One acted in such haste, but I am prepared to overlook the incident."

"Why, ah, very good of you, I'm sure, Pla —"

"You're out of luck, Fiss," Retief cut in. "You'll have to conduct your piracy without CDT sanction."

Magnan tugged at Retief's sleeve. "Here, Retief! This is hardly a time for truculence!"

"It's as good a time as any, Mr. Magnan. And Minister Barnshingle might be irritated if he came back and discovered that these squatters

had been recognized as a legal government."

Magnan groaned. "I . . . I suppose you're right."

"So? But, no matter, Soft One," Fiss whispered. "Why treat with underlings, eh? My scouts report a party of terrestrials in difficulty on an awkward slope some leagues from here. Doubtless the person Barnshingle of whom you speak will be grateful for relief. A timely rescue by selfless Groaci homesteaders will establish a correct mood for initiation of formal relations."

"The Minister's in trouble?" Magnan squeaked.

"He is at present dangling over a crevasse of awesome depth by a single strand of rope. Diplomat muscles appear unequal to the task of drawing him up."

There was a rending crunch from a shop across the plaza as a barred door collapsed under the impact of a power ram. Swarms of Groaci were systematically looting the stalls already opened, loading foodstuffs, glassware and other merchandise into wheeled vehicles.

"This is wholesale hijackery!" Magnan yelped. "Open pillage! Highway robbery! You can't do this without a license!"

"Curb your tongue, sir!" Fiss hissed. "I shall for a while indulge your arrogant preemption of Groaci property out of sentimental respect for the niceties of diplomatic usage, but I shall tolerate no insults!"

"Threats, Mr. Fiss?" Magnan choked.

"Call it what you will, Soft One," Fiss said. "When you are ready to

acquiesce, send your word to me. Meantime, leave this building at your peril!"

IV

Dusk had fallen. The sounds of shattering locks and maneuvering vehicles continued in the streets outside.

Beyond the window, booted Groaci peace-keepers paced monotonously, heavy blast guns at the ready. Now and then, in a momentary lull, the sound of Yalcan voices raised in song could be heard from the bog, where torches flared, reflecting from the mirror-dark waters. The two lesser moons were high in the sky in their slow orbits; the third had risen above the horizon and cast purple shadows across the floor of the silent Legation office.

"It's nearly dark," Magnan muttered. "Retief, perhaps I'd better accompany you. Fiss may change his mind and batter the door down."

"He could come in through the window any time he decided to," Retief said. "He's nicely bluffed for the present, Mr. Magnan. And someone has to stay here to maintain occupancy of the Legation."

"On second thought, I'm changing my instructions," Magnan said decisively. "You'd better not go. After all, if Minister Barnshingle wishes to recognize the coup, I see no reason —"

"I don't think the Minister will be reasoning at his most lucid level while dangling over a precipice. And there's also Miss Braswell to consider. She's out there somewhere."

"Retief, you can't hope to find her without being apprehended! The city is swarming with armed Groaci!"

"I think I know the back streets better than they do. I'll stay out of sight. If I can reach Barnshingle before he signs anything, it may save a lot of embarrassment all around."

"Retief, as Charge —"

"Don't give me any instructions I can't follow, Mr. Magnan," Retief took a hand-light from a desk drawer, clipped it to his belt. "Just lie low and ignore whatever Fiss says to you. I'll be back in a few hours."

Retief stepped from a doorless opening into the shadows of a narrow alley running behind the Legation. He waited until a knob-kneed Groaci in an elaborate helmet had strolled past the lighted intersection fifty feet distant, then jumped, pulled himself up onto the low, tiled roof of the adjacent building. In the light of the rising fourth moon, he moved quietly to the far side, lay flat looking down on a side street littered with items discarded by the looters.

One or two windows showed lights. A single armed Groaci stood under a corner street-lamp. Silently Retief worked his way along the roofs, jumping gaps between buildings, until he reached a narrow space leading back into darkness a few yards from the corner. He groped, found a chip of broken tile, tossed it down into the alley.

The Groaci cocked his eyes alertly, swung his gun around and came over to investigate, Retief tossed

down another pebble; as the sentry entered the dark way, Retief dropped behind him, yanked him backward off his feet and caught the falling gun. He put the muzzle against the Grocai's pulsating throat sac.

"Tell me where the Terry female is being held," he growled, "and maybe I won't tie knots in your eye-stalks."

"Iiiiikk!" the Groaci said. "To unhand me, demonic one!"

"Of course, you may not know," Retief said. "In that case I'd have to regretfully kill you and strike up a new acquaintance, which would be a nuisance for both of us."

"The impropriety of assaulting an innocent tourist! To lodge a complaint with the Travellers Aid Society!"

"No, that was this morning," Retief corrected his prisoner. "This afternoon you're a peaceful homesteader. You can think of me as an unpacified aborigine, if it will help any." He jabbed with the gun. "Make up your mind. I'm on a tight schedule."

"The ghastliness of your fate," the Groaci hissed.

"Well, I have to hurry along," Retief said. "Pardon my thumbs; shooting is such a messy business, and noisy, too."

"To restrain yourself, prowler in the night! To show you the way to the Soft She—and to savor the moment when you writhe on the hooks!"

"That's right," Retief said agreeably. "Think about something cheerful." He prodded the captive guard



to his feet. "In the meantime—" he switched to Groaci—"to play your cards right and maybe to live to see the dawn."

In a shadowy arcade running beside a rare two-story structure, Retief studied the dark windows in the wall opposite. Faint light gleamed behind two of the glassless openings.

"I'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid, Tish," Retief said softly. "I'll just pop you into one of these convenient garbage storage units. They have nicely fitted airtight doors, but you'll be all right for an hour or so. If your information is accurate, with luck I'll be back in plenty of time to let you out before you suffocate. Of course, if anything happens to delay me—well, that's just the little risk we have to run, eh?"

"To . . . to try the rear window first," Tish whispered.

"Whatever you say." Retief opened the door to the refuse bin and urged the Groaci inside. The alien clinched his olfactory sphincters tight and perched disconsolately on a heap of fruit rinds, locust carapaces and pottery shards, his head ducked under the low ceiling.

"To remember this trusting one," he said shakily. "To carefully avoid being killed before returning to release me."

"With a motivation like that, I'm sure to survive." Retief clamped the door shut, looked both ways, and darted across the street.

The wall tiles were deeply incised with decorative floral motifs. He found finger and toeholds, climbed

quickly to the level of the windows, eased through into a dark room. He paused to listen; there were faint Groaci voices somewhere. In the dim-lit hall, they were more distinct. He moved silently along to the nearest room. The door opened at a touch.

Miss Braswell jumped up from a long, low Yalcan couch, her mouth open for a scream, cut off as she recognized Retief in the gloom.

"Why—Mr. Retief!"

"Shhh." He crossed to her. A length of rope was tied firmly to her ankle and looped around a massive clay sculpture. She was barefooted, and her brown hair was in a state of mild disarray; there was a streak of dirt along one cheek.

"What in the world is it all about?" she whispered. "I was just about to buy the darlinest hand-decorated chamber pot when all of a sudden a whole bunch of these nasty little creatures popped out of nowhere waving their eyes at me."

"How many are in the building now?" Retief attacked the heavy knots in the rope.

"Heavens, I have no idea. It's been pretty quiet for the last hour." She giggled. "That tickles. I tried to untie it, but I only broke a fingernail."

The knot yielded and Retief tossed the rope aside.

"Do you feel equal to a short climb?"

Miss Braswell came close to Retief. "Whatever you say, Mr. Retief," she murmured.

"Where are your shoes?"

"I kept kicking them when they

were tying me up, so they took them. Ugh! Those creepy, damp hands!"

"If we should get separated, head for the Legation. Mr. Magnan is holding the fort."

"You mean — these awful little Groaci are there, too?"

"Haven't you heard? They're colonizing the place."

"Why, the nerve!"

There was a sudden hiss of nearby voices. Retief flattened himself against the wall just inside the door. Miss Braswell whirled and sat on the chaise-longue. There was the soft clap of Groaci feet. A small figure stepped into the room.

"Ah, young woman," a soft Groaci voice hissed. "Time to be going along."

"Where?" the girl demanded loudly.

"To more comfortable quarters in more attractive surroundings."

"If it wasn't so ridiculous, I'd think you were on the make, you sticky little monster. Keep away from me!"

"You mammals are all alike," the Groaci whispered. "But it's pointless to flaunt those ugly objects at me, my girl." Two more Groaci had followed the first, who signalled. "To make fast its arms," he snapped. "To mind its talons —"

Miss Braswell jumped up and swung an open-handed slap that sent the flimsy alien reeling back; Retief stepped quickly behind the other two, cracked their heads together sharply, thrust them aside and chopped a hand across the leader's neck.

"Time to go," he breathed. At

the window, he glanced out, then swung a leg over the sill. "It's easy; just hang on with your toes."

Miss Braswell giggled again. "It's so sort of sexy, being barefooted, isn't it?"

"That depends on what's attached to the feet," Retief said. "Hurry up, now. We're in enemy territory."

"Mr. Retief," she said from above, "Do you think I flaunt my ah . . ."

"Certainly not, Miss Braswell. They flaunt themselves."

There was a sudden drumming from the shadows of the arcade across the way.

"It just occurred to my friend Tish to use a little initiative," Retief called softly. He dropped to the street a few feet below. "Jump—I'll catch you."

The thumping continued. Miss Braswell squealed and let go, slammed against Retief's chest. He set her on her feet. "The Groaci have good ears. Come on!" They dashed for the nearest dark alley as a squad of armed Groaci Peace-keepers rounded a corner. There was a weak shout, a clatter of accoutrements as the four aliens broke into a run. Gripping Miss Braswell's hand, Retief dashed along the narrow way. Ahead, a wall loomed, blocking the passage. They skidded to a halt, turned to face the oncoming pursuers.

"Get to the roof," Retief snapped. "I'll slow them down!"

Between Retief and the Groaci, a six foot long grating set in the pavement suddenly dropped open with a clank of metal. The leading

Groaci, coming on at a smart clip, plunged over the edge, followed an instant later by the second. Relief brought his light up, shone it in the eyes of the other two as the third runner reached the pitfall, dropped from sight. As the last of the four faltered, sensing something amiss, the long, sinuous form of a Yalcan native glided from a door set in the wall, gave the Groaci a hearty push, dusted both sets of hands, and inclined its head in a gracious nod.

“Ah, Relief-Tic — and Braswell-Ticcim! What jolly surprise! Please do honor to enter humble abode for refreshing snort before continuing!”

“Nice timing, Oo-Plif,” Relief said. “I thought you’d be off to the festival by now.”

The Yalcan reached inside the door, fumbled. The grating swung back in place. “I was busy with brisk trade when Five-eyes arrive,” he explained. “Decide stick around to keep eye on store. Plenty time make scene at bog yet.”

Miss Braswell shuddered as she crossed the grate. “What’s down there?”

“Only good honest sewage, nice change for Five-eyes. After brisk swim, fetch up in bog, join in merry-making.”

“I thought you Yalcans were pacifists,” Relief commented, stepping inside a roughly finished passage running parallel with the outer wall of the building.

“All Yalcan love peace. More peaceful now noisy Five-eyes enjoying swim. Besides, only open drain

cover; visitors dive in of own free will.”

“I had the impression you helped that last fellow along.”

“Always try to be helpful when possible. Listen, you want to talk, or want snort?”

They followed Oo-Plif along interior passages to emerge behind the bar of the darkened dram-shop, took seats at a low bench and accepted elaborate glasses of aromatic liquor.

“Oo-Plif, I’d appreciate it if you’d see Miss Braswell back to the Legation,” Relief said. “I have to leave town on an urgent errand.”

“Better stay close, Relief-Tic. Come along to bog in time for high point of Voom festival. Only couple hours now.”

“I have an errand to run first, Oo-Plif. I’ve been delegated to find Minister Barnshingle and notify him that the Legation’s under siege and that he shouldn’t sign anything without reading the fine print.”

“Barnshingle-Tic-Tic? Skinny Ter-ran with receding lower mandible and abdomen like queen ripe with eggs?”

“Graphically put, Oo-Plif. He’s supposed to be hanging around a mountain somewhere, if the Groaci haven’t yet swooped down to the rescue.”

Oo-Plif was wobbling his head, now enameled in orange and green holiday colors, in the Yalcan gesture of affirmation.

“Barnshingle-Tic-Tic here in city at present moment. Arrive half-hour ago amid heavy escort of Five-eyes.”

"Hmmm. That simplifies matters, perhaps. I was expecting to have to steal a Groaci heli and hunt him down in the wilds. Did he seem to be a prisoner, Oo-Plif?"

"Hard to say, not get too good look. Busy helping Five-eyes find way to bog."

"Via the sewer, I take it?"

"Sure; plenty gratings round town. Must be fifty Five-eyes in swim now; plenty company."

"Are you sure they can swim?"

"Details, details," Oo-Plif said soothingly. "You want to go now, pay visit to Barnshingle-Tic-Tic?"

"As soon as Miss Braswell's taken care of."

"I'm going with you," the girl said quickly. "I wouldn't dream of missing the excitement."

V

"This system of hidden passages is certainly handy," Retief said. "How much farther?"

"Close now. Not really hidden passages; just space in double walls. Yalcan like build plenty strong."

They emerged into another of the innumerable alleys that characterized the town, crossed it, entered another door. Oo-Plif cautioned silence. "Place swarm with Five-eyes. We sneak up and get lie of land, find way of rescue Barnshingle-Tic-Tic from rescuers."

Five minutes later, crowded into a narrow, dusty passage in the heart of the sprawling building, Retief heard the booming tones of Barnshingle's voice nearby, and the breathy reply of a Groaci.

"Opening in back of closet just ahead," Oo-Plif whispered. "Get careful of proceedings there."

Retief edged forward. Through the half-open closet door he caught a glimpse of Minister Barnshingle seated awkwardly in a low Yalcan easy chair, dressed in dusty hiking clothes. Half a dozen Groaci in varicolored mufti surrounded him.

"—an exceedingly hairy experience, to be sure," Barnshingle was saying. "Most gratifying to see your heli appear, Drone-master Fiss. But I don't quite grasp the import of the present situation. Not that I'm suggesting that I'm being held against my will, you understand, but I really must hurry back to my office."

"No need for haste, Mr. Minister," Fiss reassured him. "Everything has been conducted with scrupulous regard for legality, I assure you."

"But there seemed to be hundreds of your . . . ah . . . esteemed compatriots about in the streets," Barnshingle pressed on. "And I had the distinct impression that there were a number of highly irregular activities in progress."

"You refer perhaps to the efforts of some of our people to remove certain obstacles?"

"Breaking down doors, to be precise," Barnshingle said a trifle snappishly. "As well as hauling away wagon-loads of merchandise from shops the owners of which appeared to be absent."

"Ah, yes, impulse buying. Hardly consonant with domestic thrift. But enough of this delightful gossip, Mr. Minister. The matter I wished to

discuss with you . . ." Fiss gave the Minister a glowing account of his peaceful takeover, citing chapter and verse each time the astounded diplomat attempted to rumble a protest.

"And, of course," he finished, "I wished to acquaint your Excellency with the facts before permitting you to be subjected to ill-advised counsel by hot-heads."

"B-but, great heavens, Drone-master —"

"Planetary Coordinator *Pro Tem*," Fiss interjected smoothly. "Now, I shall, of course, be happy to inspect your credentials at once in order to regularize relations between the Corps and my government."

"My credentials? But I've presented my credentials to Mr. Rillikuk of the Foreign Office!"

"This is hardly the time to reminisce over vanished regimes, Mr. Minister. Now —" Fiss leaned forward confidentially — "you and I are, if I may employ the term, men of the world. Not for us the fruitless expense of emotional energy over the *fait accompli*, eh? As for myself, I am most eager to show you around my offices in the finest of the towers of my capital."

"Towers? Capital?"

"The attractive edifices just beyond the swampy area where the local wildlife are now disporting themselves," Fiss explained. "I have assigned —"

"You've violated the native Sanctum Sanctorum?" Barnshingle gasped.

"An unfortunate choice of words," Fiss hissed. "Would you have me

establish my ministries here in this warren of huts?"

"The Yalcans —" Barnshingle said weakly.

"The name of the planet is now Grudlu," Fiss stated. "In honor of Grud, the patron Muse of practicality."

"Look here, Fiss! Are you asking me to turn my back on the Yalcans and recognize you as the *de jure* government here? Simply on the basis of this absurd legalistic rationalization of yours?"

"With the exception of a number of slanted adjectives, very succinctly put," Fiss whispered.

"Why in the world would I do a dastardly thing like that?" Barnshingle demanded.

"Why, good for him," Miss Braswell breathed behind Retief.

"Ah, yes, terms," Fiss said comfortably. "First, your mission would, of course, be raised at once to Embassy level, at Grudlun insistence, with yourself requested by name as Ambassador, naturally. Secondly, I have in mind certain local commercial properties which might make a valuable addition to your portfolio. I can let you in at investor's prices. The entire transaction to be conducted with the utmost discretion, of course, so as not to arouse comment among the coarse-minded. Then, of course, you'll wish to select a handsome penthouse for yourself in one of my more exclusive towers . . ."

"Penthouse? Ambassador? Portfolio?" Barnshingle babbled.

"I marvel at the patience your Excellency has displayed in tolerating the thinly veiled insult implied

in your assignment to grubby quarters in this kennel," Fiss commented. "Why a person could disappear in this maze of old crockery and never be heard from again."

"Disappear?" Barnshingle croaked. "And wha — what if I refuse?"

"**R**efuse? Please, Mr. Minister — or more properly, Mr. Ambassador — why release the fowl of fancy to flutter among such morbid trees of speculation?"

"What about my staff? Will — "

"Suitable bribes will be offered,"

Fiss whispered crisply. "Pray don't give it another thought. All surviving members of the Mission will present a united front—with the exception of the two criminals now sulking in the former Legation, of course," he added.

"Maganan? Why, he's one of my most reliable men!"

"Perhaps something could be managed in the case of Mr. Maganan, since you express an interest. As for the other—he will return to Groac to stand trial for assorted crimes against the peace and dignity of the Groacian state."

"I really must protest—" Barnshingle said weakly.

"Your Excellency's loyalty is most touching. And now, if you'd just care to sign here." An underling handed Fiss a document which he passed to Barnshingle.

"Why, the old phoney!" Miss Braswell gasped. "He's going to do it!"

"It's time to break this up," Retief whispered to Oo-Plif. "I'll take care of Fiss; you hit the others."

"On contrary, Retief-Tic," the Yalcans replied. "Most improper to interfere with natural course of events."

"Maybe you don't understand; Barnshingle's about to sign away your rights to Yalc. By the time you drag it through the courts and recover, you may all be dead. The Groaci are zealous in the field of wildlife control."

"No matter. We Yalcans pacifistic folk. Not like butt in," Oo-Plif said quietly.

"In that case, I'll have to do it alone. You'll take care of Miss Braswell —"

"No, not even alone, dear Retief-Tic. Not in spirit of Yalcans Pacifism." Something hard prodded Retief's chest; he looked down at the power gun in Oo-Plif's lower right hand.

"Why, you old stinker," Miss Braswell said. "And I thought you were sweet!"

"Hope soon to recoup good opinion, Braswell-Ticcim," Oo-Plif said. "Now silence, please."

In the room, Barnshingle and Fiss were making congratulatory noises at each other.

"Matter of fact," Barnshingle said, "I never felt these Yalcans were ready for self-government. I'm sure your wardship will be just what they need."

"Please—no meddling in internal affairs," Fiss said. "And now let us away to more appropriate surroundings. Just wait until you see the view from your new suite, Mr. Ambassador . . ." They departed, chattering.

“Well, you’ve had your way, Oo-Plif,” Retief said. “Your pacifism has a curiously spotty quality. Just why do you object to preventing our unfortunate Minister from making an idiot of himself?”

“Forgive use of weapon, Retief-Tic. Foolishness of Barnshingle Tic-Tic-Tic not important.”

“He’s a three-tic man now?”

“Promotion just received at hands of Five-eyes. Now away to bog, all buddies together, eh?”

“Where’s the rest of Barnshingle’s staff? They were together on the crater-viewing expedition?”

“All tucked away in house few alleys from here. Better get wiggle on now. Climax of festival arrive soon.”

“Good night, does your silly old carnival mean more to you than your own planet?” Miss Braswell demanded.

“Voom festival of great national importance,” Oo-Plif stated, opening and closing his bony mandibles like the two halves of a clam — a mannerism indicating polite amusement.

Following the Yalcan’s instructions, Retief squeezed through narrow passages, found his way out into the inevitable dark alley, Miss Braswell’s hand holding tightly to his. The sounds of looters and their vehicles had diminished to near-silence now. A turbine growled along a nearby street, going away. They came out into a side street, surveyed the deserted pavement, the scattered discards of the Groaci homesteaders. Above the low roof-lines, the mile-distant towers of the shrine were a blaze of gorgeous light.

“It looks so pretty, all lit up,” Miss Braswell said. “I’m just amazed that you’d let those nasty little Groaci walk in and take it all away from you.”

Oo-Plif laughed, a sound like sand in a bearing. “Towers tributes to deities. Fate of towers in deities’ hands now.”

“Hmmp. They could have used a little help from you,” Miss Braswell sniffed.

“Looks like the new owners have cleared out for now,” Retief said. “All over at the towers, throwing a party in honor of Independence Day.”

“Time go to dandy hot bog,” Oo-Plif said. “Big event soon now.”

Moving briskly along the empty street under the light of the fourth moon, now high in the sky, they reached the corner. Down the wider cross-avenue, the flaring torches of the revelers at the bog sparkled cheerfully. The faint sound of Yalcan voices raised in song were audible in the stillness.

“Just what is this big event we’re hurrying to make?” Retief enquired.

Oo-Plif indicated the large satellite overhead. “When number four moon reach position ten degrees west of zenith — Voom!”

“Oh, astrological symbolism.”

“Not know big word. Only one time every ninety-four years standard all four moon line up. When this happen — Voom!”

“Voom,” Retief said. “Just what does the word signify?”

“Fine old Yalcan word,” Oo-Pliff said. “Terry equivalent . . . ummm . . .”

"Probably untranslatable."

Oo-Plif snapped the fingers of his upper left hand.

"I remember," he said. "Mean 'earthquake!'"

Retief stopped dead.

"You did say — 'earthquake?'"

"Correct, Retief-Tic."

Retief's left fist slammed out in a jack-hammer punch to the Yalcian's midriff plates. The tall creature ooffed, coiled into a ball, all four legs scrabbling, the four arms groping wildly.

"Sorry, pal," Retief muttered, catching up the power gun. "No time to argue." He grabbed Miss Braswell's hand and started off at a dead run down the deserted street toward the towering castle of light.

VI

They skidded to a halt at a gleam from an opening door ahead. A pipe stem-legged Groaci hurried from a building, a bulging sack over one knobby shoulder. A second helmeted looter trotted behind, lugging a handsome ten-gallon spittoon.

"They've got a heli," Retief said softly. "We need it. Wait here."

Miss Braswell clutched his hand even tighter. "I'm scared!"

The two scavengers were clambering into their dark machine now. Running lights sprang into diamond brilliance. Turbos whirred. Retief disengaged his hand, ran across the thirty feet of open pavement and jumped, just as the heli lifted. There were faint, confused cries from the startled Groaci. One fumbled out a power rifle in time for Retief to

jerk it from his grasp, toss it over the side. The heli canted wildly, narrowly missing a decorated cornice. Retief got a grip on a bony neck, propelled the owner over the side, heard a faint yelp as he hit. An instant later, the second followed. Retief caught the controls, brought the heli around in a tight turn, dropped it in beside Miss Braswell.

"Oh! I was afraid it was you that fell overboard, Mr. Retief!" She scrambled up beside him, lent a hand to tumble the gaboon out to smash thunderously on the tiles. On a nearby roof, the two dispossessed Groaci keened softly, like lost kittens. The heli jumped off, lifted swiftly past them and headed for the glass towers.

The city of glass spread over forty acres, a crystalline fantasy of towers, minarets, fragile balconies suspended over space, diaphanous fretwork, airy walkways spun like spiderwebs between slim spires ablaze with jewel-colored light. Retief brought the heli in high, settled in a stomach-lifting swoop toward the tallest of the towers.

"Miss Braswell, you can operate this thing, can't you?"

"Sure, I'm a good driver, but —"

Retief threw the drive into auto-hover three feet above a tiny terrace clinging to the spire. "Wait here. I'll be back as soon as I can. If anybody else shows up, get out of here fast and head for the bog!"

"The . . . the bog?"

"It's the safest place around when the quake hits!" He was over the



side, across the five-foot wide shelf of water-clear glass, and through an opening arched with intertwined glass vines hung with sparkling scarlet and purple berries. A narrow stair wound down, debouching into a round chamber walled with transparent murals depicting gardens in the sun. Through the glass, lighted windows in the next tower were visible, and beyond, the silhouettes of half a dozen Groaci and a tall, paunchy Terrestrial.

Retief found more stairs, leaped down them, whirled through an archway of trellised glass flowers. A narrow crystal ribbon arched across the void to the lighted entry opposite. He pulled off his shoes, crossed the bridge in five quick steps.

Voices were audible above, and

dark shadows moved on the pebble-glass ceiling. Retief went up, caught a brief glimpse of five richly draped Groaci under an ornate chandelier, fingering elaborate Yalcan wine glasses and clustering about the stooping, chinless figure of Minister Barnshingle.

“— pleasure to deal with realists like yourselves,” the diplomat was saying. “Pity about the natives, of course, but as you pointed out, a little discipline —”

Retief knocked two Groaci spinning, caught Barnshingle by the arm, slopping his drink over the crimson cuff of his mess jacket.

“We’ve got to go — fast, Mr. Minister! Explanations later!”

Fiss hissed orders; two Groaci darted away and another rushed in to be stiff-armed. Barnshingle chok-

ed, spluttered, jerked free. His face had turned an unflattering shade of purple.

"What's the meaning of this outburst?"

"Sorry, Mr. Minister." Retief slammed a clean right cross to Barnshingle's jaw, caught the diplomat as he folded, stooped to hoist the weight to his shoulders, and ran for the door.

Suddenly Groaci were everywhere. Two bounced aside from Retief's rush; another ducked, swung a power gun up, fired just as Fiss leaped in and knocked his hand aside.

"To endanger the bloated one," he hissed—and went over backwards as Retief slammed him aside. A helmeted Groaci Peace-keeper tackled Retief from behind; he paused to kick him across the room, bowling over others. A blaster bolt bubbled glass above his head. The air hissed with weak Groaci shouts as Retief plunged down stairs. Behind him, there was a terrific crash; over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of glass chips showering from a fallen chandelier. He was at the bridge now; Barnshingle groaned and flapped his arms feebly. Retief stepped onto the narrow span, felt it sway under his weight. He took two steps, put a foot over the edge, teetered—

There was a crystalline tinkle, and a ten-foot spear of canary-yellow glass fell past him. He caught his balance, took another step, wobbled as the bridge quivered, leaped clear as the glass shattered into ten thousand glittering shards that sparkled as they fell.

He went up stairs three at a time. A sudden lurch threw him against the wall, where mosaic glass figures depicted glass blowers at work. A huge chunk of the scene fell backwards, letting in a gust of cool night air. Retief scrambled for footing, went up, felt a glass slab drop from underfoot as he gained the terrace. Wind beat down from the heli, hovering a few yards distant. The sparkling tower that had loomed nearby was gone. A sustained crashing, as of nearby surf, drowned the heli's turbos.

Retief lowered Barnshingle, now pawing weakly and blinking vague eyes, half lifted, half shoved him into the rear seat.

"Hurry, Mr. Retief! It's going!" The noise was deafening now. Retief grasped a strut to pull himself up, and suddenly he was hanging by one hand, his feet treading air. The heli surged, lifting. He looked down. The tower was dropping away below, a cloud of vari-colored glass splinters puffing out as the upper stories thundered down into the depths. A slender sapphire spire, thrusting up almost alone now, rippled like a dancer, then broke into three major fragments and dropped gracefully from view. Retief hauled himself up, got a foot inside the heli, pulled himself into the seat.

"Mr. Retief, you're bleeding." He put a hand up, felt slickness across his cheek.

"A lot of splinters flying around. It was a little too close—"

"Mr. Retief!" Miss Braswell worked frantically at the controls. "We're losing altitude!"

There was a harsh droning noise. Retief looked back. A heavy armored heli with Groaci markings was dropping toward them.

"Make for the bog!" Retief called over the racket.

There was a buzz, and garish light glared across the struts above Retief's head, bubbling paint.

"Hang on!" Miss Braswell shouted. "Evasive action!" The heli tilted, whipped up in the opposite direction, spun, dropped like a stone, darted ahead. The futile buzzing of the Groaci's blaster rattled around the faltering vehicle.

"Can't do much more of that," Miss Braswell gasped. "Losing altitude too fast."

A vast, dark shadow flitted overhead.

"We're sunk," Miss Braswell squeaked. "Another one —"

There was a flare of actinic blue from above and behind, followed by a muffled clatter. Retief caught a glimpse of the Groaci heli, its rotors vibrating wildly, falling away behind them. Something huge and shadowy swept toward them from the rear in a rising whistle of air.

"Get set," Retief called. He brought up the blaster he had taken from Oo-Plif, steadied his hand against the heli —

The shadow dropped close; the running lights of the heli gleamed on thirty-foot canopies of translucent tracery spread wide above a seven-foot body. Oo-Plif's gaily painted face beamed down at them. He floated on spread wings, arms and legs folded close.

"Ah. Retief-Tic! Punch in thorax

hasten metamorphosis. Got clear of chrysalis just in time!"

"Oo-Plif!" Retief yelled. "What are you doing here?"

"Follow to warn you, dear buddy! Not want you to meet gods in lousy company like crowd of Five-eyes! Now on to bog for festivities!"

Below, the torch-lit surface of the swamp rushed up. Miss Braswell braked, threw herself into Retief's arms as the battered heli struck with a massive splatter at the edge of the mud. Painted Yalcan faces bobbed all around.

"Welcome, strangers!" voices called. "Just in time for fun!"

VII

Barnshingle was groaning, holding his head.

"What am I doing here, hip-deep in mud?" he demanded. "Where's Magnan? What happened to that fellow Fiss?"

"Mr. Magnan is coming now," Miss Braswell said. "You bumped your head."

"Bumped my head? I seem to recall —"

Someone floundered up, gasping and waving skinny, mud-caked arms.

"Mr. Minister! These primitives dragged me bodily from the street!"

"I thought you were going to stay inside the Legation," Retief said.

