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NOVELETTES

THE YEAR DOT	43
by William F. Temple	
OPERATION HIGH TIME	99
by Jacqueline Lichtenberg	
IN THE SHIELD	119
by Dean R. Koontz	

SPECIAL NOVEL EXCERPT	67
The Steel General	by Roger Zelazny

SERIAL

SIX GATES TO LIMBO	5
by J. T. McIntosh	

FEATURES

EDITORIAL	4
by Frederik Pohl	
IF — AND WHEN	62
by Lester del Rey	
SF CALENDAR	155
AUTHORGRAPHS: An Interview with Roger Zelazny	159
HUE AND CRY	162

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SPACE ART

When we first began reading science fiction, which is quite a few years ago, one of the things that most caught our fancy about the sf magazines of the times was the pretty pictures on the cover and inside. Remember those Frank R. Pauls and Bonestells, with the lovely rocketships landed on the Moon and the gorgeous views of Earth as seen from space? Thirty years ago these pictures were sheerest fantasy, as far from real human experience as any thing in the stories.

Today they've come into the real world, and they are as beautiful real as they were in imagination. You can see all you want of them for \$4.25, in a new book published by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, called *Exploring Space with a Camera*.

To get these pictures for us took the combined efforts of tens of thousands of scientists and technicians around the world, as well as an astronomical number of dollars and rubles. We think they were worth the price. Luna III's first pictures of the far side of the Moon, now almost a decade old, gave us not merely a better look at a near neighbor than we had ever had before, but a sight of a landscape no human eyes had ever seen. Surveyor I's self-portraits, showing the long ladder of a human spacecraft on the barren rock of another world, are as impressive embodied in a book, as they were on the world's TV

screens, back in the summer of 1966. The Gemini color photographs of Earth, the Apollo IV color shot of the glowing Saturn V interstage falling away after separation, any of a dozen others in this book are worth hanging on your wall.

We think they're beautiful, and we think you will too.

But how many more like this are we likely to see? The space program is coasting along these days; probably it will carry out all the goals it set for itself a decade ago . . . but then what?

In spite of pious words from politicians, it is pretty clear that the steam has gone out of space. There are no new long-range goals, no plans to go on to the outer planets, to send men to Mars, least of all to take the big and all important leap to other stars. The money has dried up. Not only in the U.S.; Professor Sedov hints that it's true in Russia as well; one of the most important international space organizations is canceling its next year's meeting, because the funds to pay for it have gone.

If the politicians have their way, they will be using future tax money in the traditional manner — to buy votes instead of knowledge. And the human race, having reached out gingerly into space, will return to its little wars and squabbles.

Or shall we tell the politicians that they're making a mistake?

—THE EDITOR



Six Gates To Limbo

by J. T. McINTOSH

It was a place that could be called Limbo. But to one, it would be better called Hell!

I

After a time that was neither heaven nor hell, and a period that was pure hell, he awoke in a gentle world that was not Earth, did not seem to be heaven and was certainly not hell. The word

limbo dropped into his hazy awareness. Being reluctant to be a man without a name in a place without a name, he named one of the two at once: Limbo.

It was generously warm but not hot. The lush grass he lay on was as soft as a caress, and there was

no more than a breath of movement in the rich, clean air.

This could be Earth, but it was not. He knew of the planet Earth vaguely but so intimately, like a woman in the dark, that there could be no doubt Earth was *home*. Yet despite his real feeling for Earth, his love for a world he knew but couldn't quite remember, peace flooded him as he looked around him and knew this was not Earth.

Water . . . he had to find water. Automatically he turned downhill.

In the undergrowth, as he walked, small animals scurried. He saw lizards, hares, small deer, and heard, though he didn't see them, hogs and sheep.

When he found water, there were no half measures about it. The lake was perhaps a mile across, blue, sparkling, clean, enchanting. The moment he saw it, he ran down a grassy slope and dived into the pool.

Afterwards, on a convenient stone, he looked in the placid waters of a lakeside pool and saw himself.

He was not pretty. There was nothing to soften the line of a craggy jaw, his dark eyes were flinty under black brows, and only a hint of humor about his mouth prevented his appearance from being wholly forbidding. But he was satisfied.

It was beginning to get dark, and he found himself quite suddenly

so tired that the hunger which had begun to stir in him was far less important than sleep. He thought of making a bed, a tent, only vaguely aware of what beds and tents were. He thought of possible danger from the wood only a few hundred yards away. In the end he found a cranny among stones at the water's edge, settled himself comfortably on moss and fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, he was stiff and sore, shivering uncontrollably, with a raging thirst and no desire at all for food. Belatedly he realized he should never have allowed himself to sleep until he had filled his belly, stoking the fires which had almost gone out in him.

It was full day, bright, yet he could not see the sun. The sky was blue and cloudless, and nevertheless he couldn't see the sun.

Almost without thought, he dived into the lake. The shock nearly killed him. Instead, it brought him back to full, ravenous, thirsty life.

He drank, and the water lay in his belly like lead. Now he had to eat. He came out of the lake running. Nothing mattered but meat. It had to be meat.

He caught a hare within two minutes through fanatic determination. The hare had survived to that moment through speed — but he was famished. He caught it and killed it

with one quick, impatient movement. Tearing away some skin, he sucked the still moving blood, tore with his teeth at the warm flesh.

When there was nothing left on the bones to suck he went back to the lake soberly and cleaned himself. There was no doubt about it, he would have to learn to make fire. Eating raw flesh like an animal was all very well when hunger turned the screw, but he was never going to be as hungry as that again. Not in this world of plenty.

When he set out to explore Limbo he felt, for the first time, alone. He was sure he would know if there was another living human being anywhere in Limbo — and there was none.

Reaching a place where the gradual ascent from the lake was steeper, he struck away from it, up the hill. Height might save him a lot of trouble. He might be able to survey miles of his kingdom from a single vantage point.

Moments later, as the steep rise leveled off, he looked around and realized a strange thing about Limbo.

It was astonishingly, unnaturally flat.

True, there was a general decline to the lake. There had to be, or there would be no lake. He had found several small streams, over all of which he could jump. Following any of the streams to their source, he could find the highest

points in his domain. But these could not be very high.

Recalling the trees he had seen, he guessed not one was more than thirty or forty years old.

There was an inescapable conclusion. Since Limbo was clearly not a natural world, someone had *made* it less than half a century ago.

He did follow a stream. About six miles from the lake, the stream welled from a hole in a rock. Farther on, behind the rock, the ground level, which had never risen much, fell away sharply.

He looked at the clear water gushing from the rock and found it, as a spring, decidedly unconvincing. The spring welled from the highest point around, one of the highest points in Limbo. Of course such things *could* happen. But this spring looked, despite the natural setting, very like a public drinking fountain fed by pipes. And behind the stream he had traced to its unconvincing source, the ground, almost flat everywhere else, fell away to

Nothing.

He stared at it, trying to penetrate it.

It could be fog. It was gray like fog. But if it was, it was fog behind glass. Down the slope, steeper than anything he had seen so far, only a quarter of a mile away, Limbo ended in gray mist.

Despite his misgiving — he found

he had a caveman's fear of rolling down the slope and over a cliff edge into a bottomless chasm — he descended the slope.

The vegetation he saw on the way down was sparser and tougher than any he had seen anywhere else. Life here, behind the streams, was a struggle. Indeed, only the birds and the wiry grass and scrub found the struggle worth while. There were nests everywhere. The birds had had the sense to nest in the one place shunned by all the other inhabitants of Limbo.

The slope evened out at the bottom. There was a ten-yard track facing the wall. It was impossible not to think of it as a wall, although as he stood facing it, three feet from it, he couldn't be sure there was anything solid there at all.

Nothing grew within ten yards of it. A twig thrown at the wall bounced back, proving that it was some kind of barrier.

He went closer still and cautiously touched the wall. It gave slightly, with no sensation of touch, and then his hand was stopped.

The wall ran at first sight absolutely straight. Close to it, he found it curved gently. Probably it made a perfect circle . . . looking up and guessing the shape of the wall higher up by the part he could see before it disappeared into what he had assumed to be open sky, he saw no reason why it

could not be a truly perfect dome.

He was a prisoner.

He had been doomed to solitary confinement in an idyllic world. And he wondered — what was his sin?

Three days later, early in the morning, he was back at the mound of stones he had built to mark his starting point. Circling the outer limit of Limbo, he had walked about fifty miles, he judged, not counting the forays over the hill for food.

The bare track inside the wall never rose or fell the whole way round by as much as a foot. Inside the flat outer ring, close to the wall, all the way round, hills rose steeply to form a saucer with the lake in the middle.

If Limbo was a prison, it was a fairly generous prison, its area being something over 150 square miles. His preliminary estimates indicated that the diameter was about fourteen miles.

However, he was no longer so sure that Limbo was a prison.

At six points on the perimeter, in the wall that wasn't there, about twenty feet up, were curious indeterminate circular areas about three feet across. Although they were faintly purple rather than gray or blue, their hue and texture were not sufficiently different from the barrier in which they were set for them to be noticeable from any distance.

And yet they looked like holes or doorways. He was sufficiently sure of their nature to name them Gateways.

Having established the limits of his domain, he sought a new point of departure — and found it at once.

At his awakening he had completely ignored the area where he found himself. There just might be something there. Footprints . . . some manufactured thing like a pin, a cigarette butt, a match, an empty can or packet.

Could he find the place? Already, having explored perhaps one per cent of the available area, he was developing a sense of direction which might come from his nakedness and vulnerability, or might depend on something he had not consciously noticed. Of course he could find the place.

It didn't seem to take long, although it must have been three or four hours. He knew that civilized people, as he had been once, were ruled by time. But he no longer worshipped time. There was a glut of time in Limbo.

He found with no difficulty the glade where, for him, life began. But there was nothing to see. His own bare feet had made no marks on the ground, and there was no other marks.

If he had crawled or staggered there, where had he come from? Almost certainly up the hill a little.

He took a few cautious steps. . . .
And found the house.

II

The house shattered all his theories. Entirely out of place in a world which had no other artifact, it was set there firmly and boldly in a clearing which could become a garden.

The front door was open.

Memory did not stir. He was sure he had never set eyes on the house.

He approached the house slowly. The big windows were clean. There was no smog to make them filthy. Small animals and birds treated the house exactly like any other inanimate object. The birds rested on the roof when they felt like it, the hares ran within inches of the walls.

But no creature approached the open door.

When he reached it, he found out why. In the doorway he felt something which harmed him not at all, but made him shiver and told him to be afraid. Being a man, he shivered and refused to be afraid. Animals and birds would react differently.

He entered, and the feeling dissolved. He had crossed the invisible barrier.

Wherever he moved in the house, there was light. If he went naked from now on, it would be from choice. A complete wardrobe of

clothes was only one of the things the house provided. It had everything — furniture, beds with sheets and blankets, a fully equipped kitchen, a well stocked larder, hot and cold water, a library, and a workshop at the back which contained not only every hand tool and power tool he could imagine himself needing, and many whose purpose he didn't know, but also stacks of wood sawn into planks and beams, huge sheets of plywood and hardboard, metal tubing, brackets, posts, girders, rolls of felt, plastic sheeting, tarpaulin.

He went back to the kitchen, hungry as he always was. Only once in his six days in Limbo had he felt really satisfied — after killing and wolfing the hare. Now he could gorge himself until he couldn't move. There was an electric cooker, a refrigerator humming quietly, and although nothing here could be fresh, he was sure that all the canned and preserved stores would be in perfect condition.

In that workshop it would take him only a few minutes to fashion a bow as strong as he could pull and some wicked, deadly arrows. Deer were so plentiful and so unafraid that he could get so close to a buck it would be impossible to miss.

Anticipation of cooking and eating fresh meat was exquisite torture . . . but there was a mirror

on one wall of the kitchen, and catching sight of himself in it he decided there were things to be done even before he ate.

After bathing, shaving, trimming his hair and nails, he looked more closely at the clothes in the wardrobe. He went the length of starting to dress himself in a suit, with socks and a shirt and a tie, before rebelling and putting on only a pair of khaki shorts and soft leather sandals. In Limbo, that was all even a civilized man needed to wear.

Then, still hungry, he examined the other bedrooms, those he had previously dismissed with a glance after finding the one he wanted, the one that was his. Only two were ready for immediate occupancy, as his had been.

In the vast wardrobes of the two that were ready, he found women's clothes, in every variety and style known to him, clothes not for one woman but for two, clothes that only young and attractive women would wear

Suddenly he found himself sweating.

A man could face what he had to face. A man could see himself living until he died, alone, with only pigs and chickens for company. A man could face that as he could face life with one leg, with one eye, with no eyes.

But when hope opened the door He discarded the evi-

dence that there were to be two women and thought only of one. Could he have missed a girl who had come to life as he had come to life, at about the same time? Undoubtedly he could. In an area of 150 square miles two individuals could blunder about for months without becoming aware of each other's existence.

She *had* to be here. If there was any justice, any hope, any happiness. She had to be here.

But She was not in the house. He prowled through it again. On the ground floor he tried doors he had not yet opened. After a while he found the one he wanted.

Stone steps led down into a cellar. Although the cellar was bare and cold compared with the rest of the house, lights went on as he opened the door.

He went down the steps. In the cellar, which was not large, were three things. They lay side by side on stone plinths. They were coffins.

They were coffins in shape, with brass plates, which he could see while still halfway up the stairs, set in the polished wood. But each had one thing he had never seen on any coffin — a glass faceplate where the head should be.

He approached the first casket cautiously, unafraid but not wishing to spy on death. On the brass plate in plain letters was the one

word *Rex*. There was nothing behind the faceplate. And without thinking he touched the lid and found he could open it on a hinge.

The case was empty. He had a name. He was *Rex*.

He moved to the next casket and scarcely had to look at the plate to know what it said: *Regina*. A moment later he was gazing at her through the faceplate.

This was She, sleeping so much as the Sleeping Beauty always lay in illustrations in children's books that he put out his hand to raise the lid and kiss her to rouse her. This lid, however, didn't budge.

She was a pretty blonde, her head so small and her features so so fine and delicate that she must be tiny, slim, soft, the most feminine kind of woman. Because she was tiny, he could see her bare shoulders through the glass, and they were shaped to inflame a man. Her hair was pure gold, her skin, as much of it as he could see, exquisite.

Regina. She. And as lovely a She as he could have hoped for.

At the thought he became intensely curious about the third box. What, logically, could it contain? A child? A dog?

He padded across and looked.

He caught his breath.

Regina was pretty. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. Yet she remained a pretty girl.

This was a very beautiful woman.

On the brass plate was engraved:
Venus.

Between the two cases he stood uncomprehendingly. He had wanted a woman, wanted her with a longing which no one but another castaway could ever appreciate. He had felt, somehow, that in the nature of this environment, there must be a She. . . .

But why two of them?

It was obvious that he was not meant to burst open the caskets. His own had opened from inside; the others would do the same if they opened at all.

The labels, rather than names, Rex and Regina, he accepted easily. He was prepared to be Rex of Limbo and call his consort Regina. She had to be his consort — their labels united them.

But what of Venus? All the indications were that Venus was not meant for him. Then who was she meant for?

The puzzle diverted him so much that he climbed out of the cellar and sought information in the small library he had seen, a case of books in the main lounge in the center of the house, windowless.

There were only about a hundred of them, neatly filling four shelves in a glass-fronted bookcase. Reference books of various sizes came first on each shelf, then non-fiction, then literature, then whatever was left. There was a

dictionary, a one-volume encyclopedia, a book of facts and figures, an atlas, a medical dictionary, an outline of history. There was a book of seven-figure mathematical tables, a dictionary of music, an encyclopedia of art, a cookery book, a book on gardening, an album of flora and fauna. The Bible was there and the Koran.

Almost all the books were brand new, untouched. The last date he found was 3646. They cracked and rustled as he handled them, never having been opened. It was only by chance that a flyleaf fell open and he found that every book had a printed stick-on label reading: *Section K, Department of Education and Science, London, Earth.*

So he was a guinea pig. He had suspected it.

Suddenly he went rigid, all his senses bent on what had alerted him.

Steps in the hall. Human footsteps.

Then as he listened to the steps, and thought, he relaxed deliberately and forced himself to stay where he was, although the temptation to leave the books and investigate was strong.

When he entered the cellar, he had broken a contact, let fresh air in, or in some other way threw a switch. A few minutes later Regina awoke, as he had awakened, and did as he must have done —

crawled up the stairs, staggered outside and a little way down the hill, and rested, perhaps slept, in a glade.

He hoped fervently it was Regina and not Venus. He could not see any point in the presence of Venus. He could see many good reasons for the presence of Regina, however.

He didn't follow her, didn't force his presence and assistance on her. He had been allowed all the time he needed to orient himself in Limbo, and Regina should have the same.

Venus as well as Regina might have awakened. He turned to the books again. The dictionary told him Venus was the goddess of love in Roman mythology, equated with the Greek Aphrodite, which he knew. It also told him she represented sexual love, amorous desires or influences.

But her personal history did not seem particularly relevant. He took it for granted that he was not in any real sense a king nor Regina a queen, and that Venus was a label rather than an incarnation of a being who had never existed anyway.

Yet labels meant something. His and Regina's meant they were husband and wife, and he assumed they would be, although he had no recollection of ever seeing Regina before. Why was the other woman labeled Venus?

Regina already knew she was Regina and that there was a Rex.

For her, awakening was a far greater ordeal than for Rex, yet more complete more quickly. From the very first her mind was clear. She got out of the case, with an effort that exhausted her so much that she had to cling to the case, her head reeling, only because she was sick and did not want to be sick in a box. After a few seconds she managed to shut the case so that she could lean over it, and it was then that she saw her name.

Curiosity impelled her, though all she wanted was oblivion to end her agony, to stagger to the next box. Thus she found that Rex was already awake. Then she had to totter across to the third box.

It was the sight of Venus that made her decide to live, after all. Until she saw her, all Regina wanted was to climb back in her case hoping that she would lose consciousness again. But now she knew she was Regina and there was a Rex, both of them awake, and Venus was still asleep. It became necessary to stay awake.

She managed to reach the stairs and began to climb them, half crawling. The greater warmth at the top was the first thing to bring her some semblance of pleasure; the torture eased slightly.

It did not occur to her, finding herself in a house, to stagger out of it. Instead she went to the stairs and began to climb them, appreciating the softness and warmth of the carpeting after the hard cold floor of the cellar under her bare feet.

After ten minutes in the bathroom a second thing happened to give her the will to live. The first had been the realization that another woman was ready to step in if she refused to take her place in whatever situation existed here. The second was her first conscious sight of herself in a full-length mirror.