"I was merely conducting a negotiation," Magnan huffed. "What are you doing here, Retief — and Miss Braswell!"

"What were you negotiating for? A private apartment just below the Ambassadorial penthouse?"

"**Wha** — whatever's happened?" **Barnshingle** burst out. "Where's the shrine gone?" He stared across at the glowing heap that marked the site of the fallen towers.

"It seems to have — ah — been offered to the local deities," **Magnan** said. "It seems to be the custom."

"And all those nasty little bug-eyes with it," **Miss Braswell** put in.

"Really, **Miss Braswell**! I must ask you to avoid the use of racial epithets!"

"It's really too bad about the towers; they were awfully pretty."

Oo-Plif, perched like a vast moth on a nearby tree-fern spoke up. "Is okay. Re-use glass. Make plenty bowl and pot from fragments."

"But — what about all those **Groaci** mixed in with the pieces?"

"Impurities make dandy colors," **Oo-Plif** assured her.

"My jaw," **Barnshingle** grated. "How did I fall and hit my jaw?"

"**Retief-Tic** arrive in nick of time to snatch you from sacrificial pile. Probably bump chin in process."

"What in the world were you doing there, **Mr. Minister**?" **Magnan** gasped. "You might have been killed."

"Why, ah, I was trepanned there by the **Groaci**. Quite against my will, of course. They . . . ah . . . had some fantastic proposal to make. I was just on the point of daring them to do their worst when you appeared, **Retief**. After that, my recollection grows a bit hazy."

"**These** head-blows often have retroactive effects," **Retief** said. "I'll wager you don't recall a

thing that was said from the time they picked you off that perilous mountain."

"Don't remember? Why, I have perfect recall —"

"It's even possible that **Oo-Plif** has forgotten some of the things he overheard — about penthouses and gilt-edge stocks." **Retief** went on. "Maybe it was the excitement generated by your announcement that **Yalc** will be getting some large shipments of fine gray silica sand from **Groac** suitable for glass-making, courtesy of the **CDT**."

"Announcement?" **Barnshingle** gulped.

"The one you're going to make tomorrow," **Retief** suggested very gently.

"Oh . . . that one," the **Minister** said weakly.

"Time to go along now to next phase of celebration," **Oo-Plif** called from his perch.

"How jolly," **Magnan** said. "Come along, **Mr. Minister**."

"Not you, **Magnan-Tic**, and **Barnshingle Tic-Tic**," **Oo-Plif** said. "Mating rites no place for elderly drones. You scheduled for cosy roost in thorn-tree as ceremonial penitence for follies of youth."

"What about us?" **Miss Braswell** asked breathlessly.

"Oh, time for you to get busy on youthful follies, so have something to repent later!"

"You said . . . mating rite. Does that mean . . .?"

"**Vomm** festival merely provide time, place and member of opposite gender," **Oo-Pliff** said. "Rest up to you!" **END**

MAD MAN

by R. A. LAFFERTY

**He was the maddest man
you ever saw. In fact,
that was his career!**

The too-happy puppy came bounding up to him—a bundle of hysterical yipes and a wagging tail that would bring joy to the soul of anyone. The pathetic expectation and sheer love in the shining eyes and woolly rump was something to see. The whole world loves a puppy like that.

And George Gnevni kicked the thing end over end and high into the air with a remarkably powerful boot. The sound that came from the broken creature as it crash-landed against a wall was a heart-rending wail that would have melted the heart of a stone toad.

Gnevni was disgusted with himself.

“Less than ten meters. Should have booted him twelve. I’ll kill the

blood-sucking cod-headed little cur the next time. Nothing goes right today.”

It was not a real puppy; it was better than a real one. There is something artificial in the joy and carrying on of a real puppy as well as in its hurt screaming. But the antics of this one rang true. The thing was made by a competent artist, and it was well made. It could be set to go through the same routine again at a moment’s notice.

A Crippled Old Lady came up shaking with palsy. There was real beauty in her face yet, and a serenity that pain could never take away from her.

“A glorious morning to you, my good man,” she said to Gnevni.

And he kicked her crutches out from under her.

"I am sure that was an accident, sir," she gasped as she teetered and nearly fell. "Would you be so kind as to hand them to me again? I'm quite unable to stand without them."

Gnevni knocked her down with a smacking blow. He then stomped up and down on her body from stem to stern. And with a heavy two-footed jump on her stomach he left her writhing on the pavement.

Gnevni was again disgusted with himself.

"It doesn't seem to do a thing for me today," he said, "not a thing. I don't know what's the matter with me this morning."

It was a real lady. We are afraid of dog-lovers, but we are not afraid of people-lovers. There are so few of them. So the lady was not an artificial one. She was real flesh and blood, and the best of both. However, she was neither crippled nor old. She was a remarkably athletic woman and had been a stunt girl before she found her true vocation. She was also a fine young actress and played the Crippled Old Lady role well.

Gnevni went to his job in the Cortin Institute Building that was popularly known as the Milk Shed.

"Bring my things, crow-bait," he grumbled at a nice young lady assistant. "I see the rats have been in your hair again. Are you naturally deformed or do you stand that way on purpose? There's a point, you know beyond which ugliness is no longer a virtue."

The nice young lady began to

cry, but not very convincingly. She went off to get Gnevni's things. But she would bring only a part of them, and, not all of them the right ones.

"Old George isn't himself this morning," said the under-doctor Control of Gnevni.

"I know," said under-doctor Devon. "We'll have to devise something to get him mad today. We can't have him getting pleasant on us."

The required paranexus could not be synthesized. Many substances had been tried and all of them had been found insufficient. But the thing was needed for the finest operation of the Programmeds. It had to be the real thing, and there was only one way to get a steady supply of it.

At one time they had simplified it by emphasizing the cortin and adrenalin components of it. Later they had emphasized a dozen other components, and then a hundred. And finally they accepted it for what it was—too complex for duplication, too necessary an accessory for the Programmeds to be neglected, too valuable at its most effective to be taken from random specimens. It could be had only from humans, and it could be had in fine quality only from a special sort of humans. The thing was very complex, but at the Institute they called it Oil of Dog.

Peredacha was a pleasant little contrivance—a "Shadler Movement" or "female" of the species that had once been called *homo conventus* or *robot* and was now referred to as "Programmed Person".

She had a sound consciousness, hint of developing originality, a capacity for growth and a neatness of mechanism and person. She might be capable of fine work of the speculative sort. She was one of those on whom the added spark might not be wasted.

Always they had worked to combine the best elements of both sorts.

The Programmed Persons were in many respects superior to the Old Recension Persons or Humans. They were of better emotional balance, of greater diligence, of wider adaptability, of much vaster memory or accumulation and of readier judgment based on that memory. But there was one thing lacking in the most adept of the Programmed that was often to be found in the meanest of the Humans. This was a thing very hard to name.

It was the little bit extra; but the Programmed already had the very much extra. It had something of the creative in it, though the Programmed were surely more creative than the humans. It was the rising to the occasion; the Programmed could do this more gracefully, but sometimes less effectively, than could the humans. It was the breaking out of a framework, the utter lack of complacency, the sudden surge of power or intellect, the bewildering mastery of the moment, the thing that made the difference.

It was the Programmed themselves who sought out the thing, for they were the more conscious of the difference. It was the Programmed technicians who set up the system. It cost the humans nothing, and it

profited the Programmed very much in their persons and personalities.

On many of them, of course, it had little effect; but on a select few it had the effect of raising them to a genius grade. And many of them who could never become geniuses did become specialists to a degree unheard of before—and all because of the peculiar human additive.

It was something like the crossing of the two races, though there could never be a true cross of species so different—one of them not being of the reproductive sort. The adrenal complex sometimes worked great changes on a Programmed.

There were but a few consistent prime sources of it—and each of them somehow had his distinguishing mark. Often a Programmed felt an immediate kinship, seldom reciprocated, with the Human donor. And Peredacha, a very responsive Programmed, felt the kinship keenly when the additive was given to her.

"I claim for paternity," she cried. It was a standard joke of the Programmed. "I claim as daughter to my donor! I never believed it before. I thought it only one of those things that everybody says. The donors are such a surly bunch that it drives them really violent if one of us seeks their acquaintance on this pretext. But I'm curious. Which one was it?"

She was told.

"Oh no! Not him of the whole clutch! How droll can you get? *He* is my new kindred? But never be-

fore did I feel so glorious. Never have I been able to work so well."

The assigned job of George Gnevni was a mechanical one. In the ordinary course of things this would be all wrong, for George had less mechanical aptitude than any man ever born. George had very little aptitude for anything at all in the world — until his one peculiar talent was discovered.

He was an unhandsome and graceless man, and he lived in poverty. Much has been said about the compensations of physical ugliness — mostly the same things that have been said about poverty. It is often maintained that they may be melded behind the dross front, that the sterling character may develop and shine through the adversity.

It is lies, it is lies! It happens only rarely that these things are ennobling. With persons of the commoner sort it happens not at all. To be ugly and clumsy and poor at the same time will finally drive a man to raving anger against the whole world.

And that was the idea.

Gnevni was assigned a mean lodging, and his meal tickets were peculiar ones. He could not obtain what he wanted to eat. He could have only what was on the list for him to eat, and this was evilly contrived to cover everything that disagreed with him. As a result he was usually in gastric pain and in seething anger at his own entrails. He had an ugly nature to begin with, but the form of life forced upon him deepened and nurtured it.

Gnevni's voice was harsh and jangling, though there was real mastery of resonance in his powerful howling when his anger reached high form. He was denied wifing privileges, and no woman would have had him in any case. He was allowed just enough of bad whoa-johnny whisky to keep him edgy and mean, but not enough to bring him solace.

He was an oaf — an obscene distasteful clod of humanity. He knew it and he boiled and seethed with the shoddy knowledge. He was no better than a badger in a cage, but those things are terrific snappers.

For his poor livelihood he was given a quota of mechanical tasks to complete every day, and he had no mechanical aptitude at all. They were simple assembly jobs. A competent Programmed Person could do in minutes what it took Gnevni all day to do. Most children of the human species could do the same things easily and quickly — though some might not be able to do them at all, for the Humans are less uniform in their abilities than the Programmed.

The things that Gnevni was to assemble were never all there, some of them were the wrong things, and some of them were defective. A Programmed would have spotted the off stuff at once and sent it back, but ugly George had no way of telling whether things were right or not. He sweated and swore his days away at the grotesque labor and became the angriest man alive.

Joker tools were sometimes substituted on him for the true tools

— screwdrivers with shafts as flexible as spaghetti, key-drifts with noses as soft as wax, box-end wrench sets that were sized to fit nothing, soldering guns that froze ice on their tips, mis-marked calipers with automatic slippage, false templates, unworkable crimpers, continuity testers that shocked a man to near madness.

It is a legend that humans have an affinity for mechanical things. But normal humans have an innate hatred for machinery, and the accommodation that has grown up between them is a nervous one. The damned stuff just doesn't work right. You hate it, and it hates you. That's the old basic of it.

Swift, a wise old mad man, once wrote a piece on the "Perversity of Inanimate Objects". And they *are* perverse, particularly to a sick, ugly ignorant, incompetent, poor man who fights them in a frenzy — and they fight back.

All day long George Gnevni and a few of his unfortunate fellows attacked their tasks explosively — the air blue with multi-syllabled profanity, and anger dancing about like summer lightning. Now and then, people came and inserted tubes into these unfortunates, and performed some other indignities upon them.

The paranexus, the complex substance, the "Oil of Dog" that was needed for stimulation of the Programmed, while it could be taken from any humans, could only be had in its prime form from a de-praved, insane sort of *Very Angry Men*.

But today George Gnevni was not himself. There was only a sullenness in him, not the required flaming purple anger.

"We have to prod him," said under-doctor Cotrel. "We can't waste a whole day on him. He's sick enough. He tests at a high enough pitch of excitement. Why won't he put out? Why won't he get mad?"

"I have an idea," said under-doctor Devon. "We have an inner-office memo that one of the Programmed has recognized kinship with him. You remember when Wut was in a slump? We got a Programmed up here who threw an arm around him and called him Uncle Wilbur. The way Wut exploded, seismographs must have recorded the shock at a considerable distance. We had to move fast to prevent him from damaging the Programmed. And then Wut was so mad that we were able to use him around the clock for seventy-two hours. How our Very Angry Men do hate the Programmed! They call them the things."

"Good. Anything that worked on Wut ought to work double on Gnevni. Get the Programmed Person up here. We'll have him at ugly George."

"Her. She's a Shadler Movement Programmed and so technically a female."

"Better yet. I can hardly wait, Gnevni is the most spectacular of them all when he really goes wild. We should get a good production from him."

Peredacha, the talented little Shadler Movement Programmed,

came to the Cortin Institute Building—the Milk Shed. She understood the situation and enjoyed it. The Programmed have their humor—more urbane than that of Humans, and yet as genuine—and they appreciate the hilarity of an incongruous confrontation.

Peredacha was something of an actress, for all the Programmed have a talent for mimicry. She considered the role for a moment, and she put all her talent into it.

And she did it! She made herself into the most pathetic urchin since the Little Match Girl. Yet she was a Programmed and not a Human; it was as though a gear box should put on a waif's shawl and turn tear-jerker.

They brought her in.

"Papa!" Peredacha cried and rushed towards Gnevni.

The attendants had closed between them to prevent damage when the anger of the low man should rise like a jagged wave.

The show should have been greater than the one that Wut had once put on for less reason. Gnevni was a bigger man with more power of anger, and the situation was even more ridiculous. It should have set records on the decibel-recorder, filled the room with brimstone, and enriched the vocabulary of scatology.

But it didn't.

The face of George Gnevni was slack, and he shook his heavy head sadly.

"Take the child away," he said dully. "I will not be responsible for my feelings today."

It was a new morning and George Gnevni must return to his brutal livelihood.

A too-happy puppy came bounding up to him—a bundle of hysterically gay yipes with a wagging rump and tail hitched on to them.

"Hello, little fellow," Gnevni said and bent down to pet it. But the puppy was not programmed for such treatment. It was made to be kicked by angry men. It threw itself into a series of reverse somersaults and heart-rending wails as though it had been kicked indeed.

"Oh, the poor little toy!" said Gnevni. "It has never known kindness."

"Look, Gnevni," said an inferior sort of man who came up, "the dog was made for one thing only—so that twelve or thirteen of you hot-fires could kick it every morning and get into your mood. Now kick to."

"I won't do it."

"I'll report you."

"I don't care. How could anyone harm that poor little tyke?"

The Crippled Old Lady came up—shaking as with palsy. "A glorious good morning to you, my good man," she said to Gnevni.

"And a fine morning to you, my lady," he said.

"What? You're not supposed to say that! You're supposed to kick my crutches out from under me and then knock me down and trample on me. It helps get you in your mood. Crippled Old Ladies are infuriating sights to the Very Angry Men; they make them even angrier. Everybody knows that."

"I just don't believe that I will do it today, ah — Margaret, is that not your name? A fine day to you, my dear."

"Knock off that fine day stuff! I have my job to do. I'm a mood piece. You blow-tops are supposed to kick out my crutches and tromp me down to get in your mood. Now start kicking or I'll report you."

"Do so if you must, my dear."

Gnevni went to his job in the Cortin Institute Building, and there he was good for nothing.

Mad? He wasn't even sullen. He was puzzled and pleasant, and when you have one of the old stand-bys go pleasant on you you're in trouble. He was civil to everybody and gave them all the jitters. He completed his mechanical tasks in an hour — finding them much easier when he attacked them calmly. But he wasn't supposed to find them easier.

So there was consternation in the Department. Gnevni had been the best producer of them all. They couldn't let him go by like that.

"Damn you, get mad!" under-doctor Cotrel shouted and shook him. "We won't have any malingering on the job. Get mad and start putting out."

"I just don't seem able to get mad today," said Gnevni honestly.

"You double-damned *will* get mad, you crud-head!" pursued under-doctor Cotrel. Cotrel seemed rather upset himself. "Under-doctor Devon! Over-doctor Ratracer! Director Duggle! Come help me with this pig-headed fellow. He won't get mad."

"He's *got* to get mad," said under-doctor Devon. "We'll make the filthy-eating fink get mad."

"It looks bad," said Director Duggle. "He was at only half efficiency yesterday, and today he's good for nothing at all. Well, put him through the routine. We can't have him going sour at us."

They put him through the routine. It was brutal. It would have made a roaring devil out of the sweetest saint. Even spectators commonly became white with fury when such a thing was put on, and there was no limit to the effect on the victim. Gnevni endured it with composed sorrow but without anger. And when even the routine didn't work what more could you do to him?

Under-doctor Cotrel began to cuff and kick him: "Get mad, you slimy sulphurous son of a she shink! Get mad, you mud-headed old monkey! Get mad, you dirt-eating mutthead! You slobber-mouthed donkey, get mad!"

They brought in others. They even brought in Peredacha—hoping she would have a more positive effect on him than she had had the day before. But Gnevni brightened up to see her.

"Ah, it is my little daughter! I sent you notes at intervals through the evening and night, but I guess you did not receive them. It is so wonderful just to see you again."

"Why you bat-whiskered old bum, was it you who sent those notes? 'Sweet papa'. You? By the shop where I was made. I never heard of anything like it before!"

"Do not be cruel, Peredacha. You

are all that I care for in the world. With you I could become a new man."

"Well, not being human I guess I can be humane. I'll look after you, ugly papa. But they don't want you to become a new man; as the old one you were the best they had. Come now, get mad for the people. It's your job."

"I know, but I'm unable to do it. I have been thinking, Peredacha, that since you are my daughter in a way — cortin of my cortin and adrenalin of my adrenalin — perhaps the two of us might go off somewhere and —"

"Holy howling hog!" Under-doctor Cotrel took off in a screech too high for the human ear to follow, so perhaps only Peredacha heard and flushed. And then Cotrel broke up completely. He kicked and beat on Gnevni. He shrilled and sobbed and gobbled. And when his sounds once more became intelligible it was a screaming, "Get mad, damn you, get mad!"

Cotrel was a lean man, but powerfully corded and muscled, and now every cord of muscle and nerve stood glaringly out on him black and purple.

That man was plain frantic in his displeasure at Gnevni. The flying foam from his lips flecked the room — something you would not have

expected from under-doctor Cotrel.

"It is all right," said Director Duggle. "Gnevni was about finished in any case. The best of them are only good for a year or two — the pace is a terrific one. And we are lucky to have his replacement ready at hand."

"Replacement?" roared the livid Cotrel. "He's got to get mad! There isn't any replacement." And he continued to strike Gnevni.

"I believe that the director has you in mind, Cotrel," said over-doctor Ratracer. "Yes. I am sure of it."

"Me? I am under-doctor Cotrel! I make five hundred Guzman d'or a month!"

"And now you will make five." said Director Duggle. "Grinding poverty is a concomitant of your new job. I had suspected you had a talent for it. Now I am sure. You begin immediately. You become the latest, and soon I hope the best, of the Very Angry Men."

Cotrel became so, and immediately. Gnevni had been good. Wut before him had been one of the best. But for carrying-on- noise and stink generally, there was never such an exhibition as Mad Man Cotrel now put on — getting into the spirit of his new job.

He was the maddest man you ever saw!

END



GREMMIE'S REEF

by HAYDEN HOWARD

ILLUSTRATED BY FINLAY

The surf was perfect, the reef was ideal—what difference did it make if it wasn't of Earth?

I

Dangerously overbalanced by his long fire-engine-red surfboard, the boy tried to climb down the cliff.

White gulls ballooned in the updraft of wind against the dusty white cliff. He slipped. His skinny feet scurried for footholds down the crumbling chalk. The high wind of the Pacific Ocean knifed his wide eyes, and the hissing updraft lifted his red surfboard like a wing in his arms. Staggering high above the

high-tide surf, he fell downward.

"The same to you!" The fallen boy spat chalk and sand and the taste of blood. With stinging knees, he knelt on the narrow beach beside his red surfboard, fingering the chalk-streaked dents. "You dinged my board, too!"

The seawind ruffled his thick brown thatch of hair. On top of his bent head, his fluttering hair glowed yellow from his mother's peroxide bottle, junior high school style. Surfer style. In the dazzling beach sunlight he wore a halo. But his stub-

born lower lip was bleeding as he scowled down at the damage to his surfboard.

Behind his back, the surface of the ocean writhed. A gleaming area as large as a football field bulged the surface, quivering, and sank down a few feet, forming rows of swells in deep water where no swells should be. The tide was going down, and low tide would expose it. It looked almost like the flank of a huge animal.

And if any animal — any Earthly animal — were that bright purple color.

Turning, the boy glared at the shore-break, the steep waves breaking unridably close upon the sand, and looked no further out. His more alert brother would have noticed the disturbed water out there where the gulls were wheeling and crying. But the boy was scowling at his damaged surfboard again. "Crumby board! If I try to ride these waves, probably break in half."

The surfboard already was a patchwork of fiberglass-cloth repairs disguised with red paint. It was his brother's old board, scarred from heroic wipe-outs onto the rocks at Hammond's Reef, spectacular clobberings at Rincon Point, collisions at Huntington Beach concrete pier and other really great surfing spots where his brother wouldn't take him.

His famous brother would raise his eyebrows in mock amazement that he, Ted, would even ask to tag along. "Decision negative." His head-shaking brother was a mighty high school SENIOR, a magnificent

suntan-lotion bronze with ooh-ah muscles from years of paddling surfboards, and a modest grin.

To make it worse, his brother was an eager-beaver brain who got all "A's" last semester, a member of the — bugles, please — California Scholastic Federation. Worse still, his brother had poked thermometers into sea anemones and won First Prize in the Science Fair. He got his picture in the newspaper.

Now, instead of watching television like a normal guy, his brother studied right through *Midnite Movie*. His brother was praying for a scholarship to Stanford to study marine biology. His brother was sweating out the National Merit Scholarship Tests. His brother had developed a temper like a hand grenade. Groaning, his brother would now permit himself only two hours of surfing per week. During those two hours —

"Go home!" his brother would yell when Ted followed his brother's surfing club to the beach. "Go home. You can't surf. These waves are too big. You'll get clobbered. And don't break any bottles on the beach, you gremmie!"

His brother's surfing buddies would laugh like crazy.

"I am not a gremmie." Alone beneath the chalk cliff, now the boy glared seaward at the unridable five-foot high shorebreak.

These waves crashed straight down with popping noises. Their white soup jumbled straight in over the high-tide sand. He knew that the straight shape of the beach and the deep water directly offshore made

this place impossible for surfing. Surfers never came here, so he could practice stupidly riding the soup all day without anybody laughing at him.

He waxed his board. He dragged it into the knee-deep soup. He still did not notice what had happened out in deep water.

Whirling, he vaulted on to his board. As he tried to stand erect, his board shot out from under him like a cake of soap. He fell backward, plopping awkwardly in the shallows. He sprang up, glancing guiltily at the cliff-top. There was no one to witness his embarrassment. Dripping, he chased after his board. The wind turned icy.

The next try, his board twisted beneath his feet like a treacherous snake, and he fell sideways, flailing the air with one arm, ending up with an earful of sand. The tide was going down, and he kept falling off his board and trying to stand up on it, and falling off and trying to stand up with endless determination.

His scoutmaster had described him: "Most single-minded kid I ever saw. Spends all day trying to tie one knot. Also most unobservant. Lucky we don't live in Africa. I'd tell him to pitch his tent between four tree trunks, and he'd pitch it underneath an elephant. That kid's narrow eyes would never notice."

Lower lip thrust out, when Ted tried the soup again he stood up all the way to the beach — almost. Toppling forward, he leaped, landing deftly on his feet, and his board

whacked him across the shins agonizingly.

"I'll show him! I can *too* surf! Some day — great big eight-foot walls breaking on Hammond's Reef — when my crumby brother chickens, I'll ride one. I will! Or a tube, a really big tube breaking along the Santa Barbara sandspit — ten feet high," he lapsed into pure fantasy, "—twenty feet high at — at the Banzai Pipeline in Hawaii."

All this time the tide was going down.

Staring out at the vast Pacific, Ted blinked.

Way out there, shimmering semi-circular bulges rose in the water as if swells were passing over a submerged reef.

"There's no reef out there!"

As he watched, one of the swells creamed over, at least two hundred yards from shore, an easy downpouring like Waikiki.

"Like wow!" He could hardly believe it. His brother had taken him spearfishing out there, sloshing around with fins and masks, and there hadn't been any reef. The water had been twenty feet deep with dark beds of pebbles and weeds and light patches of sand — nothing to make these perfect surfing waves build up.

Why now?

"Don't ask no questions," he whispered his junior high school motto, "just have fun, man!"

Paddling out with hurried strokes, as if his reef would swim away or something, Ted discovered it was a heck of a long way out there.



Those waves were big, with white teeth.

"Worst can do — is clobber me," he gasped, paddling harder.

Ahead of him a glassy swell stood up, with flashing schools of anchovies silhouetted above his head. And up. His board flopped safely over its unbroken crest. He paddled beyond the break and came about. This reef seemed to cover as much space as a football field with an upward bulge near the fifty yard line.

Vaguely, briefly, he imagined it was some sort of sandpile down there. But imagination was something he didn't fuss with. That was his brother's department. His sunburned nose wrinkling, Ted grinned with excitement. Never had he tried to catch a wave as big as the monster swell that was building up over the reef and gliding toward him.

"No questions," he thought, paddling like mad to stay ahead, to catch the curl or be cleaned-up. "Just got to surf, man." He glanced back blurry-eyed as the swell loomed, then heaved under him. Like an elevator it lifted his board, and the nose of his surfboard lunged out over nothingness. In that instant of truth, he didn't chicken, didn't backwater, didn't ask questions. "Yee-oww!"

His mischievously grinning junior high school science teacher had written on the blackboard: In the Universe of men and oceans, planets and space, there are galaxies of answers so amazing that we don't even know their questions. "Give us — a new and astounding question — uh — Ted."

"Huh?" Ted had blushed, hot-faced, the schoolroom dim to his eyes because he had been staring out the window. He scratched his T-shirt with embarrassment. He didn't know what to answer. A *questioner* he didn't want be. All he wanted was to be a surfer — the greatest surfer who ever lived!

"Yee-oww-eeee!" Triumphantly shouting, he stood erect upon his surfboard. His surfboard seemed to grow eyes and a brain; a built-in guidance system, as it slid down across the face of the wave, a perfect right-slide away from the bulging center of the reef. "I am an eagle!"

In his self-imposed ignorance, Ted didn't even know this surfer-shout had originated from the excited word-signals of an early Russian cosmonaut, circling the Earth.

The ocean spray whirled past his triumphant face. Away from the influence of the reef the wave smoothed out and his board slowed. Ted shuffled backward, stalling his surfboard and swinging its nose seaward over the declining hump of the swell without falling off. He dropped to his knees, paddling back toward the wonderful new reef, grinning and wheezing with exertion.

"Man, if my big-wheel brother — saw that great ride — me — his eyeballs would drop out!"

His brother's eyeballs would have become somewhat distended if he had taken a close look at the reef. But even Ted's brother would not have been able to ask the inspired question, the astounding question

which could lead to an answer, an explanation of the reef. The key question was too wild:

Question: What is the connection between the appearance of this reef and the sudden disappearance back in 1964 of our Mariner IX space probe?

If asked, Ted would have guessed a Mariner was a — uh — not a sail-or — a satellite, maybe? His brother would have described it as a deep space probe physically resembling a miniature oil derrick and programmed to orbit a neighboring planet. At least, Mariner IX was. It also could react to command signals from Earth, radioing back information its sensors — its primitive electrical nervous system — had collected. Its behavior patterns were far less complicated and less flexible than a rat's. In this respect, Ted's brother would have compared it to an amoeba —

A glittering mass of water curled high above the reef, a hollowed wave that made Ted shout with joy: "A tube, a real tube!"

There couldn't be much water over the center of the reef to make such a beautiful tube. The tide was going down, he thought. Hurriedly, he positioned his surfboard across the center of the reef when the wave came. He wanted to try to go right through the next tube the way big guys did in surfing movies in Hawaii. His eyes widened. Big swell coming; should he or shouldn't he?

Ted took a little chicken-hearted forward stroke. Before he could backwater, his board took off across the face of the wave as if it had a mind of its own, right-sliding down

and down until the crest teetered high above him and his board was shooting along the foot of the liquid cliff. His right hand extended as if to hold back the overhanging wave-tube. The crest toppled above his head as he ran toward the nose of his board, trying to increase speed before the tunnel-like wave ate him.

Even his imaginative brother would not have considered that an *answering* space probe would enter Earth's gravitational field. This was five months after Mariner IX unexpectedly went silent, only five months after Mariner IX emitted a last squeak more characteristic of a rat than an amoeba. The embarrassing silence that followed the newspapers had blamed on another of the long history of short-circuits, electrical malfunctions and battery failures which had plagued the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Privately, certain ulcerous administrators cursed the day that electricity was — uh — invented.

In their tortured imaginations they would have been willing to believe even an *organic* space probe, if it promised to be free of short-circuits, electrical malfunctions, battery failures and congressional investigating committees. Ted's brother would have laughed: "Impossible! Living protoplasm unshielded can't survive the vacuum and hard radiation of outer space."

The microscopic spore had entered Earth's gravitational field, drifted safely through the Van Allen radiation belt, spiraled inward **through** the crowding atoms of

Earth's upper atmosphere and settled in the Pacific Ocean.

Its chromosomes had been artificially arranged, programmed so that it would grow in a predetermined pattern. When it was huge enough, its billions of neurons would be able to generate jolts of electricity an electric eel would envy, and no short-circuits as it radioed back information its blind sensors had collected. It was the *answering* space-probe, growing huge as a roof along the ocean floor.

The nose of Ted's surfboard, pearl-diving, rammed into the reef. His arms spread like wings as he flipped over the nose of his board. The liquid roof caved in.

His knees hit bottom. The blinding wave-surge dragged him along the reef and left him sitting there, exposed. Between swells the reef now had only six inches of water on it.

To his surprise, his knees didn't feel scraped or skinned. Beneath his feet the reef felt rubbery.

As he peered down, he almost imagined he could see the bottom deep beneath him instead of right under his toes as he waded. Characteristically, his eyes narrowed with suspicion, as if he was afraid some big guys, like his brother, were playing a joke on him. But he still thought he could make out blurry beds of pebbles and weeds and light patches of sand, all as dim as if they were twenty feet below his bare feet. The next wave knocked him rumble-seat over the tea-kettle.

In the deeped water inside the

reef, wheezing and snorting, Ted dog-paddled toward shore, pursuing his surfboard.

"Clobbered me — but I can really surf!" Ted sloshed excitedly through the shallows after his surfboard, which was cruising upside-down with its skeg-keel in the air like a little sail gleaming purple.