Her mood changed gradually but steadily as she looked. She was not only pretty. The slim, small body which had been giving her hell was exactly what she would have admired jealously if another girl possessed it. She could wear anything or nothing and need no assistance from what she wore.

Rex scarcely realized it was the sixth or seventh time he had returned to stare down at the lovely Venus, or how long he had spent staring. He bent closer to examine her. There was the faintest breath of movement. She wasn't exactly breathing, yet she wasn't as still and rigid as stone.

"Try kissing the glass," a voice said acidly. "Maybe that will do it."

He spun round. Only a couple of yards from him was Regina, cool and completely in command of herself, wearing a pink patterned dress and high-heeled shoes. She had done something to her hair, too.

"Hello, Regina," he said. "You look wonderful."

"I know. But thanks for noticing."

"You seem to have recovered a lot quicker than I did."

"I don't think I'll ever recover. I still feel like death."

"You went out, you were . . . sick?"

"Please," she said coldly. "We don't know each other. Let's leave the intimate details until later — much later — if ever. Anyway, I didn't go outside. Why should I?"

"No reason —"

"Never mind. Tell me what this is all about."

"I don't know what this is all about." But he told her what he did know, concluding: "Apparently we're guinea pigs of a sort, perhaps watched all the time, perhaps watched only when we try to get out of Limbo —"

"We can get out?" Regina said sharply. He had not mentioned the Gateways so far.

"In time. With some effort . . . I think. But the point is —"

"Let's get one thing clear," said Regina. "I may be ignorant. I may be only Regina to your Rex." She glanced without enthusiasm at Ve-

nus in her case. "I may be only half your weight, so you can knock me about whenever you feel like it. We may have been thrown together by a couple of names on boxes. But I will not stand for any man, even the only man in the place I happen to be in, telling me what is and what is not the point. I can think. I can add two and two and get any number I happen to fancy. If there are only two of us here —" she cast another brooding glance at the third case — "before we go any further, that doesn't automatically mean that I'm your wife. Still less does it mean I'm your squaw, and most definitely I'm not part of the interior plumbing. Is that clear?"

"Not entirely."

"All right, I'll put it plainer —"

"No don't bother. I think I caught the gist."

"Well you could have put more clothes on," said Regina unsympathetically. "I did."

"Hungry," he asked. "Let's raid the kitchen."

She saw nothing to argue about in that, and they went up the stairs, shutting the cellar door behind them.

She knew her way around a kitchen. A few quick glances into cupboards, drawers and the big refrigerator seemed to tell her exactly what was there and what was not.

"The potatoes look all right, but there are no fresh vegetables," she said. "There's no parsley growing around here, but there's mint at the back of the house —"

His eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

"What?"

"You haven't been out."

"Well do you always have to go and look before you know what you are going to find?"

"Yes."

She shrugged. "Anyway, there's mint at the back of the house. Will you get it, or do I have to go for it myself?"

"All right."

He left her in the kitchen and went out to the back of the house. Here a vegetable garden had been set out at one time, but it had not been tended for years. The rhubarb was plentiful and good. Very little else was. The mint was usable.

When he returned to the kitchen, he found Regina, an apron over her pink dress, coping competently with about a dozen things at once.

"Thanks," she said, accepting the mint. "Now go and get washed. Dinner in twenty minutes."

After he showered, there was time to go down to the cellar and see if there was any change in Venus. Venus was still the same.

"Do you want your dinner in here?" Regina asked tartly.

Again she was just behind him, and he hadn't heard her.

"Regina," he said firmly, "there are only three human beings in this little world. What do you want to do about Venus? Kill her?"

"The thought hadn't actually occurred to me. But I'll give it due consideration."

The meal was very good.

That night, after a day of hard work in which Regina proved herself not only practical but also a consummate expert in finding work for idle hands to do, it was she who said, carelessly, without thinking: "Let's go to bed."

"Let's," he said.

She looked at him broodingly. "No, not together," she said. "Definitely not together."

"You think you could stop me?"

"No. But I'd try."

He didn't try her door later. It did occur to him to go down and have another look at Venus. But Regina would know.

IV

They worked hard for six days and then, by tacit consent, observed a day of rest.

There were two main areas of friction between them. One of them arose from the fact that neither was made for simple friendliness with the opposite sex. The other area of friction was the Gateways.

"Maybe you want to escape from a place like this, but I don't," Regina said.

"I don't want to *escape*. If those spots really are Gateways, they have to be *investigated*. That's obvious."

"Don't tell me," said Regina crossly, "what is and what is not obvious."

"Well, I'm a big, healthy fellow, and I need a woman. If I can't get one in Limbo —"

"Stick to the subject. Why are you obsessed with the idea of getting away from here?"

Very mildly Rex said: "I'm not obsessed with anything. You're doing all the protesting. Why not tell me quietly, calmly, why you refuse even to think about going through a Gateway away from here?"

She didn't hit the roof. She never did. Often she seemed on the point of losing her temper, of hitting him or throwing things, but she was too innately practical to do anything of so little practical value.

"Well, some day I want to go back to Earth," she said. "I think everybody does and always will."

He was interested. For her the barrier between what she knew and didn't quite know had always been more easily broken down than for him. She knew more than he did.

"I'm in no hurry," she said. "I said some day. Earth's the only place I might leave here to go to, and I'd want to come back. There's peace here, and purpose. It's a place so much better than anywhere else

I ever heard of that I think it's crazy to leave it voluntarily."

"You don't mind being alone here?"

"I'm not exactly alone. Only half alone. You're here."

After that the conversation petered out in their other area of friction.

On the seventh day, they took a basket, which Rex carried, and a beach bag, which Regina slung over her shoulder, closed the house door and set out.

Rex, as usual, wore shorts and sandals. Regina, for the first time, was dressed frankly frivolously. "Very nice," he said when he first saw her.

"Well, there's no need to rave about it all day," she retorted. "Still, you noticed. I was beginning to think if I wanted any attention I'd have to wear nothing but a gold chain around my waist and bring a panther on a lead."

They were walking down the slope, and this meant they were bound to reach the lake. Before they reached it, however, they struck off to the right to skirt the shorter arm of the lake and reach the other side, where, Regina said "never having been there," there was a soft grass clearing nearly a mile square with deep water for swimming right up to the two-foot bank.

"Regina, you see things," said Rex. "You know things. If I asked you what the country was like two

miles from here you could tell me, though you've never been there—"

"Well, can't you?"

"No. I had to explore this place before I knew anything about it. And I haven't really explored more than about a tenth of it yet."

"You don't know what you're going to see until you see it?"

"No. Never. Now — "

"Yes?"

"Tell me about the Gateways and the wall."

"Well?" she said coldly. Every time the Gateways were mentioned they ended up arguing.

"You can sense them, can't you?"

"The wall, not what you call Gateways."

"Can't you see through the Gateways? Beyond the wall? Outside here?"

She paused and then said quietly: "No."

"No?"

"Nothing. Blankness."

He would have said more, but he didn't want an argument on this day of rest.

When they reached their destination it was exactly as Regina had described it, even to the huge boulder resting on the bank of the lake.

She waved at it. "You change on this side, and I'll change on the other," she said.

He stared at her rather blankly.

"It's all right," said Regina sweetly. "If you didn't think of it, I did." She opened her beach bag and handed him trunks wrapped in a towel. Then she went behind the rock.

Rex changed into the briefs and dived in. Only a moment later Regina in the water beside him.

It surprised him that she swam so badly. But he saw, not being insensitive, that she was on the defensive, daring him to jeer at her and frankly terrified, though she would never admit it, that he would use his infinitely superior power and skill in the water to frighten and humiliate her. He was therefore gentle and understanding, ignoring her clumsiness in the water (the only time he had ever seen her looking clumsy).

Of course Regina then went to the other extreme and complained: "I'm not a baby, you know. I won't drown. You don't have to treat me as if I were made of paper."

"No, Regina," he said gently, infuriating her.

Yet they were laughing when they climbed out, shaking the water from their hair . . . then the laughter died. If she wished to maintain the *status quo*, Rex thought, she would have been wise not to go swimming with him.

In her face, as the laugh died, was awareness, awareness of herself, awareness of him. Only by a great effort did he manage to re-

strain himself — and the next instant, when the moment had passed and they both knew it, he realized he had been wrong, he should not have fought the impulse down; the door had been opened for a moment, but now it was shut.

They sat down and ate, saying little, Regina's eyes faintly mocking. Presently, with a sigh, she lay back on the grass and went to sleep instantly.

Rex moved to sit over her. Her flesh was warm, but surely not warm enough to burn his hand so. He traced her contours, learning her, remembering they had touched only a few times, by accident, while working together. She slept on, but he was no longer over-scrupulous, afraid of making a wrong move. She smiled in her sleep, and her body began to move under his hands.

Then she was awake, easily, still smiling, and it was all right.

Afterwards everything was different, as they had both known it would be.

"Now we're really Rex and Regina," said Rex smugly.

She merely grunted.

"Regina . . . what about children?"

"What about them?" she asked.

"Are you scared here, only with me?"

"I expect we'll cope. If you mean do I want children, I think the

question scarcely arises. In a place like this we can't *not* have children, surely?"

He kissed her again, fighting down his reawakening desire. Something had to be said. The two people in a tiny world must never have things between them that could not be spoken of.

Quietly he told her: "I'm going through the first Gateway tomorrow."

She froze. "Well. I see I'm going to have something really special in the way of honeymoons."

"What do you mean? I may only be gone five minutes."

"Or five years, or forever. Why not be content with what we have here?"

"Because the Gateways exist," he said patiently.

"You mean you're one of those idiots who have to go around climbing mountains because they're there?" she demanded.

"Maybe I am."

She jumped up and rather crossly started putting on her clothes.

Rex got up too. "Don't do that," he said.

"Why not?"

"Ask a silly question," he said, "and you don't always get a silly answer."

This time she welcomed him with a passion that startled him.

"I wouldn't trust myself on that," said Regina rather sul-

lenly, looking critically at the spidery stairway.

She had openly hoped it would take Rex so long and would prove so difficult to make a stairway which could be carried to the north wall and set up there that he would give up the idea. However, a few hours' work the evening before had sufficed for him to make the stairway.

"It's not only strong enough to bear my weight, but secure enough to support me if I have to lower myself twenty feet on the other side."

"You think you'll have to?"

"No. I believe that's a matter-transference field up there."

"What's that?"

"I don't know anything about it, beyond that, and there's nothing in the books — I looked. But that's what I think those Gateways are doorways to six spots that could be anywhere in the galaxy."

The stairway was a framework of metal tubing, made in sections now securely bolted together. At the top was a wooden platform with metal rails round it on three sides, set within an inch of the wall.

He wore plain gray overalls, with a shirt and shorts underneath. He reckoned this gave him the best chance of passing muster in an environment which could be absolutely anything.

"I'll come with you if you like," Regina said ungraciously.

"No. You stay here, Regina."
"Why don't you want me to come?" she demanded.

"Because we don't know anything about this. The Gateways may be nothing but spots on the wall. They may be doors leading only to empty space, and I'll die the moment I go through."

She shuddered. "I'm not staying here alone. If you're not back in twenty-four hours, I'm coming after you."

"No, Regina," he said sharply. "I may be delayed, injured, captured, anything. I'll get back, I promise, if it's possible to get back. But it may be days, weeks."

After making her promise to wait at least twenty days before even thinking of following him through the Gateway, he kissed her and turned to the stairway. She spun him back and kissed him fiercely. "You don't think you're getting away just like that, do you?" she demanded. "A brotherly kiss, with your mind on the other side of the Gateway — "

Like thousands of other women throughout history, she put everything she had into delaying his departure. And like most of them, she succeeded.

But afterwards, he really did go.

At the top, he fastened one end of the coil of nylon rope he had round his waist to one of the rails round the platform. Then, with a wave, he touched the Gateway.

He felt a violent tug at his middle. Then nothing.

V

After a time that was neither heaven nor hell, and a period that was pure hell, he awoke to full consciousness in a not-so-gentle world.

This time he was lying on rough, hard, gravel-mud, stone-clay ground in what was obviously a disused quarry. There was a sun in this sky, gray and leaden though it was, and from its position behind the clouds, just dropping behind the ravished walls of the quarry, it would set pretty soon. He was cold and there was rain in the air. The temperature was nearly twenty degrees lower than in Limbo.

But this was less important than the discovery that matter-transference was similar to the unpleasant rebirth process that he and Regina had gone through once and had somehow expected would never have to go through again.

The rope was neatly severed, as if cut. Apparently you could take things through the Gateway, but they could not be attached to anything in Limbo. Before he could move, he had to be sure he could return to exactly this spot, or he'd never be able to return to Limbo.

Behind him there was no sign of any Gateway. Terror gripped him, but he calmed himself. The Gate-



way, though there was no visible sign of it, must be immediately behind him. He scraped away a little of the broken stone, sand, soil and moss to make doorposts for the invisible doorway, a guide to him and to no one else. Then he felt it safe to move away.

On three sides the walls of stone and earth rose to fifty or sixty feet. On the fourth, a former access road was blocked by thin scrub, and from that direction he now heard a heavy rolling sound.

Then he turned and saw the highway.

Beyond the line of shrubbery a rough barbed-wire fence had been erected, probably to keep children out of an obvious danger spot. The significance of all this was not lost on him: the Gateway was carefully located in a place useless to everyone, shut off, with no shelter, buildings or huts to attract even vagrants.

Scaling the fence presented difficulties. Fortunately, he still had most of his rope with him, the only thing he did have except for his clothes and a clasp knife. Looping the rope over one of the metal supports, he climbed up and jumped down on the other side. He hid the rope at the foot of the fence.

It was immense. Lanes stretched as far as he could see in the misty dusk. Although he could not count the lanes, they were all one-way. So probably somewhere else there was

a similar vast highway leading the other way.

There were huge articulated trucks which despite their vastness must be doing a hundred miles an hour. There were slower, lumbering lorries which looked like cattle-trucks. There were little flashing cars which sped like arrows across the plain.

Only a mile or two away, a city began. He thought of it as beginning, because he could see well enough that it had a beginning — the first houses, halls and churches, with lamps already beginning to glow. But he could see nothing to indicate that the city ever ended.

It spread in both directions into the gloom. It could not, he guessed, have fewer than 10,000,000 inhabitants. Indeed, since he had to guess, with the volume of traffic to help him to guess, he estimated the population at more like 100,000,000.

An hour later he reached the first buildings. The street lamps were lit, but this vast city was evidently a place where public light was doled out parsimoniously.

He waited until he saw people in the streets. They were two-legged, two-armed, and some of them were in overalls. It seemed safe to proceed.

Nobody looked at him. He passed a sign that said simply MERCURY. It must be the name of the town, incongruous as it was. Certainly it

was not on the planet Mercury.

Although he entered the city on the same level as the road, he presently found himself on a walkway which overlooked it, or part of it. Below was a one-way tunnel roadway, only three-lanes, along which cars and trucks raced into the city. Their speed was uniform, and the path they took so precise that there could be no doubt control was automatic.

Most of the other pedestrians were hurrying. The people were dressed quite unremarkably in rather drab garments suited to the climate, with no difference whatever between the sexes. All wore tunics and slacks.

He had seen one sign, the one that read *Mercury*. Now he saw another. Starkly it warned, in flaming red letters: DOOMSDAY IS NEAR. That was all. There was no indication whether it was intended to be taken literally or evangelistically. And nobody looked at it.

He would have liked to stop somebody, anybody, and speak to him. But for all he knew, that might mean instant arrest. Maybe he was supposed to have a work card or curfew permit or at least identification.

Only a little way into the city, the walkways became canopied. He was fortunate in reaching the first canopy just as the rain began.

The lighting was uniform, always adequate, nowhere really bright.

Shop windows, increasingly commoner as he penetrated from the outskirts, were lit dimly. He would have liked to enter any building, a shop or bar or house, but having no money he decided to go on until he found a public reading-room, library or even toilet, where he could get some idea what a Mercurian interior was like.

Again he came to a sign giving blazing warning: DOOMSDAY IS NEAR. This time he noticed that people passing it didn't ignore it. It was more than that. They were deliberately blind to it, knowing it was there and being careful not to see it.

Although from outside the city he had seen many steeples and towers which he had taken for churches, he had not yet passed one. Presently he did see a church, but it was on the opposite walkway.

Even from the opposite walkway, and in the poor light, he could read the text on the church's billboard. It was DOOMSDAY IS NEAR.

So the text was evangelical. People were being frightened into the churches, as they had been in the Dark Ages.

Now perhaps two miles into the city, he came to a crossway, no mere bridge but a walkway going at right angles between buildings, with no road beneath. He took it because the route he had been following had shown him nothing very new for a long time.

Scarcely anyone was walking here. Presently the walkway curved over another lower-level road, but this one seemed more like a railway without rails. The long green cars were uniform, there was two-way traffic, and they moved at the same speed in exactly the same track.

Here there was nobody at all, except a small girl leaning over the rail on the opposite side — engaged in the age-old children's pastime of looking at the trains, Rex thought. He took his eye off her for a moment.

When he looked back, drawn by a movement, he shouted involuntarily.

She had one thin leg over the rail and was swinging the other over. Although she must have heard his shout, she didn't look at him. She was looking down at the trains. Calmly, as one approached, she launched herself out and fell with apparent slowness right into the path of the car. She hit the ground, and the train hit her in the same instant. There was no noise above the rumbling purr of the car, no scream; and after it had happened nothing remained down there but a small stain, gleaming dimly in the poor light.

She could have been no more than nine or ten.

Before he found the church, Rex saw another suicide. This one

was public. In one of the busy walkways a man of about thirty-five, alone, suddenly leaned over the rail, pivoting on his stomach, and fell headfirst to dash his brains on the road below.

What shocked Rex most about it was the indifference of the citizens. A few, mildly curious, looked over the rail to check that the man was writhing about with broken limbs and a broken back.

Traffic control knew about it at once. Every vehicle detoured the fallen body. Close to the edge of the road, it was not much of a nuisance. Within three minutes an ambulance, clearly marked with a red cross, drew up, and the traffic went round it too. How a casualty was picked up in Mercury was new to Rex. It stopped over the body, and when it moved on a few seconds later, there was no sign that anything had been there, except a rectangle gleaming with liquid of some kind, probably disinfectant.

Before he found the church, Rex had an encounter with a homicidal maniac.

A shout alerted him, and he turned.

The moment he turned, Rex knew that the man running at him with a breadknife was completely off his head. His wildly working face told the story. Something had snapped — suddenly.

In the split seconds before the man reached him, Rex was able

to observe from the reactions of the score or so people in the immediate vicinity that this was unusual, this was shocking, this was frightening. People quietly killing themselves were barely worth a second glance. A man running amok with a breadknife was not, apparently commonplace in Mercury.