Purple?

"My crumby brother! What'd he do — making my board's skeg turn purple?" The nose of his red surfboard, where it stuck the reef, was stained purple, too. "Doesn't rub off. But I'll twitch him. I'll show him I can really surf, man!"

Dragging his board to the base of the chalk cliff, leaving it there unguarded, a stupid move in any man's language, Ted scrambled up the cliff and hot-footed over the burning concrete sidewalks for five blocks.

"David, David!" he yelled his way through the living room into his brother's bedroom. "I can surf. I can really surf! You got to see me. Big tubes, I been riding 'em. Really big like Hawa — Leggo me. Ow!"

"Then shut up, you gremmie, when I'm trying to study!" David seemed slightly irritated, like an awakened grizzly bear with his foot caught in a trap and attacked by hornets. "Everybody bothering me!"

"Please, David, you got to see! Really big surfing waves."

"Shut up. I'll never win a National Merit Scholarship Award with you always bothering me!" David roared dramatically. "I got to study."

"Beautiful surfing waves, David, on a reef like —"

"I'm never going surfing again," David groaned as if he was trying to win an Academy Award.

"*Fantastico* tubes like you never —"

"Get outa here! Get your dirty feet off my rug!"

"Please, David! Just watch me ride one wave, just one wave."

"You stupid crock, even your knees are purple. I said get your dirty purple feet off my rug." David bayoneted him backward off the rug with his hard-poking Karate finger. "You been wading in athlete's foot medicine. No, you little fiend, you been trampling sea hares. Purple sea slugs to you, you half-pint monster."

"I have not! This purple won't hurt your crumby rug. See, this purple doesn't rub off," Ted yelled angrily. "All I wanted you to do was watch me ride one wave."

"Shuddup!"

The trigger word: *wave*, seemed to redouble David's fury. Breathing hard, he pinned Ted against the enormous metal short-wave radio transmitter cabinet. Its remaining knobs and switches felt uncomfortably bumpy against Ted's bare back. The transmitter had been partially dismantled because David had lost his ham radio license. The F. C. C. had taken it away after Federal Communications Commission investigators had discovered it was David who was experimenting on unauthorized wave lengths.

"Just one wave, David," Ted squeaked.

"No! No! No! I'm supposed to be

studying. I'll never win a scholarship to Stanford now." David's room already was decorated with red and white Stanford pennants covering his butterfly collections, neatly pinned row on row.

His Karate finger jabbed deeper into Ted's stomach. "Go away, you little gremmie."

Ted tried to — lunging sideways. His arm sashed into David's twenty-gallon aquarium, tearing the black paper screening.

David yelped with horror. "You've disturbed 'em."

Two eyeless pink things emerged from the muddy tunnels at the bottom of the aquarium, darted about and vanished again.

"How'll I win another Science Fair Award with you always bothering my blind gobies!" David was feeding them bait doped with fluorescent dye so that he could watch them in the dark. "Get away from my black light. You're dripping water on it, you crock!" David had caught the gobies, tiny blind fish, by digging up the mud-tunnels of ghost shrimps in a tidepool. In the aquarium he had laid a sheet of glass on the mud, a roof for their tunnels.

In darkness, when David had turned on the ultra-violet fluorescent light, the gobies glowed purple as if they had been dyed. David had color-tagged them so he could watch their movements while the blind gobies thought they were in darkness, invisible. Glowing purple, they wriggled out of the tunnels of their host, the ghost shrimp, to

search for more glowing purple food — provided by David, the hard-eyed experimenter.

"Please, David! Just watch me ride one wave across the reef. You won't even have to climb down the cliff —."

"What cliff? There's no cliff at Hammond's Reef."

"This is another reef, David. A better reef."

"I got to study. What reef are you talking about?"

Without thinking, Ted blurted the truth: "At the Chalk Cliff."

"The Chalk Cliff?" David roared. "No surfing waves, no reef at the Chalk Cliff. Whatta you mean bothering me? Whatta you mean telling lies? No surfing at the Chalk Cliff. Not even you gremmies go there. The Chalk Cliff! Have a knuckleburger!"

"Ow, David! A reef, a new reef. Don't cork me again, David."

"Then say that you're a dirty lying bothering little gremmie. Go on, say it! — There is no reef at the Chalk Cliff."

"But there is a reef. Please, David! A surfers' reef."

"Now you got me so nervous I'll never study again. Everybody bothering me. I got to get out of here," David groaned. "I'm going to Hammond's Reef."

But when David's 1937 Ford "woodie" station wagon burped to a halt, it was at the Chalk Cliff.

"See, David! Look, David, real tubes! Look at 'em building out there on the reef!"

David's adam's apple jiggled.

Speechless, he stood up through the hole in the roof of his "woodie." Finally, his voice squeaked with awe and joy. "I'm stoked!"

"A new reef, an anomaly, a phenomenon," David's voice faded as he whipped his surfboard over the tailgate of his "woodie."

"Cow-a-bunga!" David yelled like a cornball and galloped down the slanting cliff as if he'd turned off the Law of Gravity.

Like mad, as if he saw his Perfect Wave coming, David paddled toward the cresting reef.

"Hey, wait, David, wait for me. It was *me* you came to watch ride one —" By the time Ted finished falling down the cliff, his brother already was maneuvering his surfboard to take off into a tube.

Erect, with perfect surfing form, David angled across the face of the wave toward the shallows of the hidden reef. His wave shimmered skyward above his head, rising and hollowing into a translucently green flowing tube.

It was beautiful. David's board hit the invisible reef so hard he ran right off the nose and seemed to be running through the air when he vanished into a wave.

He emerged, crawling eighteen inches above the water, when the wave passed. On all fours, David began thumping the air beneath him, his fists bouncing back as if he was hitting rubber. The next wave buried him.

David reappeared standing on nothing. His raised hands glinted purple as he waded toward shore. Abruptly, he sank as he stepped off

the edge of the reef. Sputtering, he swam toward Ted's board.

"Stay away or you'll (something) it," David gasped. "Delicate scientific exper—I'll be famous. Careful scientific investigation." He waddled hurriedly toward the beach.

"Wait, David! Watch me ride one, just one wave."

But David was retreating rapidly up the cliff.

"Now watch me, David, watch me!" Taking off, sliding away from the center of the reef, Ted rose unsteadily on his board. "Look, David! Look at me ride!"

But David had vanished behind his "woodie."

Without falling off, Ted stalled his board and paddled out again.

"Hey David, watch me this time!"

David ploughed down the slanting cliff from his station wagon through rising chalk dust with something clutched in either hand. He splashed through the shallows after his capsized board.

"Look at me, David, look at me ride." Ted fell off.

David paddled past him muttering: "Be quiet, delicate scientific tests —"

A heavy ballpeen hammer dangling from one fist, David clambered on to the invisible reef. With the scientific delicacy of a blacksmith, David pounded a huge screwdriver into the reef. There was an electrical crackling.

David rose. Ted glimpsed him rising ten feet above the ocean as the waves rolled back. Then David fell. The water spread bright purple.

With more anger than surprise, Ted witnessed his reef and the protruding handle of David's screwdriver streaking out to sea like a periscope trailing purple foam.

"You ruined my reef! You never even watched me ride one wave!"

To Ted's disappointed yells, David made no reply. David's contorted face seemed purple.

Even when David became the first brilliant purple student to win a National Merit Award Scholarship, he had very little to say. David spent his time scowling at his mirror. Purple?

Now he could *never* go to Stanford. Their colors were red and white.

Skin specialists insisted the purple dye would wear off, but it didn't. Not even sandpaper.

Amazingly, David was as popular as ever.

"Put on a gold-colored shirt to go with your cute purple face." David's buxom girl friend giggled, "and enroll at U. S. C. with me."

The tragedy was Ted.

"Everybody staring at me." Ted wouldn't go out of the house. "Everybody laughing at me. I'm not a cow. Everybody making jokes about a purple cow. Nobody liked me to begin with and now they say I'm a freak. At least you're purple all over, David. I'm all blotchy. I wish I was dead."

In deep water the gigantic space probe had stopped contracting. It had dissolved the intruding screwdriver. Gradually it expanded along the bottom toward shore, huger than ever. As it bulged reef-like toward

the surface, gulls whirled above the disturbed water.

With a shriek, a gull veered away as if it had bounced off a plate glass window, and crashed into the sea. The gull's sodden breast feathers turned purple. It was dead.

Across the continent in New York's Yankee Stadium the pitcher loosed the first ball of the World Series.

In the boys' bedroom Ted laughed at the portable TV, frantically twisting the horizontal control knob. There was nothing but a jumble of upward rolling lines and roaring static on every channel.

"Wherever I go!" Ted shrieked. "Static's in here, too, so it isn't just the living room TV. It's everywhere I go. Being purple isn't enough. Now I can't even watch TV!"

In the living room, that TV set shouted clearly: "Strike one!" Its perfect picture showed the batter turning to stare in amazement at the umpire's upraised arm.

David had gone out into the hall. Now as he came back into the living room, the pitcher's intent face freckled with static snow. The picture rolled and David stepped closer to adjust the horizontal control. The pitcher's contorted faces peering to get the sign from the multiple vibrating catchers dissolved into a howling snowstorm.

"Terrible static!" David backed away, eyeing the rabbit-ears antenna on top of the TV set, and the pitcher reappeared ghost-like through the snow and disappeared again as David reached toward the antenna.

"Have I been electrified? Like that glass rod experiment — rubbed with silk? Is it me, or —?" David ran out of the living room to look for his portable radio.

The umpire shouted: "Strike two!"

Scowling, the batter bent for a handful of dirt, but no one was watching him in the living room.

David was out on the lawn, twisting the little portable radio from side to side. He ran back into the bedroom.

"Listen, listen, Ted, the static's louder when I turn my portable this way. The aerial's wrapped around a little card inside my portable radio so that it's directional —."

"I don't care about your lousy radio. I don't care about the World Series. All I care about is me. I'm a spotted freak. At least you're purple all over. It's all your fault I'm purple spotted."

"What can I say?" David stared out the window, slowly turning the portable radio toward the sea, and the static blared.

David peered at his brother's swollen purple eyes. "Somebody is shooting at us. We're not giving off static. I think we're reflecting it. Somebody is following each of us with a narrow radio beam — aimed like a firehose — no, like a laser. We're a couple of targets. That's what I think."

"I don't care about goofy scientific stuff," Ted bleated. "So shut up with all that stuff. It's your fault, you and that lousy reef. I wish I was dead!"

"Don't talk like that. Get my big



Virgil
Finlay

speargun over there." David carried the portable radio. "Yes, outside. I want you to come outside. All right, put on your hat if you don't want anybody to see your stupid purple head."

David led the way toward the Chalk Cliff.

Ted tagged after him, lugging the heavy speargun. A home-made arbelele powered by four thick strands of rubber surgical tubing, the speargun had driven its steel harpoon shaft clear through a small leopard shark. Above the surface, freed from the resistance of the water, the speargun was more powerful and deadly.

"I'm going to shoot that thing." Ted's purple eyelids slitted, and he glanced about. But there were no amused faces or pitying faces of neighbors to see his purple-blotched face.

He stopped. Fitting the three-foot long steel shaft into the steel cup, hissing with effort, he stretched the rubber tubing, cocking the speargun like a hair-trigger crossbow. He ran after his brother.

Ahead, gulls on the updraft white-flagged the edge of the cliff. David was peering down. His back was bent. He wasn't saying anything.

Ted stumbled. "Look, David, down there! Something shining on top of the water — like a ghost."

"That's what I'm looking at. Sunlight reflecting off the spray, the dried salt, the organs of its — body. Hard to see what shape — Hey you little idiot, don't shoot it!"

"Keep away from me, David. You

told me to bring the speargun."

"Don't point it at me! Give it here."

"I'm going to shoot. Keep away."

"Listen, Ted, I told you wrong. Shooting it with the speargun isn't going to help us. We'll still be purple, Ted. Give me the speargun. I was a stupid crock to tell you to bring it. Shooting this thing when we don't know what will happen —" David lunged.

Ted scuttled backward along the edge of the cliff.

"Don't you aim it at me, Ted. I told you I was wrong to bring it. Shooting won't solve anything. Look what happened when I stuck a screwdriver in it. I'm just a crock, always poking things with pins or thermometers to see what they will do. Don't shoot it with the speargun!"

"You keep away from me!"

"Don't shoot it." David's voice softened. "Behind me, you hear the portable radio, hear the static. That thing down there's no worm. Only stupid crocks and gremmies —" David's voice rose edgily — "go around sticking and poking and pestering things they don't know anything about!"

"You hear the radio static!" David's voice brightened with promise. "That thing down there in the surf is broadcasting static, on unauthorized wavelengths. Yes, listen! I know how to make people believe us about this thing — make people take us seriously — so hand me the speargun."

But Ted backed off, his narrow eyes slitted.

"Hand me the speargun." David followed. "The F. C. C., the Federal Communications Commission men, remember how they caught me when I broadcast on unauthorized wavelengths. All we have to do is report this thing, and their tracer equipment will —"

Whirling at the brink of the cliff, Ted fired the speargun. The long steel harpoon shafted flashed downward like an arrow. Ted scrambled down the cliff toward the lashing sea. He wallowed in the purple staining shallows, even ducking his head into the spreading purple dye.

"You stupid little gremmie!" David violently dragged his brother out on to the purple sand. "What did you do that for? Now we don't know what it'll do. You idiot, after all I said, why — why did you have to go and shoot it?"

"At least," Ted gasped, purple dye streaming down his face, "at least now I'm purple all over like you. Leggo!"

But David arm-locked his brother, rushing him toward the cliff. "Butt out of here! That thing is spouting purple like a geyser."

"Hope it dies," Ted wheezed as he climbed the cliff. "Look at my hands, like your hands now. But I don't want purple hands!" he cried out, clawing the purple chalk.

He was sobbing as David shoved him up to the top of the purple-sprayed cliff. Above him, purple gulls and purple fog rose in the up-draft and swept inland on the sea wind. As the two boys ran toward home there was a purple mist before their eyes.

Purple faces yelled in horror at each other and scattered into purple houses. A purple policeman stared helplessly at the purple sky.

Purple defense officials shouted into purple telephones. A purple military mind instinctively pushed a purple button. The locks clicked in the deep missile silos. The clocks ticked while an A. S. W. plane, with a long magnetic-anomaly detector protruding from its tail like a stinger, droned low along the cliffs and over the purple surf. Its bomb-bay door opened. A fat gleam of metal tumbled downward through the air and splashed as the plane veered away in frantic evasive action. The purple explosion mushroomed toward the stratosphere.

The organic probe of the third planet had blossomed, seeded.

Catalytic molecules spread with the winds, triggering film of moisture which coated plants, planarian worms, plagiarists and platypuses, and everything was turning purple.

Purple people ran randomly through the streets of Salt Lake City, Kansas City, Jersey City, their eyeballs purple with outrage.

Purple cows chomped contentedly on the purple grass of Western Europe — and Eastern Europe.

Purple presidents and dictators shouted angrily back and forth via purple-moistured microphones. Louder and louder the static engulfed them. Static on all wavelengths was echoing from everyone all over the purple planet.

Even from outer space the Earth appeared purple. In perigee be-

yond the Moon, the translucently organic ship tipped as six eyes peered out, four ears wiggled. Three eyelids fluttered.

"MMMMM! WHAt a CONFUSION of BROADCASTS! REAlly, you'VE gooFED aGAIN. EVEN boTH of US can'T follow the THOUGHT PATterns of All FOUr BILLion of THEM at onCE."

"O. K. K. K.! O. K. K. K., but MISTakes is HOW we LEArn. I reMEMber it TOok yoU THRee ORGanic ATTEMpts JUSt to DISsolve Their simple MECHANICAL INTRUDER."

"REAlly, I SHould HAVe sucCEEded but FOR MINor techNICAL diffICULTies, and BUREAUcratic interFERENCE, INSufficient FUNds —"

"INSufficient braINS! MY secOND spacE sporE ALready is

DRIFTing DOWN with A muCH imPROVED GENETic PATtern, MOre POWerful CATALyst, TWIce as RADIO-REFlective, TWIce as PURPLE!"

"REAlly, Don'T yoU think TURNing theM all SO purPLE, all the same COLOR, Will DEFlect Their NATural BEHAvioR, ALTER the VERY HABits we'Ve LIGHT-YEARed so FAR to STUDy?"

"NO!"

"BUT youR Radio-REFlective TRAcEr Dye DIMInisheS theIR VISible DIFFerences. Will it DEplete Their VERY EXCiting SAVAgery?"

"AT thiS STAGe of Their MetaMORPHOSIS —" three eyes narrowed confidently — "I HARDly thinK SO!" The mouth-slit smiled. "BuT it's ALways FUN to exPERimenT!"

END

NOTICE!

Due to mechanical difficulties this issue of IF was shipped late. Because of this delay, we have changed the dating from September to October. No issue will be dated September. The next issue will be dated November.

This does not affect the contents.

RESCUE MISSION

BY KIT REED

*She was a maiden in distress,
seeking aid against the brutes
who refused to take her life!*

He was reading in the living room of his late uncle's house when a piece of the dust ruffle detached itself from the couch and started moving.

He watched distractedly, not paying any particular attention at first, then, curious, finally annoyed, because the thing *would* keep moving, and when it reached a point midway between the couch and his chair he got up and removed the dust ruffle with the tip of his shoe, revealing a bug as big as his hand.

That night, in bed, he was reading again when he began plumping up the pillows for sleep. He thought it only an annoyance when the pillow on the left plumped back. He

gave it another couple of pats, found as he turned over that it had disarranged itself and thumped it, really hard this time, with his fist. It seemed agitated, and as he gave it another thump something muscular and black slithered out of the pillowcase faster than he could apprehend it and began circling, rushing like a mad monorail around and around the baseboards of the room, going faster and faster until it dissipated itself finally and fell in a limp heap in the corner.

His first thought was to get someone to help him remove it, but he was alone in the house, and he had not lived in the neighborhood long enough to get to know any of the

neighbors. He picked it up on a broom (as he had the bug) and then, satisfied that he was alone in the room, he turned on his side and went to sleep.

The next morning the wolfskin rug by his late uncle's bed seemed to come alive. It skittered around the floor like an outsized doormat, going along on four rubbery pink legs, and he bundled up the creature (whatever it was) in the wolfskin and dumped it out the window without even having a closer look. He had the strangest feeling, as he let it go and it plummeted down the hill, that it had been trying to tell him something.

He was not a nervous man (he was, after all, a professor of mathematics) but when his toaster belched twice and disgorged a covey of centipedes which massed and marched on him, coming rank on rank across the breakfast table, he said to himself, "This must stop," and he went over the house with a series of insecticides and heavy sticks, not turning up so much as a stray spider, or a single ant.

He thought briefly of getting someone in to live with him, someone who was good with wild life. But he was a confirmed bachelor of independent leanings and he could not imagine himself accommodating another person, especially now, on his sabbatical. He was a small muscular man with a determined jaw and the head of a battle-scarred cat. The more he thought of asking someone else to help him cope, the less he liked it.

"Hell with it," he said, giving the

house a final once-over. Then he put crawling things out of his mind and went on up to bed.

Because the insecticides lingered, he spent that night on the porch outside his uncle's second-story room. It seemed high enough, and safe enough. He rather liked the way the hillside swept down and away from him, and the fact that the porch was no more than a platform with a low railing and a telescope, so that it was rather like sleeping at the edge of a cliff. He kept an eye peeled for wild life until nine or ten at least. Then, exhausted by the day's activities with insecticides, he curled up in his sleeping bag and went to sleep.

He waked at three, not knowing why.

The air was as sharp and chill as white wine. Each leaf on each of the black trees that overhung the porch seemed magnified in the early morning chill. He was aware of the leaves — every one of them — and could not keep himself from thinking of the thousands of leaves on thousands of twigs, all gathered to hang over him, each motionless and distinct. He sat up, wondering why in all this stillness he was trembling.

Then, because he knew he would not sleep for a while, he got up and paced the porch, smoking, finally coming to a stop at his uncle's telescope. He turned it to the skies first, trying to sight the moon through a break in the trees. Then, realizing that it was set for closer ranges, he gave up and trained it on the valley below, looking over fields and sleep-

ing houses, fixing finally on a house on the hill which rose at the other side.

The telescope was excellent at such distances. He could see figures framed in the picture window and then faces and finally expressions, warped and highlighted by a blue brilliance that cast every shadow in sharp relief and seemed to dominate the room.

The house itself was a low, brick rambler, bourgeois and unremarkable except for the fact that there were three glossy, black cars pulled up around it, like cattle at a feeding station. The whole was lit by a powerful, unearthly blue glow that seemed important to the young man only in retrospect; at the time he was so taken up with the quarrel, or fight, going on behind the picture window that he hardly marked or noticed it.

There seemed to be four men in the room, three advancing on a fourth, arguing, finally coming to blows. They were shadows moving weirdly in the brilliant, somehow mechanical blue light which would strike him, as he looked back on it, as a conflagration of diamonds, cold and at the same time unquenchable.

Behind the window the activity grew more and more frantic. The men were furious now, mouths distended in shouts which the young man, watching through the telescope, could see but could not hear. They moved faster and faster, in growing violence.

One had raised a stick, or an instrument, to strike another when all four stopped suddenly and faced

what must have been the front door.

The young man, watching, picked out the front door of the house and focussed on it, not ready to believe that there was indeed a woman in night clothes beating on the door with bare hands, or that her whole body shook with agitation, or that a plethora of hair billowed out and down her back.

Before he could refocus his telescope to make sure, the front door opened and closed in a fraction of a second and the young woman disappeared. She had rushed in through a crack in the door — or had been dragged — and now she was inside.

Growing stiff from the cold, he left his telescope just long enough to wrap himself in a blanket. By the time he refocussed the icy telescope, the blue glow was gone. The cars were still there, like beetles around the carcass of a larger beetle, and he imagined he could still see a crack of blue light between hastily-drawn drapes. But there was no sign of movement. Enthralled, suddenly, by the quick remembered image of the woman, he kept the telescope trained on the house across the valley, keeping his vigil until the sun came up and he went to sleep.

When he woke the half-remembered details came back like the hazy elements of a dream. But there was the telescope. When he trained it on the hill opposite there was the house, there were the signs of a quick departure, to verify what he had seen. He went down to breakfast, thinking on it.

Later he took his morning paper to the living room, determined to put the whole thing out of his mind. When the dust ruffle began moving just as he reached for the sports section his first impulse was to trample it. But something made him lift it first, to see what he would be trampling, and he saw that this time it was a spider, and the spider had a note in its mouth.

Once he had distracted the spider with a piece of salami and snatched the note from it, he found that it was in a clear, legible hand. It said, simply and predictably, "HELP."

He did not have to guess who had sent it. He had known from the look of the woman's back as she had pounded on the door across the valley that she was beautiful, and that she needed help.

"Strange," he said to himself, wanting to do something about it. Then he settled down to preparing his courses for the term which would follow his sabbatical, reminding himself that there was little he could do until he knew her whereabouts, or her problem, or at least her name.

I AM MAVRA, said the note the blacksnake dropped in his lap before it took off around the bedroom, running until it passed out. I NEED YOUR HELP.

Feeling a certain responsibility, he wrote a return note and popped it in the blacksnake's mouth . . . before he picked it up on a broom and tossed it out the window.

MARCUS JUSTICE, he said. DELIGHTED TO MEET YOU, and in a burst of loyalty kept the telescope trained on the house

across the valley until he fell asleep. When he woke it was at that same still, dead time of night, and the house across the valley was alight. He watched the four men running around in growing excitement, saw them rise to a murderous pitch and then stop suddenly, and saw the woman fling at the door again and again, hammering with bare fists until it opened and someone jerked her inside; he imagined that she tipped him a wave just before the door closed on her. He knew from experience that he might as well go on back to bed.

He shook the blacksnake out of his pillowslip without even looking at it, dumped the toads from his bedroom slippers and pushed the preying mantis off the nighttable, saying, all right, all *right*, with a touch of impatience, as he turned off the light.

The girl herself was standing in front of the fireplace as he brought his breakfast coffee into the living room. He had taken the note from the giant cockroach in the pantry without reading it and now he beheld the woman, who was lithe in black, and held two salamanders and a spider straining at a red patent leather leash.

She whispered to the spider, which detached itself and made a little rush for his ankles.

"Don't *do* that," he said, aiming a kick at it. The spider slunk away.

"Oh, I'm sorry," the girl said in a voice like midnight. "I thought everyone liked pets."

"Not everyone." He eyed the sala-

manders. "What's on your mind?"

"Help. I'm from another planet and I need your help."

"So I understand." He tugged at his tweed jacket, wishing he'd had the elbows patched. "Won't you have some tea?"

She shook her head. "It's too urgent. The planets will only be in conjunction for the rest of the week, so we have to act fast."

"We?"

"You and I."

"Why me?"

"Because last time your *uncle* didn't," she said, curling up beside him. As he stiffened, she shooed the salamanders to the other side of the room. "I had him all lined up during the last conjunction. Then at the last minute he deserted me."

"Died." Marcus corrected her.

"Deserted me." She made a little mouth. "Sometimes I think he died on purpose. So he wouldn't have to go through with it."

He hated arguments. "If you say so. Now what's going on over there?"

"Ah," she said. "You found the telescope."

"Well, yes. Now what's all this about Uncle Harry?"

She shook her head sadly. "We were — very close — and he had it all figured out so I could go."

"I don't understand."

"It's perfectly simple," she said. "Those fools are in love with me."

"What fools?" He gave the spider a nervous kick.

"My countrymen. Garth Togl-Rammy and Seth. Well, all but Seth. He knows what his instructions are, and he's ready to go through with

them." She looked at him brightly. "That's what all the fighting's about."

He looked at her blankly.

"It's perfectly simple," she said, crossing her legs with a rustle of silk. "We were sent here ten years ago on a mission. I was in my early teens." She looked at him as if this explained everything. "I was an *ugly* teenager, when you get right down to it. That made the whole plan seem perfectly simple. We were to collect minerals — and a certain amount of information — for three years, and then report back to the sending station. The house across the valley. All we had to do was wait for a conjunction. Then the people at home would set things in motion and transport the boys."

"The boys?"

"Garth," she said patiently. "Togl-Rammy and Seth. But by the time the Conjunction came, I'd gotten — well — I'd *grown*. I was more or less as you see me, and three of the boys were in love with me. They wouldn't let Seth..."

Marcus leaned forward suspiciously. "Wouldn't let him what?"

"Set things in motion. The being." She looked at him for a minute, saw that he wasn't comprehending, and tried to simplify. "The machine. It's not really a machine, but it's not really a being, either. I don't know what it is, but when the planets are in conjunction, it's strong enough to disintegrate three people and re-create them somewhere else."

"Three people," he said, disturbed.

"Well, for, coming," she said. "It could take four going back, too, if we had the fuel..."

"It. That — blue light I saw in the telescope?"

"That's It. Seth takes care of It."

"And the — fuel?"

"Me," she said with a luminous smile. "I'm a Catalyst. That's a very big deal, back home. You go out beautifully. You simply advance into It — the being — the machine — and generate enough power to send any number of people anywhere in the universe." She lifted her head proudly. "I'm told I'll be one of the best. That's why I was chosen for this mission."

He was straining, trying hard to understand. "Then you..."

"I'm all set, all ready. I've been waiting all my life for this, and now those stupid fools are in love with me and they won't let me get on with it."

Marcus said with a sinking feeling, "It?"

"My final assignment. Sending them home. It's the simplest thing in the world." She lowered thick, furry lashes on her cheeks and then looked up at him with eyes that were almost no color, brilliant and clear. "All they have to do is feed me into it. Zip. Mission accomplished, and they're on their way back home."

"And you..."

"Atomized." She seemed to glow. "Think of me in the breeze, in the air all around. It's beautiful." Stroking the spider meditatively, she went on. "But they won't do it, because Garth and Rammy and Togl have all fallen in love with me — and they're all bigger than Seth." She

leaned forward. "That's why I need your help."

"Help?"

"Complete my mission. Go into the — machine. Listen, say yes, and I'll tell you the plan."

Appalled, Marcus came to his feet. "I don't want to hear your plan. Listen, when the conjunction is over, I want you to come back. I'd like you to come live with me." He waved his hands desperately. "I'll marry you."

"Then you won't help?"

"How could I help, when it means your destruction and you're so..."

She cut him off. "That's my trouble," she said with a sigh. "Everyone falls in love with me. Well, good-by."

"Don't say good-by," he said because he couldn't help himself. "Say I'll be seeing you."

"I won't be seeing you if I can help it," she said with a sniff. "This is the last night of the conjunction, and I'm going to find a way into that machine."

He reached out, wanting to stop her. But she had gathered the spider and the salamanders and a hoptoad he hadn't even noticed until that moment. With a lovely, doomed wave she disappeared.

Not even the sports page could hold his interest after that. He went listlessly through the routine of the day, bored by calculus, dreaming over topology, seeing only her face, tenuous and changing, in all the convolutions of the problem in front of him.

He found himself watching the

dust-ruffle hopefully. He almost wished he would bump into a giant cockroach in the pantry and was frankly disappointed when he shook out his pillow-case at bedtime and the blacksnake was not there. He watched the house across the valley for what seemed like hours, until his eye was almost frozen to the eyepiece of the telescope. This time he was awake when the blue glow showed itself in the window, faint at first and then brighter, finally blinding, dizzying. He saw Seth hurrying back and forth, serving it.

As he watched the cars pulled up — one for Garth, one for Togl, one for Rammy. He saw Seth go to the door to let them in. The three hulking aliens pushed wide the door, which Marcus noticed did not seem to have a handle, and swaggered in. As he watched they advanced on the fourth figure — Seth — in rising excitement and wrath.

Then he saw the woman, Mavra, rushing out of nowhere. At the sight of the sweep of her hair and the curve of her back he could no longer contain himself. He rushed out of the house and into the car, still in his pajamas, and hurled the car along the country roads, finding the house across the valley as surely as if he had been rehearsing that wild drive all his adult life. Blazing, terrified by the idea that she might succeed this time, and exist no more, he flung himself at the front door of the house.

It opened easily. "Mr. Justice," she said, more beautiful even than he had remembered her. "I'm so glad you came."

In the background, the three men were wrangling with Seth.

"I had to come — I had —"

"You had to help me." Her eyes were shimmering with gratitude. "Now if you'll just keep the others out of my way, Seth will —"

He was almost choked by urgency. "Help you, *hell!* I came to stop you. Which one is Seth?"

"You've come to help *us*, then." A tall, craggy, rock-pile of a man advanced.