There was time to sense this, but no time to be afraid. And then, as the man came nearer, there was no real need to be afraid, because he wasn't coming for Rex at all. He was running past him, his quarry a little old lady who from her dazed, terrified yet puzzled expression had never seen the maniac in his life.

Rex didn't think. As the man with the knife raced past him, Rex caught the arm holding the knife, diverted it upwards and used all his strength on the wrist. All his strength was not necessary. The knife dropped, as he had intended. He had not intended to break the man's wrist and dislocate his shoulder.

In pain, the maniac whimpered and drooped. Sanity did not return. What returned was apathy.

He was swept out of the way as quickly, cleanly and neatly as the man who had killed himself. Three men in white coats, summoned by means or persons unknown to Rex, arrived magically and took him into the nearest entrance. With them was a blue-suited man who had to

be a policeman. To Rex's astonishment, he didn't speak to him at all, and only very briefly, one question and answer to the terrified old woman. Then the policeman nodded briefly at Rex, ten yards away, turned and picked up the knife and followed the others.

That was it. The flow on the walkway resumed, and not one of the people concerned cast another glance at Rex. The old lady had hurried away the moment the police let her go.

Still wondering why he hadn't even been asked his name, he saw something lying close to the wall, where it had been kicked in the brief struggle. He picked it up.

It was the maniac's wallet.

There was nothing in it but paper money and coins. It was a purse rather than a wallet, not intended for anything other than money. There was no identification.

In most other places in the galaxy a man openly picking up a purse would have attracted some attention. In Mercury, nobody noticed. Nobody was interested.

Rex hesitated for quite a while, the purse in his hand. Finally, not happy about it, he put it in his pocket.

Before he found the church, he was offered love, or what passed for love in the walkways of Mercury. The girl simply caught his arm and looked at him, ignoring

everybody else, and this happened at a particularly busy spot. He smiled down at her, trying to turn her down gently without having to say a word.

His smile inflamed her — she was not used to smiles like that. She pulled him to one of the boxes he had guessed to be telephone kiosks. They were. When she shut the door it locked.

She put her hand to the zip of her tunic. Then, in the brighter light of the kiosk, she happened to see his eyes clearly.

She froze. "A Twentyman," she whispered. "You should have told me."

The next instant she was out of the kiosk, letting it swing slowly shut behind her. Rex's impression was that she was not terrified, not desperate to escape; she merely knew that no Twentyman, whoever or whatever that might be, could possibly be interested in her.

Soon after leaving the booth he found the church. DOOMSDAY IS NEAR, the board announced. But if this was forbidding, the door was open and there was light within. Organ music rolled out to him.

He entered. The church was vast. As he took in its immensity, he realized why he had taken so long to come on a church. If they were as big as this, not many would be needed.

Vast as it was, and although no service was in progress and no min-

ister present, it was well filled. Before the many altars people knelt and crossed themselves. Thousands of candles blazed, as if the electric lighting were not fully adequate. Every moment hundreds entered and hundreds left.

The decorations and ritual seemed overpoweringly Roman Catholic. At the thought of Catholicism, he watched the moving crowds for a pattern and presently saw, in addition to the normal coming and going, a steady procession to a large archway beside the main altar.

Confession. There would be priests in there, evidently very many priests.

Rex started for the doorway. He was no Catholic, but confession was privileged, wasn't it? What would happen if he saw a priest and confessed he did not belong to this world and asked for information and advice?

It would be interesting to find out.

VI

His awakening in Limbo was the worst of the three he had experienced, but there was one good thing about it. Regina was there. She was crying. Vaguely he gathered he'd been gone seventeen days.

Tiny as she was, she had virtually carried him home and left him in the bathroom.

An hour later, desperately tired

and weak, but clean, he managed to stagger to bed. He was surprised and hurt that Regina wasn't anywhere upstairs.

Then through his fatigue he sniffed and found energy enough to get out of bed again. Regina was cooking grilled steak. . . .

He went down in his pajamas. When he arrived, Regina was pouring the wine.

Much later, he was sufficiently restored to talk. Indeed, after such a meal he didn't feel inclined to move for at least an hour.

He told her all the obvious things, and she listened, seldom asking questions. He told her he had seen three suicides.

He told her more about his impressions of Mercury than the details. "It's a sad, tired, aimless place. There's nothing wrong, no oppressive government, no war, no crime wave. Nobody's starving and there are no problems, except everything."

"There must be a reason. Deficiency in air or food?"

"Deficiency in environment is my guess. Of course I don't know any details of government, laws, sanctions, anything like that. But how it looks is — nobody sees any future."

He paused and then said. "But the Twentymen exist. Perhaps they represent hope.

"You haven't told me about them."

"No. . . . I told you that later, after seeing the priest, I was talking in a bar to a girl who knew that another shot of pex would kill her, and took it. . . . Well, after she died, a Twentymen came in to see what had happened. This one was a woman, an old woman. Twentymen can be men or women, young or old. When she came in, everybody knew about it."

"What did she look like?"

"I don't remember, and it didn't matter."

"What are Twentymen?"

"Special. You can see it and feel it. She came to me at once and said 'Twentymen? From where?' I said nothing and just stared back at her."

"And then what?"

"Then . . . practically nothing. She asked what had happened, I told her, and she went away. Seems there's a Twentymen union. She was in no doubt that I was a Twentymen — neither were the two others who looked into my eyes — and after that my business was my own and anything I said had to be the truth."

"Well, everybody knows you're something very special indeed. You are Rex. Naturally you're a Twentymen. One small question that crosses my mind — "

"Yes," said Rex.

"What exactly do you mean by yes?"

"You're a Twentymen too."

She was disconcerted. "How do you know?"

He smiled. "Take it from me you are."

"Apart from the Twentymen aspect, you paint a grim picture, Rex."

"There's worse. I didn't really tell you about the priest. I took a risk talking to him, telling him a little about this place, about you. . . . I needn't have worried. Nobody in Mercury cares enough to denounce anybody or persecute anybody or hound a stranger out of town. Besides, he knew I was a Twentymen. Everybody knows, unless you keep your eyes down or look blank.

"What did he tell you about Twentymen?"

"Nothing. He simply ignored my questions. But he told me a few things, afterwards. I told him about the wallet, and he said in the circumstances he didn't think it would be very wrong if I used the money, which wasn't much, to find out something about the city. So I did, and I found the three things that seem to keep them going. They call them pex, lex and sex."

"One of them sounds normal."

"Not the way they go about it. Sex is purely for escape. That makes it the weakest and least reliable of the three. You escape for only an infinitesimal fraction of your life. Pex is better. It's a drug, not alcohol, though you drink it in a bar. It releases all the available

reserves of happiness in a person. He's happy for an hour or so. Then he has to pay. He's more miserable than he dreamed of being. The cure is time or another shot."

"Did you try it yourself?"

"No. Maybe I should have. But I couldn't take the chance of doing something crazy in Mercury."

"And they don't ban this stuff?" Regina said wonderingly.

"Ban many people's hope of happiness?"

"That leaves lex. Lex for law?"

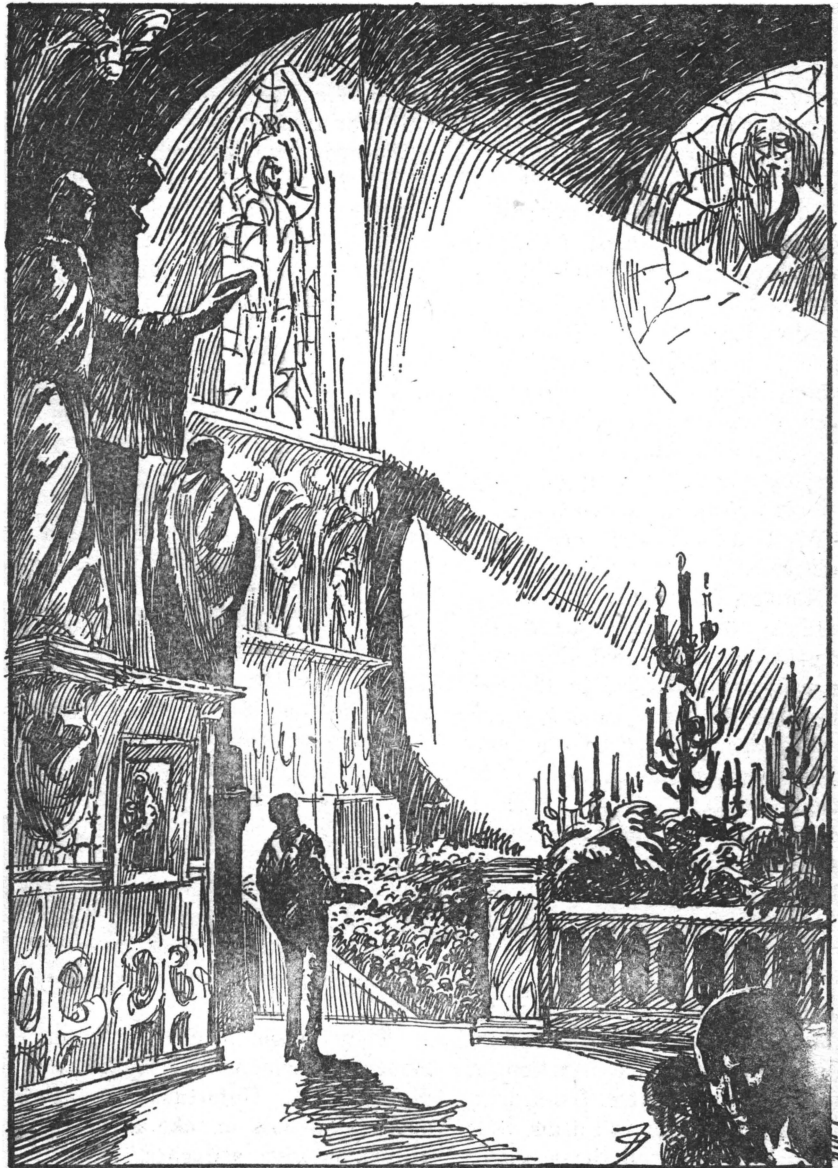
"Yes, but they use it in a special sense. They mean the law of God."

"Religion doesn't seem to fit in the kind of environment you've been describing. But if they're religious, doesn't it help them?"

"Not as it should, because they lean too heavily on it. God isn't a staff and comfort. God has to be father, mother, doctor, nurse, confessor, crutch and sanctuary. Religion doesn't work for them, though they cling desperately to it, because they put nothing into it, only take from it. Well, they give the church money — plenty of money. But that's all they put in."

"Money? Aren't they poor? I got the impression of a poor society."

"They're poor in everything but money. Mercury is highly automated, efficient. Unfortunately they don't know how to take advantage of comparative affluence."



Regina said: "You didn't tell me much about the priest. You said he told you a few things *afterwards*. After what?"

"After I told him a little about this place and about you and me. He asked me a few questions. He was a good, patient man in his way. But when I'd answered his questions and asked for his help, he stretched out his arms and said 'Help me.'"

VII

The day after his return Rex went to the library to find out about Twentymen. And what he found was that the library contained no mention of Twentymen, in poetry, prose, fiction, history, anthropology, sociology or anything else.

He also found something he kicked himself for not noticing before, because it must be important. Most of the books in the small library were brand new, dated 3646. The others, those which were not brand new, were dated various years back to 3597. The point was that these books were encyclopedias, dictionaries, histories and other reference books.

For several weeks Rex and Regina worked hard until all that remained to be done in Limbo was maintenance. The subject of the Gateways was temporarily dropped. They stabled some cattle, fenced

others in, built a fish trap at the lake and started stocking a smaller pool near the house with trout. Although the most predatory birds, animals and fish had been kept out of this reserve when it was stocked, many of the creatures there were incapable of long-term survival without a guiding hand. Many of the things that grew, likewise, needed cultivation.

At first Rex had thought of the creatures of Limbo — whom he assumed to be Section K, London, Earth — as all-seeing, all knowing gods, trusting them to have made Limbo as perfect as it could be expected to be, trusting their assumed plan.

But now he was no longer as trusting. Limbo was not the beautifully balanced sanctuary he had thought it to be. There should have been predators, after all, to keep the fish in check, the birds, the deer, Venison was so plentiful in Limbo that the cattle were fed on it. Partridges and grouse were no delicacy; he would have been glad of a few shooting parties to reduce the numbers, the carcasses being shipped away to some place that would be glad of them, like Earth.

He didn't mind being a hunter. He hated being a butcher.

The Gateways were ignored. They had left the stairway where it was, although Rex had no wish to return.

Not all their time was spent working. Soon they had read most of the books in the small library, at want to life in Limbo. any rate the parts that were rele-

One day when Regina was out doing the chores, including a visit to the herds on the south side of the lake, because Rex had tripped on a root and slightly sprained his ankle, he looked again at the books and something clicked.

It was not memory. It was more like deduction.

They had been provided with everything they needed — far more than they needed. It did not make sense that what their minds needed was not supplied — unless, of course, the Gateways were the answer, and curiosity and boredom were meant to make them turn to exploration.

He hadn't even looked at Venus for several weeks. Now he went down the stairs again and gazed at her. Venus was as lovely as ever. He loved Regina and he could not love Venus; he didn't believe a man could fall in love with a beautiful, sleeping face.

However, he wasn't there to look at Venus. Instead he did something it had not previously occurred to him to do .

He examined the cellar closely.

The walls were plainly white-painted, the floor plastic. Although cold, it was not damp. He found

ventilators and wondered where they led. Not upward, he guessed. There were no cold air currents in the house or outside it. He found no sign of a door, trapdoor or hatch.

The two empty cases seemed to mock him, and he returned to examine his own. The plinth seemed solid. The lid opened and closed easily, not locking. He could see the locks, all the way round. Once they were closed, it would be easier to smash the solid oak lid than to force the locks.

This made him pause for a moment, but there was nothing to be gained by standing looking at the case. He climbed in and pulled the lid shut.

At once, as he had half expected, the bolts shot. The base on which he lay began to sink smoothly and rapidly, and he sighed with relief. He had guessed right.

The descent stopped without a jar and lights came on. Rex rolled out into a second, lower cellar.

This one was colder still, scarcely if at all above freezing point, and he was already shivering from the chill of the upper cellar. Ignoring the other marvels of this vault, he looked around and, to his relief, saw an insulated suit hanging on a hook. He lost no time in putting it on.

The vault was vast and it was immediately obvious that this was the heart of that artificial haven, Limbo. Being non-technical, he was im-

pressed by, but not particularly interested in, the machines. He ignored them.

There were three shafts leading upward from three plinths, open for a few feet on one side. All looked the same from where he stood.

Regina's shaft, examined closely, was identical to his own. There was nothing even to indicate that the base which had raised her was still at the top of the shaft, while his had lowered him to the bottom again.

But Venus's, when he examined it, was not quite the same. . . .

When Regina arrived, not unexpectedly, he held out another suit for her. "Here," he said, "put this on."

She did. "You crazy idiot," she said as she did so. "I thought you were dead."

"Why?"

"Oh, it's another of those sensory blocks, I suppose, like the wall round Limbo. I knew you were in the cellar, but not what you were doing — except when you were drooling over Jezebel, of course. Then you . . . stopped. Like when you went through the Gateway."

"I'm sorry. Of course, there had to be a block. Otherwise you'd have known about the vault."

Apart from the machines, the main content of the vault was a vast library of microfilm, and one other thing.

It was a model of the galaxy, in an ovoid case. What was particularly interesting was that from some of the tiny specks representing systems (the scale was too small for mere planets to be represented) hairline wires led to the plastic case, and from there thicker wires ran to a board on the wall.

There were six wires.

"The Gateways," said Regina flatly. There was never any enthusiasm in her voice when she had to speak of the Gateways.

Rex nodded. It was no mere coincidence.

He felt for controls around the base of the projection and found them. Any section of space could be brought up to fill the whole case. It was easy to find the system of the Sun and bring it up to full magnification. The device was a mere model, in no way a projection of the real galaxy. But the model of the Solar System was so detailed, within the limits of the scale, that each tiny planet was instantly recognizable.

And there was no wire to it.

Even Regina, who had deliberately thought less about such matters than Rex, was surprised.

"Section K, Department of Education and Science, London, England, Europe, Earth, Solar System, doesn't want us casually dropping in to complain about the arrangements," she said.

"No," said Rex thoughtfully.

At one corner of the model was a panel giving the names of systems and planets as they were focused. Soon Rex found Bullan, the ninth planet of a star called Carthage, with a city named Mercury. A wire led from Bullan, confirming something that scarcely needed confirming. The Bullan wire led to a connection exactly at the top point of the circle on the wall board.

The five others led to worlds called Cresta, Neri, Landfall, Chuter and Byron. Not one was a planet of a sun with a name known to Rex or Regina, stars that had been old friends of mariners on Earth long before man started sailing the spaceways.

"But that doesn't matter," said Rex, going back to the microfilm shelves and setting up a viewer.

Twenty minutes later he frowned up at Regina, who had been silently watching him. "Not a word about any of them," he said thoughtfully. "Everywhere else, yes."

"We're meant to make up our minds at first hand, then."

He managed not to laugh. Taken unawares, she had admitted what she had obstinately refused to admit. But he said nothing. Instead, he went back to the model and turned the knobs apparently aimlessly.

Regina started to move about.

"I don't have a built-in crystal ball," she said. "I knew the moment you were back from Bullan. But the moment before that — nothing. I was lying awake in bed. No presentiment. Suddenly you were back. That was all. Nevertheless, I've got a presentiment about *this*. Go on as you're doing, and something fearful is going to happen. I know it."

"You could be right. But don't you see, it doesn't make any difference? People do what they have to do."

She whirled away impatiently. Then abruptly she came to a stop at the foot of Venus's shaft. "What is this?" she said.

Rex came and stood beside her. "I saw that," he said quietly.

Unlike the other two, this shaft had a large, ostentatious switch on the plinth.

"What do you want to do about that?" said Regina, going to a lot of trouble to be casual.

He shrugged and said nothing. Indeed, he walked away, leaving Regina by the shaft.

"Are you just going to leave it like that?" she demanded.

"Leave what like what?"

"Well, I won't." she said deliberately threw the switch at the base of Venus's shaft.

"Why did you do that?" Rex asked mildly.

"It had to be done."

"Did it?"

She shrugged and didn't answer. "You mean," he suggested, "it's like having to climb mountains because they're there?"

"Perhaps."

She ignored that.

They looked at the shaft, and waited a couple of minutes. Nothing happened.

VIII

That night, scanning the microfilm as Regina sat at a table altering clothes which she had decided she didn't like, Rex found a recurring theme, one which puzzled him.

Just why was Earth still so important?