"That's Garth," the girl whispered giving Marcus a little push. "And Togl and Rammy behind. The determined one — that's Seth."

"You think as we do." Almost tearful with gratitude, Rammy joined Garth. "We've got to make Seth see that he just can't do it."

In the background Seth glowered, recalcitrant. And at his back was the source of the blue glow, an immense, amorphous, brilliant *being*, a power, a devourer, crouched and waiting in the space where the dining alcove had once been.

"It comes alive during the conjunctions," Garth said in a whisper. "Once the Catalyst goes in, somebody back home throws a switch."

The being flickered at first, getting brighter and brighter as Marcus watched. He saw that it could not move of itself, that it was just waiting, and he resolved to do everything in his power to keep Seth from letting the girl to it.

Rammy and Togl arrayed themselves on either side of Marcus, reinforcing him. "You can't do it, Seth," they said as one.

"You can't do it, Seth," said

Garth, in the lead. "This man from outside, *he* says you can't do it."

"Of course he does!" Seth hissed at him. "He knows we're here on reconnaissance. Do you think he wants us to go home and give our report?"

"I come as a friend," Marcus said a little sententiously. "And as a friend I must beg . . ."

Seth snorted unpleasantly. "Friend, hell. *Alien*. He thinks we're spies."

"Never mind what he thinks," Rammy said nervously. "Listen to what he *says*."

"The conjunction is almost over. We have to hurry home!"

"What is home, if Mavra dies?" Garth was almost in tears.

Rammy said, "Mavra, the beautiful."

Togl added, "Mavra, our love."

"Love, hell," Seth said. "She knows her job."

"Look man," Marcus said, wishing he were a little better at persuasion. "Our decency, our common humanity . . ." and then he broke off, wailing, "You just can't, I'm in love with her."

"You fool!" Seth spat. And then he turned and the others turned with him, to see that Mavra, taking advantage of their confusion, had slipped into the dining alcove, tipping Seth a little wink as she went. Now, with a gallant little wave, she was disappearing into the bowels of the blue glow, the being, the center of the machine.

As she connected there was a flash like a shower of flaming needles. Marcus reeled, without sight, without blood or breath for an excruciating second. When he recovered, gasping, he saw that the others were changing; Garth, Togl and Rammy facing him in a luminous brilliance, Seth flaming dutifully, facing the spot where the being or machine had been, all three already on their way home.

Caught in the agony of passage, they incandescend.

"We've been had," Garth said mournfully, just as he and the others flickered and went out.

And Marcus, in his pajamas, was alone, in the cold and deserted room.

END

SOLDIER, ASK NOT

by Gordon R. Dickson

A complete short novel in the worlds of
the Dorsai and the Friendly Soldiers

This and many other complete stories
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MONSTER TRACKS

by **ROBERT E. MARGROFF**

Never trust an Alien! When they are most defenseless—they're most totally deadly!

The Alien Alert sounded while Rohan was sitting down with his Uncle Spadler to his first meal of venison. Uncle Spadler had just cut himself a bite-size chunk of rare steak. The fork, with the meat spit-
ted upon it, wavered before the granite chin and the dark red, extremely bushy mustache.

Three times the eerie sound tormented the chilly mountain air. Sixty seconds passed—the silence weighing like heavy heartbeats—three times again, the wail.

All was quiet inside and outside the isolated cabin. Rohan's boyish lips trembled.

"I—I thought I heard something outside, Uncle."

"You *what?*"

"I thought I heard a noise outside, Uncle."

Uncle Spadler's eyes gleamed. He rose from the table and crossed the cabin to the gun rack. He plucked one of the two sporting rifles from its magnetic holder. He yanked back the rifle bolt, three, four, six times.

Expelled deer slugs made clicking sounds as they hit the floor. Uncle Spadler took some high explosive killer shells from a green box. Snip, snip, snip went the shells into the rifle's magazine.

Rohan gripped the edge of the table hard as he watched his uncle cross the floor with the gun in his hands. His breath sucked in as, gun resting with the stock steady against his hip, Uncle Spadler threw the door open.

Wind rushed in, cold and snow-filled. Flakes fell to the floor, melting like human consciences.

Uncle Spadler moved through the doorway. His broad back disappeared from view, and for a moment there was an open square of dusk-filled daylight. Then he had backed inside again.

"What is it, Uncle?" Rohan gasped.

Spadler did not answer. He closed the door silently. Then he whirled, heavy, huge and bear-like. He faced Rohan at close-quarters, and he said, in a voice like thunder, "Tracks outside."

"Alien?"

"Alien."

"Big ones?"

"Big ones."

Rohan shuddered. He stirred not a leg nor an arm while his uncle moved about the cabin. From behind him he heard. "Hurry up! Get ready now! We've got a job to do."

"But I—"

His uncle's face was before him, glowering red with rage. "A job, I say! You too, as well as I."

"But—"

"Here!" And Uncle Spadler thrust into his hands a wadded bundle of outdoor clothing.

He took the rifle and the extra flashlight his uncle handed him. He moved to the door. He put on the snowshoes.

"The tracks are over there," said Uncle Spadler, pointing through the snowstorm. "Big flat ones, like nothing I ever saw before."

Rohan stared. He moved the way his uncle had directed him.

The track was shaped roughly

like a human's. Twelve feet ahead of the track there was another one, and twelve feet further on, another. Each track was positioned one directly ahead and behind another, in a way that no animal—human or otherwise—should normally walk.

"There's many different kinds of Aliens." Rohan's voice was hoarse. "Aren't there, Uncle?"

"Many, many kinds," said Uncle Spadler.

"And you've never seen this kind of track before?"

"I told you I hadn't!"

"And you never heard of an Alien that makes this kind?"

"Never!"

"It must want to live very badly to escape prison camp and attempt to cross a hunting area."

Rohan raised a hand encased in a shooting glove to his forehead. Through the skin-tight plastic, his fingers could just detect the hair-like line upon his forehead. "So long," he said wonderingly. "So very long! All that dark and the wetness. Half dead, half knowing. Angel voices. The rustle of a nurse's gown. Soft hiss of a nutrient supply tube."

"Are you re-living that again?" said his uncle.

"Yes," said Rohan.

"Stop it!" his uncle said brutally.

"But—"

"It's ten years since your broken body was put in the re-growth tank. You've been out of the hospital two years. Long enough, I'd think."

"But, Uncle Spadler, when I was little . . ."

"What?"

"Before all the trouble . . ."

"Out with it!"

"I—I thought everyone *liked* Aliens."

Spadler's face moved close to his. Snow flecked the bushy eyebrows.

"You stupid, boy?"

"N-no, I don't think so."

"After those souvenirs from 'friendly' —" contempt reversed meaning — "Aliens started exploding and killing people . . . after 'tourists' produced weapons and started killing people . . . after 'tame' house-pets began blinding and poisoning people . . . after all that, you still think there's good in Aliens?"

"S-some Aliens, perhaps."

"Bah!" said Uncle Spadler.

Rohan looked down at his right snowshoe, then at the giant track in front of it. He swallowed. He did not contradict his uncle.

"You have a rifle there," Uncle Spadler said.

"Yes," Rohan said.

"That gun will stop any Alien that you have to stop with it."

"I'm glad it will," Rohan said.

"C'mon, then!"

Rohan looked up to see his uncle moving off into the snowstorm. His lips twisted. He drew cold air into his lungs, then expelled a cloud of white vapor. Taking a firm grim on the gun, he followed his uncle.

His legs were a dull ache as morning approached.

By then it had long since quit snowing. The stars were beginning to fade, and still they had not seen the Alien.

Uncle Spadler pointed at the

nearest track with his now turned off flashlight. "See, it stood here for a while. Resting, maybe thinking up some devilment. It knows part of its advantage is gone in the daylight."

"The tracks head for the woods, Uncle," Rohan said.

Uncle Spadler moved that way. "Be alert now," he said. "It could be preparing an ambush."

"Do they do that often Uncle?"

"Some do," said Uncle Spadler.

Rohan frowned. His eyes watered. His fingernails tried to dig through his gloves and into his rifle stock.

At the edge of the forest, Uncle Spadler dropped his flashlight. He did not bother to pick it up.

"Uncle?"

Spadler pointed. Ahead, one track mark stood out plainly beneath a low-hanging tree limb.

"It's a low place for it to have stood, isn't it, Uncle?"

"The thing hops," Uncle Spadler said.

"Perhaps it's not so big as it looks."

"Perhaps not. That doesn't mean it's any less dangerous."

Rohan swallowed as he peered into the woods. "So many bushes — it could hide anywhere, couldn't it?"

"It's too rough to wear snowshoes. We'll have to wait until the sun is all the way up before we go in."

"And that will give it still more of a chance, won't it, Uncle?"

"Shut up!" said Uncle Spadler.

Abent branch sprang back and wrapped itself around the calf

of Uncle Spadler's right leg. Uncle Spadler screamed. Then he stopped screaming and swore lividly.

Hurrying to his uncle's side, Rohan saw a row of needle-like thorns protruding from the top half of his uncle's combat boot.

"Didn't penetrate through the boot leather," Uncle Spadler said at last. "You can bet I'd be dead if they had."

"Poison?"

Uncle Spadler pointed at a yellowish, all but invisible mucus on one of the thorns. He was careful not to touch it. "That's poison of some kind. The Alien we're tracking is probably venomous."

"We'd better get those thorns out," Rohan said concernedly. He searched in a pocket and found a pair of pliers. Carefully, so as to avoid touching the mucus, he began pulling the thorns.

When he had pulled three thorns, he stopped in astonishment. "Uncle, some of these thorns — they've got barbs on them!"

"Hold one up where I can see," said Uncle Spadler.

Rohan held up the pliers.

"Small," said Uncle Spadler.

"That means a delicate touch, doesn't it? Probably real small manipulating appendages?"

"Hurry up with those thorns."

"Uncle, could there be a big Alien carrying a small Alien?"

"Hurry up, I said."

Rohan pulled the last of the thorns. He straightened up and saw his uncle's eyes were directed at a bush in back of him.

"I'm going over there," said his

uncle. "You stay here and watch for me."

"All right, Uncle."

Rohan stood in the snow and watched his uncle advance on the bush. His head swiveled right and left; his eyes tried to see everywhere.

Uncle Spadler reached the bushes. He maneuvered around the edges. He waved for Rohan to keep back. Then he disappeared from sight behind some tree trunks.

Seconds lengthened into minutes. Minutes dragged interminably.

Suddenly Rohan's hands tightened convulsively on his rifle. His eyelids stretched. He opened his mouth wide, but no sound came.

From a different direction than the one his uncle had taken, there had come a thing — a bunny rabbit thing, with fur that was softly glowing. A thing without visible legs, that hopped twelve feet at a time in a straight line toward him.

The rifle flew to Rohan's shoulder, drawn there by hours of drill and practice. "H-halt, Alien!" he said.

The Alien halted. It raised babyish pink hands before its wrinkled face. Violet eyes stared liquidly upwards. It spoke:

"Oh, Being of Many Thunders," it said in a surprisingly strong, scarcely accented voice. "Oh, Master of Space, Son of Conqueror of Worlds —"

Rohan yelled loudly for his Uncle Spadler. Only the stillness of the forest answered him.

"Oh, Sentient Creature a Million

Times my Superior. Oh, Man, this Worthless Nonentity is Vastly Pleased that you have come for me.”

“W-what do you mean?”

Violet eyes rolled. The creature gave off a scent like springtime flowers. A sound came from its body which was both lulling and stirring at the same time and might well have been the opening chord in some grand Alien symphony.

“On Far World of My Origin, I Live, Work, and One Day Honored. Entertainers I, Most Honored of Profession. Conquerors Come, but not you Conquerors. Conquerors want Entertainers. I am Honored.”

“You mean,” Rohan swallowed, “you were a non-combatant? One of a race conquered by other Aliens?”

“Non-Combatant I,” talked-sang the Alien. “I not Escape From Camp. I ordered From. I told Test Man’s Tracking ability. I do . . . Not Want.”

“Who ordered you?”

“Mans at Camp. Guards say Hop Fast. Say where go. Say Man Rewarded Find me.”

“Uncle Spadler!” Rohan called. Stillness.

“I can’t believe what you say! It can’t be the way things happen. You tried to kill my uncle.”

“No, No, Not Do! I try Catch Food. You come. I Fear. Not Want Kill; Not want Hurt. You Million Times my Superior.”

Suddenly, the music Alien played took on a dirge-like quality. The pinkish face bent over its cupped hands. Tears ran rather than leaked from the violet eyes, falling like tiny

beads of amber into the cup that awaited them.

Rohan stared. His face softened. He lowered his rifle. Impulsively he dropped to his knees in front of the Alien. He tossed the gun aside and reached for a handkerchief.

The tears were now brimming the hollow formed by the hands. From each pink finger there clicked a long curved claw. The claws pointed upwards, curved back from the fingertips.

Rohan found his handkerchief with his right hand.

And Alien’s claws snapped outwards, and amber droplets filled the air.

Instinctively Rohan’s eyes squeezed shut. His left forearm raised, his head dropped.

From the bushes, a rifle cracked. A killer shell exploded. Stuff hit Rohan’s raised forearm. Rohan was hurled backwards.

Rohan’s eyes opened.

“It tried to get me too,” someone said. “It thought it led me into a deadfall, but I avoided it.”

Rohan turned to see his Uncle Spadler. His mouth worked. “B-but, Uncle, it was so h-helpless,” he said.

“Take a look at your coat!”

Rohan looked at his left coat sleeve. Wisps of smoke were coming from tiny brown holes where the Alien’s tears had landed.

“Helpless as a spitting cobra.”

Rohan’s two perfectly good eyes widened. In a voice hardly recognizable as his own he added:

“And every bit as trustworthy.”

END

FARNHAM'S



ILLUSTRATED BY GAUGHAN

Conclusion

He had five lives in his care — and he could save them only by giving up everything that mattered in his own!

FREEHOLD

by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

XVI

For the next many days Hugh was busy redesigning the game of Scrabble to fit Language, translating *Hoyle's Complete Book of Games*, dictating rules and descriptions (to the best of his memory) of games and recreations not in Hoyle (such as Ping Pong, golf, water skiing),

attending conferences with Ponse and Joe, and others with Joe alone — and playing bridge.

The last was by far the best. With Joe's help he taught several of the Chosen the game, but most of the sessions were play, with Joe, Ponse, and always Barbara. Ponse had the enthusiasm of a new convert. When he was in residence he played bridge

What Has Gone Before . . .

HUGH FARNHAM, bridge player and head of a grown family, is caught in the destruction of a sudden and devastating nuclear war. With his wife and children they take refuge in his bomb shelter, bringing with them

BARBARA WELLS, a schoolmate of his daughter, with whom Farnham finds himself unexpectedly and peremptorily in love. But there is little time for them to dwell on their relationship, for when the bombs stop falling and they leave the shelter they find themselves in a world where no sign of man appears. There is no destruction—there is no city! They establish a primitive way of life, in which Farnham's chief lieutenant is the other member of their party,

JOSEPH, the young Negro who was once the Farnham's houseboy and is now more of a son to him than his own son, Duke. Farnham's daughter, Karen dies in childbirth. As they are recovering from the tragedy they are visited by a fleet of strange ships commanded by

PONSE, a regal and intelligent man who takes them prisoner and brings them to the castle which is his home. He treats them with a sort of disinterested good humor, except for Joseph, who he makes an honored guest. It is Joseph's skin color that has earned him special privilege. They learn that they have fallen through a flaw in time and are in the world of thousands of years from now, where the European and American nations have all but destroyed themselves in nuclear war; now all power belongs to the unharmed Africans who have taken over and rebuilt on the ruins. Except for Joseph, Farnham's family group is taken into the community as domestic slaves. Farnham himself is turned over to

MEMTOK, major-domo and chief administrator of Ponse's huge slave estate. They are separated and put to work. They are well fed and reasonably housed, but they are slaves nonetheless. In captivity, Barbara bears Farnham's twin children—which he can never see. He determines to escape.

But where is there to go?

every minute that he could spare, and always wanted the same four, the best players available.

It seemed to Hugh that Their Charity was fond of Barbara, as fond as he was of the cat he called "Doklivstnipsoom" — never "Doc." Ponse extended to cats the courtesy due equals, and Doc, or any of the cats, was free to jump up into his lap even when he was bidding a difficult hand. He extended the same courtesy and affection to Barbara as he knew her better, always called her "Barba," or "Child," and never again referred to her as "it." Barbara called him "Ponse," or "Uncle," and clearly felt unafraid and happy in his company.

Sometimes Ponse left Barbara and Hugh alone in his lounging room, once for more than twenty minutes. These were jewels beyond price; they did not risk losing such a privilege by doing more than hold hands.

If it was time to nurse the boys, Barbara said so and Ponse always ordered them fetched up. Once he ordered them fetched to his lounge when it wasn't necessary, said that he had not seen them for a week and wanted to see how much they had grown. So the game waited while their "Uncle" Ponse got down on the rug and made foolish noises at them.

Then he had them taken away. Five minutes of babies was enough. But he said to Barbara, "Child, they're growing like sugar cane. I hope I live to see them grow up."

"You'll live a long time, Uncle."

"Maybe. I've outlived a dozen food tasters, but that salts no fish.

Those brats of ours will make magnificent matched footmen. I can see them now, serving in the banquet hall of the Palace — the Residence, I mean, not this summer cottage. Whose deal is it?"

Hugh saw Grace a few times during this period, but never for more than seconds. If he showed up and she was there, she left at once, displeasure large on her face. If Barbara arrived for bridge before Hugh did, Grace was always out of sight. It was clear that she was an habituee of the lord's informal apartments; it was equally clear that she resented Barbara as much as ever, with bile left over for Hugh. But she never said anything and it seemed likely that she had learned not to cross wills with Their Charity.

It was now official that Grace was bedwarmer to Their Charity. Hugh learned this from Kitten, who would happily gossip about anything if encouraged. It appeared that the sluts knew when the lord was in residence (Hugh often did not) by whether Grace was downstairs or up. She was assigned no other duties and even the slutmaster did not dare put her to work on her days of idleness. She was immune to all whips, even Memtok's. She was also, the few times Hugh glimpsed her, lavishly dressed and bejeweled.

She was also very fat, so fat that Hugh felt relieved that he no longer had even a nominal obligation to share a bed with her. True, all bedwarmers were fat by Hugh's standards. Even kitten was plump enough

that had she been a XXth century American girl, she would have been at least pretending to diet, and talking about it. Kitten did talk about it. She fretted that she was unable to put on weight.

Kitten was so young that her plumpness was somewhat pleasing, as with a baby. But Hugh found Grace's fatness another matter. Somewhere in that jiggling mass was buried the beautiful girl he had married. He tried not to think about it and could not see why Ponse would like it—if he did. But in truth, Hugh admitted, he did not know that Grace was anything more than nominally Ponse's bedwarmer, just as Kitten was to him. After all, Ponse was alleged to be more than a century old. Would Ponse have any more use for one than Memtok had? Hugh did not know—nor really care. Ponse looked to be perhaps sixty-five and still strong and virile. But Hugh held a private opinion that Grace's role was odalisque, not houri.

While the question did not really matter to him, it did to Duke. Hugh's first son came storming into Hugh's office one day and demanded a private interview; Hugh led him to his apartment. He had not seen Duke in nearly a month. Satisfactory translations had been coming in from him; there had been no need to see him.

Hugh tried to make the meeting pleasant. "Sit down, Duke. May I offer you a drink of Happiness?"

"No, thanks! What's this I hear about Mother?"

"What do you hear, Duke?" (Oh, Lord! Here we go again.)

"You know damned well what I mean!"

"I'm afraid I don't."

Hugh made him spell it out, offering no help. Duke had his facts correct and, to Hugh's surprise, had learned them just that day. Since every one of more than four hundred servants had known all along that one of the slut savages—the other one, not the tall skinny one—lived upstairs with Their Charity more than she lived in the sluts' quarters, it seemed incredible that Duke had taken so long to find out. However, Duke had very little to do with the other servants and was not popular with them—"a troublemaker," Memtok had called him.

Hugh neither confirmed nor denied Duke's story.

"Well?" Duke demanded. "What are you going to do about it?"

"About what, Duke? Are you suggesting that I put a stop to servants' hall gossip? I doubt if I could. My usual practice is to ignore it."

"I don't mean that at all! Are you going to sit there while your wife is being raped?"

"Probably. You come in here with some story you've picked up from a second assistant dishwasher, or some equally reliable source, and expect me to do something. Now, I would like to know, first, why do you think this gossip is true? Second, what has what you have told me got to do with rape? Third, if all or any of it were true, what would you expect me to do about it? Fourth, what, if anything, do you

think I *can* do about it? Take them in order and please be specific. Then we may talk about what I will do."

"Quit twisting things around."

"I'm not twisting anything. You are. Duke, you had an expensive education as a lawyer—I know, I picked up the tab. You used to lecture me about 'rules of evidence.' Now use some of that education. Take those questions in order. Why do you think this gossip is true?"

"Uh . . . I heard it and I checked around. Everybody knows it."

"So? Everybody knew the Earth was flat, at one time. They were wrong. But what is the allegation? Be specific."

"Why, I told you. Mother is assigned as that bastard's bedwarmer."

"Who says so?"

"Why, everybody!"

"Did you ask the slutmaster?"

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"I'll take that as rhetorical. But to shorten this, what 'everybody knows' as you put it, is that Grace is assigned duties of some sort, upstairs. This seems possible and no doubt could be verified, one way or the other. Possibly in attendance on Their Charity, possibly waiting on the ladies of the household, or perhaps other duties. Do you want me to arrange an appointment for you with the slutmaster, so that you can ask him what duties your mother has? I tell you truthfully that I do not know her duties."

"Uh, you ask him."

"I shan't. I feel sure that, if I did ask, Grace would regard it as snooping on my part. Let's assume for

the moment that *you* have asked him and that he has told you, as you now suspect only from gossip, that her assignment is as bedwarmer. To Their Charity. On this assumption, made for the sake of argument only, since you certainly haven't proved it—on this assumption, where does rape come in?"

Duke looked astonished. "I would not have believed it, even of you. Do you mean to sit there and say baldly that you think Mother would do such a thing *voluntarily*?"

"I long ago gave up trying to guess what your mother would or would not do. But *I* haven't said she is doing anything. You have. I don't know that her assignment is bedwarmer other than through gossip, gossip which you have repeated without proof. If true, I still would not know if she had ever carried out the assignment by actually getting into his bed, voluntarily or otherwise—I've never seen his bed nor even heard gossip on this point . . . just your evil thoughts. But if those thoughts are correct, I still would have no opinion as to whether or not anything other than sleep had taken place. I myself, over the course of years, have shared beds with more than one female and did nothing but sleep; I know it can happen. But in any event I doubt very strongly that Their Charity has ever raped *any* female in all his long life. I doubt it especially now. Never mind. I see only one way to get at the facts, if any, underlying these foul suspicions in your mind. Ask the Lord Protector."

"Go right ahead! First sensible thing you've said."

"Oh, not me. Duke. You see, I don't even faintly suspect him of rape. But you can ask him. Simply see the Chief Domestic. You don't have to go through me to see Memtok; you know his policy. He'll see any Palace servant who wants to see him. At the servant's risk, of course, but I doubt if he'll tingle anyone in my department without good cause; I do have some fat cat privileges. Tell him you want an audience with the Lord Protector. I think that is all it will take, although you may have to wait a week or two. If Memtok turns you down, tell me. I fancy I can get him to arrange it. Then, when you see the Lord Protector, simply ask him, point blank."

"And be lied to. If I ever get that close to that black ape, I'm going to kill him!"

Mr. Farnham sighed. "Duke, I don't see how can man can be so wrong-headed so many different ways. If you are granted an audience, Memtok will be right at your side. With his whip. The Lord Protector will probably be about fifty feet away. And the whip *he* carries doesn't just tingle; it's a deadly weapon. Very. The old man has lived a long time, he's not easy to kill."

"I can try!"

"So you can. If a grasshopper tries to fight a lawnmower, one may admire his courage but not respect his judgment. But you are equally silly in thinking that Their Charity would lie about it. If he has done

what you think he has — raped your mother, forced her to submit unwillingly — he would feel not the slightest shame, not in any way reluctant to answer you plainly and honestly. Duke, he would no more bother to lie to you than it would occur to him to step aside if you were in his way. However — would you believe your mother?"

"Of course I would."

"Then tell him also that you would like to see her. I am almost certain that he would grant the request. For a few minutes and in his presence. The strict harem rules he can break if he chooses. If you have the guts to tell him to his face that you want to hear *her* confirm whatever he tells you, I think he would be astonished. But I think he would then laugh and grant the petition. If you want to see your mother, assure yourself personally of her welfare and safety, that's all I can suggest. You certainly can't see her otherwise. It's so irregular that your only chance is to spring it on him, face to face."

Hugh stood up. "We've wasted enough time in futile talk. Either get back to work, or go see Memtok."

"I'm not through."

"Oh, yes, you are. That was an order, not a suggestion. Do one or the other, and do it now."

"If you think I'm scared of that whip —"

"Oh, heavens, Duke, I wouldn't tingle you myself. You're my son, it might restrain me. If you ever force me to it, I'll ask Memtok to chastise you. He's reputed to be quite ex-

pert. Now get out. You've wasted half my morning."

Duke left. Hugh stayed a while, trying to compose himself. A row with Duke always left him shaking inside; it had been so when the lad was only twelve. But something else troubled him, too. He had used every sophistry he could think of to divert Duke from a hopeless course. That did not worry him, nor did he share Duke's basic worry. Whatever had happened to Grace, he felt sure that rape was not a factor.

But he was sourly aware of something that Duke, in his delusions, apparently did not realize — the oldest Law of the Conquered, that their women eventually submit — willingly.

Whether his ex-wife had or had not was a matter almost academic. He suspected that she had never been offered the opportunity — but, either way, she was obviously contented with her lot — smug about it. That troubled him little; he had tried to do his duty by her, she had long since withdrawn herself from him. But he did not want Barbara ever to feel the deadening load of hopelessness that could — and had, all through history — turned chaste women into willing concubines.

Much as he loved her, he had no illusions that Barbara was either angel or saint. The Sabine women had stood no chance and in the long run, neither would she. "Death before dishonor!" was a fine slogan, but it did not wear well. In time, enough time, it changed to happy cooperation.

He got out his bottle of Happiness,

looked at it . . . put it back. He would never solve his problems that way.

Hugh made no effort to find out whether or not Duke had gone to see Memtok. Hugh got back to work, that day and following days, at his endless task of buttering up Their Charity in every way available to him, whether by good bridge, money-making ideas, or simply translating. He no longer had any real hope that the boss would eventually permit him to move Barbara and the twins into his comfortable apartment; old Ponse seemed adamant on that point. But favor at court could be useful, even indispensable, no matter what happened — and in the meantime it let him see Barbara occasionally.

He never gave up his end purpose of escape. As the summer wore on he realized that the chances were very slim indeed of escaping — all four of them escaping, twins in arms — that year. Soon the household would move to the city, and so far as he knew the only possible time to escape was when they were near mountains. No matter. A year, two years, even longer, perhaps even wait until the boys could walk. Hard enough even then, but very nearly impossible with babies in arms. He must tell Barbara, with whispered urgency, the very next time they were left alone even for a minute, what he had in mind — urge her to keep her chin up, and wait.

He didn't dare write it in his nightly notes to her. Ponse could get them translated — other scholars

somewhere understood English, even though Joe would never give him away. Would Grace? He hoped not, but couldn't guess. Probably Ponse knew all about these notes, had them translated every day, chuckled over them. and did not care.

Perhaps he could work out a code with Barbara — something as simple as first word, first line, then second word, second line, and so on. Might risk it.

He had figured out one thing in their favor, an advantage that might overcome their sad luck of sophistication in this society. It was evident that runaways rarely succeeded because of their appearance. A white skin might be disguised — but servants average many inches shorter and many pounds lighter than the Chosen.

Both Barbara and Hugh were above average height for their own time; they were big enough to pass in that respect for Chosen. Features? The Chosen were not uniform in feature; Hindu influence mixed with Negroid and with other things. His permanent baldness was a problem, he would have to steal a wig. Or make one. But with stolen clothes, squirreled food, weapons of some sort (his two hands!), and *makeup* — they might be able to pass for "poor black trash" and safely take to the road.

If it wasn't too far. If the hounds did not get them. If they did not make some ridiculous bumble through not knowing the customs. But servants, marked by their complexion, were not allowed to go one step outside the household, farm,

ranch, or whatever was their lawful cage — without a pass from their patron.

Perhaps he could learn what a pass looked like, forge one. No, that was useless. Barbara and he could *not* travel as servants on a forged pass for the very reasons that made it dimly possible for them to disguise as Chosen: Their size was too distinctive, a pickup call for them would be carried out on sight.

The more Hugh thought about it the more it seemed to him that he would have to wait at least until the next summer and then make a quick run for the mountains.

If they were among the servants picked for the Summer Palace next year — if they *both* were — if *all four* were — He had not thought of that angle. Christ! Their little family might never be all under this one roof again. Perhaps they would have to run for it, right here, right now, in the short time left before the move — run and take a chance on hounds, on bears, on those nasty little leopards . . . with two nursing babies to protect. God! Was ever a man faced with poorer chances for saving his family?

Yes. He himself had been — when he built that shelter.

Prepare every way he could . . . and pray for a miracle. He started saving food from meals served in his rooms, such sorts as would keep a while. He kept his eyes open to steal a knife — or anything that could be made into a knife. He carefully kept what he was doing from Kitten's eyes.



Not once did he consider starting out some night alone.

Much sooner than he had hoped he got a chance to acquire makeup. A feast day always meant an orgy of Happiness in servants' hall; one came along that featured amateur theatricals. Hugh was urged to clown the part of Lord Protector in a comic skit. He did not hesitate to do so. Memtok himself had pointed out that his size made him perfect for the part. Hugh roared through it, brandishing a quirt three times as big as Their Charity ever carried.

He was a dramatic success. He saw Ponse watching the fun from the balcony from which Hugh had first seen Happiness issued, watching and laughing. "So Hugh ad-libbed, calling out, "Hey, less noise up there! Memtok! Tingle that critter!"

Their Charity laughed harder than ever, the servants were almost hysterical and, at bridge the following day, Ponse patted him and told him that he was the best Lord of Nonsense that the pageant had ever had.