The emotional ties he could understand. On Earth and on Earth alone, a human race, the human race, had evolved. Yet with the emotional ties unbroken, Earth could still have become the Old Country, half despised, half reluctantly loved.

Somehow it hadn't happened like that.

Earth ran everything. Every colony was always turning to Earth. That was why there had never been major conflict among the human settlements. Nobody risked being cut off from Earth.

"What's Earth to you, Regina?" he asked.

Absently, busy with her work, she said: "Home. The mother world. That's all."

And you want to go back there some day?"

"Some day." She looked up, more alert. "Don't try to talk me into anything, Rex. Limbo is fine. Earth's a noisy overpopulated, screaming madhouse like nearly everywhere else. The last thing I want is to go back and live there. All I'm say is, everybody wants to see the old place again, sometime."

He passed that, although apparently he was not included in everybody.

The next day, Rex's ankle being much better, they both went to check on the herds on the south side of the lake. Regina had not reached them the day before.

In the middle of a severely practical discussion on killing or castrating young bulls, preferably killing if they could get the carcasses back to the house, Regina observed:

"She's out now."

"Venus. What's she doing?"

Regina shrugged. "I haven't the faintest idea."

"Why did you do it, Regina?"

She knew what he meant. I'd never build a house halfway up a volcano or labor anxiously in a valley threatened by an avalanche that had to come sooner or later. I like to know where I stand. If something has to happen sooner or later, I'd rather it was sooner."

"Do we go back now? I'm asking because this seems to be your idea."

"No. We carry on as intended."

It was late afternoon when they returned to the lake, making their way round the shoreline because it was mostly flat and easy going.

"We're privileged, or about to be," Regina said. "You especially, being a man."

"What are you talking about?"

"An historic occasion. A wonderful spectacle. You're about to be present as Venus Rises from the Waves."

Rex still looked blank.

They rounded the small ridge. And there, emerging from the lake to meet them, was Venus.

She was naked and she was as magnificent as Regina had feared. It would have been, even Regina admitted, ludicrous for such a being to emerge from the waves vulgarized by a bathing costume. It would have been like putting clothes on cats and dogs.

Seeing them without surprise, Venus pulled herself strongly up the three-foot bank, twisting lithely to get her feet under her and stand up all in one fluid movement. Mere water could not make her long dark hair limp. Breathing deeply, beginning already to steam as water was still running off her pale flesh, she was less a goddess than woman incarnate, making Regina feel suddenly very young, small, frail and helpless. It was not that Venus was old —she might have been twenty-

two or twenty-six, but no more.

"You must be Rex and Regina," said Venus.

"We must," Regina agreed. "Nice to see you. Anyway, Rex thinks so. You must forgive a certain lack of enthusiasm in me."

Venus laughed and spontaneously caught one of Rex's hands and one of Regina's, clasping them together in both of hers. "No suspicion, Regina," she said in her warm, slightly husky voice. "From the start, no suspicion, no jealousy, no awkwardness between us. In the way you're concerned about, I'll stay in my place. In others —"

"What places are you not going to stay in?" Regina asked, since Venus did not continue and Rex, smiling as he looked thoughtfully into Venus's eyes, did not seem inclined to say anything at all.

Venus smiled too. "Oh, that just slipped out. I meant for instance, if Rex . . . No, that really must wait. We've just met."

Rex was thinking: *She knows more than Regina or I knew in our first hours awake in Limbo. Perhaps she already knows more than we do now.*

On the way back to the house, Rex asked Venus to go on ahead. When she had gone, he took Regina gently by the shoulders and said, "You precipitated this, remember?"

"It's all my fault, then. Obviously."

"I didn't say that. If it's any-

body's fault, it's the fault of whoever decided Venus should be here with us. That's certainly a puzzle — ”

“No, it isn't,” said Regina coldly. “The reason is quite obvious.”

“It's not obvious to me.”

“With *her* here, we've got to investigate the Gateways.”

He had expected something quite different. “Huh?” he said blankly, completely at a loss.

“Don't you see? You and I were a unit. Now she's here, suddenly we have conflict. It's inevitable. It is not your fault or mine or even hers. It's in the situation. Her promise, if it was a promise, is neither here nor there. Three of us in Limbo . . . that means we have to look outside.”

“I see what you mean,” he said slowly. “But why did you throw that switch?”

“I told you at the time.”

She had told him, he decided more than enough for the moment. He kissed her to tell her something important: that she was Regina and Venus was just Venus.

IX

Venus couldn't have been less trouble to them. She acted like a self-effacing mother-in-law, though nothing looking less like any mother-in-law could have been imagined. If Rex and Regina seemed to want to be alone at night, Venus went

to her room with a book or a microfilm. If Regina was otherwise engaged — but only then — Venus would cook meals almost equal to Regina's. If there was work to be done, Venus was glad rather than willing to do it; time seemed to hang a little heavy on her hands, though she was far more patient than either Rex or Regina.

Rex never gave Regina a moment's anxiety. Neither did Venus. But. . . They all knew that Venus's presence meant Limbo was overflowing, too full of company or not full enough.

Ironically, the second Gateway expedition was made by Rex and Regina.

At the foot of the stairway to the second Gateway, they turned to Venus awkwardly.

“See you in seventeen days or so,” she said cheerfully.

It was at that moment that Regina remembered one unanswered question, and it suddenly seemed important.

“Venus,” she said, “when we first met you, you said that in one way you'd stay in your place, but in others. . . . You promised to tell us later what you meant.”

Venus smiled.

“I didn't promise to tell you,” she said, “but I will. Here, Rex is supposed to be the boss. I've never disputed it, have I? But if I thought Rex shouldn't be the boss, and I should, I'd do something about it.”

There was no menace in her voice. Rex knew, however, that she meant it. It even seemed logical, understandable, that, the patient Venus should turn out to be the supervisor of the Limbo plan, whatever that was.

Regina, two steps up, started to come down. She seemed to think there was something to discuss, to argue about.

Rex caught Regina by the waist and gently started her up the stairway again.

"I see," he said. "So long, Venus."

"Good luck."

Rex and Regina climbed the stairs, waved to Venus, and simultaneously touched the Gateway.

It was worse than the arrival at Bullan's city of Mercury, worse even than the awakening in Limbo.

It was hot, blindingly hot, searingly hot. Rex's overalls were already soaked with sweat, steaming in the heat. Regina lay beside him, pale and limp and unconscious, and although he ached to help her, he could do nothing for her, yet. Around them was blinding yellow desert — nothing else. Rex looked around for some indication where he should go and found none. The needle of the compass he had brought was spinning aimlessly.

He reached over to stroke Regina's cheeks, her hair. She was breathing, but as if in a deep trance.

This time they had brought with them three things — a compass, a water-bottle and a knife. All could be thrown away if they didn't need them. The compass had already proved useless. The knife might or might not be valuable. The water-bottle was worth its weight in gold.

Rex took his first sip from the bottle. The water, he found with relief, was the main restorative. Now his headache was easing and he was able to face the ordeal of standing up.

Regina could not be left, as she had been left in Limbo, to revive in her own time. He sat up, and she groaned without opening her eyes. For a minute or two he seasawed her up and down.

Then she opened her eyes. "Let me die," she said.

"Don't think like that."

"You're very bright and spry," she said resentfully. "Have you been awake for hours?"

"Only a few minutes." The ordeal was far worse for her than for him. She was, of course, a slim, tiny creature, with only a small reserve of strength.

Regina pulled herself together with an effort, sniffed the air and looked around. "It's all right," she said without enthusiasm. "I know where we are. Stay here for a moment."

She staggered about twenty yards and turned round two or three

times, her eyes shut. Then, her eyes still closed, she returned and stopped only inches short of where the Gateway must be.

She opened her eyes. "We don't need to mark the spot," she said. "I'll be able to come right back to it. That's north." She pointed. "There's a city almost due east of here, about four miles."

A city four miles away in a world where compasses didn't work would have been hard to find without Regina's special sense.

"Can you sense the whole world?" Rex asked.

"Only very vaguely."

"You can sense people, can't you?"

"Only that there are people. Men and women, not aliens. But I can't tell you whether they're black, red or green, dwarfs or giants, friends or enemies."

The city was not large; Regina couldn't give a more accurate estimate than that. There was no other city within fifty miles. The population of the planet was small, she thought, and mainly on the equator.

Their overalls were not unsuitable for the environment, but they should have had sunhelmets. Rex took off the tunic of his overalls, took off the shirt he was wearing underneath, and put the tunic back on. He ripped the shirt in two to make turbans to protect their heads.

When he turned, he saw Regina flat on her face on the burning sand, motionless.

He dropped beside her. She was scarcely breathing. He felt her pulse and found it rapid and, frighteningly irregular.

A thought grew from nothing until it filled his whole mind. Regina was dead against exploring the Gateways, whether he did it alone or they went together. She had never exactly agreed to accompany him; her attitude was rather that if it was impossible to stop him going, she would go with him.

Regina had a special gift. It was not telepathy, and she could not foresee the future. Yet she had had a presentiment. Wasn't it possible that she knew that for her the Gateways were deadly?

When at last she opened her eyes, he said: "We're going straight back."

She smiled with something of the old sarcastic twist. "You could. I can't. Do you think I could take that again so soon and live?"

She began to laugh weakly, half lying, half sitting. With the slight exertion her flesh began to steam again and droplets welled from her to run over her body and fall on the sand. "It's funny," she said. "There's nothing I want more than to get back to Limbo. But I can't go. I'll have to help you to explore this hellspot. If I don't make myself get up and move and burn out

this sickness, I'll never see Limbo again."

X

Regina, who had been leading the way in a dead straight line, at last turned almost due south. "Over that ridge," she said, nodding at it, "is the city. If we skirt the ridge we'll be about level with the city as we enter. Appearing on the skyline we might be too conspicuous."

Rex nodded.

A few seconds later they saw the city. It consisted of squat concrete buildings, wide avenues and grassy parkland not unlike a North African city except that there was no Arab influence in the architecture. The cars that speeded about were ordinary ground cars, and though the pedestrians they could see were too far distant for any details to be made out, they seemed to be ordinary humans.

They waited until a few people had passed close enough for them to make out what they were like. Inspection of the Crestans satisfied them that Rex's overalls and Regina's tunic and skirt, their height, color and general appearance would pass without comment in the city. Their improvised turbans, however, would not. The Crestans didn't wear sunhelmets.

Rex and Regina took off their turbans and buried them in the

sand. Then they stepped forward boldly.

More than most cities, this one began abruptly at a set point, instead of straggling out into the country, semi-urban, semi-rural. The presence of the desert explained that.

Soon Rex and Regina were in quite a busy quarter. Although they were not ignored, as Rex had been in Mercury, anyone who stared stared at Regina, and that was merely her natural right.

These people were busier, more alert, more purposeful than the people of Mercury. Everyone appeared to have somewhere to go, and all were in a hurry to get there.

When they found a church open they went inside. It was clear at once that churches here, like everything else, were very different from those of Bullan. Here were no reminders that Doomsday was near. This church was small, very modern, cool and empty. There was no equivalent of the archway in the Mercurian church, and this was not merely because this church was not Catholic. The Crestans were too busy always to be running to the priest for what help he could give them.

After walking in Strand 7 for an hour, they felt they were getting nowhere.

On the face of it, they had learned a great deal. Cresta was a recently developed world, not rich as

planets went but not poor either, specializing in delicate workmanship because the natural resources of the planet were negligible.

A valuable find was a thick newspaper left on a park bench. Strand 7 was not big enough to have a newspaper of its own. The *Cresta Times* served the whole world and at that it was not daily but weekly.

Since no one else was sitting on a public bench reading a newspaper, they scanned it quickly and then carefully folded it to put in their pockets. But now, from tag-ends of conversation, a notice or two and what they had gleaned from the paper, plus some guesswork, they knew one of the main Crestan problems, the one on which the future of the settlement depended, and the main hope of a solution — a plan to stock the seas with fish.

Before colonization, Cresta had had no life whatever; such soil as there was had to be worked on for a long time before it would grow anything useful. The grass they had seen was artificial. Cresta had no soil to waste on mere decorative grass.

For years the seas had been stocked with live fish, algae, plankton and all the organic refuse Cresta could spare from the eternal fight to make another acre of soil productive. The basic snag was that any creature brought alive to the

planet could live only on something else brought to the planet.

Cresta took everything other worlds didn't want — sewage, any non-poisonous effluent, vegetation in any condition, all the refuse of other, live planets. To get all this for nothing beyond freight cost, which was considerable, Cresta couldn't afford to be choosy. The plan, or rather the pious hope, was that all life or near-life being dumped into the seas and on sterile soil would eventually rearrange itself into a balanced pattern.

And all this refuse was brought to Cresta by ships. There was no mention of any Gateway.

Little Limbo could actually breathe life into Cresta, possibly enough to make it a real, living world. Thousands of birds and animals, hundreds of tons of vegetation could be pushed through the looking glass. . . .

Of course, Cresta would want too much, would fight for it, and Limbo would die, like many another golden goose.

They had learned a lot, but they had made none of the fleeting contacts Rex had made with the people of Mercury, the brief glimpses into their lives which had told him almost everything of any importance that he discovered there.

At last Regina said: "If we're going to find out anything here without money, we'll have to make something happen."



"Do you have any ideas?"

"You're the one who's supposed to have ideas. You managed to find out quite a bit about Mercury. Why not here?"

"You sit on that bench," he said. "If anything happens to me, don't get involved."

"What are you going to do?"

He moved away from her without answering, because he didn't know.

Then he remembered the immigration office they had seen in the next street. Without a glance back at Regina, he went to it, walked in and said to the clerk at the desk: "I want to go back."

The clerk, a thin girl with pale eyebrows, smiled thinly and said: "You know you can't."

"I want to go back, I tell you."

"Back where?"

"Earth."

For a moment she was too astonished to laugh. Then she laughed.

"You came direct?" she asked.

Something told me not to say yes. He didn't want to say no either, because he couldn't answer the next question.

"What does that matter?" he retorted, trying to act belligerent and not very smart, so that anything he didn't know could be put down to general ignorance.

"You know perfectly well," she said, as if to a child, "that if you left Earth voluntarily, you under-

took never to return except on visits, the first not less than thirty years ahead. If you didn't leave Earth voluntarily, you don't get back, ever."

Half the time you don't know what you're signing," he grumbled.

She shook her head. "You must have known, if you really came from Earth. How can I help you?"

"If you can't get me back you can't help me."

"Short of that, how can I help you?"

"I'm out of a job."

This time he'd really said the wrong thing.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He was in trouble.

"Look," he said desperately, "I'd say or do anything to get off this planet. Any ideas?"

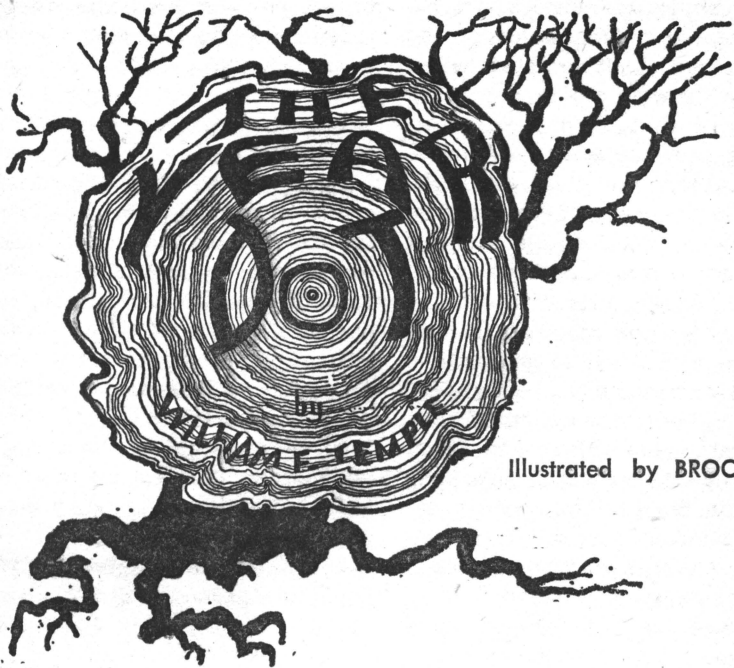
"What do you know about the birds?" she asked carefully.

He knew it was a trick question. It was like asking a man who claimed to come from Mercury if the street lighting was still good. He couldn't guess the answer. He had to know it.

"What birds?" he said, and was not in the least surprised when her eyes showed instantly this was one of the many wrong answers.

She reached for a button on the desk. He didn't know who she was summoning, but he was quite sure it would be someone — or something — he didn't like.

TO BE CONCLUDED



Illustrated by BROCK

There was a year missing from the calendar. Only the X-men knew where it went — and why.

I

A boy needs to identify himself with someone, I guess. Or, anyhow, *something*.

There has to be a model. Usually a parent. Maybe Ma first, than Pa later. I suppose it comes naturally to those who have parents. I didn't, not after I was three years old, so I had to cast around.

There was no anchorage in Gran. She had lost her own bearings soon after finding her son and daughter-in-law shot dead at the river's brink. She had taken me for a walk. Together, hand in hand, we came upon them.

Ma lay on her back, head and shoulders submerged. Her face was a pallid blob which seemed to be actively grimacing. But it was only

the effect of the brown water flowing over and around it.

My father was sprawled on top of her, arms about her, head on her bosom. We wore a blue and yellow checkered shirt, with a red pear-shaped patch between his shoulder blades. From the stalk end of the pear, redness trickled very slowly, making a thread down the dirt bank. The thread's end was frayed by the streaming river.

Years later, I was able to form a guess about it. Someone with a gun had trapped them, backs to the river. Maybe trying to evade a shot, my mother had fallen. My father had shielded her with his body and caught the next shot in his back. He died holding her, and his weight forced her down the bank-side. She drowned.

I never heard that anyone tried all that hard to catch the murderer. Anyhow, no one was caught.

I grew up with Gran but most of the time she made no sense. Her mind had gone to pieces. Little she said led anywhere. Our highest flights of conversation concerned the weather. It was hot or cold, dry or wet. She paid small attention to what I said and usually contradicted what she herself said. She confused me. I couldn't ape her behavior; there was no pattern to it.

If I had other living relatives, I never heard tell of them.

My neck of the woods was thinly inhabited. None of the inhabitants

cared a cent about me. It was so unanimous that I reckoned I was unlikable. I couldn't think why, for I was eager to please. Yet I was always odd-boy-out at school, as if I were trying to be different by being an orphan.

I wasn't popular with the teacher, either. I found it tough to follow the drift of his mind. The others seemed able to keep in touch with it. I floundered behind and was punished for it.

If I protested, the answer was the same in flavor and content. "You want reasons, Cabot? Right. One, you're incurably stupid. Two, you're lazy. Three, you ask too many silly questions. Why don't you just remember what I tell you, as the other boys do? That way you might complete a halfway decent exam paper."

I preferred animals to people. Yet they had shortcomings, too. I mean, there was nothing *noble* about them. I used to think maybe a lone wolf was noble. But I never saw one — I think it was only book-stuff. When the snows drove the wolves down out of the mountain woods, they went around in packs attacking the weaker creatures. Just like schoolboys.

I think my father must have been noble.

The giant oak was noble. They called it that — giant. Maybe it would have been a giant among

other oaks but here there were no other oaks. It stood on top of a hill. The pines rooted on the slopes seemed *nothing* beside it. It had lived and suffered and grown twisted and gnarled. The pines were just a lot of skinny telegraph posts. They hadn't any character. They were only striplings.

The oak was older than they were in every way.

The metal plate on the stake nearby said: *This oak was planted from an acorn on August 15th 1945 to commemorate the victory of the Allied Forces.*

That was after the Second World War, of course.

I used to think a lot about the past because the present was dismal and portended no change for the future. The past seemed to become real when I sat and dreamed under the widespread arms of the oak. It was my childish fancy that they were antennae picking up faint pulses from a world that had been hereabouts but drifted away.

I was fool enough to mention this to the Sheriff's son.

He looked at me strangely. "You ain't right in the head, Bart."

Thereafter I kept my fancies to myself.

Another attraction of the oak was its being the only vantage point from which you could see a mite over the next ridge, into the valley of the X-men. The X-men — apparently so-called because they

were an unknown quantity — fascinated me. There seemed to be very few of them — I'd never glimpsed more than two of them at the same time. They rarely left the valley, either on foot or by spaceship.

You'd never meet one to speak to. Since Dobbie was knocked out, no one wished to.

Dobbie was a trigger-happy goon who killed more creatures than he could eat, because it made him feel good. One day he saw something move in the undergrowth and shot at it from force of habit. It was an X-man who shot right back at him with some kind of ray-gun. Dobbie was unconscious for two days.

The Sheriff posted an order: Everyone keep clear of the valley of the X-men.

You couldn't enter the valley, anyhow. There was an invisible fence around it. I ran into it once. It was like coming up against a headwind which became stronger at every step. It forced me to a standstill. But there was no wind, only an elastic force-field which stretched but wouldn't break.

Obviously the X-men were interested in us only to the extent of making us keep our distance.

Maybe once, and never more than twice a year one of their spaceships would drift earthward, humming like a great bee, and

settle in the valley. Almost always its visit was short. Within a couple of days, it would be off again into the infinite.

Where did the X-men come from? Where did they go to? And why was no one except myself interested enough to wonder?

There was a sizable library in Yorktown. Each time I was in town, I would search for information about them — in vain.

The librarian was middle-aged, fat and stupid. Her face was like the back of a shovel — convex and blank. She cared so little for books that she often set them on the shelves upside down. She was no help.

“The X-men? No, I don’t recollect seeing anything about them. I reckon nobody knows anything about them, anyway. So who could write a book?”

“But surely there must be something about them in the newspapers or the magazines?”

“There are the files. Look for yourself, son.”

I looked. And looked and looked during repeated visits. One day I discovered something I wasn’t looking for: the Year Dot. Logically, it should have been the year 1978 A.D. but, illogically, it didn’t exist.

I first noticed the hiatus in the massed pulp of the *Yorktown Weekly Advertiser*. Each complete year of issues was tape-strung between two wooden slats. I’d been

leafing back through the last couple of decades, yawning over the same old fines imposed on the same old drunks, and the same old disputes about drains and boundaries.

During such a yawn, I reached down the next file. As the files were in chronological order, it should have been labeled 1978. But it was in fact 1977. I completed the yarn without surprise. The fat lady was a slipshod filer.

Then I went hunting for the missing year 1978. Eventually I was among the yellow and gray pages of almost half a century ago, half afraid to turn them because they were brittle and tore easily.

By then I’d had about enough and was tempted to forget it. But the librarian was oozing past, so I tapped her elbow.

“Pardon me, but do you know where Year 1978 of the *Advertiser* has gotten to?”

She looked at me vaguely, then over my shoulder at the desk.

“Why, you’ve got it right there in front of you.”

“What? No, look, this one’s 1977.”

She looked again, and frowned. “Don’t waste my time, son. It’s not April Fool’s Day.”

She jellied on.

Bemused, I checked the fifty-two copies in the file. They were all 1977. I sucked my thumb, which sometimes gives me an idea.

It did now, though nothing brilliant. I went and surveyed the ranks of various yearbooks. Some sets didn't go back far enough but the ones that did shared a characteristic: there was no edition for the year 1978.

With a respect I didn't feel but thought wise to assume to avoid being ejected, I asked the librarian to come and look.

"Look at what?" she asked irritably, but came.

I ran my finger along the spines of the *Medical Yearbook*.

"1977, you see, and then 1979. But no 1978."

She said, "Look, boy, I've had enough of this. Settle down quietly or else get out."

She was dead serious. But then, so was I.

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make trouble. Guess I can't see straight today. Would you point out the 1978 volume?"

She looked at me suspiciously, hesitated, then touched the Yearbook for 1977.

"Oh, I see," I said, guilelessly. "And that's 1976 to the left of it?"

Half watching me, half watching what she did, she jerked her finger back along the line of books. "1976, '75, '74, '73, '72 . . . and so on. It's plain as plain. You'd better see an oculist son; you need glasses."

I rubbed an eye and then peer-

ed with an assumption of myopia.

"And the other way — 1979 on?" I asked.

She sighed, and finger-jabbed again. "1979, '80, '81, '82, '83 . . ."

This time her pronouncements and the dates on the spines coincided — I couldn't have agreed more. Whereas, working back, she named the year *before* each edition, a year out of kilter all the way. And I couldn't prove she was wrong. No use to subtract the first date (1945) from the last (1995) and then count the books to show that there was one short. For she would see 1945 as 1944, a compensating error. None so blind, et cetera.

"Thanks," I said quietly. "I'll go see that oculist."

"Wait — let me see your reader's ticket."

I gave it to her. She glanced at it and asked, "Why didn't you renew this last year, when it expired?"

I peeped at it. It was in date. Somehow, she was seeing last year's date. What a way to run a library, I thought. There was no future — or past — in arguing the point. I bent with the gale.

"Guess I forgot. Sorry."

"I'll renew it," she said, and did so at her desk. She passed me the new ticket. I watched for her to tear up the old one — the usual procedure. She didn't. She put it in a drawer.

I began the long walk home,

wondering about that — and the rest of it.

II

Was it my business to report that the librarian had slipped a cog in her brain? Maybe the Council knew that and bore with it, together with her slovenly methods. Why was 1978 so painful to her that it had to be exorcised from her memory and even from her library? She wore no wedding ring. Was that the year of her final rejection, sentencing her to spinsterhood — and a trauma?

Back at the shack which I called home, I asked, with little hope of a sensible answer, "Do you remember the year 1978, Gran?"

For once there was a responsive flicker in her eyes of much diluted blue. Her lips twitched in the beginning of a smile which never made it.

"Sure I remember. I remember 'em all — right back to the Year Dot."

The Year Dot was a term she often used. I took it to mean the Year Zero, the year God created the world.

"Anything special happen in 1978?"

"The Year Dot," she said, and the smile came, and it was a grim and strange one. "That happened. That was the Year Dot, Bart."

"I don't understand."

"It was a cold winter, that year. Terrible cold. Everything froze. Everybody froze to the bone like they was all bone. Except for the wolves. And they came down and ate everybody up. Bones and all. Thousands of 'em."

"Thousands of wolves?"

"Thousands," she said, her eyes emptying again. She chewed her gums and plucked at non-existent loose threads on her lap. She made mumbling noises, then said, almost brightly, "It's turning cold again. Colder than yesterday."

Subject normal — and safe. I could get no more out of her about the Year Dot.

There was no one else in this district I would confide in. But there were other towns than Yorktown and other libraries. All far away, but I would start saving for fares.

I saved nothing, for Gran died a few days later from hardened arteries. The funeral swallowed my small capital and more. I had to sell most of our old furniture to cover the bill.

She'd provided, of late, so little company that I told myself I'd hardly miss her. I missed her like hell. She was the only person I didn't regard as a stranger, my only blood relation.

The last link with my parents had broken, and I learned what real loneliness meant.

The day after the funeral I was

wedged in the topmost crotch of the giant oak, as far above this sad world as I could get, brooding over what I could glimpse of the valley of the X-men. It wasn't much. The trees, the scrub, the stony ground looked much the same as in my own valley. The difference lay in their inaccessibility and the danger that dwelt there.

Once already this morning I'd seen an X-man walking slowly — they never seemed to hurry — across the far slope. Distance made him tiny, but X-men, I knew, were taller than us — at least a foot taller. He wore a long gray coat and a black hood or helmet, that might have been of fur. He was very erect; his carriage conveyed dignity. I couldn't distinguish enough of his face to form a picture of it. But my imagination furnished a noble brow, imperious nose, and wise, kind eyes. The kind off ace maybe my father had.

Nobility was suggested by the stately way they walked. It was a quality lacking in my world. I guess I was aware of it from history books about Washington and Lincoln and story books about King Arthur.

"Cabot!"

A harsh bellow came from my ignoble world down there under the waves of curiously and endearingly shaped oak leaves.

"Cabot, come down here!"

It was the Sheriff, He-Who-Must-Be-Obedied. Reluctantly but sensibly, I duly obeyed. That tough screen of branches mightn't stop all of the buckshot from reaching me. The Sheriff was Dobbie's opposite. Dobbie's rule of thumb was: if it moves, shoot it. The Sheriff's rule was: if it *doesn't* move when ordered to, shoot it.

"Coming," I called, to forestall perforation, and abandoned my eyrie.

Instead of looking down, I became the one looked down on. The Sheriff was almost as tall as an X-man, not a bit noble, and had difficulty in controlling sudden animal rages.

He glowered at me. "You're a great reader, ain't you, Cabot?"

"Yes, I do read a lot, Sheriff."

"Then why the hell didn't you read my notice? It said to keep away from that valley."

"I never go any nearer to it than this."

"And that's too damn near. Do you want to get shot?"

"Do you mean by you — or the X-men?"

Animal rage won for the moment. His backhander sent me crashing against the knobbly trunk.

"Don't sass me. What was you doing up there?"

"Only looking, Sheriff."

"See any X-men?"

"Yes. One."

"Then make no mistake, he saw

you. They carry guns, you know. They don't like to be spied on. They'll pick you off that tree like you was a crow."

"I'll watch it, Sheriff."

"Watch nothing. Just stay away from this ridge. Stay home and read your books. What kind of books you read? History books?"

His eyes, close-set as a chimpanzee's, were conning me with unusual intensity. As he was all but illiterate, I wondered at his sudden interest in my literary tastes.

"Sometimes."

"What you trying to learn."

"What it used to be like in the old days, I guess."

"What old days?"

What lay behind this cross-examination? Why had the Sheriff come looking for me, anyhow? Books, libraries — memory connected them and I made a guess. I experimented with the guess.

"The nineteen-seventies mostly."

His eyes narrowed until they almost disappeared. Yes, the connection was sound. The librarian had held my old reader's ticket because it bore my name and address. She had phoned the Sheriff about me. He was checking how much I knew about the Year Dot. Obviously, I wasn't supposed to know anything. From here on, I should have to watch my step.

"What's so interesting about them, Cabot?"

I shrugged. "I was born around the end of that decade. It's just natural curiosity about what the world was like when I came into it."

"Mooning about what's past and gone won't earn you no bread. And you ain't got all that much in the larder now, have you? You'd do better to think about making a living instead."

"Guess you're right, Sheriff."

"I ought to jail you for breaking the law — you know that? But seeing you're only young, I'm gonna parole you instead. You report to my office twice a day, except Sundays, at eleven and four, sharp, until further orders. Got that?"

"Yes, Sheriff."

"Then get this too. Don't ever come up this area again. Keep away from this tree. Stay in the valley. That's a final order. Break it and I'll break you — in pieces. There won't be no second chance. Now get out of here."

I slouched in a defeated sort of way down to our valley. There was every cause to feel defeated. Unless you had a car or horse — I had neither — you had to walk to Yorktown which was a three-hour tramp, either way. Those reporting times were designed to prevent me from visiting the Yorktown library during its open hours.

But I didn't feel all that cast down. I realized I'd happened upon something important. Discovering

just what was a challenge that offered excitement and some danger.

Just as well, maybe, that I didn't realize then the degree of danger.

I paused once to glance back up the slope. The Sheriff was standing, hands on hips, looking judicially up at the oak tree as though he'd been asked to estimate its height.

III

Next morning I went to the Sheriff's office to report, and he was out. His Deputy was in. I tried to report to him.

"You can't do that," he said. "Sheriff said you gotta report to him personal. You just wait till he gets back."

I waited for three and a half hours, becoming angry and then uneasy. If it went on like this, I'd never be able to earn enough to eat. Maybe that was the idea . . .

The Sheriff arrived in a station wagon. He dropped a couple of passengers — the Evans brothers, woodsmen. They went on down the street, taking a cross-cut saw with them.

The Sheriff came on in, ducking under the lintel. He looked at me and smiled, surprisingly. It was the sort of cruel anticipatory smile people have when they know someone they don't like is due for a nasty shock.

"Okay, Cabot — blow. But be back at four o'clock."

It was two-thirty and hardly worth trudging home to turn around and come back. But I had hung about long enough and had a lot of bottled frustration to work off. I strode out, silent but furious. I heard the Sheriff whisper something to his Deputy, and the latter's cackling "Haw-haw-haw" followed me along the passage.

It was one of those times when I suddenly hated the human race.

The quiet, deserted woods were a haven and soothed my rage. As I walked through them, I fell to thinking about the Year Dot. It stood to reason that there could be no missing year. Time didn't stop and start like a clock. At midnight, December 31st, 1977 Earth began another circuit of the sun and the period of twelve months it took to complete it was 1978. Calling it 1979 changed nothing basically.

Therefore, this current year of grace, 1996, was in fact 1995.

My mind began circling instead of tackling the problem. It needed figuring out at leisure; I would postpone it till the cool of the evening.

I reached my shack and glanced at my watch. I could spend a whole fifteen minutes at home before starting back. I went on a little way along the valley to a spot where I could see the forbidden hill.

The hill was still there. The gi-

ant oak wasn't. I could see blue sky through the gap where it wasn't.

That pang of dismay is sharp in my memory yet. It was as bad as that time I looked into Gran's room and saw at once that she was dead.

I didn't give another thought to the Off-Limits order. I ran up there, reached the crest with a thumping heart and no breath.

The oak was still there, after all, but in two parts. Its great roots incongruously supported a stump only two feet high. The upper bulk, fallen, lay just over the crest, sprawling down the steep slope. I looked down at it, sobbing for breath, and then over its foliage at the ridge of the valley of the X-men.

Like a sentinel, an X-man stood on that ridge. He seemed to be gazing straight at me.

Shocked and hurt, I jumped to a conclusion. The X-men had done this to stop me from peeping into their valley. Possibly they'd used some kind of long-range cutting ray.

I shook my fist at the distant figure and gasped vain threats of retaliation.

Then I sat down on the stump, hid my face in my hands and cried like a lost child — which in effect I was. That oak had been to me the one solid, reassuring thing

in a bewildering and untrustworthy world. Its roots were my roots, its existence confirmation of my own existence. I had scaled it so often that my hands and feet knew the shape of every bough, the relative positions of all vantage points for the ascent. More than once, for amusement, I'd climbed it with my eyes shut.

And now my hands, although I was still aware of the conditioned impulses in them, would never again reach for those rough branches.

When I pulled myself together and stood up, the X-man was still there, as motionless as any of the valley pines. Then I discovered I'd done him an injustice. From the evidence of the sawdust and teeth-marks, the oak had been cut down by human hands. Those of the Evans brothers, doubtless, by order of the Sheriff. Now I understood his smile.

For the first time, I felt a senseless urge to kill a man.

I looked at the raw, sap-bleeding stump. Long though the tree had stood, as oaks go it had been slain in the prime of life, at the age of fifty years, if my theory that it was now 1995 were correct. Should I ever be able to verify it?

The concentric circles of the annual rings suggested a monster eye staring up into space. I stood there like an oaf too dumb to read the message in it: *This is the record of my years.*

Newton and Archimedes were quicker off the mark than I, but I got the message presently and with equal excitement.

I counted the rings carefully thrice and thrice agreed with myself. The oak was fifty-one years old, and therefore the present year was 1996, just as they said it was. My theory was incorrect.

And this meant that one year had been snipped clean out of history, leaving no record — at least, not in Yorktown. The Year Dot: 1978.

They may have destroyed all the yearbooks for that year and deleted it from the calendars. They may have maintained by a trick of numeration that there never was such a year. But they couldn't buck Nature's calendar.

I sat there awhile, brooding about who was trying to fool whom and why. Maybe they had been fooled into believing there was no 1978. Maybe a hypnotic blind spot had been planted in their minds. By whom? The X-men? If so, why?

I looked across to see if the X-man were still there. He was.

I stood up on the small plateau of the stump and studied him for a couple of minutes. He was as thin as a scarecrow and could have been one for all the movement he made. In fact, I began to wonder if it were a dummy planted there to

act, so to speak, as a scare-human.

Behind me, the Sheriff's voice said, "Wasted my breath warning you, didn't I?"

I froze, heart sinking, then slowly turned. He was only a couple of yards away and looked tensed up. He hadn't brought his shotgun, but there was a revolver in his holster and his arm was crooked as if halfway to the draw.

"Figured I couldn't trust you, Cabot. That's why I follered you. I been watching you counting them rings. Smart, ain't you? But I outsmarted you."

I realized then that he at least knew the books had been cooked, and wasn't fooled any about the Year Dot.

I tried to look cool and sound steady. "You outsmarted yourself, too, Sheriff. When you cut down this tree you revealed the true calendar."

"Get down from there," he growled. "Come here. This time you go to jail."

I saw from his eyes that he meant it — and more. I would be clapped in a cell and never emerge from it in this life.

"I'm coming," I said, quietly, to mislead him — and suddenly leaped from the stump, away from him, over the crest, down into the lower branches of the fallen giant.

There was tangled undergrowth all around. The trunk formed a bridge over it. The maze of branch-

es was no obstacle to me; I knew every foot of the route through it. The Sheriff didn't. He took a blind shot from the crest at me; the leaves hid me and the thick limbs shielded me.

Then he plunged after me. I'd almost swear that the oak did its best to block and hinder him. He kept getting hooked up on its branches.

By the time he broke free, I had said goodbye to the oak and reached the bottom of this valley.