Result: one stolen package of pigment which needed only to be mixed with the plentiful deodorant cream to be makeup as good as Max Factor ever sold to make him the exact shade of the Lord Protector; one wig which covered his baldness with black wavy hair. It was not the wig he had worn in the skit; he had turned that one back to the chief housekeeper, picking a time under Memtok's eyes and urging Memtok to try it on to see how it would look. No, it was a wig he had tried on out of several saved from year to year —

and which had fitted him just as well. He tried it on, dropped it, kicked it into a corner, recovered it in private—and kept it hidden under his robe for several days until it seemed certain that it hadn't been missed. Then it wound up under a heavy file case in his outer office one night when he chose to work later than his clerks.

He was still looking for something he could grind into a knife.

He did not see Duke during the three weeks following their row. Sometimes Duke's translations came in, sometimes he skipped a day or two; Hugh let him get away with it. But when Hugh could not recall having seen any scrolls come through of the sort Duke was concerned with for a full week, Hugh decided that he ought to check up. Eventually Ponse might notice; Duke might get into trouble. Or get Hugh into trouble.

Hugh walked around to the combined study and bedroom that was Duke's privilege for being a "researcher in history." He scratched on the door—no answer.

He scratched again, decided that Duke was sleeping, or not in; he slid the door up and looked in.

Duke was not asleep but he was out of this world. He was sprawled naked on his bunk in the most all-out Happiness jag Hugh had ever seen. Duke looked up when the door opened, giggled foolishly, made a wide gesture, and said, "Hiyah, y'ole bas'ard! How's tricks?"

Hugh stepped closer for a better look at what he thought he saw and

felt sick at his stomach. "Son, son!"

"Still crepe-hanging, Hughie? Old hooley Hugh!"

Gulping, Hugh started to back out, and backed almost into the Chief Veterinarian. The surgeon smiled and said, "Visiting my patient? He hardly needs it." He moved past Hugh with a muttered apology, leaned over Duke, peeled an eyelid back, examined him in other ways, said to him jovially, "You're doing fine, cousin. Let's give you another treatment, then I'll send you in another big meal. How does that sound?"

"Jus' fine, Doc. Jus' dandy! You're my frien'. Best frien' never had!"

The vet set a dial on a little instrument, pressed it against Duke's thigh, waited a moment, and came out. He smiled at Hugh. "Practically recovered. He'll dream a few hours now, wake up very hungry, and not know any time has passed. Then we'll feed him and give him another dose. A fine patient, he's rallied beautifully. Doesn't know what's happened. And by the time we're ready to taper him off, he won't be interested."

"Who ordered this?"

The surgeon looked surprised. "The Chief Domestic, of course. Why?"

"Why wasn't I told?"

"I really don't know, better ask him. I got it as a routine order, we carried it out in the routine fashion. Sleeping powder in his evening meal, I mean, then surgery that night. Followed by post-surgical care and the usual massive dosage to keep him

tranquil. It tends to make some of them a little nervous at first, we vary it to suit the patient. But, as you can see, this patient has taken it as easily as pulling a tooth. By the way, that bridge I installed in your mouth. Satisfactory?"

"What? Yes. Never mind that! I want to know —"

"May it please you, the Chief Domestic is the one to see. Now, if this one may be excused, I'm overdue to hold sick call. I merely stopped by to make sure my patient was happy."

Hugh let him go, then went to his apartment and threw up. Then he went looking for Memtok.

Memtok seemed pleased to see him, received him into his office at once, invited him to sit down. Hugh had begun to value the Chief Domestic as a friend, or as the nearest thing he had to a friend below stairs. Memtok had formed a habit of dropping in on Hugh in the evenings occasionally and, despite the boss servant's vinegary approach to life and the vast difference in their backgrounds and values, Hugh found him shrewd and always stimulating and extremely well informed within his limits. Besides Memtok seemed to have the loneliness that a ship's captain must endure; he seemed pleased to relax and enjoy friendship.

Since the other upper servants were correctly polite with the Chief Researcher rather than warm, Hugh, lonesome himself, had enjoyed Memtok's unbending and had thought of him as his friend. Until this —

Hugh told Memtok bluntly, without protocol, what was on his mind. "Why did you do this?"

Memtok looked surprised. "Such a question! Such a very improper question, in fact. Because the Lord Protector ordered it."

"He *did*?"

"My dear cousin! Tempering is always by the lord's order. Oh, I recommend, to be sure; that's routine. But orders for alterations must come from above. However, if it is any business of yours, in this case I made no recommendation. I was simply given the order, I had it carried out. All."

"Certainly it was my business! He works for me."

"Oh! But he had already been transferred before this was done. Else I would have made a point of telling you, believe me. Propriety, cousin, propriety in all things. I hold subordinates strictly accountable, as you know. So I never undercut them. Can't run a taut household if one does. Fair is fair."

"I wasn't told he was transferred. Don't you count that as undercutting?"

"Oh, but you were." The Chief Domestic glanced at the enormous rack of pigeon holes backing his desk, searched briefly, pulled out a slip. "There it is."

Hugh looked at it. "Duty Assignment. Change In. One servant, male (savage, rescued & adopted), known as Duke, description —" Hugh skipped on down. "—relieved of all duties in the Department of Ancient History and assigned to the personal service of Their Charity, effective

immediately. Billeting & Messing assignments: Unchanged until further —”

“I never saw this!”

“No, it’s my file copy. You got the original.” Memtok pointed at the lower left corner. “Your deputy clerk’s sign. It always pleases me when my executive can read and write, it makes things so much more orderly. With an ignoramus like the Chief Groundskeeper, one can tell him until one’s throat is raw and later the stupid lout will claim that wasn’t the way he heard it — yet a good tingling improves his memory only for that one day. Disheartening. One can’t be forever tingling an upper servant, it simply doesn’t work.” Memtok sighed. “I’d recommend a change, if his assistant wasn’t even stupider.”

“Memtok, I still never saw this.”

“As may be. It was delivered, your deputy receipted for it. Look around your office. One bullock gets you three you’ll find it. Perhaps you’d like me to tingle your deputy? Glad to.”

“No, no.” Memtok was almost certainly right, the order was probably on his own desk, unread. Hugh’s department had grown to two or three dozen people, he did not know how many; there seemed to be more every day. Most of them seemed to be button sorters or some such, all of them wanted to take up his time. Hugh had long since told the earnest, fairly literate clerk who was his deputy that he was not to be bothered with anything short of an emergency. Otherwise

Hugh would have accomplished no translating after the first week; Parkinson’s Law had taken over. The clerk had obeyed, after some reprimands, and routine matters stacked up. Every week or so Hugh would go through the stack rapidly, shove it all back at his deputy for file or burning or whatever it was they did with useless papers.

Probably the order transferring Duke was in the current accumulation. If he had seen it in time — Too late, too late! He put his elbows on his knees and covered his face. Too late! Oh, my son!

Memtok touched his shoulder almost gently. “Cousin, take hold of yourself. Your prerogatives were not abridged. You see that, do you not?”

“Yes. Yes, I see it,” Hugh mumbled through his hands.

“Then why are you so overwrought?”

“He was — He is — my son.”

“He is? Then why are you behaving as if he were your nephew?” Memtok used the specific form, meaning “your eldest sister’s oldest son” and he was honestly puzzled by the savage’s odd reaction. He could understand a mother being interested in her son — or her oldest son, at least. But a father? Uncle! Memtok had sons, he was statistically certain, throughout the household — “One-Shot Memtok” the former slutmaster used to call him. But he didn’t know who they were and could not imagine wanting to know. Or caring.

“Because —” Hugh started. “Oh, forget it, forget it. You did your duty. Conceded.”

"Well — You still seem upset. I'll send out for a bottle of Happiness. I'll join you, this once."

"No. No, thank you."

"Oh, come, come! You need it. A tonic is excellent, it is excess that one must avoid."

"Thanks, Memtok, but I really don't want it. Right now I must be sharp, especially so. I want to see Their Charity. Right away if possible. Will you arrange it for me?"

"I can't do that."

"Damn it, I know that you *can*. And I know he will see me if you ask him."

"Cousin, I didn't say that I would not; I said 'I *can't*.' Their Charity is not in residence."

"Oh." Then he asked to have word sent to Joe — Joe would surely know what had happened, and why. But the Chief Domestic told him that the young Chosen had left with the Lord Protector. He promised to let Hugh know when either or both of them returned — yes, at once, cousin.

Hugh skipped dinner, went to his rooms and brooded. He could not avoid tormenting himself with the thought that it was, in part at least, his own fault — no, no, not for failing to read every useless paper that came into his office the instant it arrived; no, *that* was sheer bad luck. Even if he checked his "junk mail" each morning, it probably would have been too late. The two orders had probably gone out at the same time.

What did anguish his soul was

fear that he had pushed the first domino, in that quarrel with Duke the last time he had seen him. He could have lied to the boy, told him flatly that his mother was, to Hugh's certain knowledge, a maid-in-waiting or some such, to the Lord Protector's sister, safe inside the royal harem and never seen by a man. Pampered, living the life of Riley, and happy in it — and that other tale was just the gossip servants talk to fill their idle minds.

Duke would have believed it because Duke would have wanted to believe it, and would have had no way to disprove it.

As it was —

Perhaps Duke had gone to see Their Charity. Perhaps Memtok had arranged it, or perhaps Duke had simply tried to bull his way in and the row had reached Ponse's ears. In any case it was more than possible, he saw now, that his advice to Duke to see the head man might well have resulted in a scene that would have caused Ponse to order the tempering as casually as he would order his air coach. All too likely —

He tried to tell himself that no one is *ever* responsible for another person's actions. He believed it, he tried to live by it. But he found that cold intellectual wisdom no comfort.

At last he quit brooding, got writing materials, and got to work on a letter to Barbara. He had had not even a moment's chance to tell her his plans for them to escape, no chance to work up a code. But from here on she must be ready at no

notice. He must tell her immediately, somehow.

Barbara knew German, he himself had a smattering left over from one high school year of it. He could not speak, read, nor understand it — but he recalled some words. He knew enough Russian to stumble through a simple conversation. Barbara had picked up a few words from him during their time in the wilderness — a game that they could share without giving Grace cause for jealousy — they often annoyed Grace unintentionally.

He wrote a draft of what he wanted to say, then painfully translated the letter into a mishmash of German, Russian, colloquial English, beatnik jive, literary allusions pig Latin, and special idioms. In the end he had a message that he was sure Barbara could puzzle out, but he was certain that no students of ancient languages could translate it into Language even in the unlikely event that the scholar knew English, German, and Russian.

He was not afraid that it might be translated by anyone else. If Grace saw it, she pronounce it gibberish; she knew no Russian, no German. Duke was off in a drug-ridden dreamworld. Joe might guess at the meaning — Joe was sharp — but he trusted Joe not to give him away. Nevertheless he tried to conceal the meaning even from Joe, intentionally hashing the syntax and using deliberate and obvious misspellings.

The draft read:



My darling,

I have been planning our escape for some time. I do not know how I will manage it but I want you to be ready, day or night, to grab the twins and simply follow me. Steal food if you can, steal some stout shoes, steal a knife. We'll head for the mountains. I had intended to wait until next summer, let the boys grow some first. But something has happened to change my mind: Duke has been tempered. I don't know why and I'm too heartbroken to talk about it. But it could happen to me next. Worse than that. You remember Ponse's saying that he wanted to see our twins as matched footmen? Darling, studs do not serve in the Banquet Hall. Nor is there any other fate in store for them; they are both going to be tall. It must not happen!

And we can't wait. The capital city of the Protectorate is somewhere near where St. Louis used to be. We can't run all the way to the Rocky Mountains carrying our two boys — and we have no way of knowing (and no reason to expect) that all four of us will be sent here to the Summer Palace next year.

Be brave. Don't touch any Happiness drug in any form from here on; our chance is likely to be a split-second one, with no warning.

I love you,
Hugh

Kitten came in; he told her to watch the show, not bother him. The child obeyed.

The final draft read:

Luba,

Ya bin smoking komplott seit Hector was weaned. The Count of Monte Cristo bit, dig? Kinder too klein machs nix — ya hawchool Goldilocks' troubles machs nix — as the fellow said, it's the only game in town. Good Girl Scouts always follow the Boy Scout motto. Speise, schuhen, messer — what Fagin taught Oliver, nicht? Da! Schnell is die herz von duh aparat; Berlin is too far from the Big Rock Candy and Eliza would

never make the final curtain.

Ein ander jahr, nyet. It takes two to tango and four to play bridge, all in ein kammer, or the trek is dreck. A house divided is for the vogelen, like doom. Mehr, ya haben schrecken. Mein Kronprinz now rules only the Duchy of Abelard. Page Christine Jorgenson, he answers — I kid you not Spilt milk butters no parsnips after the barn is burned so weep no more, my lady — but falsetto is not the pitch for detski whose horoscope reads Gemini. Borjemoi! Old King Coal is a Merry Old Soul but he'll get not zwilling kellneren from thee. Better a bonny bairn beards baren Karen — is ratification unanimous? Igday eemay?

Verb. Sap: I don't drink, smoke, nor chew, nor run around with twists who do. Cloud nine is endsville for this bit. Write soon, even if it's only five dollars utbay swing the jive; the dump is bugged and the Gay Pay Oo is eager.

Forever—H.

Kitten was long asleep before Hugh finished composing this jargon. He then tore the draft into bits and dropped it down the whirlpool toilet, went to bed. After a long time haunted by Duke's giggling, foolish, happy, drug-blurred face he got up and broke his own injunction to Barbara, dosed his sorrows and his fears with bottled "Happiness."

XVII

Barbara's answer came the next day. It read:

Darling,

When you bid three no-trump, my answer is seven no-trump, without hesitation. Then it's a grand slam—or we go set and don't cry. Any time you can get four together we'll be ready to play.

Love always—B.

Nothing else happened that day. Nor the next — or the next. Hugh doggedly dictated translations, his mind not on his work. He was very careful what he ate or drank, since he now knew the surgeon's humane way of sneaking up on a victim; he ate only from dishes Memtok had eaten from, tried to be crafty by never accepting a fruit or a roll that was closest to him when a servant offered him such, avoided drinking anything at the table — he drank only water which he himself had taken from the tap. He continued to have breakfast in his room, but he started passing up many foods that he liked in favor of unpeeled fruits and boiled eggs in the shell.

He knew these precautions were futile. No determined Borgia would have found them difficult to outwit, and in any case, if orders came to temper him, they need only grab him after subduing him with a whip if it proved difficult to drug him. But at least he might have time to protest, to demand that he be taken before the Lord Protector.

As for whips — He resumed his karate practice, alone in his rooms. A karate blow delivered fast enough would cause even a whip wielder to lose interest. There was no real hope behind any of it. He simply intended not to go peacefully. Duke had been right; it would have been better to have fought and died at once.

He made no attempt to see Duke.

He continued to hide food from his breakfast tray, sugar mostly, salt, and some hard bread. He assumed that such food must be undrugged

even though he ate none of it at the time, because it did not affect Kit-ten.

He had been going barefoot most of the time but wearing felt slippers for his daily exercise walks in the servants' garden. Now he complained to Memtok that the gravel hurt his feet through these silly slippers — didn't the household afford anything better?

He was given heavy leather sandals, wore them thereafter in the garden.

He cultivated the household's chief engineer, telling him that, in his youth, he had been in charge of construction for his former lord. The engineer was flattered, being not only one of the junior executive servants but also in the habit of hearing mostly complaints rather than friendly interest. Hugh sat with him after dinner and managed to appear knowledgeable largely by listening.

Hugh was invited to look around the plant, and spent a tiring morning the next day crawling over pipes and looking at plans — the engineer could not write but could read a little and understood drawings. It would have been an interesting day in itself if Hugh had been free from worries; Hugh's background made construction and engineering interesting to him. But he concentrated on trying to memorize every drawing he saw, match it in his mind with the passageways and rooms he was taken through. He had a deadly serious purpose: Despite having lived most of a summer in this big

building, he knew only small pieces of it inside and only a walled garden outside. He needed to know every possible exit from servants' quarters, what lay behind the guarded door to sluts' quarters, its layout, and most particularly, where in that area Barbara and the twins lived.

He got as far as the meander door that led into the distaff side. The engineer hesitated when the guard suddenly became alert. He said, "Cousin Hugh, I'm sure it's all right for you to go in here, with me—but maybe we had better go up to the Chief Domestic's office and have him write you out a pass."

"Whatever you say, cousin."

"Well, there really isn't anything of interest in here. Just the usual appointments of a barracks—water, lights, air service, plumbing, baths, such things. All the interesting stuff, power plant, incinerator, air control, and so forth, is elsewhere. And you know how the boss is—likely to fret over any variation from routine. If it's all the same to you, I'll make my morning inspection in there this afternoon."

"However you want to arrange things," Hugh answered with a suggestion of affronted dignity.

"Well . . . everybody knows you're not one of those disgusting young studs." The engineer looked embarrassed. "Tell you what. You just tell me flatly that you want to see everything . . . in my department that is . . . and I'll trot up to Memtok and tell him you said so. He knows—Uncle! We all know—that you en-

joy the favor of Their Charity. You understand me? I don't mean to presume. Memtok will write out a pass right quick and I'll be in the clear and so will the guard and the head guard. You wait here and be comfortable. I'll hurry."

"Don't bother. There's nothing in there I want to see," Hugh lied. "You've seen one bath, you've seen 'em all, I always say."

The engineer smiled in relief. "That's a good one, I'll remember that. 'You've seen one bath, you've seen 'em all!' Ha ha! Well, we've still got the carpentry shop and the metal shop."

Hugh went on with him, arm in arm and jovial, while fuming inside. So close! Yet letting Memtok suspect that he had any special interest in sluts' quarters was the last thing he wanted.

But the morning was well spent. Not only did Hugh acquire a burglar's insight as to strong and weak points of the building (that delivery door to the unloading dock; if it was merely locked at night, it should be possible to break out. "*Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum to rest it on*—") but also he picked up two prizes.

The first was a broken piece of spring steel, about eight inches long. Hugh palmed it from some scrap in the metal shop; it wound up taped to his arm, after an unneeded plumbing call, for he had gone prepared to steal.

The second was even more of a prize: a printed drawing of the lowest level, with engineering instal-

lations shown boldly — but with every door and passage marked — including sluts' quarters.

Hugh had admired it. "Uncle, but that's a beautiful drawing! Your own work?"

The engineer shyly admitted that it was. Based on architect's plans, you understand — but changes keep having to be added.

"Beautiful!" Hugh repeated. "It's a shame there's only one copy."

"Oh, plenty of copies, they wear out. Would you like one?"

"I would treasure it. Especially if the artist would inscribe it to me." When the man hesitated, Hugh moved in fast and said, "May I suggest a wording? Here, I'll write it out and you copy it."

Hugh walked away with the print, inscribed: "To my dear cousin Hugh, a fellow craftsman who appreciates beautiful work."

That night he showed it to Kitten. The child was awestruck. She had no concept of maps and was fascinated by the idea that it was possible to put down, just on a piece of paper, the long passages and twisty turns of her world. Hugh showed her how one went from his quarters to the ramp leading up to the executive servants' dining room, where the servants' main dining hall was, how the passage outside led, by two turns, to the garden. She confirmed the routes slowly, frowning in unaccustomed mental effort.

"You must live somewhere over here. Kitten. This area is sluts' quarters."

"It is?" she asked, incredulous.

"Yes. See if you can find where you live. I won't show you, you know how now. I'll just sit back."

"Oh, Uncle help me! Let me see. First, I have to come down this ramp —" She paused to think while Hugh kept his face impassive. She had just confirmed what he had almost stopped suspecting; the child was a planted spy. "— then . . . this is the door?"

"That's right."

"Then I walk straight ahead past the slutmaster's office, clear to the end, and I turn, and . . . I must live right *there!*" She clapped her hands and giggled.

"Your billet is across from your mess hall?"

"Yes."

"Then you got it right, first time! That's wonderful! Now let's see what else you can figure out."

For the next quarter hour she took him on a tour of sluts' quarters — junior and senior common rooms, messes, virgins' dormitory, bedwarmers' sleep room, nursery, lying-in, children's hall, service stalls, baths, playground door, garden door, offices, senior matron's apartment, everything — and Hugh learned that Barbara was no longer billeted in lying-in. He didn't ask. Kitten volunteered it.

"Barbara — you know, the savage slut you write to — she used to be *there* at first, and now she's right *there.*"

"How can you tell? Those rooms all look alike."

"I can tell. It's the second one of

the four-mother rooms on this side, when you walk away from the baths."

Hugh noted with deep interest that a maintenance tunnel ran under the baths, with an access manhole in the very passage Barbara's room was on — and with even deeper interest that this seemed to connect with another one that ran clear across the building. Could it be that here was a wide-open unguarded route between all three main areas of servants' land? Surely not, as the lines seemed to show that any stud with initiative need only crawl a hundred yards in the dark to let himself into sluts' quarters.

Yet it might be true — for how would any stud know where those tunnels led?

And why would a stud risk it if he guessed? With the ratio of intact males to breeding sluts about that of bulls to cows on a cattle ranch. And could thumbless hands handle the fastenings?

For that matter, could those trap doors be opened from below? It might very well be impossible, probably was.

"You're a fast learner, Kitten. Now try a part you don't know as well. Figure out, on the drawing, how to get from our rooms here to my offices. And if you solve that one, here's a harder one. What turns you would take and what ramp you would use if I told you to take a message to the Chief Domestic?"

She solved the first one after puzzling, the second she traced without hesitation.

At lunch next day, with Memtok at his elbow, Hugh called down the table to the engineer. "Pipes old cousin! That beautiful drawing you gave me yesterday — do you suppose one of your woodworkers could frame it for me? I'd like to hang it over my desk where people can admire it."

The engineer flushed and grinned widely. "Certainly, Cousin Hugh! How about a nice, clear-grained piece of mahogany?"

"Perfect." Hugh turned to his left. "Cousin Memtok, our cousin is wasted on pipes and plumbing. He's an artist. As soon as I have it hung, you must stop by and see what I mean."

"Glad to. Cousin. When I find time. If I find time."

More than a week passed with no word about Their Charity, nor about Joe — a week of no bridge, and no Barbara. At last, one day at lunch, Memtok said, "By the way, I had been meaning to tell you, the young Chosen Joseph has returned. Do you still want to see him?"

"Certainly. Is Their Charity also in residence?"

"No. Their Gracious sister believes that he may not return until after we go home. Ah, you must see that, Cousin! Not a cottage like this. Great doings night and day — and this humble servant will be lucky to get three meals in peace all winter. Run, run, run, worry, worry, worry, problems popping right and left," he said with unctuous satisfaction. "Be glad you're a scholar."

Word came a couple of hours

later that Joe expected Hugh. He knew his way, having been to Joe's guestrooms to help teach bridge to Chosen, so he went up alone, passed the check points and was escorted from the last one to Joe's door.

Joe greeted him enthusiastically. "Come in, Hugh! Find a seat. No protocol, nobody here but us chickens. Wait till you hear all I've accomplished. Boy, have I been busy! One shop all ready to go as a pilot plant before Their Charity finished wangling the protection, all on the Q.T. But so organized that we were in production the same day protection was granted. Not bad terms, either. Their Mercy takes half, Their Charity hangs onto half and floats the financing, and out of Their Charity's half I'm cut in for ten per cent and manage the company. Of course as we branch out and into other lines—the whole thing is called 'Inspired Games' and the charter is written to cover almost any fun you can have outside of bed—as we branch out, I'll need help in management. And that's a sticky problem; I'm scared silly that old Ponse is going to want me to put some of his dull-witted relatives in. Hope not, there's no place for nepotism when you're trying to hold coats and turn an honest bullock. Probably best to train servants for it—cheaper in the long run, with the right sort. How about you, Hugh? Do you think you could swing the management of a factory? It's a big job, I've got a hundred and seven people working there already."

"I don't see why not. I've bossed three times that many risking my own money, and never missed a payroll—and I once bossed over two thousand skilled trades of all sorts when I was in the Seabees. But, Joe, I came up here with something on my mind."

"Uh, all right, all right, spill it. Then I want to show you the layout. And the plans."

"Joe, you know about Duke?"

"What about Duke?"

"Tempered. Didn't you know?"

"Oh. Yes, I knew. That happened just about as I left. He's not hurt, is he? Complications?"

"'Hurt?' Joe, he was *tempered*. You act as if he had merely had a tooth pulled. You knew? Didn't you try to stop it?"

"No."

"In the name of God, *why not?*"

"Let me finish, can't you? I don't recall that you tried to stop it, either."

"I never had the chance. I never knew."

"Neither did I. That's what I've been trying to tell you, but you keep jumping down my throat. I learned about it the morning after it happened."

"Oh. Sorry. I thought you meant you just stood by and let it happen."

"Well, I didn't. Don't know what I could have done if I had known. Maybe asked Ponse to call you in and tell you, first, I suppose. Wouldn't have done any good, so I guess we were both better off not having to fret about it. Maybe all for the best. Now about our plans. If

you'll have a look at this schematic layout, you'll see —"

"Joel!"

"Huh?"

"Can't you see I'm in no shape to talk about playing-card factories?"

Joe folded up his plans. "I'm sorry, Hugh. Let's sit down together and you talk, if it will make you feel better. I guess I'm pretty pre-occupied with this venture. It's exciting. But get it off your chest. I suppose you do feel bad about it. Looking at it from one angle."

Joe listened, Hugh talked. Presently Joe shook his head. "Hugh, I can set your mind at rest on one point. Duke never did see the Lord Protector. Never asked to, so far as I know. So your advice to Duke — good enough advice, I think — could not have had anything to do with his being tempered."

"I hope you're right. I'd feel like cutting my throat if I knew it was my fault."

"It's not, so quit fretting about it."

"I'll try. Joe, whatever possessed Ponse to do it. He knew how we felt about it, from that time it almost happened through a misunderstanding. So why would he? I thought he was my friend."

Joe looked embarrassed. "You really want to know?"

"I've got to know."

"Well . . . you're bound to find out. Grace did it."

What? Joe, you must be mistaken. Sure, sure, Grace has her faults. But she wouldn't have that done to her own son."

"Well, no, not exactly. I doubt if she knew what it was until after it was done. But, just the same, she set it off. She's been wheedling Ponse and whining at him almost from the day we got here that she wanted her Dukie with her. She was lonesome. 'Ponsie, I'm lonesome. Ponsie, you're being mean to Gracie. Ponsie, I'm going to tickle you until you say Yes. Ponsie, why won't you?' — all in that baby whine she uses sometimes. Always uses now, I should say. Hugh, I guess you didn't see much of it."

"None of it."

"I would have wrung her neck. But Ponse just ignored her, except when she tickled him. Then he would laugh and they would roll on the floor and he would tell her to shut up, and make her sit quiet for a while. Treated her just like one of the cats. Honest, I don't think he ever — I mean, it doesn't seem likely, from what I saw that he was interested in her as a —"

"And I'm not interested. Didn't anybody tell Grace what it would entail, for her to have her son with her?"

"Hugh, I don't think so. It would never occur to Ponse that any explanation was required . . . and certainly I never discussed it with her. Not that she ever talked to me much. She doesn't like me any more. I take up too much of her Ponsie's time." Joe wrinkled his nose. "I doubt if she knew. Of course she should have figured it out on her own. Anybody else would have. But, excuse me, since she's your wife.

but I'm not sure she's bright enough."

"And hopped up on Happiness, too — every time I caught sight of her. No, she's not bright. But she's not my wife, either. Barbara is my wife."

"Well . . . legally speaking, a servant can't have a wife."

"I wasn't speaking legally, I was speaking the truth. But even though Grace is no longer my wife, I'm somewhat comforted to know that she probably didn't push it knowing what it would cost Duke."

Joe looked thoughtful. "Hugh, I don't think she did . . . but I don't think she really cares, either . . . and I'm not sure that you can properly say that it cost Duke anything."

"You might explain those statements. Perhaps I'm dense."

"Well, if Grace minds that Duke has been tempered, she certainly doesn't show it. She's pleased as punch. And he doesn't seem to mind."

"You've seen them? Since?"

"Oh, yes. I had breakfast with Their Charity yesterday morning. They were both there."

"I thought Ponse was still away?"

"**H**e was back and now he's gone out to the west coast. Business. We're really tearing into it. He was only here a couple of days. But he had this birthday present for Grace. Duke, I mean. Yes, I know it wasn't her birthday, hers is in December, as I recall, and anyhow birthdays aren't anything nowa-

days; it's namedays that counts. But she told Ponse she was about to have a birthday and kept wheedling him — and you know Ponse, indulgent with animals and kids. And with Grace. So he set it up as a surprise for her. The minute he was back, he made a present of Duke to her. Shucks, they've even got a room somewhere off Ponse's private quarters. Neither one of them has to sleep below stairs any longer, they live up here. In the private-private quarters I mean. Where you've been, where we play bridge."

"Okay, I don't care where they sleep. You were telling me how Grace felt about it. And Duke."

"Oh, yes. Can't say just when she found out what had been done to Duke to make it possible for him to be with her. all I can say is that she is so happy about it that she was even cordial with me — telling me what a dear Ponsie was to arrange it and doesn't Dukie look just *grand*? In his new clothes? Stuff like that. She's got him dressed in the fancy livery the servants wear up here, not a robe like that you're wearing. She's even put jewelry on him. Ponse doesn't mind. He's an outright gift, a servant's servant, Grace's. Actually I don't think he does a lick of work, he's just her pet. And she loves it that way."

"But how about Duke?" Hugh persisted.

"That's what I've been telling you, Hugh. Duke hasn't lost by it. He's snug as a bug in a rug and he knows it. He was almost patronizing to me. You might have thought I

was the one wearing livery instead of the other way around. With Grace in solid with the big boss and with her wound around his little finger, Duke thinks he's got it made. Well, he *has*, Hugh. And I didn't mind his manner; I could see he was hopped on this tranquilizer you servants use."

"You call it 'got it made' when a man is grabbed and drugged and tempered and then kept drugged so that he doesn't care what happens to him? Joe, I'm surprised. I'm shocked."

"Certainly I call it that. Hugh, put your prejudices aside and look at it rationally. Duke is happy. If you don't believe it, let me take you in there and you talk to him. Talk to both of them. I'm free to go in there even when Their Charity is not in residence and I'll take the liberty of taking you with me, though I shouldn't. See for yourself."

"No, I'll take your word for it, I don't think I could stomach it. I'll concede that Duke is happy. I'm well aware that, if you feed a man enough of that 'Happiness' drug, he'll be happy as a lark even if you cut off his arms and legs and then start on his head. But you can be that sort of 'happy' on morphine. Or heroin. Or opium. That doesn't make it a good thing. It's a tragedy."

"Oh, don't be melodramatic, Hugh. These things are all relative. Consider it in its frame. Duke was certain to be tempered eventually. It's not lawful for a servant as big as he is to be kept for stud. I'm sure you know that. So what difference

does it make whether it's done last week, or next year, or when Ponse dies. The only difference is that he is happy in a life of luxury, instead of hard manual labor in a mine, or a rice swamp, or such. He doesn't know anything useful, he could never hope to rise very high. High for a servant, I mean."