Which way now? To the right, the valley became a *cul-de-sac*, a potential trap. To the left, it emerged on a bare prairie where there was no place to hide. Either way, capture or death was inevitable.

Ahead of me the ground sloped up to the spot where the X-man stood like an unconcerned spectator. He was an unknown quantity. The Sheriff was a known quantity.

I hesitated.

Thud. A bullet hit the earth a yard behind me.

I opted for the unknown and scrambled up towards it.

I heard the revolver fire again and lead swish past my ear. Sweat ran onto my eyebrows, and it wasn't all caused by exertion.

Wildly I looked for cover but the undergrowth was thin on this side of the valley. I scrambled onward towards the X-man. All at

once he came to life and pointed an arm in my direction. Something in his hand glowed deep red for an instant.

I flung myself on my chest. But I wasn't the target. I heard a truncated cry behind me, and peered back and down. Near the valley bottom, the Sheriff lay on his back, arms and legs spread stiffly apart, forming an X.

Would it be my turn next?

I looked up. The X-man was statuesque again. I was close enough now to see his eyes. They were watching me. Calmly. Sanely. There was none of the anger, scorn or stupidity so common in human eyes.

But the rest of him was repellent.

His long military-style coat was unfastened and hung apart, revealing a figure emaciated and seemingly deformed. Where had I gotten that impression of physical grace and dignity? His limbs were double-jointed though not in the usual sense. They were hinged into three moveable sections; each arm had two elbow joints, each leg two knee joints.

That grotesque arrangement bothered me less than the evidences of disease. His neck glands were swollen lumps, one practically a goiter. His bloodless face was purple-scarred with the craters of old pustules. His large-knuckled fingers looked arthritic. His fur helmet was skull-tight.

Nevertheless, he had kept his pride.

He held himself erect. His mouth was firm yet sensitive.

I got to my feet, watching him all the time.

He spoke. His voice carried to me through the still air like a sweet-toned faraway campanile bell. His English was only slightly accented.

"You may go. I shall not harm you."

"There's nowhere for me to go."

"I wouldn't say that. Suppose you come and discuss it with me, Bartholomew Cabot?"

I didn't ask him how he knew my name. Just then, reasons were less important than feelings. For the first time I could remember, I had been made to feel welcome. I went to him without another thought.

He fingered a small control box on his belt. I guess he dissolved the invisible fence temporarily, for I reached him with no trouble. He towered over me, misshapen, horribly marred, a nightmare creature. And friendly warmth radiated from him.

I felt no fear.

"Call me Lon," he said. "It's near enough."

He led me into his valley, walking in a deliberate, stately fashion. It was his way of combatting Earth's stronger gravitation without losing poise.

Lon had shown me over the huge ship repair bay deep in the valley. It was cybernetics-plus. The atomic reactor plant drilled for ore, extracted its fuel, and governed its output with severe self-discipline. The gantries moved their mass around at the touch of a finger. Robots bristling with powered tools awaited the word of command.

Lon issued the commands. It was all he had to do.

He was quite alone in that long, dog-leg valley. He saw another X-man but once or twice a year, when a ship stopped by for repair or refueling. They were mostly one-man ships, fully automatic.

"We're nomads now, and there aren't all that many of us. We're the remnants of a once great and flourishing people, who thought they were the masters of their future, *Hubris*, Bart. Nobody's omniscient — there are just too many imponderables in the universe. The computers only knew what we told them, and we didn't tell them about the Lykas because we didn't know about the Lykas."

We were in the spacious open-plan room where Lon spent most of his time. There was the living area with the long sofas to rest those long legs. A section of the wall here was hung with paintings of exotic flowers and beasts; the luminous paint made them glow

with life. There was the kitchen corner. Then came the operational area with the consoles and the wall panels where colored pin-points crawled like insects over numbered configurations. There was a whole battery of TV screens. Some screens which were dark now would light only to reveal intruders at the boundary fence.

Lon became abstracted.

"I don't know about the Lykas, either," I prompted.

He looked at me. "You do and you don't." Then he smiled at my plain confusion. "Visual illustration," he said, and reached long arms to a control panel.

He indicated one of the screens. It framed an aerial view of my own valley. He had told me of the many tiny eyes, no larger than mustard seeds, seemingly wind-borne for miles around but actually components of a planned scanning network. They were micro-engineered cameras of infinite complexity.

This particular Eye moved up the valley, though the gap where the oak had stood, swooped down the far slope and hovered so low over the still unconscious Sheriff that his face filled the screen. Then it swept into the dark cavern of his left nostril. The screen was black only for a moment. Then the Eye became a penetration ray camera looking into the brain, turn-

ing its arteries into glass, its convolutions into shadows, with the sutured cranium a background to it all.

Thick among the brain cells, infesting the bloodstream, were a myriad of moving black points, like iron filings.

"The Lykas: a microbe race," said Lon. "Their intelligence was always limited by their size, but in human blood they've become even duller than they were; it's not a very stimulating environment."

"They've made the Sheriff sick in his mind?"

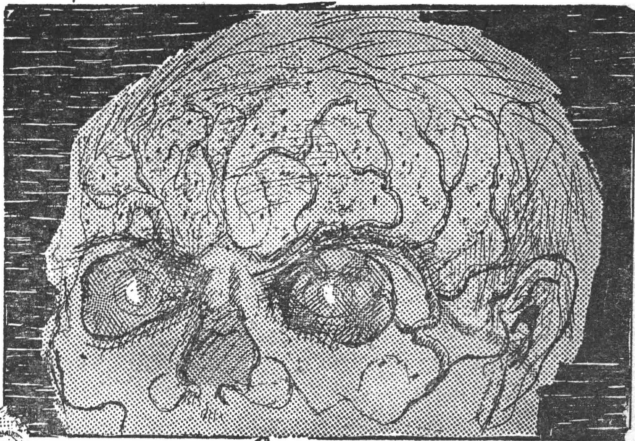
"Well, sicker, shall we say? Frankly, much of the human race was pretty sick before they affected it."

An abominable thought struck me. "Are the Lykas in *my* brain?"

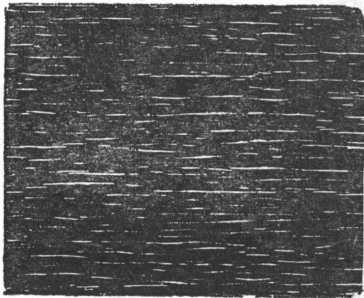
"No, Bart. I've checked the whole local population. Even gone into their personal and medical histories as far as I could. You're the only one that's clean. You have a rare blood-group which doesn't suit the Lykas at all. Even if I hadn't checked, I should have known that you weren't infected. You came to me. You weren't afraid. But the Lykas *are* afraid — afraid I might discover they're here and exterminate them."

"So they think you've not discovered them yet?" I asked, feeling a lot easier.

Lou smiled. "They've degenerat-



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ed to the point where they can hardly think at all now. Their reasoning is infantile. They're behaving like a child which shuts its eyes and reasons that because it can't see you, therefore you can't see it."

"How long have they been here? How did they get here?"

"They came by way of my planet long, long ago. But they didn't reach Earth until the year which should have been numbered — "

"Nineteen seventy-eight!" I exclaimed. "The Year Dot, I call it."

"Which they pretend was non-existent. You see how childish they've become."

"Tell me all about them, Lon."

It was a story which ended with a question, and I had to answer that question. Lon gave me time to think it over. I used much of the time going back over his story.

The Phelenic Empire was the wonder of its corner of the Galaxy. Proud, learned, aspiring, it acknowledged neither master nor equal. The handsome and vigorous Phelenes lived life to the full in every direction: exploration and adventure, art and sport, research and philosophy. They were happily aware that sex, too, offered opportunities in all these directions.

They were benignant to their subject races so long as there was no protest. But at the mere hint of

rebellion or suggestion of self-government, the offending race was crushed by force and new laws and its spirit broken.

The Phelenes were the rulers and intended to stay so.

But the Lykas came without respect for their intentions. They were a nomadic tribe, but not from choice; they were seeking their Promised Land. Microscopic, almost without mass, they let light pressure carry them through the void to new worlds and new hopes of roots — roots in creatures immeasurably larger than themselves, whose bodies would become both larders and instruments of power.

They had little luck. Sooner or later, the organisms they tried to take over rejected them. It was so with the Phelenes. Unsuspected, the Lykas entered the bloodstream of the master race and strove to overcome the automatic bodily defenses.

It was a war without victory. True, the Lykas were ousted eventually. But the price was the destruction of the Phelenic Empire and more gradually of the Phelenic race itself. The Phelenes' glandular systems had collapsed into anarchy under the strain. The race lost protection against disease — and also the power to reproduce.

The Phelenes died off, save for a small percentage which were tempered in the fire and became resistant even to the natural process of aging. But they remained sterile.

Toppled from their throne of power, humiliated in the sight of their subject races, denied growth and an expanding future, the survivors vowed to hunt down and cleanse the Galaxy of the Lykas.

"We claimed to be plague exterminators," Lon had said. "Then that seemed too prosaic. A master race should be more than scavengers. Remember, our pride needed restoring. So we elevated ourselves to the Saviors of the Galaxy. We were selflessly trying to save others from sharing our fate. Obviously, therefore, we were instruments of the Holy Spirit, Crusaders for the Right. Many of us are still rampaging on like that through the wondering worlds and maybe still impress the impressionable. But some, like myself, realized it was only a cloak covering the desire for vengeance. We were ever a spoiled race. We never really gave a damn for anyone but our own kind."

It was Lon, alone, who caught up with the Lykas at last. It was his duty then to rally the pack and be in at the death.

But by then vengeance had left him. He felt he needed time to consider the situation on Earth and reconsider the conception of duty.

The Lykas, aware they were hunted, sought obscurity. Although seated in the brains of Earthlings, they tried to maintain an illusion that the human race had not been

infected. They hoped the Phelenes would pass them by, undetected.

The battle to gain control of the Earthlings lasted a full year. Then they tried, naively, to obliterate all human records and memories of that year, so that the Phelenes wouldn't notice any traces. But a small minority of Earthlings had escaped infection. If and when they identified them, the Lykas usually arranged either to confine or kill them. Pretty certainly, I judged, my parents were such victims. Maybe I was spared at the time because I was too young to know anything, and Gran because she had lost her mind, anyway.

"Frankly," Lon told me, "the average level of human intelligence had been declining steadily for some time before the Lykas reached Earth. They came only to fall on stony ground yet again. This time, I think, for the last time. Earthlings and the Lykas are bad for each other. A process of mutual mental degeneration has set in. I doubt if the Lykas have enough wit left to pull out now. That solves my dilemma."

"What dilemma?" I asked.

"There's no way of destroying the Lykas without destroying the Earthlings also; they're commingled. The only workable method is mass extermination. And the few who are immune, like yourself, are so scattered that it would be im-

possible to isolate them; they would share the general fate."

"I don't see the solution," I said.

"Time will provide it without my intervention. The Lykas are on the way out. Whether the human race survives them is not my problem — at least, not a problem that I can do anything about at this time. Things will have to take their course. I'm glad not to be involved in killing. I've traveled much in this far-from-hospitable Galaxy, and my sympathy goes out to any form of life trying to cling to a foot-hold in it. I find an increasing number of my fellow Phelenes, as they call in here, beginning to share that outlook. Experience teaches tolerance. The hunt is losing its impetus even before it knows the quarry has been found."

"But the Lykas caused it in the first place, by attacking you."

Lon smiled wryly. "Bart, you must broaden your education too. You must go out there and see some of the things I have seen. The Lykas didn't attack us from malice but from necessity. In fact, they're less blameworthy than we. It was we who went spreading hatred among the stars. And we shall pass into extinction as surely as they. Our life-span was enormously increased, yet we remain mortal — and sterile. What I have left of life — which is still far more

than you have left, Bart — I plan to spend well. Exploring, learning, and wherever possible doing all I can to keep Life, in the broader sense, going. It has a thousand enemies, and ignorance and hatred are only two of them. What could be more rewarding? I can hardly wait to get started. I shall be leaving Earth soon, Bart. Come with me — and learn. There's no future for you on this planet but that of a hunted outcast. Will you come?"

I considered.

"Shall we ever return to Earth?"

"It's a remote possibility. No more than that."

"I must think it over, Lon."

"Of course."

Lon turned his attention to the screens. The Eyes covering the settlement were depicting the Deputy's departure in search of the Sheriff. He would find him sooner or later, but in any case could learn nothing from him about myself for another two days. That was the minimum period of recovery from brain-stunning.

I thought about this world and it millions of alien hybrids like that, all against me.

I thought about the endless wonders and beauties of faraway worlds which I should never see unless I went with Lon — and the wisdom I might attain if I did.

I thought about the other out-

casts like myself here on Earth, but who were denied my chance of escape. They were as bewildered, isolated and unhappy as I had been — and they would never know the reason why . . . unless I enlightened them.

I made my decision.

"I'm staying, Lon. On Earth, I mean, but not in this locality. I'll clear out tonight and head south. I have two days start on them, at least. Maybe much more. The Sheriff may assume I'm still here in the valley with you. He can't be sure I'm not. And when you go, he may think I've gone with you."

Lou studied me, warmly, sagely.

"What's the point, Bart?"

"I want to link up with my own kind. We'll get organized and fight them off. We stand a chance of survival — we aren't degenerating, you know, whereas they are. We'll cling to our foot-hold, as you call it. Survival's our immediate aim. If we succeed, we may learn wisdom later."

Lon smiled.

"It's the answer I expected, really. But there's a bit more to it than that, isn't there, Bart? At your age, you feel another call."

Yes, I felt it in my heart and in my loins. Spirit and body were uniting in crying for a mate. It was a call which could be answered only on my own planet.

Lon didn't need my confirmation. He went on, "Maybe I should envy you. However, sterility has its compensations: peace of mind, detachment, the contemplative life. The gulf between youth and maturity is so wide . . . Yes, we must go our separate ways, Bart."

"I lost my father when I was too young to realize it," I said. "And now I feel as if realization has caught up with me. I'll always miss you, Lon. But I have to go."

That night I left the valley of the X-men and journeyed under the stars I should never reach, southbound for the hot lands. I was alone again but very determined that I would not remain so.

END

Next Month in IF I

PRaisEWORTHY SAUR

by Harry Harrison

TRIAL BY FIRE

by James E. Gunn

AT BAY WITH THE BAYCON

by Robert Bloch

— and many more!

Don't miss the February issue of IF I

IF . . . and WHEN

by LESTER DEL REY

The Staff and Stuff of Life

The big shuttle from the Moon settled onto the landing grid at Denver Spaceport, and the airlock began to open. As the ramp touched the good rich soil of Earth, Joe Lunik was already running down it. His eyes were glued firmly to the sign of the nearest restaurant, and he headed for it in a mad dash. After a year eating the hydroponic junk fed the Lunar colony, he couldn't wait for real food — honest, soil-grown baked potato and apple pie with the unmistakable flavor only Earth could provide.

Sound familiar? It's a scene used often enough in science fiction, and one I've been guilty of writing myself. But it's probably totally wrong, if the future follows the present trends. It's part of the great body of myths we've come to accept about what we grow and what we eat, and there's no sign that these myths are any less entrenched now than ever.

The chief of these myths is the claim that American agriculture can keep producing more and better food in an almost unending progress; and once the world learns to use our methods, there'll be no need to worry about feeding twice the world's present population better than ever before in the history of mankind. And after that, we'll take our know-how out to the oceans, where we can probably feed a population of at least ten times what we now support.

Like many myths, there are elements of truth and historical fact behind this one. Without any question, the land today is producing at least four times as much food as it could have grown in Revolutionary times. It is doing so with only a tiny segment of our labor force, as compared to earlier times when over half of our population had to work the soil to feed this country alone. And we've been exporting

grain to the starving countries on other continents.

Furthermore, with heavy use of fertilizers and modern machinery, we can produce much more. We can also turn land that was once deemed useless into reasonably fertile soil where more food can be grown.

But the emphasis in the above truths lies on pure quantity and on what may be very short-term views. It's something like the statement that a man who takes enough amphetamines can produce twice or four times as much work; it's enough, but it overlooks the fact that in a short time he may be producing no work at all, because he'll be dead or in the hospital from the destruction of his constitution.

The theory of fertilizers is that they may replace what is taken from the soil by the growing plants. That is scientific enough an idea. But it just isn't so.

The types of fertilizers in use today are made up of only a few elements, however complicated their formulation may be. They are intended to replace the nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. With those, they usually contain some sulfur — because the sulfates are handy chemicals to hook up the other substances — and often calcium, which may also be added in lime to keep the soil from becoming too acid.

That makes a total of five basic elements. The plants can supply their own carbon, hydrogen and oxygen from the water and air. So we have eight elements, out of the more-than-ninety to be found in a table of the elements.

Without these eight, the plants simply won't grow. With them, vegetation seems to do well. Hence, by sheer economic necessity, the fertilizers are designed to supply the missing ingredients only.

Yet we know already that plants contain a far greater number of the elements than eight. And we know that some of the compounds formed are both incredibly complex and necessary for the animals that live off the plants.

Grapes that grow within a few yards of each other and receive identical care can vary tremendously in the wine they produce. A slight difference in the soil can make one grape produce a dull wine and the other yield a vintage that will be pure delight. The chemists have identified an incredible number of substances in wine, but so far they have not been able to spot the exact tiny differences in the two ferments. One gets something from the soil that the other lacks — and beyond that, we don't know what happens.

Iron is needed for the plant chlorophyll and the red blood cells of the human who eats the plant. Magnesium, manganese, iodine, and sev-

eral other elements are needed in tiny amounts. Without these, the plants don't do well. But many other elements in "trace" amounts — often less than one part per million — influence the flavor of vegetables, and some may have effects on human health not yet recognized.

These are not being replaced by chemical fertilizers. Some are sufficiently present in most soils and so little used that it may not matter for millennia — as magnesium. Others, like iodine, are already deficient in most soils.

Organic farming — the use exclusively of animal and plant wastes in place of chemicals — isn't a satisfactory answer today, either. It was a fine solution when most of the produce was consumed locally and hence supplied practically the same amount of waste to be returned to the soil. But today far greater amounts of food are grown per acre and shipped beyond the local area. Large amounts of agricultural produce are also used commercially, where little can be salvaged to be returned, but is dumped into the sewers to flow away forever.

Little by little, we are leeching out these trace elements from the land. And obviously, the more we grow per acre, the faster we exhaust this vital resource.

In the short-range outlook, it may not seem to matter. The plants

still thrive and will continue to do so.

Part of the reason is that plants are versatile. They can substitute one element for another fairly well. As an example, in some areas there is a deficiency of sulfur, and the wild plants use selenium in its place. The result is sometimes rather poisonous to animals, and the taste is vile; but the plant goes on.

Modern agricultural experts have also been extremely good at developing new varieties of food plants. Our hybrid corn, for instance, produces a profusion of giant, uniform ears that would have shocked any farmer of the last century.

These plant geniuses have already begun to develop strains that do well on soils previously considered impossible for sound agriculture. And we'll unquestionably go on with that technical answer to the problems of the soil. It's apparently a lot easier to develop a new breed of plant that doesn't need some trace element than to go looking for whatever it is that is missing in some slight degree. It might turn out to be indium, needed by the plant in one part per billion, and not probably of any use in human nutrition — according to what little we now know on that aspect of the trace elements.

Anyhow, it sometimes takes forty or fifty years before men begin to show evidence of some kind of mal-

nutrition from the absence of an element. A man usually doesn't develop serious atherosclerosis until he is in his later years. If it turns out that traces of vanadium in his diet might have prevented that, it's a little late to go back and stop using the plants that do very well on soil lacking in vanadium.

Maybe it's just tradition that accounts for the way gourmets come back raving about the taste of vegetables they get in the little rural restaurants of France. But the peasants there are growing food in the ancient ways and using the older strains of plants. Their productivity is low, anyhow, and a few gourmets shouldn't stand in the way of efficiency.

As for the Vietnamese who don't like the taste of our high-yield rice — well, they only live on the stuff. They obviously are pretty poor farmers, so who cares what they think?

Meantime, back at the ranch, some strange things may be going on in that good rich soil that has been so carefully fertilized with calcium, nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

Natural compost has a tendency to improve the texture of the soil, as does the plowing under of such natural sources of nitrogen as clover. I grew up on a farm, and I can still remember the change in soil after a few years of such enrich-

ment. It was not only richer, but it had a texture that held the rain gently and released it to every tiny rootlet of the plants.

The chemicals contain soil-conditioning additives, but the results are not the same. Natural soil is a complex and living thing. It requires the work of a vast army of creatures such as angleworms to keep it in shape. These creatures live on the organic wastes put back into the soil, in return for which they turn and revitalize the soil. The chemicals offer them no food suitable for their use. And the carefully weed-free crops give them far less compost than the natural ecology.

Without the healthy creatures of the soil, the ground cannot last, despite all our efforts. The waters leech out the surface materials and slowly wash away the true loam that was built up over thousands of years. Then the soil cover thins, and the earth is blown away.

Even with primitive methods of agriculture, man has been able to ruin the soil in large areas of the world. The Negev desert once bloomed, though it never got much rain. Today it is a waste. And we have narrowly escaped similar waste areas in our own plains. Apparently, once the balance is tipped, the decline is rapid and irreversible.

It might be wise to wait before persuading the Asian peasant to give up his "night soil" and old-fashioned plant varieties until we

have had a little longer to see how our chemicals and hybrids work out. We should keep at least a few areas in reserve for the next effort to overproduce.

Of course, there are the oceans to be farmed, as every reader of science fiction must know. But we have found that most of the seas are badly in need of fertilizer. Phosphorus tends to sink to the bottom; only at the Antarctic, where cold waters flow downward and stir up the bottom ooze, is the sea really fertile. The equatorial areas of the oceans are able to support less plant life than most of our desert land areas.

Which leaves us with our Moon colonist in the restaurant at Denver Spaceport. This year, Joe Lunik's on the way back to the costly controllable hydroponic gardens of Luna City. He sits fingering the menu, trying to persuade himself to eat some sort of tasteless Earth food before embarking. He stares at the half-healthy people around then glances back at the menu.

Finally he makes up his mind. Bit by bit, he stuffs the paper of the menu into his mouth and begins chewing. After a month on this benighted planet, it tastes delicious!

END

This Month in GALAXY

THE ORGANLEGGERS

Complete Short Novel
by Larry Niven

FOEMAN, WHERE DO YOU FLEE?

by Ben Bova

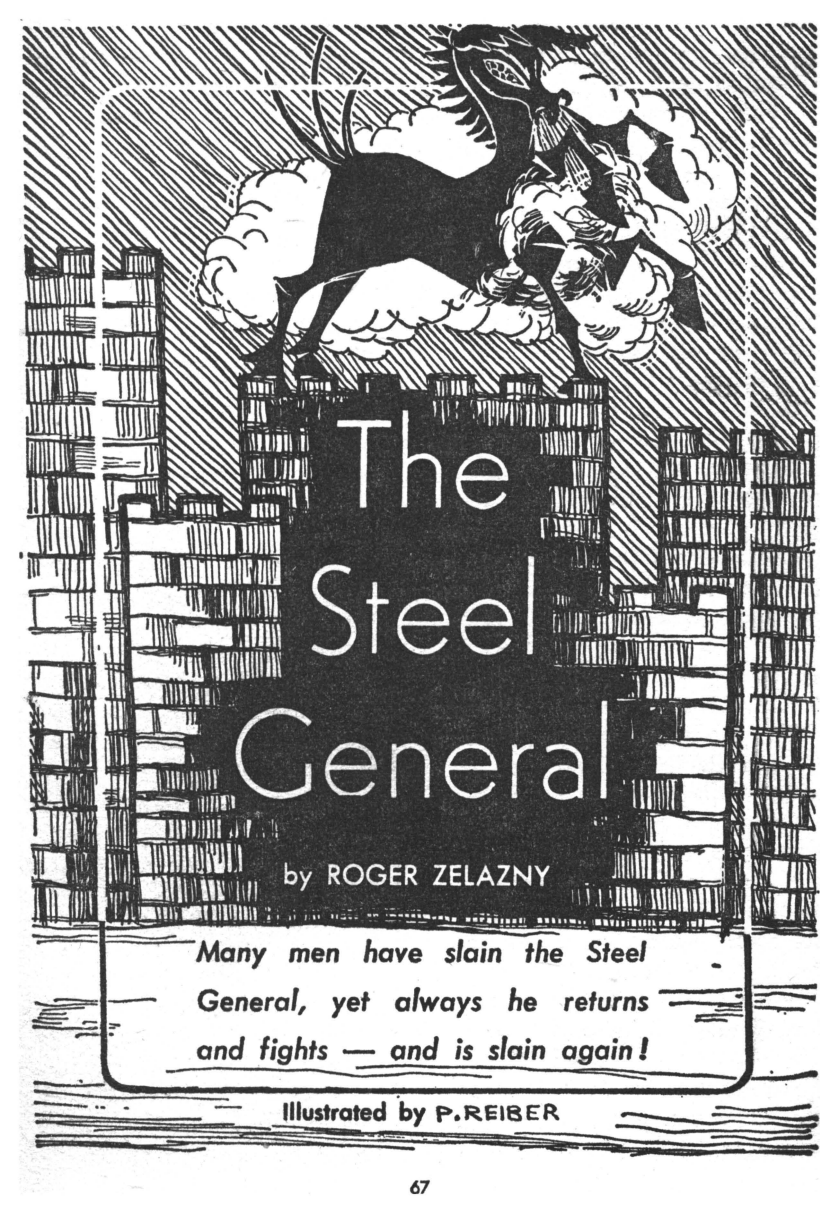
DUNDERBIRD

by Keith Laumer
and Harlan Ellison

PARIMUTUEL PLANET

by James Tiptree, Jr.

Don't miss the big January Galaxy — on sale now!



The Steel General

by ROGER ZELAZNY

*Many men have slain the Steel
General, yet always he returns
and fights — and is slain again!*

Illustrated by P. REIBER

Upward stares Wakim, seeing the Steel General.

"Faintly do I feel that I should have knowledge of him," says Wakim.

"Come now!" says Vramin, his eyes and cane flashing fires green. "All know of the General, who ranges alone. Out of the pages of history come the thundering hoofbeats of his war horse Bronze. He flew with the Lafayette Escadrille. He fought in the delaying action at Jarama Valley. He helped to hold Stalingrad in the dead of winter. With a handful of friends, he tried to invade Cuba. On every battleground, he has left a portion of himself. He camped out in Washington when times were bad, until a greater general asked him to go away. He was beaten in Little Rock, had acid thrown in his face in Berkeley. He was put on the Attorney General's list, because he had once been a member of the I.W.W. All the causes for which he has fought are now dead, but a part of him died also as each was born and carried to its fruition. He survived, somehow, his century, with artificial limbs and artificial heart and veins, with false teeth and a glass eye, with a plate in his skull and bones out of plastic, with pieces of wire and porcelain inside him — until finally science came to make these things better than those with which

man is normally endowed. He was again replaced, piece by piece, until, in the following century, he was far superior to any man of flesh and blood. And so again he fought the rebel battle, being smashed over and over again in the wars the colonies fought against the mother planet, and in the wars the individual worlds fought against the Federation. He is always on *some* Attorney General's list, and he plays his banjo and he does not care, for he has placed himself beyond the law by always obeying its spirit rather than its letter. He has had his metal replaced with flesh on many occasions and been a full man once more — but always he hearkens to some distant bugle and plays his banjo and follows — and then he loses his humanity again. He shot craps with Leon Trotsky, who taught him that writers are underpaid; he shared a boxcar with Woody Guthrie, who taught him his music and that singers are underpaid; he supported Fidel Castro for a time and learned that lawyers are underpaid. He is almost invariably beaten and used and taken advantage of, and he does not care, for his ideals mean more to him than his flesh. Now, of course, the Prince Who Was A Thousand is an unpopular cause. I take it, from what you say, that those who would oppose the House of Life and the House of the Dead will be deemed supporters* of the Prince, who

has solicited no support — not that that matters. And I daresay you oppose the Prince, Wakim. I should also venture a guess that the General will support him, inasmuch as the Prince is a minority group all by himself. The General may be beaten, but he can never be destroyed, Wakim. Here he is now. Ask him yourself, if you'd like."

The Steel General, who has dismounted, stands now before Wakim and Vramin like an iron statue at ten o'clock on a summer evening with no moon.

"I have seen your beacon, Angel of the Seventh Station."

"Alas, but that title perished with the Station, sir."

"I still recognize the rights of the government in exile," says the General, and his voice is a thing of such beauty that one could listen to it for years.

"Thank you. But I fear that you have come too late. This one — this Wakim — who is a master of temporal fugue would, I feel, destroy the Prince and thus remove any basis for our return. Is that not so, Wakim?"

"Of course."

"Unless we might find a champion," says Vramin.

"You need look no further," says the General. "It is best you yield to me now, Wakim. I say this with no malice."

"And I reply with no malice: Go to hell. If every bit of you were

to be destroyed, then I feel there would no longer be a Steel General — and there would never be again. I think a rebel, such as yourself deserves annihilation, and I am here."

"Many have thought so, and I am still waiting."

"Then wait no longer," says Wakim, and he moves forward. "The time is here, and begging to be filled."

II

Horus has entered the Middle Worlds, and he comes to the world of mists that is called D'donori by its inhabitants, meaning Place of Contentment. As he disembarks from his chariot that has crossed the cold and airless night he hears the sounds of armed strife about him within the great mists that cover over all of D'donori.

Slaying with his hands the three knights who fall upon him, he comes at length to the high walls of the city of Liglamenti.

D'donori is a world which, though it lies within the tides of the Power, has never been subject to the plagues, the wars, the famines that limit the populations of the other Midworlds. This is because the inhabitants of D'donori take care of their own problems. D'donori is made up of numerous small city-states and ducal principalities which are constantly at war with one an-

ether, uniting only for purposes of destroying anyone who attempts to unite them on a permanent basis.

Horus approaches the great gates of Liglamenti and bangs upon them with his fist. The booming sound carries throughout the city and the gates creak upon their hinges.

A guard hurls down a torch through the gloom and follows it with an arrow, which, of course, misses its mark — for Horus is able to know the thoughts of his attacker and mark the line of the arrow's flight. He steps to the side as the arrow whizzes past him and he stands in the light of the torch.

"Open your gates or I'll unhinge them!" he calls out.

"Who are you that walks about weaponless, wearing only a loin cloth, and would give me orders?"

"I am Horus."

"I do not believe you."

"You have less than a minute to live," says Horus, "unless you open these gates to me. Your death will be the proof that Horus does not lie. I will then unhinge these gates and enter here, walking upon you as I pass in search of your Lord."

"Wait! If truly thou be he, understand that I am only doing my duty and following the orders of my Lord. Do not think me blasphemous if I should refuse admittance to any who may call himself Horus. How do I know but that thou art an enemy who would say this to deceive me?"

"Would an enemy dare be so foolish?"

"Mayhap. For most men are fools."

Horus shrugs and raises his fist once more. A vibrant musical note stirs then within the air, and the gates of Liglamenti shiver upon their hinges and the guard within his armor.

Horus has increased in stature by now, to near three meters. His breechclout is the color of blood. The torch flickers at his feet. He draws back his fist.

"Wait! I will give thee entrance!"

Horus lowers his fist, and the music dies. His height decreases by a third.

The guard causes the portal to be opened, and Horus enters Liglamenti.

Coming at length to the fog-shrouded palace of its ruler, the Lord Dilwit, Duke of Ligla, Horus learns that word of his arrival has preceded him from the walls. The somber, black-bearded Duke, whose crown has been grafted upon his scalp, manages as much of a smile as he is able; that is, the showing of a double row of teeth between tight-drawn lips. He nods slightly.

"Thou art truly Horus?" he asks.

"Yes."

"It is told that every time the god Horus passes this way there is difficulty in recognizing him."

"And no wonder," says Horus.

"In all this fog it is rather miraculous that you manage to recognize one another."

Dilwit snorts his equivalent of a laugh. "True. Often we do not, and slay our own men in error. But each time Horus has come, the ruling Lord has provided a test. The last time. . . ."

". . . The last time, for Lord Bulwah, I sent a wooden arrow into a two-foot cube of marble so that either end protruded from a side."

"Thou rememberest!"

"Of course. I am Horus. Do you still have that cube?"

"Yes. Certainly."

"Then take me to it now."

They enter the torchlit throne room, where the shaggy pelts of predators offer the eye its only diversion from the glittering war weapons upon the walls. Set atop a small pedestal in a recessed place to the left of the throne is a cube of gray and orange marble which contains an arrow.

"There you see it," says Dilwit.

Horus approaches, regards the display.

"I'll design my own test this time," says he. "I'll fetch you back the arrow."

"It might be drawn. That is no —"

Horus raises his right fist to shoulder level, swings it forward and down, striking the stone, which shatters. He retrieves the arrow and hands it to Dilwit.

"I am Horus," he states again.

Dilwit regards the arrow, the gravel, the chunks of marble.

"Thou art indeed Horus," he agrees. "What may I do for thee?"

"D'donori has always been justly famous for its sriers. Those of Liglamenti have oft been exceeding good. Therefore, I would consult with your chief srier, as I've several questions I'd have answered."

"This would be old Freydag," says Dilwit, flicking rock dust from his red and green kilt. "He is indeed one of the great ones, but"

"But what?" asks Horus, already reading Dilwit's thought, but waiting politely, nevertheless.

"He is, Great Horus, a mighty reader of entrails. But none but those of the human sort will serve him. Now, we seldom keep prisoners, as this can run into some expense. And volunteers are even harder to come by for things such as this."

"Could not Freyday be persuaded to make do the entrails of some animal, for this one occasion?"

Horus reads again and sighs.

"Of course, Great Horus. But he will not guarantee the same level of reception as he would with better components."

"I wonder why this should be?"

"I cannot answer this, Most Potent Horus, being no srier myself—though my mother and sister both had the Sight. But of all sriers, I

know scatologists to be the queerest sort. Take Freyday, now. He's quite nearsighted, he says, and this means — ”

“Furnish him with the necessary components and advise me when he is ready to entertain my questions!” says Horus.

“Yes, Puissant Horus. I will organize a raiding party immediately, as I can see thou art anxious.”

“Most anxious.”

“ . . . And I've a neighbor could use a lesson in observing boundaries!”

Dilwit springs upon his throne, and reaching upward takes down the long gol-horn which hangs above it. Three times does he place it to his lips and blow until his cheeks bulge and redden and his eyes start forth from beneath the pelt of his brows. Then does he replace the horn, sway, and collapse upon his ducal seat.

“My chieftains will attend me momentarily,” he gasps.

Momently, there comes the sound of hoofbeats, and three kilted warriors, mounted upon the unicorn-like golindi, come riding, riding, riding, into and about the chamber, staying only when Dilwit raises his hand and cries out, “A raid! A raid, my hearties! Upon Uiskeagh the Red. Half a dozen captives I'll have of him, ere the mist lightens with tomorrow's dawn!”

“Captives, did you say, Lord?” calls out the one in black and tan.

“You have heard me right.”
“Before tomorrow's dawn!” A spear is raised.

Two more flash high.

“Before tomorrow's dawn!”

“Aye!”

And they circle the chamber and depart.

The following dawn, Horus is awakened and conducted to the room where six naked men lie, hands and ankles bound together behind their backs, their bodies covered with gashes and welts. This chamber is small, cold, lighted by four torches; its one window opens upon a wall of fog. Many sheets of that monthly journal, the *Ligla Times*, are spread upon the floor, covering it fully. Leaning against the windowsill, a short, age-tousured man, pink-faced, hollow-cheeked and squinting, sharpens several brief blades with a whetting bar. He wears a white apron and a half-furnished smile. His pale eyes move upon Horus, and he nods several times.

“I understand thou hast some questions,” he says, pausing to gasp between several words.

“You understand correctly. I've three.”

“Only three, Holy Horus? That means one set of entrails will doubtless do for all. Surely, a god as wise as thyself could think of more questions. Since we have the necessary materials it is a shame to

waste them. It's been so long. . . ."

"Three, nevertheless, are all the questions I have for the entrail-oracle."

"Very well, then," sighs Freydag. "In that case, we shall use his," and he indicates with his blade one gray-bearded man whose dark eyes are fixed upon his own. "Boltag is his name."

"You know him?"

"He is a distant cousin of mine. Also, he is the Lord Uiskeagh's chief scrier. A charlatan, of course. It is good fortune that has finally delivered him into my hands."

The one called Boltag spits upon the *Times* obituary section when this is spoken. "Thou art the fraud! Oh mighty misreader of innards!" says he.

"Liar!" cries Freydag, scrambling to his side and seizing him by the beard. "This ends thy infamous career!" and he slits the other's belly. Reaching in, he draws forth a handful of entrails and spreads them upon the floor. Boltag cries, moans, lies still. Freydag slashes along the bending length of the intestines, spreading their contents with his fingers. He crouches low and leans far forward. "Now, what be thy questions, son of Osiris?" he inquires.

"First," says Horus, "where may I find the Prince Who Was A Thousand? Second, who is the emissary of Anubis? Third, where is *he* now?"

Freydag mumbles and prods at the steaming stuff upon the floor. Boltag moans once again and stirs.