"Joe, do you know what you sound like? Like some white-supremacy apologist telling how well off the darkies used to be, a-sittin' outside their cabins, a-strummin' their banjoes, and singin' spirituals."

Joe blinked. "I could resent that."

Hugh Farnham was angry and feeling reckless. "Go ahead and resent it! I can't stop you. You're a Chosen, I'm a servant. Can I fetch your white sheet for you, Massah? What time does the Klan meet?"

"Shut up!"

Hugh Farnham shut up. Joe went on quietly, "I won't bandy words with you. I suppose it does look that way, to you. If so, do you expect me to weep? The shoe is on the other foot, that's all — and high time. I used to be a servant. Now I'm a respected businessman — with a good chance of becoming a nephew by marriage of some noble family. Do you think I would swap back, even if I could? For *Duke*? Not for anybody. I'm no hypocrite. I was a servant, now you are one. What are you beefing about?"

"Joe, you were a decently treated employee. You were not a slave."

The younger man's eyes suddenly

became opaque and his features took on an ebony hardness Hugh had never seen in him before. "Hugh," he said softly, "have you ever made a bus trip through Alabama? As a 'nigger'?"

"No."

"Then shut up. You don't know what you are talking about." He went on, "The subject is closed and now we'll talk business. I do want you to see what I've done and am planning to do. This games notion is the best idea I ever had."

Hugh did not argue whose idea it had been; he listened while the young man went on with eager enthusiasm. At last Joe put down his pen and sat back. "What do you think of it? Any suggestions? You made some useful suggestions when I proposed it to Ponse—keep on being useful and there will be a good place in it for you."

Hugh hesitated. It seemed to him that Joe's plans were too ambitious in the early stages in view of the fact that the market was only a potential and a demand had yet to be created. He did not say so. All he said was, "It might be worth while to package with each deck, no extra charge, a rule book."

"Oh, no, we'll sell those separately. Make money on them."

"I didn't mean a complete Hoyle. Just a pamphlet with some of the simpler games. Cribbage. A couple of solitaire games. One or two others. Do that and the customers start enjoying them at once. It should lead to more sales."

"Hmm. I'll think about it." Joe folded up his papers, set them aside. "Hugh, you got so shirty a while ago that I didn't tell you one thing I have in mind."

"Yes?"

"Ponse is a grand old man, but he isn't going to live forever. I plan to have my own affairs separate from his by then so that I'll be financially independent. Trade around interests somehow, untangle it. I guess I don't need to tell you that I'm not anxious to have Mrika as my boss—and I didn't tell you, so don't repeat it. But I'll manage it, I'm looking out for number one." He grinned. "And when Mrika is Lord Protector I won't be living here. I'll have a household of my own, a modest one—and I'll need servants. Guess whom I plan to adopt when I staff it."

"I couldn't."

"Not you—although you may very well be a business servant to me, if it turns out you really can manage a job. No, I had in mind adopting Grace and Duke."

"Huh?"

"Surprised? Mrika won't want them, that's certain. He despises Grace because of her influence over his uncle, and it's a sure thing he's not going to like Duke any better. Neither of them is trained and it shouldn't be expensive to adopt them from him if I don't appear to eager. But they would be useful to me. For one thing, since they speak English, I'd be able to talk to them in a language nobody else knows. And that could be an advantage, especi-

ally when other servants are around. But best of all — well, the food here is good but sometimes I get a longing for some plain old American cooking. And Grace is a very good cook, when she wants to be. So I'll make her a cook. Duke can't cook but he can learn to wait on table and answer the door and such. Houseboy, in other words."

Hugh said slowly, "Joe, you don't want them because Grace can cook."

Joe grinned unashamedly. "No, not entirely. I think Duke would look real good as my houseboy. And Grace as my cook. Tit for tat. Oh, I'll treat them decently, Hugh, don't you worry. They work hard and behave themselves and they won't get tingled. However, I don't doubt but what it will take a few tinges before they get the idea." He twitched his quirt. "And I won't say I won't enjoy teaching them. I owe them both a little. Three years, Hugh. Three years of Grace's endless demands, never satisfied with anything — and three years of being treated with patronizing contempt by Duke whenever he was around."

Hugh said nothing. Joe said, "Well? What do you think of my plan?"

"I thought you were a gentleman, Joe. It seems I was wrong."

"So?" Joe barely twitched his quirt. "Boy, we excuse you. All."

XVIII

Hugh came away from Joe's rooms feeling utterly discouraged.

He knew that he had been foolish — no, criminally careless! — in letting Joe get his goat. He needed Joe. Until he had Barbara and the twins safely hidden in the high mountains, he needed every possible source of favor and privilege. Joe, Memtok, Ponse, anyone he could find — and probably Joe most of all. Joe was a Chosen. Joe could go anywhere, tell him things he didn't know, give him things he could not possibly steal. He had even considered, as a last resort, asking Joe to plot with him, help them to escape.

Not now! It would take long and careful buttering before he could risk that. Idiot! Utter fool! To risk Barbara and the boys just because you can't hold your bloody temper!

It seemed to him that things were as bad as they could get — and part of it his own folly.

But he soon learned that things could be much worse.

He did not stand around moping; he looked up Memtok. It had become more urgent than ever to set up some way to communicate with Barbara. Secretly. And that meant that he had to talk to her — and that mean at least one bridge game in the Lord Protector's lounge and a snatch of talk even if he had to talk English in front of Ponse. He had to force matters.

Hugh found the Chief Domestic leaving his office. "Cousin Memtok, could you spare me a word?"

Memtok's habitual frown barely relaxed. "Certainly, cousin. But walk along with me, will you? Trouble,

trouble, trouble. You would think that a department head could run his department without someone to wipe his nose, wouldn't you? You'd be wrong. The freezer flunky complains to the leading butcher and he complains to the chef, and it's a maintenance matter, and you would think that Gnou would take it up directly with engineering and between them they would settle it. Oh, no! They both come to me with their troubles. You know something about construction, don't you?"

"Yes," Hugh admitted, "but I'm not up to date in the subject. It has been some years." (About two thousand, my friend! But we won't speak of that.)

"Construction is construction. Come along, give me the benefit of your advice."

(And find out that I'm faking. Chum, I'll double-talk you to death.) "Certainly. If this humble one's opinion is worth anything."

"Damned chill room. It's been a headache every summer. I'm glad we'll be back in the Palace soon."

"Has the date been set? May one ask?"

"One may. A week from tomorrow. So it's time to think about packing up your department and being ready to move."

It was a body blow. Hugh almost stumbled but he tried to keep his face calm and his voice steady. "So soon?"

"Why are *you* looking worried? A few files, some office equipment. Have you any idea how many thou-

sands of items *I* have on inventory? And how much gets stolen, or lost, or damaged simply because you can't trust any of these fools? Uncle!"

"It must be terribly wearing," agreed Hugh. "But that brings to mind something. I petitioned you to let me know when Their Charity was next in residence. I learned from the young Chosen, Joseph, that Their Charity returned a day or two ago and is now gone again."

"Are you criticizing?"

"Uncle forbid! I was just asking."

"It is true that Their Charity was physically present for a short time. But he was not officially in residence. Not in the best of health, it seemed to be — Uncle protect him."

"Uncle protect him well!" Hugh answered sincerely. "Under the circumstances naturally you did not ask him to grant me an audience. But could I ask of you the small favor, next time —"

"We'll talk later. Let's see what these two helpless ones have to offer." Head Chef Gnou and the Chief Engineer met them at the entrance to Gnou's domain, they went on through the kitchen, through the butcher shop, and into the cold room. But they lingered in the butcher shop, Memtok impatient, while parka-like garments were fetched, the Chief Domestic having refused the ones offered on the legitimate grounds that they were soiled.

The butcher shop was very crowded with live helpers and dead carcasses — birds, beeves, fish, anything. Hugh reflected that thirty-



eight Chosen and four hundred and fifty servants ate a lot of meat. He found the place mildly depressing even though he himself had cleaned and cut and trimmed many an animal.

But only his habitual tight control in the presence of Memtok and his "cousins" in service kept him from showing shock at something he saw on the floor, trimmed from a carcass almost cut up on one block.

It was a dainty, plump, very feminine hand.

Hugh felt dizzy, there was a roaring in his ears. He blinked. It was still there. A hand much like Kitten's —

He breathed carefully, controlled the retching within him, kept his back turned until he had command over himself. There had suddenly flooded over him the truth behind certain incongruities, certain idioms, some pointless jokes.

He now understood what they had meant.

Gnou was making nervous conversation while his boss waited. He moved to the chopping block, unintentionally kicking the dainty

little hand underneath into a pile of scraps and said, "Here's one you won't have to bother to taste, Chief Domestic. Unless the old one returns unexpectedly."

"I always bother to taste," Memtok said coldly. "Their Charity expects his table to be perfect whether he is in residence or not."

"Oh, yes, surely," Gnou agreed. "That's what I always tell my cooks. But — Well, this very roast illustrates one of my problems. Too fat. You'll feel that it's greasy — and so it will be. But that's what comes of using sluts. Now, in my opinion, you can't find a nicer piece of meat, marbled but firm, than a buck tempered not older than six, then hung at twice that age."

"No one asked your opinion," Memtok answered. "Their Charity's opinion is the only one that counts. They thinks that sluts are more tender."

"Oh, I agree, I agree! No offense intended."

"And none taken. In fact I agree with your opinion. I was simply making clear that your opinion — and mine in this matter — is irrelevant. I see they've fetched them.

Did they stop to make them?"

The party put on heavy garments, went on inside. The engineer had said nothing up to then, effacing himself other than a nod and a friendly grin to Hugh. Now he explained the problem, a cranky one of refrigeration. Hugh tried to keep his eyes on it, rather than on the contents of the meat storage room.

Most of the meat was beef and fowl. But one long row of hooks down the center held what he knew he would find—human carcasses, gutted and cleaned and frozen, hanging head down, save that the heads were missing. Young sluts and bucks, he could see, but whether the bucks were tempered or not was no longer evident. He gulped and thanked his unlucky stars that that pathetic little hand had given him some warning, at least saved him from fainting.

"Well, Cousin Hugh, what do you think?"

"Why, I agree with Pipes."

"That the problem can't be solved?"

"No, no." Hugh had not really listened. "His reasoning is correct and he implied the answer. As he says, the problem can't be solved—now. The thing to do is not to try to patch it up. *now*. Wait a week. Tear it out. Put in new equipment."

Memtok looked sour. "Expensive."

"But cheaper in the long run. Good engineering isn't accomplished by grudging a few bullocks. Isn't that right, Pipes?"

The engineer nodded vigorously.

"Just what I always say, Cousin Hugh! You're absolutely right."

Memtok still frowned. "Well—prepare an estimate. Show it to Cousin Hugh before you bring it to me."

Memtok paused on the way out and patted the loin of a stripling buck carcass. "That's what I would call a nice piece of meat. Eh, Hugh?"

"Beautiful," Hugh agreed with a straight face. "Your nephew, perhaps? Or just a son?"

There was a frozen silence. Nobody moved except that Memtok seemed to grow taller. He raised his whip of authority most slightly, no more than tightening his thumbless grip.

Then suddenly he grimaced and gave a dry chuckle. "Cousin Hugh, your well-known wit will be the death of me yet. That's a good one. Gnou, remind me to tell that this evening."

The chef agreed and chuckled, the engineer roared. Memtok gave his cold little laugh again. "I'm afraid I can't claim the honor, Hugh. All these critters are ranch bred, not one of them is a cousin of ours. Yes, I know how it is in some households, but Their Charity considers it unspeakably vulgar to serve a house servant, even in cases of accidental death. And besides, it makes the servants restless."

"Commendable."

"Yes. It is gratifying to serve one who is a stickler for propriety. Enough, enough, time is wasting. Walk back with me, Hugh."

Once they were clear of the rest Memtok said, "You were saying?"

"Excuse me?"

"Come, come, you're being absent-minded today. Something about Their Charity not being in residence."

"Oh, yes. Memtok, could you possibly, as a special favor to me, let me know the minute Their Charity returns? Whether officially in residence or not? Not petition anything for me. Just let me know." Damn it, with time pouring away like life through a severed artery his only course might be a belly-scrapping apology to Joe, then get Joe to intercede.

"No." said Memtok. "No. I don't think I can."

"I beg your pardon? Has this one offended you?"

"You mean that witticism? Heaven, no! Some might find it vulgar and one bullock gets you three that if you had told it in sluts' quarters some of them would have fainted. But if there is one thing I pride myself on, Hugh, it's my sense of humor — and any day I can't see a joke simply because I am the butt of it, I'll petition to turn in my whip. No, it was simply my turn to have a little joke at your expense. I said, 'I don't think I can.' That is a statement of two meanings — a double-meaning joke, follow me? I don't think I can tell you when Their Charity returns because he has sent word to me that he is not returning. So you'll see him next at the Palace . . . and I promise I'll let you know when he's in resi-

dence." The Chief Domestic dug him in the ribs. "I wish you had seen your own face. My little joke wasn't nearly as sharp as yours. But your jaw dropped. Very comical."

Hugh excused himself, went to his rooms, took an extra bath, a most thorough one, then simply thought until dinner time.

He braced himself for the ordeal of dinner with a carefully measured dose of Happiness — not enough to affect him later, strong enough to carry him through dinner, now that he knew why "pork" appeared so often on the menu of the Chosen. He suspected that the pork served to the servants was really pork. But he intended to eat no more bacon nevertheless. Nor ham, nor pork chops, nor sausage. In fact he might turn vegetarian.

He was very busy that evening, writing long after Kitten was asleep. It had become utterly necessary to reach Barbara secretly, yet his only means was the insecure route through Kitten. The problem was to write to Barbara in a code that only she could read, and which she would see as a code without having been warned and without the code being explained to her — and yet one which was safe from others. But the double-talk mixture he had last sent her would not do; he was now going to have to give her detailed instructions, ones where it really mattered if she missed a word or failed to guess a concealed meaning.

His last draft was a miracle of double-talk.

Darling,

If you were here I would love a literary gabfest, a good one. You know what I mean, I'm sure. Let's consider Edgar Allan Poe, for example. Can you recall how I claimed that Poe was the best writer both to read and reread of all the mystery writers before or since, and that this was true because he never could be milked dry on one reading? The answer or answers in the Gold Bug, or in that little gem The Murders in the Rue Morgue, or the Case of the Purloined Letter, or any of them; same rule applies to them all, when you consider the very subtle way he had of slanting his meaning so that one reaches a full period in his sentences only after much thought. Poe is grand fun and well worth study. Let's have our old literary talks by letter. How about Mark Twain next? Tired - must go to bed!

Love,
H.

Since Hugh had never discussed Edgar Allan Poe with Barbara at any time, he was certain that she would study the note for a hidden message. The only question was whether or not she would find it. He wanted her to read it as:

If
you
can
read
this
answer
the
same
way
period

Having done his best he put it aside, first disposing of all trial work, then prepared to do something else much more risky. At that point he

would have given his chances of immortal bliss, plus 10% for a cheap flashlight — and then have settled for a candle.

His rooms were lighted, brilliantly or softly as he wished, by glowing, translucent spheres set in the upper corners. Hugh did not know what they were save that they were not any sort of electric light he had ever known. They gave off no heat, seemed not to require wiring, and were controlled by little cranks.

A similar light, the size of a golf ball, was mounted on his scroll reader. It was controlled by twisting it; he had decided tentatively that twisting these spheres polarized them in some way.

He tried to dismount the scroll reader light.

He finally got it loose by breaking

the upper frame. It was now a featureless, brilliantly shining ball and nothing he could do would dim it — which was almost as embarrassing as no light at all.

He found that he could conceal it in an armpit under his robe. There was still a glow but not much.

He made sure that Kitten was asleep, turned out all lights, raised his corridor door, looked out. The passageway was dim, lighted only by a standing light at an intersection fifty yards away. Regrettably he had to go that way. He had expected no light at this hour.

He felt his "knife" taped to his left arm — not much of a knife, but patient whetting with a rock picked up from a garden path had put an edge on it, and tape had made a firm grip. It still needed hours more work and he could work on it only after Kitten was asleep or in time stolen from working hours. But it felt good to have it there and it was the only knife, chisel, screwdriver, or burglar's jimmy that he had.

The manhole to the engineering service tunnels which he wanted lay in the passage to the right after he had to pass the lighted intersection. Any manhole would do, but that one was on the logical route to the veterinary's quarters. If caught outside his rooms but otherwise without cream on his lip, he planned to plead a sudden stomach ache.

The manhole cover swung back easily on a hinge, it was fastened by a clasp that needed only turning to

free it. The floor of the tunnel, glimpsed with his tiny sphere, lay four feet below the corridor floor. He started to let himself down and ran into his first trouble.

These manholes, and the tunnels they led to, had been intended for men a foot shorter and fifty pounds lighter than Hugh Farnham, and proportionately smaller in shoulders, hips, hand-and-knees, height, and so forth.

But he could make it. He had to.

He wondered how he would make it when it counted, crawling and carrying at least one baby. But that he had to do, too. So he would.

He almost trapped himself. Barely in time he found that the under side of the steel door was smooth, no handle and that it latched automatically by a spring catch.

That settled why no one worried that the studs might gain unplanned access to sluts. But it also settled something else. Hugh had seriously considered snatching this very chance, if he found things quiet at the other end: Wake Barbara, bring all four of them back via the tunnel — then outside and away, by any of half a dozen weak points, away and off to the mountains on foot, reach them before light, find some stream and ford it endwise long enough to throw off hounds. Go, go, go! With almost no food, with nothing but a makeshift knife, with no equipment, a "night shirt" for clothing, and no hope of anything better. Go! And save his family, or die with them. But die free!

Perhaps, perhaps some day his

twin sons, wiser in the new ways than himself and toughened by a life fighting nature, could lead an uprising against this foul thing. But all he planned to do, all he could hope for, was get them free, keep them free, alive and free and un-gelded until they were grown and strong.

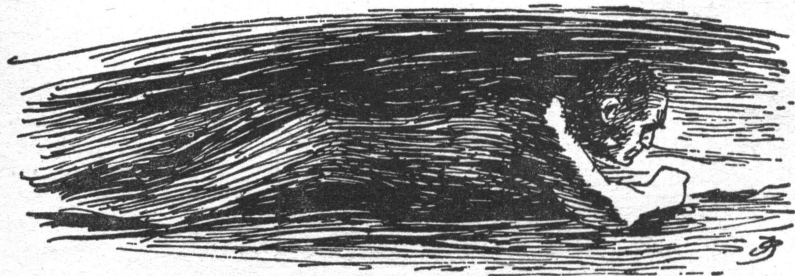
Or die.

Such was still his plan. He wast-

At last he managed to get at and break the spring. He removed the catch entirely. The manhole, closed, now looked normal, but it could be opened from underneath with just a push.

Only then did he let himself down inside and close it over him.

He started out on knees and elbows with the light in his mouth, and stopped almost at once. The



ed not a moment sorrowing over that spring catch. It merely meant that he *must* communicate with Barbara, and set a time with her, because she would have to open the hatch at the far end. Tonight he could only reconnoiter.

He found that tape from his knife handle would hold the spring catch back. He tested it from above, and found that the lid could now be swung back without turning the clasp.

But his wild instincts warned him that this would not do. The tape might not hold until he was back. He might be trapped inside.

He spent a sweating half hour working on that spring catch, using knife and fingers and holding the light ball in his teeth.

damned skirt of his robe kept him from crawling! He tried bunching it around his waist. It slid down.

At last he inched back to the manhole shaft, took the pesky garment off entirely, left it under the manhole and crawled away without it, naked save for knife strapped to his arm and the light in his teeth. He found that he could then make fair progress, although never able to get fully on hands and knees. His elbows had to be bent, his thighs he could not bring erect, and there were places where valves and fittings of the pipes he crawled past forced him almost to his belly.

Nor could he tell how far he was going. However, there were joints in the tunnel about (it seemed to him) every thirty feet; he counted them and tried to match them in his

mind with the engineering drawing.

Pass under two manholes . . . sharp left turn into another tunnel at next manhole . . . crawl about a hundred and fifty feet and under one manhole —

Something more than an hour later he was under a manhole which had to be the one closest to Barbara.

If he had not lost himself in the bowels of the palace — If he had correctly remembered that complex drawing — If the drawing was up to date — (Had two thousand years made any difference in the well-known lag between engineering changes and revisions of the prints to match?) If Kitten knew what she was talking about in locating Barbara's billet by a method so novel to her — If it was still Barbara's billet —

He crouched in the awkward space and tried to press his ear against the shaft's cover.

He heard a baby cry.

About ten minutes later he heard hushed female voices. They approached, passed over him, and someone stepped on the lid.

Hugh unkinked himself, prepared to return. The space was so tight that the obvious way was to back up the way he had come, so he found himself trying to crawl backward through the tunnel.

That worked so poorly that he came back to the shaft and, with some contortions and loss of skin, he got turned around.

What seemed hours later he was convinced that he was lost. He began to wonder which was the more like-

ly: Would he starve or die of thirst down here? Or would some repairman get the shock of his simple life by finding him first?

But he kept on crawling.

His hands found his robe before his eyes saw it. Five minutes later he was in it; seven minutes later (he stopped to listen) he was up and out and had the lid closed. He forced himself not to run back to his rooms.

Kitten was awake.

He wasn't aware of it until she followed him into the bath. Then she was saying with wide-eyed horror, "Oh, dear! Your poor knees! And your elbows, too."

"I stumbled and fell down."

She didn't argue it, she simply insisted on bathing him and salving and taping the raw places. But when she started to pick up his dirty robe, he told her sharply to go to bed. He did not mind her touching his robe. But his knife had been on top of it and only by clumsy maneuvering had he managed to keep himself between her and it long enough for him to flip a fold of cloth over the weapon.

Kitten went silently to bed. Hugh hid the knife in its usual place (much too high for Kitten), then went into his living room and found the child crying in her pillow. He petted her, soothed her, said he had not meant to sound harsh, and fed with her while she drank it, watched her go happily to sleep.

Then he did not even try to get along without it himself. Kitten had her a bonus dose of Happiness — sat

gone to sleep with one hand outside her cover. It looked to Hugh exactly like a forlorn little hand he had seen twelve hours earlier on the floor of a butcher shop.

He was exhausted and the drink let him go to sleep. But not to rest. He found himself at a dinner party, black tie and dressy. But he did not like the menu. Hungarians goulash . . . French fries . . . Chinese noodles . . . po' boy sandwich . . . breast of peasant . . . baked Alaskans — but it was all pork. His host insisted that he taste every dish. "Come, come!" he chided with a winty smile. "How do you know you don't like it if you don't taste it? One bullock gets you three you'll learn to love it."

Hugh moaned and could not wake up.

Kitten did not chatter at breakfast, which suited him. Two hours of nightmare-ridden sleep was not enough, yet it was necessary to go to his office and pretend to work. Mostly he stared at the print framed over his desk while his scroll reader clicked unnoticed. After lunch he sneaked away and tried to catch a nap. But the engineer scratched at his door and apologetically asked him to look over his estimates on refitting the meat cooler. Hugh poured his guest a dollop of Happiness, then pretended to study figures that meant nothing to him. After a decent time he complimented the man, then scrawled a note to Memtok, recommending the idea that the contract be let.

Barbara's note that night applauded the idea of a literary discussion club by mail and discussed Mark Twain. Hugh was interested only in how it read diagonally:

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mark

XIX

Darling
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must
escape
next
six
days
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ready
night
after
letter
has
phrase
freedom
is
a
lonely
thing —

For the next three days Hugh's letters to Barbara were very long and chatty and discussed everything from Mark Twain's use of colloquial idiom to the influence of progressive education on the relaxation of grammar. Her answers were lengthy, equally "literary," and reported that she would be ready to

open the hatch, confirmed that she understood, that she had a little stock of food, had no knife, no shoes — but that her feet were very calloused — and that her only worry was that the twins might cry or that her roommates might wake up, especially as two of them were still giving night feedings to their babies. But for Hugh not to worry, she would manage.

Hugh drew a fresh bottle of Happiness, taped it near the top of the shaft, instructed her to tell her roommates that she had stolen it, then use it to get them so hopped on the drug that they would either sleep or be so slaphappy that if they did wake, they would do nothing but giggle — and, if possible, get enough of the drug into the twins that the infants would pass out and not cry no matter how they were handled.

Making an extra trip through the tunnels to plant the bottle was a risk Hugh hated to take. But he made it pay. He not only timed himself by the clocks in his room and learned beyond any possibility of mistake the rat maze he must follow but also he carried a practice load, a package of scrolls taped together to form a mass bigger and heavier, he felt sure, than one of his infant sons would be. This he tied to his chest with a sling made of stolen cloth; it had been a dust cover for the scroll printer in his offices. He made two such slings, one for Barbara, and tore and tied them such that they could be shifted to the back later to permit the babies to be carried papoose style.

He found that it was difficult but not impossible to carry a baby in this fashion through the low tunnels, and he spotted the places where it was necessary to inch forward with extreme care not to place any pressure on his dummy “precious burden” and still not let the ties on his back catch on engineering fittings above him.

But it could be done and he got back to his rooms without waking Kitten — he had increased her evening bonus of Happiness. He replaced the scrolls hid his knife and spherical lamp, washed his knees and elbows and anointed them, then sat down and wrote a long P.S. to the letter he had written earlier to tell Barbara how to find the bottle. This postscript added some afterthoughts about the philosophy of Hemingway and remarked that it seemed odd that a writer would in one story say that “freedom is a lonely thing” and in another story state that — and so on.

That night he gave Kitten her usual amplified nightcap, then said, “Not much left in this bottle. Finish it off and I’ll get a fresh one tomorrow.”

“Oh, I’d get terribly silly. You wouldn’t like me.”

“Go ahead, drink it. Have a good time, live it up. What else is life for?”

Half an hour later Kitten was more than willing to be helped to bed. Hugh stayed with her until she was snoring heavily. He covered her hands, stood looking down at her, knelt and kissed her good-bye.

A few minutes later he was down the first manhole with the lid closed over him.

He took off his robe, piled on it a bundle of what he had collected for survival—food, sandals, his stolen wig, two pots of servants' deodorant cream into which he had blended brown pigment. He did not expect to use disguise and had little faith in it, but if they were overtaken by daylight before they were in the mountains, he intended to darken all four of them, tear their robes into something resembling the breechclout and wrap-around which he had learned were the working clothes of free peasant farmers among the Chosen—"poor black trash" as Joe called them—and try to brazen it out, keeping away from people if possible, until it was dark again.

He tied one baby sling to him with the other inside it and started. He hurried, as time was everything. Even if Barbara managed to pass out her roommates promptly, even if he had no trouble breaking out at his preferred exit, even if the crawl back through the tunnels could be made in less than an hour—doubtful, with the kids—they could not be outdoors earlier than midnight, which allowed them five hours of darkness to reach wild country. Could he hope for three miles an hour? It seemed unlikely, Barbara barefooted and both carrying kids, the country unknown and dark—and those mountains seen from his window seemed to be at least fif-

teen miles away. It would be a narrow squeak even if everything broke his way.

He made fast time to sluts' quarters, punishing his knees and elbows.

The bottle was missing, he could feel the tacky places where he had fastened it. He settled himself as comfortably as possible and concentrated on quieting his pounding heart, slowing his breathing, and relaxing. He tried to make his mind blank.

He actually dozed off. But he was instantly alert when the lid over him was raised.

Barbara made no sound. She handed him one of their sons, he stuffed the limp little body as far down the tunnel as he could reach. She handed him the other, he placed it beside the first, then added a pitiful little bundle she had.

But he did not kiss her until they were both down inside—only seconds after he had wakened—and the lid had clicked into place over them.

She clung to him, sobbing; he whispered fiercely not to make a sound, then added last-minute instructions into her ear. She quieted instantly, nodded acknowledgement; they got busy.

It was agonizingly difficult to get ready for the crawl in a space too small for either of them and nearly impossible for them both. They did it because they had to. First he helped her get out of the shorter garment sluts wore, then he had her lie down with her legs back in the other reach of the tunnel while he

He tied a baby sling to her, then a baby was stuffed into each sling and the knots tightened to keep each child snug as firmly in its little hammock as possible. Barbara's baggage was a problem Hugh solved by knotting the skirt of her garment together, stuffing her hoarded food into the sack thus formed, tying the sleeves around his left leg and letting it drag behind. He had planned to tie it around his waist, but the sleeves were too short.

That done (it seemed to take hours), he had Barbara back up into the far reach of the tunnel, then managed most painfully to turn himself around and get headed the right way without banging little Hughie's skull. Or was it Karl Joseph? He had forgotten to ask. Either one, the baby's warm body against his, its lightly sensed breathing, gave him fresh courage. By God, they would make it! Whatever got in his way would die.

He set out, with the light in his teeth, moving very fast whenever clearance let him do so without danger to the child. He did not slow down for Barbara and had warned her that he would not unless she called out.

She did not, ever. Once her baggage worked loose from his leg. They stopped and he had her tie it to his ankle; that was their only rest. They made good time but it seemed forever before he reached the little pile of plunder.

They unslung the babies and caught their breaths.

Then he helped Barbara back into her shift, rearranged her sling to carry her one baby papoose fashion, and made up their luggage into one bundle. All that he held out was his knife, still taped to his arm, his robe, and the light. He showed her how to hold the light in her mouth, then spread her lips and let the tiniest trickle leak out between her teeth. She tried it.

"You look ghastly," he whispered. "Like a jack o' lantern. But it's better than a flashlight. No hands. Now listen carefully. I'm going up. You be ready to hand me my robe instantly. I may reconnoiter."

"I could help you get it on, right here."

"No, because if I'm caught coming out, there will be a fight and it would slow me down. But I won't want it, probably, until we reach a storeroom that is our next fairly safe place. If it's all clear above, I'll want you to hand out everything fast, including the baby who's not on your back. But you will have to carry him as well as the bundle and my robe; I've got to have both hands free. Darling, I don't want to kill anybody but if anyone is unlucky enough to get in our way, I will. You understand that, don't you?"

She nodded. "So I carry everything. Can do, my husband."

"You follow me, fast. It's about two city blocks to that storeroom and we probably won't see or hear anyone. I jiggered the lock on it late this afternoon, stuffed a wad of Kitten's chewing gum into it. Once

inside we'll rearrange things and see if you can wear my sandals."

"My feet are all right. Feel."

"Maybe we'll take turns wearing them. Never mind. I then have to break a lock on a delivery door but I spotted some steel bars a week ago which ought still to be there. Anyhow, I'll break out. Then away we go, as fast as we can trot. It should be breakfast time before we are missed, sometime after that before they are sure we are gone, still longer before a chase is organized. We'll make it."

"Sure we will."

"Just one thing. If I reach for my robe and then close the lid on you, stay here. Don't make a sound, don't try to peek out."

"I won't."

"I might be gone an hour. I might

lips. I'm going to sneak a peek."

He raised the lid a quarter of an inch, then lowered it. "In luck," he whispered. "Even the standing light is out. Here I go. Be ready to hand things up fast. Joey first. And don't show a light."

He pushed the lid up and flat down without a sound, raised himself, got his feet to the corridor floor,

A light him. "That's far enough," a dry voice said. "Don't move."

He kicked the whip hand so fast that the whip flew aside as he closed. Then *this* — and *that* — and sure enough! The man's neck was broken, just as the book said it would be.

Instantly he knelt down. "Everything out! Fast!"

Barbara did not answer; she shoved baby and baggage up to him, was



fake a belly ache and have to see the vet, then come back."

"All right,"

"Barbara, it might even be twenty-four hours, if anything goes wrong. Can you stay here and keep quiet and keep the twins quiet that long? If you must?"

"Whatever it takes, Hugh."

He kissed her. "Now put the light back in your mouth and close your

out fast as he took her hand. "Some light," he whispered. "His went out and I've got to dispose of him."

She gave him light.

Memtok —

Hugh quelled his surprise, stuffed the body down the hole, closed the lid. Barbara was ready, baby on back, baby in left arm, bundle in right. "We go on! Stay close on my heels!" He set out for the intersec-

tion, holding his course in the dark by finger tips on the wall.

He never saw the whip that got him. All he knew was the pain.

XX

For a long time Mr. Hugh Farnham was aware of nothing but pain. When it eased off, he found that he was in a confinement cell like the one in which he had lived his first days under the Protectorate — possibly the same one.

He was there three days. He thought it was three days, as he was fed six times. He always knew when they were about to feed him — and to empty his slop jar, for he was not taken outside for any purpose. He would find himself restrained by that invisible spider web, then someone would come inside, leave food, replace the slop jar, and go. He soon learned that it was impossible to get the servant who did this to answer him.

After what might have been three days he found himself unexpectedly caught up by that prisoning field (he had just been fed) and his old colleague and "cousin" the Chief Veterinary came in. Hugh had more than a suspicion as to why; his feeling amounted to a conviction, so he pleaded, demanded to be taken to the Lord Protector and finally shouted.

The surgeon ignored it. He did something to Hugh's thigh, then left.

To Hugh's limited relief he did not become unconscious, but he found, when the tanglefoot field let

up, that he could not move anyhow and that he felt lethargic. Shortly two servants came in, picked him up, placed him in a box all too much like a coffin.

Hugh found that he was being shipped somewhere. His shipping case was given casual but not rough handling; once he felt a lift surge to a stop; his box was placed in something; and some minutes, hours, or days later it was moved again; and presently he was dumped into another confinement room.

He knew it was a different one; the walls were light green instead of white. By the time they fed him he had recovered and was again "tangled" while food was placed inside.

This went on for one hundred and twenty-two meals. Hugh kept track by biting a chunk out of his too-long finger nails and scratching the inside of his left arm. This took him less than five minutes each day; he spent the rest of his time worrying and sometimes sleeping. Sleeping was worse than worrying because he always re-enacted his escape attempt in his sleep and it always ended in disaster — although not necessarily at the same point. He did not always kill his friend the Chief Domestic and at least twice they got all the way to the mountains before they were caught.

But, long or short, it ended the same way and he would wake up sobbing and calling for Barbara.

He worried most about Barbara — and the twins, although the boys were not as real to him. He had

never heard of a slut being severely punished for anything. However, he had never heard of a slut being involved in an attempted escape and a killing, either; he just did not know. But he did know that the Lord Protector preferred slut meat for his table.

He tried to tell himself that old Ponse, whatever he did, would do nothing to a slut while she was still nursing babies — and that would be a long time yet; among servants, according to Kitten, mothers nursed babies for at least two years.

He worried about Kitten, too. Would the child be punished for something she had nothing to do with? A completely innocent bystander. Again he did not know. There was “justice” here; it was a major branch of religious writings. But he also knew that it resembled so little the concept “justice” of his own culture that he had found the stuff almost unreadable.

He spent most of his time on what he thought of as “constructive” worry, i.e., what he should have done rather than what he had done.

He saw now that his plans had been laughably inadequate. He should never let himself be panicked into moving too soon. It would have been far better to have built up his connection with Joe, never disagreed with him, tickled his vanity, gone to work for him and, in time, prevailed on him to adopt Barbara and the kids. Joe was an accommodating person and old Ponse was so open-handed that he might simply

have made Joe a present of these three useless servants instead of demanding cash. The boys would have been in no danger for years (and perhaps never in danger if Joe owned them), and, in time, Hugh could have expected to become a trusted business servant, with a broad pass allowing him to go anywhere on his master's business — and Hugh would have acquired sophisticated knowledge of how this world worked that a house servant could never acquire.

Once he learned exactly how it ticked, he could have planned an escape that would work.

Any society man has ever devised, he reminded himself, could be bribed — and a servant who handles money can find ways to steal some. Probably there was an “underground railroad” that ran to the mountains. Yes, he had been far too hasty.

He considered, too, the wider aspects — a slave uprising. He visualized those tunnel being used not for escape but as a secret meeting place. Classes in reading and writing, taught in whispers; oaths as mighty as a Mau Mau initiation binding the conspirators as blood brothers, with each Chosen having marked against his name a series of dedicated assassins, servants patiently and slowly grinding scraps of metal into deadly knives.

This “constructive” dream he enjoyed most — and believed in least.

Would these docile sheep ever rebel? It seemed unlikely. He had been classed with them by accident of complexion but they were not of his breed even though he did not

doubt that they were of his ancestry. Centuries of selective breeding had made them something else, as little like himself as a lap dog is like a timber wolf.

And yet, and yet, *how did he know?* He knew only the tempered males, and the few studs he had seen had all been dulled by a liberal ration of "Happiness" — to say nothing of what it might do to a man's fighting spirit to lose his thumbs at an early age and be driven around with whips-that-were-more-than-whips.

This matter of racial differences — or the equally nonsense notion of "racial equality" — had never been examined scientifically; there was too much emotion on both sides. Nobody *wanted* honest data.

Hugh recalled an area in Pernambuco he had seen while in the Navy, a place where the rich plantation owners, dignified, polished, educated in France, were all black, while their servants and field hands — giggling, shuffling, shiftless knuckleheads "obviously" incapable of better things — were mostly white men.

He had stopped telling this anecdote in the States. It was never really believed and it was almost always resented — even by Whites who made a big thing of how anxious they were to "help the American Negro improve himself." Hugh had formed the opinion that almost all of these bleeding hearts wanted the Negro's lot improved until it was *almost* as high as their own — and no longer on their consciences. But the idea that the tables could ever

be fully turned was one they rejected emotionally.

Hugh knew that the tables could indeed be turned. He had seen it that once, now he was experiencing it.

But Hugh knew that the situation was still more confused. Many Roman citizens had been "black as the ace of spades" and many slaves of Romans had been as blond as Hitler wanted to be — so any "white man" of European ancestry was certain to have a dash of Negro blood. Sometimes more than a dash. That southern Senator, what was his name? — the one who had built his career on "white supremacy." Hugh had come across two sardonic facts: This old boy had died from cancer of the jaw and had had many blood transfusions — and his blood type was such that the chances were two hundred to one that its owner had not just a touch of the tar brush but practically the whole tar barrel. A Navy surgeon had gleefully pointed this out to Hugh and had proved both points in medical literature.

Nevertheless, this confused matter of races would *never* be straightened out — because almost nobody wanted the truth.

Take this matter of singing. It had seemed self-evident to Hugh that Negroes of his time averaged better singers than had whites; most people seemed to think so and Hugh felt such a preference. Yet the very persons, white or black, who insisted most loudly that "all races were equal" always seemed happy to agree that Negroes were superior.

on the average, in this one way. It reminded Hugh of Orwell's *Animal Farm*, in which "All Animals Are Equal But Some Are More Equal Than Others."

Well, he knew who wasn't equal here — despite his statistically certain drop or more of black blood. Hugh Farnham, namely. He found that he agreed with Joe: When things were unequal, it was much nicer to be on top!

On the sixty-first day in this new place, if it was the sixty-first, they came for him, bathed him, cut his finger and toe nails, rubbed him all over with deodorant cream, and paraded him before the Lord Protector.

Hugh learned that he still could be humiliated by not being given even a night shirt as clothing, but he conceded that it was a reasonable precaution in handling a prisoner who killed with his bare hands. His escort were two young Chosen, in uniforms which Hugh assumed to be military, and the whips they carried were definitely not "lesser whips."

The route they followed was very long; it was clearly a huge building. The room where he was finally delivered was very like in spirit (although different in detail) to the informal lounge where Hugh had once played bridge. The big view window looked out over a wide tropical river.

Hugh hardly glanced at it; the Lord Protector was there. And so were Barbara and the twins!

The babies were crawling on the floor. But Barbara was breast deep in that invisible quicksand, a trap that claimed Hugh as soon as he was halted. She smiled at him but did not speak. He looked her over carefully. She seemed unhurt and healthy, but she was thin and had deep circles under her eyes.

He started to speak; she gestured warningly with eyes and head. Hugh then looked at the Lord Protector — and noticed only then that Joe was lounging near him and that Grace and Duke were playing some card game over in a corner, both of them chewing gum and both ostentatiously not seeing that Hugh was there. He looked back at Their Charity.

Hugh decided that Ponse had been ill. Despite the fact that Hugh felt comfortably warm in skin Ponse was wearing a full robe with a shawl over his lap and he looked, for once, almost his reputed age.

But when he spoke, his voice was still resonant. "You may go, Captain. We excuse you."

The escort withdrew. Their Charity looked Hugh over soberly. At last he said, "Well, boy, you certainly made a mess of things, didn't you?" He looked down and played with something in his lap, caught it and pulled it back to the middle of the shawl. Hugh saw that it was a white mouse. He felt sudden sympathy for the mouse. It didn't seem to like where it was, but if it did manage to escape, the cats would quickly get it. Maggie was watching with deep interest.

Hugh did not answer, the remark seemed rhetorical. But it had startled him very much. Ponse covered the mouse with his hand, looked up. "Well? Say something!" "You speak English!"

"Don't look so silly. Of course I do. I'm a scholar, Hugh. Do you think I would let myself be surrounded by people who speak a language I don't understand? I speak it, and I read it, silly as the spelling is. I've been tutored daily by skilled scholars—plus conversation practice with a living dictionary." He jerked his head toward Grace. "Couldn't you guess that I would want to read those books of mine? Not be dependent on your hit-or-miss translations? I've read the 'Just So Stories' twice. Charming!"

He shifted back to Language. "But we are not here to discuss literature." Their Charity barely gestured. Four slut servants came running in with a table, placed it in front of the big man, placed things on it. Hugh recognized them all—a homemade knife, a wig, two pots for deodorant cream, a bundle that would be food, an empty Happiness bottle, a little white sphere now dull, a pair of sandals, two robes, one long, one short, and both mussed and rather dirty, and a surprisingly high stack of paper, creased and much written on.

Ponse put the white mouse on the table, stirred the display of exhibits, said broodingly, "I'm no fool, Hugh. I've owned servants all my life. I had you figured out before you had

yourself figured out. Doesn't do to let a man like you mingle with loyal servants, he corrupts them. Gives them ideas they are better off without. I had planned to let you escape as soon as I was through with you. You could have afforded to wait."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

Doesn't matter whether you do or don't. It's the truth. I could not afford to have you very long—one bad apple rots the rest, as my uncle was fond of saying. Nor could I put you up for adoption and let some unwitting buyer pay good money for a servant who would then corrupt others elsewhere in my realm. No, you had to escape."

"Even if that is so, I would never have escaped without Barbara and my boys."

"I said I am not a fool. Kindly remember it. Of course you would not. I was going to use Barba—and these darling brats—to force you to escape. At my selected time. Now you've ruined it. I must make an example of you. For the benefit of the other servants." He frowned and picked up the crude knife. "Poor balance. Hugh, did you really expect to make it with this pitiful tackle? Not even shoes for that child by you. If only you had waited a decent time, you would have been given opportunity to steal what you really needed."

"Ponse, you are playing with me the way you've been playing with that mouse. You weren't planning to let us escape. Not really escape at least. I would have wound up on your table."

"Please!" The old man made a grimace of distaste. "Hugh, I'm not well, someone has again been trying to poison me — my nephew, I suppose — and this time almost succeeded. So don't talk nasty, it upsets my stomach." He looked Hugh up and down. "Tough. Inedible. An old stud savage is merely garbage. Much too gamy. Besides that, a gentleman doesn't eat members of his own family, no matter what. The thought is repugnant to me. So let's not talk in bad taste. There's no cause for you to bristle so. I'm not angry with you, just very, very provoked." He glanced at the twins, said, "Hughie, stop pulling Maggie's tail." His voice was neither loud nor sharp; the baby stopped at once. "Admittedly those two would make tasty appetizers were they not of my household. But even had they not been, I would have planned better things for them; they are so cute and so much alike. Did plan better things at first. Until it became clear that they were necessary to forcing you to run."

Ponse sighed. "I can see that you still do not believe a word I'm saying. Hugh, you don't understand the system. Well, servants never do. Did you ever grow apples?"

"No."

"A good eating apple, firm and sweetly tart, is never a product of nature. It is the result of long development under careful control from something small and sour and hard and hardly fit for animal fodder. Then it has to be scientifically propagated and protected. On the

other hand, too highly developed plants — or animals — can go bad, lose their firmness, their flavor, get mushy and soft and worthless. It's a nice two-horned problem. We have it constantly with servants. On the one hand you must weed out the rebels, the troublemakers, not let them breed. On the other hand these very troublemakers, the worst of them, are invaluable breeding stock that must not be lost. So we do both. The run-of-the-crop bad ones we temper and keep. The very worst ones — such as you — we encourage to run. If you live — and some of you do — we can rescue you, or your strong get, at a later time and add you in, judiciously, to a breeding line that has become so soft and docile and stupid that it is no longer worth its keep. Our poor friend Memtok was a result of such pepping up of the breed. One quarter savage he was. He never knew it of course — and a good stud that added strength to a line. But far too dangerous and ambitious to be kept too long at stud; he had to be made to see the advantages of being tempered. Most of my upper servants have a recent strain of savage in them. Some of them are Memtok's sons. My engineer, for example. No, Hugh, you would not have wound up on anybody's table. Nor tempered. I would like to have kept you as a pet, you're diverting — and a fair bridge hand in the bargain. But I could not let you stay in contact with my loyal servants. Presently you would have been put in touch with the underground."

Hugh opened his mouth and closed it.

"Surprised, eh? But there is always an underground, throughout history, wherever there is a ruling class and a serving class. Which is to say, always. If there were not an underground, it would be necessary to invent one. However, since there is one, we keep track of it, subsidize it—and use it. In the upper servants' mess its contact is the veterinary—trusted by everyone and quite shamelessly free of sentiment. I don't like him. But if you had confided in him, you would have been guided, advised, and helped. I would have used you to cover about a hundred sluts, then sent you on your way. Don't look started. Even Their Mercy uses studs who have to stoop a bit to get through the studs' door when a freshening of the line is indicated—and there was always the danger that you might get you yourself, and those dear boys, killed, and thereby have wasted your fine potential."

Their Charity picked up the pile of Kitten-delivered mail. "These things—All my Chief Domestic was expected to do was to thwart you from doing something silly; he never knew the veterinary's second function. Why, I even had to crack down on Memtok a bit to turn his copies of these things over to me—when anyone could have guessed that a stud like you would find a way to get in touch with his slut. I deduced that it would happen that time that you stood up to me about her, our first bridge game. Remem-

ber? Perhaps you don't. But I sent for Memtok, and sure enough, you had already started. Although he was reluctant to admit it, since he had not reported it."

Hugh was hardly listening. He was turning over in his mind the glaring fact that he was hearing things told only to dead men. None of the four of them was going to leave this room alive. No, perhaps the twins would. Yes, Ponse wanted the breeding line. But he—and Barbara, too—would never have a chance to talk.

But Ponse was saying. "You still have a chance to correct your mistakes. And you made lots of them. One note you wrote my scholars assured me was gibberish, not English at all. So I knew it was a secret message whether we could read it or not. So thereafter all your notes were subjected to careful analysis, not just reading. So of course we found the key—rather naive to be considered a code, rather clever considering the handicaps. And very useful to me. But confound it, Hugh, it cost me! Memtok was naive about savages, he did not realize that they fight when cornered."

Ponse scowled. "Damn you, Hugh, your recklessness cost me a valuable property. I wouldn't have taken ten thousand bullocks for Memtok's adoption—no, not twenty. And now your life is forfeit. The purely technical charge of attempting to run we could overlook, a tingling in front of the other servants would cover that. Destroying your master's property we could even cover up if it had been done secret-

ly. Did you know that that bed-warmer I lent you knew most of what you were up to? Saw much of it? Sluts gossip."

"She told you?"

"No, damn it, it didn't tell the half; we had to tingle it out of it. Then it turned out it knew so much that we could not afford to have it talking and the other servants putting one and one together. So it had to go."

"You had her killed." Hugh felt a surge of disgust and said it, knowing that nothing he said could matter now.

"What's it to you? Its life was forfeit, treason to its master. However, I'm not a spiteful man, the little critter has no moral sense and didn't know what it was doing — you must have hypnotized it, Hugh — and I am a frugal man; I don't uselessly waste property. It's adopted so far away now that it'll have trouble understanding the accent, much less have its stories believed."

Hugh sighed. "I'm relieved."

"Choice about the slut, eh? Was it that good?"

"She was innocent. I didn't want her hurt."

"As may be. Now, Hugh, you can repair all this costly mess. Pay me back the damage and do yourself a good turn at the same time."

"How?"

"Quite simple. You've cost me my key executive servant, I've no one of his caliber to replace him. So you take his place, that's all. No scandal, no fuss, no upset below stairs — every servant who saw any piece of it is already adopted away. And you

can tell any story you like about what happened to Memtok. Or even claim you don't know. Barba, can you refrain from gossip?"

"I certainly can where Hugh's welfare is concerned."

"That's a good child. I would hate to have you muted, it would hamper our bridge game. Although Hugh will be rather busy for bridge. Hugh, here's the honey that trapped the bear. You take over as Chief Domestic, do the kind of job I know you can do once you learn the details — and Barba and the twins live with you. What you always wanted. Well, that's the choice. Be my boss servant and have them with you. Or your lives are forfeit. What do you say?"

Hugh Farnham was so dazed that he was gulping, trying to accept, when Their Charity added, "Just one thing. I won't be able to let you have them with you right away."

"No?"

"No. I still want to breed a few from you, before you are tempered. Needn't be long, if you are as spry as you look."

Barbara said, "No!"

But Hugh Farnham was making a terrible decision. "Wait, Barbara. Ponse. What about the boys? Will they be tempered, too?"

"Oh." Ponse thought about it. "You drive a hard bargain, Hugh. Suppose we say that they will not be. Let's say that I might use them at stud a bit — but not take their thumbs; it would be a dead giveaway for so private a purpose with

studs as tall as they are going to be. Then at fourteen or fifteen I let them escape. Does that suit you?" The old man stopped to cough; a painful spasm racked him. "Damn it, you're tiring me."

Hugh pondered it. "Ponse, you may not be alive fourteen or fifteen years from now."

"True. But it is very impolite for you to say so."

"Can you bind this bargain for your heir? Mrika?"

Ponse rubbed his hair and grinned. "You're a sharp one, Hugh. What a Chief Domestic you will make! Of course I can't — which is why I want some get from you, without waiting for the boys to mature. But there is always a choice, just as you have a choice now. I can see to it that you are in my heavenly escort. All of you, the boys, too. Or I can have you all kept alive and you can work out a new bargain, if any. 'Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi' — which was the ancients' way of saying that when the protector leaves there is always a new protector. Just tell me, I'll do it either way."

Hugh was thinking over the grim choices when Barbara again spoke up. "Their Charity —"

"Yes, child?"

"You had better have my tongue cut out. Right now, before you let me leave this room. Because I will have nothing to do with this wicked scheme. And I will not keep quiet. *No!*"

"Barba, Barba, that's not being a good girl."

"I am not a girl. I am a woman and a wife and a mother! I will

never call you 'uncle' again — you are vile! I will not play bridge with you ever again, with or without my tongue. We are helpless . . . but I will give you *nothing*. What is *this* you offer? You want my husband to agree to this evil thing in exchange for a few scant years of life for me and our sons — for as long as God lets that evilness you call your body continue to breathe. Then what? You cheat him even then. We die. Or we are left to the mercy of your nephew who is even worse than you are. Oh, I know! The bed-warmers all hate him, they weep when they are called to serve him — and weep even harder when they come back. But I would not let Hugh make this choice even if you could promise us all a lifetime of luxury. *No!* I won't, I won't! You try to do it, I'll kill my babies! Then myself. Then Hugh will kill himself I know! No matter what you have done to him!" She stopped, spat as far as she could in the old man's direction, then burst into tears.

Their Charity said, "Hughie, I told you to stop teasing that cat. It will scratch you." Slowly he stood up, said, "Reason with them, Joe," and left the room.

Joe sighed and came over close to them. "Barbara," he said gently, "take hold of yourself. You aren't acting in Hugh's interests even if you think you are. You should advise him to take it. After all, a man Hugh's age doesn't have much to lose by it."

Barbara looked at him as if she had never seen him before in her

life. Then she spat again. Joe was close, she got him in the face.

He jumped and raised his hand. Hugh said sharply, "Joe, if you hit her and I ever get loose, I'll break your arm."

"I wasn't going to hit her," Joe said slowly. "I was just going to wipe my face. I wouldn't hit Barbara, Hugh; I admire her. I just don't think she has good sense." He took a kerchief to the smear of saliva. "I guess there is no arguing."

"None, Joe. I'm sorry I spit on you."

"That's all right, Barbara. You're upset . . . and you never treated me as a nigger, ever. Well, Hugh?"

"Barbara has decided it. And she always means what she says. I can't say that I'm sorry. Staying alive here just isn't worth it, for any of us. Even if I was not to be tempered."

"I hate to hear you say that, Hugh. All in all, you and I always got along pretty well. Well, if that's your last word, I might as well go tell Their Charity. Is it?"

"Yes."

"Yes, Joe."

"Well — Good-bye, Barbara. Good-bye, Hugh." He left.

The Lord Protector came back in alone, moving with the slow caution of a man old and sick. "So that's what you've decided," he said, sitting down and gathering the shawl around him. He reached out for the mouse, still crouching on the table top; servants came in and cleared off the table. He went on, "Can't say that I'm surprised — I've played bridge with both of you. Well,

now we take up the other choice. Your lives are forfeit and I can't let you stay here, other than on those terms. So now we send you back."

"Back where, Ponse?"

"Why, back to your own time, of course. If you make it. Perhaps you will." He stroked the mouse. "This little fellow made it. Two weeks at least. And it didn't hurt him. Though one can only guess what two thousand years would do."

The servants were back in and were piling on the table a man's watch, a Canadian dime, a pair of much worn mountain boots, a hunting knife, some badly made moccasins, a pair of levis, some ragged denim shorts with a very large waistline, a .45 automatic pistol with belt, two ragged and faded shirts, one somewhat altered, a part of a paper of matches and a small notebook and pencil.

Ponse looked at the collection. "Was there anything else?" He slid the loaded clip from the pistol, held it in his hand. "If not, get dressed."

The invisible field let them loose.

XXI

"I don't see what there is to be surprised about," Ponse told them. "Hugh, you will remember that I told my scientists that I wanted to know how you got here. No miracles. I told them rather firmly. They understood I would be most unhappy — and vexed — if the Protectorate's scientists could not solve it when they had so many hints, so much data. So they did. Probably.

At least they were able to move this little fellow. He arrived today, which is why I sent for you today. Now we will find out if it works backward in time as well as forwards — and if the big apparatus works as well as the bench model. I understand it is not so much the amount of power — no atom-kernel bombs necessary — as the precise application of power. But we'll soon know."

Hugh asked, "How will you know? We will know — if it works. But how will you know?"

"Oh, that. My scientists are really quite clever, when they have incentive. One of them will explain it."

The scientists were called in, two Chosen and five servants. There was of course no introduction; Hugh found himself treated as impersonally as the little white mouse who still tried to meet his death on the floor, but was restrained. Hugh was required to take off his shirt and two servant-scientists taped a small package to Hugh's right shoulder. "What's that?" It seemed surprisingly heavy for its size.

The servants did not answer; the leading Chosen said, "You will be told. Come here. See this."

"This" turned out to be Hugh's former property, a U.S. Geodetic Survey map of James County. "Do you understand this? Or must we explain it?"

"I understand it." Hugh used the equal mode. The Chosen ignored it while continuing to speak in protocol mode, falling.

"Then you know that here is where you arrived."

Hugh agreed, as the man's finger covered the spot where Hugh's home had once stood. The Chosen nodded thoughtfully and added, "Do you understand the meaning of these marks?" He pointed to a tiny x-mark and very small figures beside it.

"Certainly. We call that a 'bench mark.' Exact location and altitude. It's a reference point for all the rest of the map."

"Excellent." The Chosen now pointed to a similar mark at the summit of Mount James as shown by the map. "Now, tell us, if you know — but don't lie about it; it will not advantage you — how much error there would be, horizontally and vertically, between these two reference points."

Hugh thought about it, held up his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. The Chosen blinked. "It would not have been that accurate in those primitive times. We assume that you are lying. Try again. Or admit that you don't know."

"And I suggest that you don't know what you are talking about. It would be at least that accurate. Probably much closer." Hugh thought of telling him that he had bossed surveying parties in the Seabees and had done much of his own surveying when he was getting started as a contractor — and that while he did not know how accurate a government geodetic survey was, he did know that enormously more accurate methods had been used in setting those bench marks than were ever used in the ordinary (quite accurate) survey.

But he decided that explanation would be wasted.

The Chosen looked at him, then glanced at Their Charity. The old man had been listening but his face showed nothing. "Very well. We will assume that the marks are accurate, each to the other. Which is fortunate, as this one is missing —" he pointed to the first one, near where Hugh's home had been — "whereas this one —" he indicated the summit of Mount James — "is still in place, in solid rock. Now search your memory and do not lie again, as it will matter to *you* . . . and it will matter to Their Charity and to us, as a silly lie on your part could waste much effort and Their Charity would be much displeased, we are certain. Where, quite near this reference mark and the same height — certainly no higher! — is — was, I mean, in those primitive times — a flat, level place?"

Hugh thought about it. He knew exactly where that bench mark had been: in the cornerstone of the Southport Savings Bank. It was, or had been, a small brass plate, let into the stone beside the larger dedication plate, about eighteen inches above the sidewalk at the northeast corner of the bank building. It had been placed there shortly after the Southport shopping center had been built. Hugh had often glanced at it in passing; it had always given him a warm feeling of stability to note a bench mark.

The bank had sided on a parking lot shared by the bank, a Safeway Supermarket, and a couple of other

shops. "It is level and flat off this way for a distance of —" (Hugh estimated the width of that ancient parking lot in feet, placed the figure in modern units.) "Or a little farther. That's just an estimate, not wholly accurate."

"But it is flat and level? And no higher than this point?"

"A little lower and sloping away. For drainage."

"Very well. Now place your attention on this configuration." Again it was Hugh's property, a Conoco map of the state. "That object fastened to your back you may think of as a clock. We will not explain it, you could not understand. Suffice it to say that radiation decay of a metal inside it measures time. That is why it is heavy; it is cased in lead to protect it. You will take it to *here*." The Chosen pointed to a town on the map; Hugh noted that it was the home of the state university.

At a gesture the Chosen was handed a slip of paper. To Hugh he said, "Can you read this? Do you know what it means? Or must it be explained?"

"It says 'University State Bank,' " Hugh told him. "I seem to recall that there was an institution of that name in that town. I'm not sure, I don't recall doing any business with it."

"There was," the Chosen assured him, "and its ruins were recently uncovered. You will go to it. There was, and still is, a strong room, a vault, in its lowest part. You will place this clock in that vault. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Hugh said.

"By Their Charity's wish, that vault has not yet been opened. After you have gone, it will be opened. The clock will be found and we will read it. Do you understand why this is crucial to the experiment? It will not only tell us that you made the time jump safely but also exactly how long the span was — and from this our instruments will be calibrated." The Chosen looked very fierce. "Do this exactly. Or you will be severely punished."

Ponse caught Hugh's eye at this point. The old man was not laughing but his eyes twinkled. "Do it, Hugh," he said quietly "That's a good fellow."

Hugh said to the Chosen scientist. "I will do it. I understand."

The Chosen said, "May it please Their Charity, this one is ready to weight them now, and then leave for the site."

"We've changed our mind," Ponse announced. "We will see this." He added, "Nerve in good shape, Hugh?"

"Quite."

"All of you who made the first jump were given this opportunity, did I tell you? Joe turned it down flatly." The old man glanced over his shoulder. "Grace! Changed your mind, little one?"

Grace looked up "Ponsie!" she said reproachfully. "You *know* I would never leave you."

"Duke?"

The tempered servant did not even look up. He simply shook his head.

Ponse said to the scientist, "Let's hurry and get them weighed. We intend to sleep at home tonight."

The weighing was done elsewhere in the Palace. Just before the four were placed on the weighing area the Lord Protector held up the cart-ridge clip he had removed from the pistol Hugh now wore. "Hugh? Will you undertake not to be foolish with this? Or should I have the pellets separated from the explosives?"

"Uh, I'll behave."

"Ah, but how will you behave? If you were impetuous, you might well succeed in killing me. But consider what would happen to Barba and our little brats."

(I had thought of that, you old scoundrel. I'll still do exactly what seems best to me.) "Ponse, why don't you let Barbara carry the clip in a pocket? That would keep me from loading and firing very fast even if I did get ideas."

"A good plan. Here, Barba."

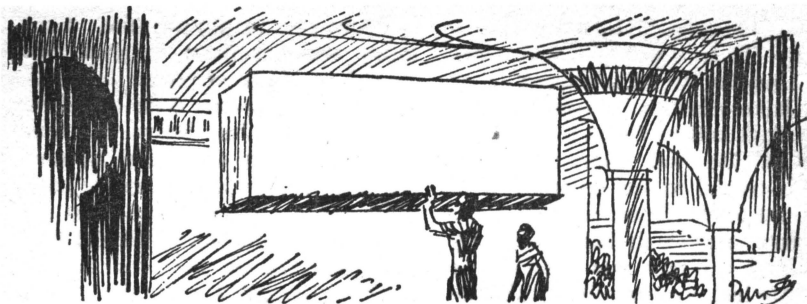
The boss scientist seemed unhappy at the total weight of his experimental package. "May it please Their Charity, this one finds that the body weights of both adults must have lessened markedly since the time of the figures on which the calculations were made."

"And what do you expect of us?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, may it please Their Charity. Just a slight delay. The mass must be exact." Hurriedly the Chosen started piling small metal discs on the platform.

It gave Hugh an idea. "Ponse, you really expect this to work?"

"If I knew the answer to that, it



would not be necessary to try it. I hope it will work."

"If it does work, we'll need money right away. Especially if I'm to travel half across the state to bury this clock devise."

"Reasonable. You used gold, did you not? Or was it silver? I see your idea." The old man gestured "Stop that weighing."

"We used both, sometimes, but it had to have our own protectorate's stamp. Ponse, there were quite a number of American silver dollars in my house when you took it away from me. Are they available?"

They were available and in the Palace and the old man had no objection to using them to make up the missing weight. The boss scientist was fretted over the delay—he explained to his lord that the adjustments were set for an exact time span as well as exact mass in order to place these specimens at a time *before* the East-West War had started, plus a margin for error—but that any delay was reducing the margin and might require recalculation and long and painful recalibration. Hugh did not follow the technicalities.

Nor did Ponse. He cut the scient-

ist off abruptly. "Then recalculate if necessary. All."

It took more than an hour to locate the man who knew where these particular items of the savage artifacts were filed, then dig them out and fetch them. Ponse sat brooding and playing with his mouse. Barbara nursed the twins, then changed them with the help of slut servants; Hugh petitioned plumbing calls for each of them—granted, under guard—and all this changed all the body weights and everything was started over again.

The silver dollars were still in, or had been replaced in, the \$100 rolls in which Hugh had hoarded them. They made quite a stack, and (on the happy assumption that the time jump would work) Hugh was pleased that he had lost while imprisoned the considerable paunch he had regrown during his easy days as "Chief Researcher." However, less than three hundred silver dollars were used in bringing them up to calculated weight—plus a metal slug and some snips of foil.

"If it suits the Lord Protector, this one believes that the specimens should now be placed in the container without delay."

"Then do it! Don't waste our time."

The container was floated in. It was a box, metallic, plain, empty, and with no furnishings of any sort, barely high enough for Hugh to stand upright in, barely large enough for all of them. Hugh got into it, helped Barbara in, the babies were handed to them and Hughie started to squawl and set off his brother.

Ponse looked annoyed. "My sluts have been spoiling those brats. Hugh, I've decided not to watch it, I'm weary. Good-bye to both of you — and good riddance; neither of you would ever have made a loyal servant. But I'll miss our bridge games. Barba, you must bring those brats back into line. But don't break their spunk doing it; They're fine boys." He turned and left abruptly.

The hatch was closed down on them and fastened; they were alone. Hugh at once took advantage of it to kiss his wife, somewhat hampered by each of them holding a baby.

"I don't care what happens now," Barbara said as soon as her mouth was free. "That's what I've been longing for. Oh, dear, Joey is wet again. How about Hughie?"

"It's unanimous. Hughie also. But I thought you said you didn't care what happens now?"

"Well, I don't, really. But try explaining that to a baby. I would gladly swap one of these rolls of dollars for ten new diapers."

"My dear, do you realize that the human race lasted at least a million

years with no diapers at all? Whereas we may not last another hour. So let's not spend it talking about diapers."

"I simply meant — Wups! They're moving us."

"Sit flat on the floor and brace your feet against the wall. Before we have scrambled babies. You were saying?"

"I simply meant, my darling, that I do not care about diapers, I don't care about anything — now that I have you back with me again. But if we aren't going to die — if this thing works — I'm going to have to be practical. And do you know of anything more practical than diapers?"

"Yes. Kissing. Making love."

"Well, yes. But they lead to diapers. Darling, could you hold Hughie in your other arm and put this one around me? Uh, they're moving us again. Hugh, is this going to work? Or are we going to be very suddenly dead? Somehow I can imagine time travel frontwards — and anyhow we did it. But I can't imagine it *backwards*. I mean, the past has already happened. That's it. Isn't it?"

"Well, yes. But you haven't stated it correctly. The way I see it, there are no paradoxes in time travel, there can't be. If we are going to make this time jump, then we already did; that's what happened. And if it doesn't work, then it's because it didn't happen."

"But it hasn't happened yet. Therefore, you are saying that it didn't happen, so it can't happen. That's what I said."

"No, no! We don't know whether

it has already happened or not. If it did, it will. If it didn't, it won't."

"Darling, you're confusing me."

"Don't worry about it. 'The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on' — and only then do you find out if it goosed you in passing. I think we've straightened out on a course; we're steady now, just the faintest vibration. And if they are taking us where I think they are, James County I mean, then we've got at least an hour before we need worry about anything." He tightened his arm around her. "So let's be happy that hour."

She snuggled in. "That's what I was saying. Beloved, we've come through so many narrow squeaks together that I'm not ever going to worry again. If it's an hour, I'll be happy every second of it. If it's forty years, I'll be happy every second of that, too. If it's together. And if it's not together, I don't want it. But either way, we go on. To the end of our day."

"Yes. 'To the end of our day.'"

She sighed happily, rearranged a wet and sleeping infant, snuggled into his shoulder and murmured, "This feels like our very first day. In the tank room of the shelter I mean. We were just as crowded and even warmer — and I was never so happy. And we didn't know whether we were going to live through that day, either. That night."

"We didn't expect to. Else we wouldn't have twin boys now."

"So I'm glad we thought we were going to die. Hugh? It actually isn't

any more crowded than it was that night in the tank room."

"Woman, you are an insatiable lecher. You'll shock the boys."

"I don't think once in more than a year is being insatiable. And the boys are too young to be shocked. Aw, come on! You said yourself we might be dead in an hour."

"Yes, we might and you have a point and I'm theoretically in favor of the idea. But the boys do inhibit me and there actually isn't quite as much room even if we weren't cluttered up with eight or nine wet babies and I don't see how it's mechanically possible. The act would be a tesseract, at least."

"Well — I guess you're right. But it does seem a shame, if we're going to die."

"I refuse to assume that we're going to die. I won't ever make that assumption again. All my figuring is based on the assumption that we are going to live. We go on. No matter what happens — we go on."

"All right. Seven no trump."

"That's better."

"Doubled and redoubled. Hugh? Just as soon as the boys are big enough to hold thirteen cards in their pudgy little hands, we're going to start teaching them contract. Then we'll have a family four of our own."

"Suits. And if they can't learn to play, we'll temper them and try again."

"I don't want ever to hear that word again!"

"Sorry."

"And I don't want to hear that

language again, either, dear. The boys should grow up hearing English."

"Sorry again. You're right. But I may slip; I've gotten in the habit of thinking in it — all that translating. So allow me a few slips."

"I'll always allow you a few slips. Speaking of slips — Did you? With Kitten?"

"No."

"Why not? I wouldn't have minded. Well, not much anyhow. She was sweet. She would baby-sit for me any time I would let her. She loved our boys."

"Barbara, I don't want to think about Kitten. It makes me sad. I just hope whoever has her now is good to her. She didn't have any defenses at all — like a kitten before it has its eyes open. Helpless. Kitten means to me everything that is utterly damnable about slavery."

She squeezed his hand. "I hope they're good to her, too. But, dear, don't hurt yourself inside about it; there is nothing we can do for her."

"I know it and that's why I don't want to talk about her. But I do miss her. As a daughter. She was a daughter to me. 'Bedwarmer' never entered into it.

"Hey, I think we're there."

The box was moved several times, then remained stationary a few minutes, then surged straight up with sickening suddenness, stopped with another stomach twister, seemed to hunt a little, and then was perfectly steady.

"You in the experimental chamber," a voice said out of nowhere.

"You are warned to expect a short fall. You are advised to stand up, each of you hold one brat, and be ready to fall. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Hugh answered while helping Barbara to her feet. "How much of a fall?"

There was no answer. Hugh said, "Hon, I don't know what they mean. A 'short fall' could be one foot, or fifty. Protect Joey with your arms and better bend your knees a little. If it's quite a fall, then go ahead and go down; don't try to take it stiff legged. These jokers don't give a hoot what happens to us."

"Bent knees. Protect Joey. All right."

They fell.

XXII

Hugh never did know how far they fell but he decided later that it could not have been more than four feet. One instant they were standing in a well-lighted, cramped box; the next instant they were outdoors, in the dark of night, and falling.

His boots hit, he went down, landing on the right side of his rump and on two very hard rolls of silver dollars in his hip pocket — rolled with the fall and protected the baby in his arms.

Then he rolled to a sitting position. Barbara was near him, on her side. She was not moving. "Barbara! Are you hurt?"

"No," she said breathlessly. "I don't think so. Just knocked the breath out of me."

"Is Joey all right? Hughie is, but I think he's more than wet now."

"Joey is all right." Joey confirmed this by starting to yell; his brother joined him. "He had the breath knocked out him, too, I think. Shut up, Joey; Mother is busy. Hugh, where are we?"

He looked around. "We are," he announced, "in a parking lot in a shopping center about four blocks from where I live. And apparently somewhere close to our own proper time. At least that's a 'sixty-one Ford we almost landed on." The parking lot was empty save for this one car. It occurred to him that their arrival might have been something else than a bump — an explosion, perhaps? — if they had been six feet to the right. But he dropped the thought. Enough narrow squeaks and one more didn't matter.

He stood up and helped Barbara up. She winced and in the dim light that came from inside the bank he noticed it. "Trouble?"

"I turned my ankle when I hit."

"Can you walk?"

"I can walk."

"I'll carry both kids. It's not far."

"Hugh, where are we going?"

"Why, home, of course." He looked in the window of the bank, tried to spot a calendar. He saw one but the standing light was not shining on it; he couldn't read it. "I wish I knew the date. Honey, I hate to admit it but it does look as if time travel has some paradoxes — and I think we are about to give somebody a terrible shock."

"Who?" Barbara asked.

"Me, maybe. In my earlier incarnation. Maybe I ought to phone him first, not shock him. No, he — I, I mean — wouldn't believe it. Sure you can walk?"

"Certainly."

"All right. Hold our monsters for a moment and let me set my watch." He glanced back into the bank where a clock was visible even though the calendar was shadowed. "Okay. Gimme. And holler if you need to stop."

They set off, Barbara limping but keeping up. He discouraged talk because he did not have his thoughts in order. To see a town that he had thought of as destroyed so quiet and peaceful on a warm summery night shook him more than he dared admit. He carefully avoided any speculation as to what he might find at his home — except one fleeting thought that if it turned out that his shelter was not yet built, then it never would be and he would try his hand at changing history.

He adjourned that thought, too, and concentrated on being glad that Barbara was a woman who never chattered when her man wanted her to be quiet.

Presently they turned into his driveway, Barbara still limping and Hugh beginning to develop cramps in both arms from being unable to shift his double load. There were two cars parked tandem and facing out in the drive; he stopped at the first one, opened the door and said, "Slide in, sit down, and take the load off that ankle. I'll

leave the boys with you and reconnoiter." The house was brightly lighted.

"Hugh! Don't do it!"

"Why not?"

"This is my car. *This is the night!*"

He stared at her for a long moment. Then he said quietly, "I'm still going to reconnoiter. You sit here."

He was back in less than two minutes, jerked open the car door, collapsed onto the seat, let out a sob.

Barbara said, "Darling! Darling!"

"Oh, my God!" He choked and caught his breath. "*She's in there! Grace. And so am I.*" He gasped again. "*All of us are there. I heard Karen laugh!*" He dropped his face to the steering wheel and sobbed.

"Hugh."

"What? *Oh, my God!*"

"Stop it, Hugh. I started the engine while you were gone. The keys were in the ignition, I had left them there so that Duke could move it and get out. So let's go. Can you drive?"

He sobered down. "I can drive." He took ten seconds to check the instrument board, adjusted the seat backward, put it in gear, turned right out of the drive. Four minutes later he turned west on the highway into the mountains being careful to observe the stop sign; it had occurred to him that this was no night to get stopped and pulled off the road for driving without a license.

As he made the turn a clock in the distance banged the half hour. He glanced at his wrist watch, noted a one-minute difference. "Switch on the radio, hon."

"Hugh, I'm sorry. The darn thing quit and I couldn't afford to have it repaired."

"Oh. No matter. The news doesn't matter, I mean; time is all that matters. I'm trying to estimate how far we can go in an hour. An hour and some minutes. Do you recall what time the first missile hit us?"

"I think you told me it was eleven-forty-seven."

"That's my recollection, too. I'm certain of it, I just wanted it confirmed. But it **all** checks. You made crepes Suzettes, you and Karen fetched them in just in time to catch the end of the ten o'clock news. I ate pretty quickly—they were wonderful—and this looney old character rang the doorbell. Me, I mean. And I answered it. Call it ten-twenty or a little after. So we just heard half-past chime and my watch agrees. We've got about seventy-five minutes to get as far from ground zero as possible.

Barbara made no comment. Moments later they passed the city limits; Hugh put the speed up from a careful forty-five to an exact sixty-five.

About ten minutes later she said, "Dear? I'm sorry. About Karen, I mean. Not about anything else."

"I'm not sorry about anything. No, not about Karen. Hearing her merry laugh again shook me up, yes. But now I treasure it. Barbara, for the first time in my life I have a conviction of immortality. Karen is alive right now, back there behind us—and yet we saw her die. So somehow, in some timeless sense,

Karen is alive forever, somewhere. Don't ask me to explain it, but that's how it is."

"I've always known it, Hugh. But I didn't dare say so."

"Dare say anything, damn it! I told you that long ago. So I no longer feel sorrow over Karen. I can't feel any honest sorrow over Grace. Some people make a career of trying to get their own way, and succeeding; she's one of them. As for Duke, I hate to think about him. I had great hopes for my son. My first son. But I never had control over his rearing and I certainly had no control over what became of him. And, as Joe pointed out to me, Duke's not too badly off—if welfare and security and happiness are sufficient criteria." Hugh shrugged without taking his hands from the wheel. "So I shall forget him. As of this instant I shall endeavor never to think about Duke again."

Presently he spoke again. "Hon, can you, in spite of being smothered in babies, get at that clock thing on my shoulder and get it off?"

"I'm sure I can."

"Then do it and chuck it into the ditch. I'd rather throw it away inside the circle of total destruction if we're still in it." He scowled. "I don't want those people *ever* to have time travel. Especially Ponse."

She worked silently for some moments, awkwardly with one hand. She got the radiation clock loose and threw it out into the darkness before she spoke. "Hugh, I don't think Ponse intended us to accept that offer. I think he made the terms such that he knew that I would

refuse, even if you were inclined to sacrifice yourself."

"Of course! He picked us as guinea pigs and chivvied us into 'volunteering.' Barbara, I can stand—and somewhat understand but not forgive—a straight-out skunk. But Ponse was much worse, for my money. He had good intentions. He could always prove why the hotfoot he was giving you was for your own good. I despise him."

Barbara said stubbornly, "Hugh, how many white men of today could be trusted with the power Ponse had and use it with as much gentleness as he did use it?"

"Huh? None. Not even yours truly. And that was a low blow about 'white men.' Color doesn't enter into it."

"I withdraw the word 'white.' And I'm sure that you are one who could be trusted with it. But I don't know any others."

"**N**ot even me. Nobody can be trusted with it. The one time I had it I handled it as badly as Ponse. I mean that time I caused a gun to be raised at Duke. I should simply have used karate if he really got in my way, and knocked him out, not humiliated him. *Nobody*, Barbara. But Ponse was especially bad. Take Memtok. I'm really sorry that I happened to kill Memtok. He was a man who behaved better than his nature, not worse. Memtok had a streak of meanness, sadism, wide as his back. But he held it closely in check so that he could do his job better. But Ponse—Barbie hon, this is probably a subject on which you

and I will never agree. You feel a bit soft toward him because he was sweet to you part of the time and always sweet to our boys. But I despised him *because* of that—because he was always showing ‘king’s mercy’—being less cruel than he could of been, but always reminding his victim of how cruel he could be if he were not such a sweet old guy and such a prince of a fellow. I despised him for it. I despised him long before I found out about his having young girls butchered and served for his dinner.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you know? Oh, surely, you must have known. Ponse and I discussed it in our very last talk. Weren’t you listening?”

“I thought that was just heavy sarcasm, on the part of each of you.”

“Nope, Ponse is a cannibal. Maybe not a cannibal, since he doesn’t consider us human. But he does eat us—they all do. Ponse always ate girls. About one a day for his family table, I gathered. Girls about the age and plumpness of Kitten.”

“But—But—Hugh. I ate the same thing he did, lots of times. I must have—I must have—”

“Sure you did. So did I. But not after I knew. Nor did you.”

“Honey . . . you better stop the car. I’m going to be sick.”

“Throw up on the twins if you must. This car doesn’t stop for anything.”

She managed to get the window open, got her head outside. Presently he said gently. “Feeling better?”

“Some.”

“Sweetheart, don’t hold what he ate too much against Ponse. He honestly did not know it was wrong—and no doubt cows would feel the same way about us, if they knew. But these other things he *knew* were wrong. Because he tried to justify them. He rationalized slavery, he rationalized tyranny, he rationalized cruelty, and always wanted the victim to agree and thank him. The headsman expected to be tipped.”

“I don’t want to talk about him, dear. I feel all mixed up inside.”

“Sorry. I’m half drunk without a drop and babbling, I’ll shut up. Watch the traffic behind, I’m going to make a left turn shortly.”

She did so and after they had turned off on a state road, narrower, and not as well graded, he said, “I’ve figured out where we’re going. At first I was just putting distance behind us. Now we’ve got a destination. Maybe a safe one.”

“Where, Hugh?”

“A shutdown mine. I had a piece of it, lost some money in it. Now maybe it pays off. The Havelly Lode. Nice big tunnels and we can reach the access road from this road. If I can find it in the dark. If we can get there before the trouble starts.” He concentrated on herding the car, changing down on the grades both climbing and on the occasional downhill piece, braking hard before going into a curve, then cornering hard with plenty of throttle in the curves.

After a particularly vicious turn with Barbara on the hair-raising outside, she said, “Look, dear,

I know you're doing it to save us. But we can be just as dead from a car crash as from an H-bomb."

He grinned without slowing. "I used to drive jeeps in the dark with no headlights. Barbie, I won't kill us. Few people realize how much a car will do and I'm delighted that this has a manual gear shift. You need it in the mountains. I would not dare this way with an automatic shift."

She shut up and prayed, silently.

The road dropped into a high alp where it met another road; at the intersection there was a light. When he saw it Hugh said, "Read my watch."

"Eleven twenty-five."

"Good. We are slightly over fifty miles from ground zero. From my house, I mean. And the Havelly Lode is only five minutes beyond here, I know how to find it now. I see Schmidt's Corner is open and we are low on gas. We'll grab some and groceries, too—yes, I recall you told me you had both in this car; we'll get more—and still make it before the curtain."

He braked and scattered gravel, stopped by a pump, jumped out. "Run inside and start grabbing stuff. Put the twins on the floor of the car and close the door. Won't hurt 'em." He stuck the hose into the car's tank, started cranking.

She was out in a moment. "There's nobody here."

"Honk the horn. The Dutchman is probably back at his house."

Barbara honked and honked and the babies cried. Hugh hung up the hose. "Fourteen gallons we owe him



for. Let's go in. Should roll in just ten minutes, to be safe."

Schmidt's Corner was a gasoline station, a small lunch counter and a one-story grocery store, all of the sort that cater to local people, fishermen, hunters and the tourist who likes to get off the pavement. Hugh wasted no time trying to rouse out the owner. The place told its own story: All lights were on, the screen door stood open, coffee was simmering on a hot plate, a chair had been knocked over, and the radio was tuned to Conelrad. It suddenly spoke up as he came in:

"Bomb warning. Third bomb warning. This is not a drill. Take shelter at once. Any shelter, God damn it, you're going to be atom-bombed in the next few minutes. I'm damn well going to leave this god-damn microphone and dive for the basement myself when impact is five minutes away! So get the lead out, you stupid fools, and quit listening to this chatter! TAKE SHELTER!"

"Grab those empty cartons and start filling them. Don't pack, just dump stuff in. I'll trot them out. We'll fill the back seat and floor." Hugh started following his own orders, had one carton filled before Barbara did. He rushed it out, rushed back! Barbara had another waiting, and a third almost filled. "Hugh. Stop one second. Look."

The end carton was not exactly empty. Mama cat, quite used to strangers, stared solemnly out at him while four assorted fuzzy ones nursed. Hugh returned her stare.

He suddenly closed the top of the carton over her. "All right," he said.

"Load something light into another carton so it weighs this one down while I drive. Hurry." He rushed out to the car with the little family while the mother cat set up an agonized complaint.

Barbara followed quickly with a half-loaded carton, put it on top of the cat box. They both rushed back inside. "Take all the canned milk he's got." Hugh stopped long enough to put a roll of dollars on top of the cash register. "And grab all the toilet paper or Kleenex you see, too. Three minutes till we leave."

They left in five minutes but with more cartons; the back seat of the car was well leveled off. "I got a dozen tea towels," Barbara said gleefully, "and six big packs of Chux."

"Huh?"

"Diapers, dear, diapers. Might last us past the fallout. I hope. And I grabbed two packs of playing cards, too. Maybe I shouldn't have."

"Don't be hypocritical, my love. Hang onto the kids and be sure that door is locked. Now it gets rough." He drove for several hundred yards, with his head hanging out. "Here!"

The going got very rough. Hugh drove in low gear and very carefully.

A black hole in the side of the mountain loomed up suddenly as he turned. "Good, we've made it! And we drive straight inside." He started in and tromped on the brake. "Good Lord! A cow."

"And a calf," Barbara added, leaning out her side.

"I'll have to back out."

"Hugh. A cow. With a calf."

"Uh . . . how the hell would we feed her?"

"Hugh, it may not burn here at all. And that's a real live cow."

"Uh . . . all right, all right. We'll eat them if we have to." There was a wooden wall and a stout door about thirty feet inside the mouth of the mine tunnel. Hugh eased the car forward, forcing the reluctant cow ahead of him, and at last crunched his side of the car against the rock wall to allow the other door to open.

The cow immediately made a break for freedom; Barbara opened her door and thereby stopped her. The calf bawled, the twins echoed him.

Hugh squeezed out past Barbara and the babies, got past the cow and unfastened the door, which was secured by a padlock passed through a hasp but not closed. He shoved the cow's rump aside and braced the door open. "Kick on the 'up' lights. Let it shine in."

Barbara did, then insisted that cow and calf be brought inside. Hugh muttered something about, "Noah's bloody ark!" but agreed, largely because the cow was so very much in the way. The door, though wide, was about one inch narrower than bossie; she did *not* want to go through it. But Hugh got her headed that way, then kicked her emphatically. She went through. The calf followed his mother.

At which point Hugh discovered why the cow was in the tunnel. Someone — presumably someone nearby—had converted the mine in-

to use as a cow barn; there were a dozen or so bales of hay inside. The cow showed no wish to leave once she was at this treasure.

Cartons were carried in, two cartons were dumped and a twin placed in each, with a carton of cat and kittens just beyond and all three weighed down to insure temporary captivity.

While they were unloading Barbara's survival gear from the trunk, everything became noonday bright.

Barbara said, "Oh, heavens! We aren't through."

"We go on unloading. Maybe ten minutes till the sound wave. I don't know about the shock wave. Here, take the rifle."

They had the car empty with jeep cans of water and gasoline out but not yet inside when the ground began to tremble and noise of giant subways started. Hugh put the cans inside, yelled, "Move these!"

"Hugh! Come in!"

"Soon." There was loose hay he had driven over just back of the car. He gathered it up, stuffed it through the door, went back and scavenged, not to save the hay but to reduce fire hazard to gasoline in the cars tank. He considered backing the car out and letting it plunge down the hill. He decided not to risk it. If it got hot enough to set fire to the car's gas tank—well, there were side tunnels, deep inside. "Barbara! Do you have a light yet?"

"Yes! Please come inside. *Please!*"

He went in, barred the door. "Now we move these bales of hay, far back. You carry the light, I carry the hay. And mind your feet.

It is wet a bit farther back. That's why we shut down."

They moved groceries, livestock (human, bovine, and feline) and gear into a side tunnel a hundred yards inside the mountain. They had to wade through several inches of water on the way but the side tunnel was slightly higher and dry. Once Barbara lost a moccasin. "Sorry," said Hugh. "This mountain is a sponge. Almost every bore struck water."

"I," said Barbara, "am a woman who appreciates water."

Hugh did not answer as the flash

"What did you mean?"

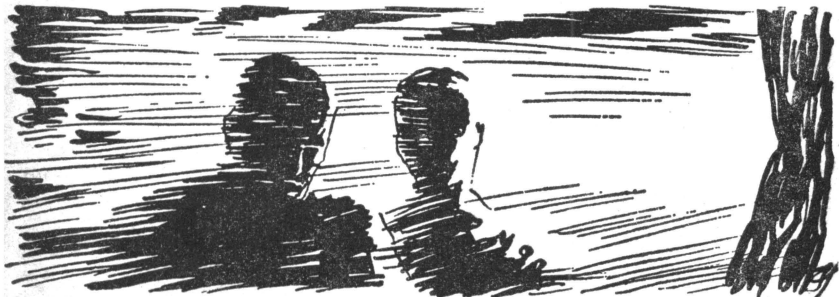
"Hugh, I didn't tell you at the time. I was too upset by it and didn't want you to get upset. But I don't own a manual gear shift car."

"Huh? Then whose car is that?"

"Mine. I mean my keys were in it—and it certainly had my stuff in the trunk. But mine's automatic."

"Honey," he said slowly, "I think you've flipped your lid a little."

"I thought you would think so and that's why I didn't say anything until we were safe. But Hugh—listen to me, dear!—I have *never* owned a manual shift car. I didn't learn to drive that far back. I don't



of the second bomb suddenly brightened everything even that deep inside—just through the cracks of a wooden wall. He looked at his watch. "Right on time, I think. We're sitting through a second show of the same movie, Barb. But this time I hope it will be cooler."

"I wonder."

"If it will be cooler? Sure it will. Even if it burns outside. I think I know a place where we can go down, and save us, and maybe the cats but not the cow and calf, even if smoke gets pulled in."

"Hugh, I didn't mean that."

know how to drive manual shift."

He stared thoughtfully. "I don't understand it."

"Neither do I. Darling, when you came away from your house, you said, 'She's in there. Grace.' Did you mean you saw her?"

"Why, yes. She was nodding over the television, half passed out."

"But, dearest, Grace *had* been nodding over the television. But you put her to bed while I was making crepes Suzettes. Don't you remember? When the alert came, you went and got her and carried her down—in her nightgown."

Hugh Farnham stood quite still for several moments. "So I did," he agreed. "So I had. Well, let's get the rest of this gear moved. The big one will be along in about an hour and a half."

"But will it be?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hugh, I don't know what has happened. Maybe this is a different world. Or maybe it's the same one but just a tiny bit changed by—well, by us coming back, perhaps."

The big one came on time. It shook them up, did not hurt them. When the air wave hit, it blew in the wall and shook them up again.

Hugh noted the time, then said thoughtfully. "If it is a different world, it is not very. Yet—"

"Yet what, dear?"

"Well, it is *some* different. You wouldn't forget that about your own car. And I do remember putting Grace to bed early; Duke and I had a talk afterwards. So, it's different." Suddenly he grinned. "It could be importantly different. If the future can change the past, or whatever, maybe the past can change the future, too. Maybe the United States won't be wholly destroyed. Maybe neither side will be so suicidal as to use plague bombs. Maybe—Hell, maybe Ponse will never get a chance to have teen-age girls for dinner!" He added, "I'm damn' well going to make a try to see that he doesn't!"

XXIII

They lived through the missiles, they lived through the bombs, they lived through the fires, they

lived through the epidemics—which were not extreme and may not have been weapons; both sides disclaimed them—and they lived through the long period of disorders while civil government writhed like a snake with a broken back. They lived. They went on.

Their sign reads —

FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD
TRADING POST & RESTAURANT
BAR

American Vodka
Corn Liquor
Applejack
Pure Spring Water
Grade "A" Milk
Corned Beef & Potatoes
Steak & Fried Potatoes
Butter & some days Bread
Smoked Bear Meat
Jerked Quisling
(by the neck)
Crepes Suzettes to Order

!!!! Any BOOK Accepted as Cash !!!!

DAY NURSERY

!! FREE KITTENS !!

Blacksmithing, Machine Shop, Sheet Metal
Work — You Supply the Metal

FARNHAM SCHOOL OF CONTRACT BRIDGE

Lessons by Arrangement
Social Evening Every Wednesday

WARNING! !

Ring Bell, Wait. Advance with your
Hands Up. Stay on path, avoid mines.
We lost three customers last week. We
can't afford to lose YOU. No sales tax.

Hugh and Barbara Farnham & Family
Freeholders

High above their sign their home-made starry flag is flying—and they are *still* going on.

END

FREE

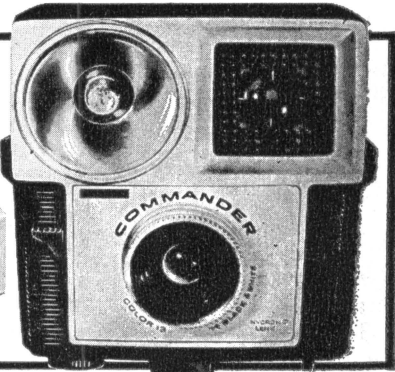
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Forgotten road to success in writing

By J. D. Ratcliff

I can't imagine why more beginners don't take the short road to publication — by writing magazine and newspaper articles.

I've made a good living for 25 years writing articles, and I've enjoyed every minute of it. I've interviewed Nobel Prize winners and heads of state. I've covered stories from Basel to Bangkok to Buffalo.

It's a great life. No commuter trains to catch, no office routine. Whether I'm at home or abroad on assignment, I write from eight to noon every day — no more, no less. My afternoons are my own.

The market for articles is vast and hungry. Over 350,000 were sold last year to magazines alone. Editors want pieces on almost any subject that comes natural to you — but they demand that your writing be sound and professional.

To teach professional writing techniques to serious beginners, I joined with Rod Serling, Faith Baldwin, Bennett Cerf, and eight other leading authors to start the Famous Writers School.

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