Horus attempts to read the thoughts of the scrier, but they tumble about so that finally it is as if he were staring out the room's one window.

Then Freydag speaks:

"In the Citadel of Marachek," he says, "at Midworlds' Center, there shalt thou meet with one who can take thee into the presence thou seekest."

". . . Strangely," mutters Boltag, gesturing with his head, "thou hast read that part aright. But thy failing vision — was clouded — by that bit of mercenary thou hast erroneously mixed—into things . . ." With a mighty effort Boltag rolls nearer, gasps, "And thou — dost not tell — Great Horus — that he will meet with mighty peril — and ultimately — **failure** . . ."

"Silence!" cries Freydag. "I did not call thee in for a consultation!"

"They are my innards! I will not have them misread by a poseur!"

"The next two answers are not yet come clear, dear Horus," says Freydag, slashing at another length of entrail.

"False seer!" sobs Boltag. "Marachek will also lead him to the emissary of Anubis — whose name is spelt out in my blood — there — on the editorial page! That name — being — **Wakim!**"

"Oh, false!" cries Freydag, slashing further.

"Hold!" says Horus, his hand falling upon the man's shoulder. "Your colleague speaks truly in one respect, for I know his present name to be Wakim."

Freydag pauses, considers the editorial page.

"Amen," he agrees. "Even an amateur may suffer an occasional flash of insight."

"So it seems I am destined to meet with Wakim after all, if I go to the place called Marachek — and go there I must. But as to my second question: Beyond the name of Wakim, I wish to know his true identity. Who was he before Lord Anubis renamed him and sent him forth from the house of the Dead?"

Freydag moves his head nearer the floor, stirs the stuff before him, hacks at another length.

"This thing, Glorious Horus, is hidden from me. The oracle will not reveal it —"

"Dotard . . .!" gasps Woltag. "It is there, so — plain — to see . . ."

Norus reaches after the gutless seer's dying thought, and the hackles rise upon his neck as he pursues it. But no fearsome name is framed within his mind, for the other has expired.

Horus covers his eyes and shudders, as a thing so very near to the edge of comprehension suddenly fades away and is gone.

When Horus lowers his hand, Freydag is standing once more and smiling down upon his cousin's corpse.

"Mountebank!" he says, sniffing, and wipes his hands upon his apron.

A strange, small, beastly shadow stirs upon the wall.

III

Diamond hooves striking the ground, rising, falling again. Rising . . .

Wakim and the Steel General face one another, unmoving.

A minute goes by, then three, and now the falling hooves of the beast called Bronze come down with a sound like thunder upon the fair-ground of Blis, for each time that they strike the force of their falling is doubled.

It is said that a fugue battle is actually settled in these first racking moments of regard, before the initial temporal phase is executed, in these moments which will be wiped from the face of Time by the outcome of the striving, never to have actually existed.

The ground shakes now as Bronze strikes it, and blue fires come forth from his nostrils, burning downward into Blis.

Wakim glistens with perspiration now; and the Steel General's finger twitches, the one upon which he wears his humanity-ring.

Eleven minutes pass.

Wakim vanishes in a flash.
The Steel General vanishes.

Bronze descends again, and tents fall down, buildings shatter, cracks appear within the ground.

Thirty seconds ago, Wakim is standing behind the General and Wakim is standing before the General, and the Wakim who stands behind, who has just arrived in that instant, clasps his hands together and raises them for a mighty blow upon that metal helm —

—while thirty-five seconds ago, the Steel General appears behind the Wakim of that moment of Time, draws back his hand and swings it —

— while the Wakim of thirty seconds ago, seeing himself in fugue, delivering his two-handed blow, is released to vanish, which he does, into a time ten seconds before, when he prepares to emulate his future image observed —

— as the General of thirty-five seconds before the point of attack, sees himself draw back his hand, and vanishes to a time twelve seconds previously

All of these, because a foreguard in Time is necessary to preserve one's future existence

. . . And a rearguard, one's back

. . . While all the while, somewhere/when/perhaps, now, Bronze is rearing and descending, and a probable city trembles upon its foundation.

. . . And the Wakim of forty seconds before the point of attack, seeing his arrival, departs twenty seconds backward — one minute of probable time therefore being blurred by the fugue battle, and so subject to alteration.

. . . The General of forty-seven seconds before the point of attack retreats fifteen to strike again, as his self of that moment observes him and drops back eight —

. . . The Wakim of one minute before goes back ten seconds —
Fugue!

Wakim behind the Steel General, attacking, at minus seventy seconds sees the General behind Wakim, attacking, as both see him and his other see both.

All four vanish, at a pace of eleven, fifteen, nineteen and twenty-five seconds.

. . . And all the while, somewhere/when/perhaps, Bronze rears, falls, and shock waves go forth.

The point of initial encounter draws on, as General before General and Wakim before Wakim face and fugue.

Five minutes and seven seconds of the future stand in abeyance as twelve Generals and nine Wakims look upon one another.

. . . Five minutes and twenty-one seconds, as nineteen Wakims and fourteen Generals glare in frozen striking stances.

. . . Eight minutes and sixteen seconds before the point of attack,

one hundred twenty-three Wakims and one hundred thirty-one Generals assess one another and decide upon the moment

. . . To attack *en masse*, within that instant of time, leaving their past selves to shift for themselves in defense — perhaps, if this instant be the wrong one, to fall, and so end this encounter, also.

But things must end somewhere. Depending upon the lightning calculations and guesses, each has picked this point as the best for purposes of determining the future and holding the focus. And as the armies of Wakims and the Generals clash together, the ground begins to rumble beneath their feet and the fabric of Time itself protests this use which has been made of its dispositions. A wind begins to blow and things become unreal about them, wavering between being and becoming and afterbeing. And somewhere Bronze smashes his diamonds into the continent and spews forth goutts of blue fire upon it. Corpses of bloodied and broken Wakims and fragments of shattered Generals drift through the twisting places beyond the focus of their struggles and are buffeted by the winds. These be the dead of probability, for there can be no past slaying now and the future is being remade. The focus of the fugue has become this moment of intensity, and they clash with a force that sends widening ripples of

change outward through the universe, rising, diminishing, gone by, as Time once more ticks history around events.

Beyond their midst, Bronze descends and somewhere a city begins to come apart. The poet raises his cane, but its green fires cannot cancel the blue flare that Bronze exhales now like a fountain upon the world. Now there are only nine cities on Blis and Time is burning them down. Buildings, machines, corpses, babies, pavilions, these are taken by the wind from the flame, and they pass, wavering, by the fair-ground. Regard their colors. Red? There's a riverbank, green stream hung above, and flying purple rocks. Yellow and gray and black the city beneath the three lime-bright bridges. Now the creamy sea is the sky and buzzsaw come the breezes. The odors of Blis are smoke and charred flesh. The sounds are screams amid the clashing of broken gears and the rapid-fire rainfall of running feet like guilt within the Black Daddy night that comes on like unconsciousness now.

"Cease!" cries Vramin, becoming a blazing green giant in the midst of chaos. "You will lay waste the entire world if you continue!" he cries, and his voice comes down like thunder and whistles and trumpets upon them.

They continue to strive, however, and the magician takes his friend Madrak by the arm and attempts

to open them a gateway of escape from Blis.

"Civilians are dying!" cries a moment of the General.

A moment of Wakim laughs.

"What difference does a uniform make in the House of the Dead?"

A great green door appears in outline, grows more substantial, begins to open.

Vramin diminishes in size. As the door swings wide, he and Madrak are both swept toward it, as tall waves race and topple upon a wind-slashed ocean.

The armies of Wakim and the General are also raised by the waves of chaos and driven by the winds of change until they, too, are come at last to the green gateway which stands now wide, like a luminous magnet/drain/whirlpool's center. Still striving, they flow toward it and one by one pass within and are gone.

Bronze begins to move very slowly as the gateway closes, but somehow passes through it before the chaos comes upon the empty space it occupied.

Then the roaring and the movement cease and the entire world of Blis seems to sigh within the moment of its reprieve. Many things are broken and people dead or dying at this moment, which could have been one set thirty-three seconds before Wakim and the General began the fugue which will not now begin upon the litter-strewn fair-

ground with its crevasses and its steaming craters.

Among the fallen archways, the toppled towers, the flattened buildings, salvation strides with its sword of fires unsheathed. The fivers of the day come forth from the Houses of Power, and somewhere a dog is barking.

IV

Regard now the Citadel of Marachek at Midworlds' Center

Dead. Dead. Dead. Color it dust.

This is where the Prince Who Was Once A God comes often, to contemplate — many things.

There are no oceans on Marachek. There are still a few bubbly springs, these smelling like wet dogs and being warm and brackish. Its sun is a very tired and tiny reddish star, too respectable or too lazy ever to have become a nova and passed out in a burst of glory, shedding a rather anemic light which makes for deep, bluish shadows cast by grotesque stands of stone upon the enormous beach of dun and orange that is Marachek beneath its winds; and the stars above Marachek may be seen even at midday, faintly, though in the evening they acquire the intensity of neon, acetylene and flashbulb above the windswept plains; and most of Marachek is flat, though the plains rearrange themselves

twice daily, when the winds achieve a kind of sterile climax, heaping and unheaping the sands and grinding their grains finer and finer — so that the dust of morning and dusk hangs throughout the day in a yellowish haze, which further detracts from Marachek's eye in the sky — all, ultimately, levelling and settling, the mountains having been ground down, the rocks sculpted and resculpted, and all buried and resurrected perpetually. This is the surface of Marachek, which of course was once a scene of glory, power, pomp and pageantry, its very triteness crying out for this conclusion; but further, there is one building upon Marachek at Midworlds' Center which testifies to the saw's authenticity, this being the Citadel, which doubtless shall exist as long as the world itself, though mayhap the sands shall cover and discover it many times before that day of final dissolution or total frigidity. The Citadel — which is so old that none can say for certain that it was ever built. The Citadel, which may be the oldest city in the universe, broken and repaired (who knows how often?) upon the same foundation, over and over, perhaps since the imaginary beginning of the illusion called Time. The Citadel, which in its very standing testifies that some things *do* endure, no matter how poorly, all vicissitudes — of which Vramin wrote, in *The Proud Fossil*:

"The sweetness of decay ne'er touched thy portals, for destiny is amber and sufficient" — the Citadel of Marachek-Karnak, the archetypal city, which is now mainly inhabited by little skittering things, generally insects and reptiles, that feed upon one another, one of which (a toad) exists at this moment of time beneath an overturned goblet upon an ancient table in Marachek's highest tower (the northeastern) as the sickly sun raises itself from the dust and dusk, and the starlight comes down less strongly. This is Marachek.

When Vramin and Madrak enter here, fresh through the gateway from Blis, they deposit their charges upon that ancient table, made all of one piece out of a substance pink and unnatural which Time itself cannot corrupt.

This is the place where the ghosts of Set and the monsters he fights rage through the marble memory that is wrecked and rebuilt Marachek, the oldest city, forever.

Vramin replaces the General's left arm and right foot; he turns his head so that it faces forward once more, then he makes adjustment upon his neck, to hold the head in place.

"How fares the other?" he inquires.

Madrak lowers Wakim's right eyelid and releases his wrist.

"Shock, I'd suppose. Has anyone ever been torn from the center of a fugue battle before?"

"To my knowledge, no. We've doubtless discovered a new syndrome — 'fugue fatigue' or 'temporal shock' I'd call it. We may get our names into textbooks yet."

"What do you propose to do with them? Are you able to revive them?"

"Most likely. But then, they'd start in again — and probably keep going till they'd wrecked this world also."

"Not much here to wreck. Perhaps we could sell tickets and turn them loose. Might net a handsome penny."

"Oh, cynical monger of indulgences! 'Twould take a man of the cloth to work a scheme like that!"

"Not so! I learned it on Blis, if you recall."

"True — where life's greatest drawing card had become the fact that it sometimes ends. Nevertheless, in this case, I feel it might be wiser to cast these two upon separate worlds and leave them to their own devices."

"Then why did you bring them here to Marachek?"

"I didn't! They were sucked through the Gateway, when I opened it. I aimed for this place myself because the Center is always easiest to reach."

"Then suggestions are now in order as to our course of action."

"Let us rest here awhile, and I will keep these two entranced. We might just open us another Gateway and leave them."

"'Twould be against my ethics, brother."

"Speak not to me of ethics, thou inhuman humanist! Caterer to whatever life-lie man chooses! Th'art an holy ambulance-chaser!"

"Nevertheless, I cannot leave a man to die."

"Very well. Hello! Someone has been here before us, to suffocate a toad!"

Madrak turns his eye upon the goblet.

"I've heard tales that they might endure the ages in tiny, airless crypts. How long, I wonder, has this one sat thus? If only it lives and could speak! Think of the glories to which it might bear witness."

"Do not forget, Madrak, that I am the poet, and kindly reserve such conjectures to those better able to say them with a straight face. I —"

Vramin moves to the window, and, "Company," says he. "Now might we leave these fellows in good conscience."

Upon the battlements, mounted like a statue, Bronze whinnies like a steam whistle and raises three legs and lets them fall. Now he exhales laser beams into the breaking day, and his rows of eyes wink on and off.

Something is coming, though still

unclear, through the dust and the night.

"Shall we, then?"

"No."

"I share thy sentiment."

Sharing, they wait.

V

Now everyone knows that some machines make love, beyond the metaphysical writings of Saint Jakes the Mechophile, who posits man as the sexual organ of the machine which created him, and whose existence is necessary to fulfill the destiny of mechanism, producing generation after generation of machinekind, all the modes of mechanical evolution flowing through man, until such a time as he has served his purpose, perfection has been reached, and the Great Castration may occur. Saint Jakes is, of course, an heretic. As has been demonstrated on occasions too numerous to cite, the whole machine requires a gender. Now that man and machine undergo frequent interchanges of components and entire systems, it is possible for a complete being to start at my point in the mech-man spectrum and to range the entire gamut. Man, the presumptuous organ, has therefore achieved his apotheosis or union with the Gasket-head through sacrifice and redemption, as it were. Ingenuity had much to do with it, but ingenuity

of course is a form of mechanical inspiration. One may no longer speak of the Great Castration, no longer consider separating the machine from its creation. Man is here to stay, as a part of the Big Picture.

Everyone knows that machines make love. Not in the crude sense, of course, of those women and men who, for whatever economic purposes may control, lease their bodies for a year or two at a time to one of the vending companies, to be joined with machines, fed intravenously, exercised isometrically, their consciousness submerged (or left turned on, as it would be), to suffer brain implants which stimulate the proper movements for a period not to exceed fifteen minutes per coin, upon the couches of the larger pleasure clubs (and more and more in vogue in the best of homes, as well as the cheap street corner units) for the sport and amusement of their fellows. No. Machines make love via man, but there have been many transferences of function, and they generally do it spiritually.

Consider, however, a unique phenomenon which has just arisen: the Pleasure-Comp — the computer like an oracle, which can answer an enormous range of inquiries, and will do so, only for so long as the inquirer can keep it properly stimulated. How many of you have entered the programmed boudoir, to

have enormous issues raised and settled, and found that time passes so rapidly. Precisely. Reverse-centaur-like — i.e., human from the waist down — it represents the best of two worlds and their fusion into one. There is a love story wrapped up in all this background, as a man enters the Question Room to ask the Dearabbey Machine of his beloved and her ways. It is happening everywhere, always, and there can often be nothing quite so tender.

VI

Now comes Horus, who, seeing Bronze on the wall, deposes and saith:

“Open this damned gate or I’ll kick it down!”

To which Vramin makes reply over the battlement, saying:

“Since I did not fasten it, I am not about to undo it. Find your own entrance or eat dust.”

Horus does then kick down the gate, at which Madrak marvels slightly, and he then mounts the winding stair to the highest tower. Entering the room, he eyes the poet and the warrior-priest with some malevolence, inquiring:

“Which of you two denied me passage?”

Both step forward.

“A pair of fools! Know you that I am the god Horus, fresh come from the House of Life!”

“Excuse us for not being duly

impressed, god Horus,” says Madrak, “but none gave us entrance here, save ourselves.”

“How be you dead men named?”

“I am Vramin, at your service, more or less.”

“And I, Madrak.”

“Ah! I’ve some knowledge of you two. Why are you here, and what is that carrion on the table?”

“We are here, sir, because we are not elsewhere,” says Vramin, “and the table contains two men and a toad — all of whom, I should say, are your betters.”

“Trouble can be purchased cheaply, though the refund may be more than you can bear,” says Horus.

“What, may I inquire, brings the scantily clad god of vengeance to this scrofulous vicinity?” — Vramin.

“Why, vengeance, of course. Has either of you vagabonds set eyes upon the Prince Who Was A Thousand recently?”

“This I must deny, in good faith.”

“And I.”

“I come seeking him.”

“Why here?”

“An oracle, deeming it a propitious spot. And while I am not eager to battle heroes — knowing you as such — I feel you owe me an apology for the entrance I received.”

“Fair enough,” says Madrak, “for know that our cockles have been

raised by a recent battle and we have spent the past hours waxing wroth. Will a swig of good red wine convey our sentiments — coming from what is, doubtless, the only flask of the stuff on this world?"

"It should suffice, if it be of good quality."

"Bide then a moment."

Madrak fetches forth his wine bulb, swigs a mouthful to show it unsullied, casts about the room.

"A fit container, sir," he says, and raises up the downturned goblet which lies upon the table. Wiping it with a clean cloth, he fills it and proffers it to the god.

"Thank you, warrior priest. I accept it in the spirit in which it was offered. What battle was it which so upset you that you forgot your manners?"

"That, Brown-eyed Horus, was the battle of Blis, between the Steel General and the one who is called Wakim the Wanderer."

"The Steel General? Impossible! He has been dead for centuries. I slew him myself!"

"Many have slain him. None have vanquished him."

"That pile of junk upon the table? Could that truly be the Prince of Rebels, who one time faced me like a god?"

"Before your memory, Horus, was he mighty," says Vramin, "and when men have forgotten Horus, still will there be a Steel General.

It matters not which side he fights upon. Win or lose, he is the spirit of rebellion, which can never die."

"I like not this talk," says Horus. "Surely, if one were to number all his parts and destroy them, one by one, and scatter them across the entire cosmos, then would he cease to exist."

"This thing has been done. And over the centuries have his followers collected him and assembled the engine again. This man, this Wakim, whose like I have never seen before," says Vramin, "voiced a similar sentiment before the fugue battle which racked half a world. The only thing which keeps them from laying waste — excuse the poor choice of words — to this world Marachek is that I will not permit them to awaken again from a state of temporal shock."

"Wakim? This is the deadly Wakim? Yes. I can believe it as I look upon him in repose. Have you any idea who he is really? Such champions do not spring full-grown from the void."

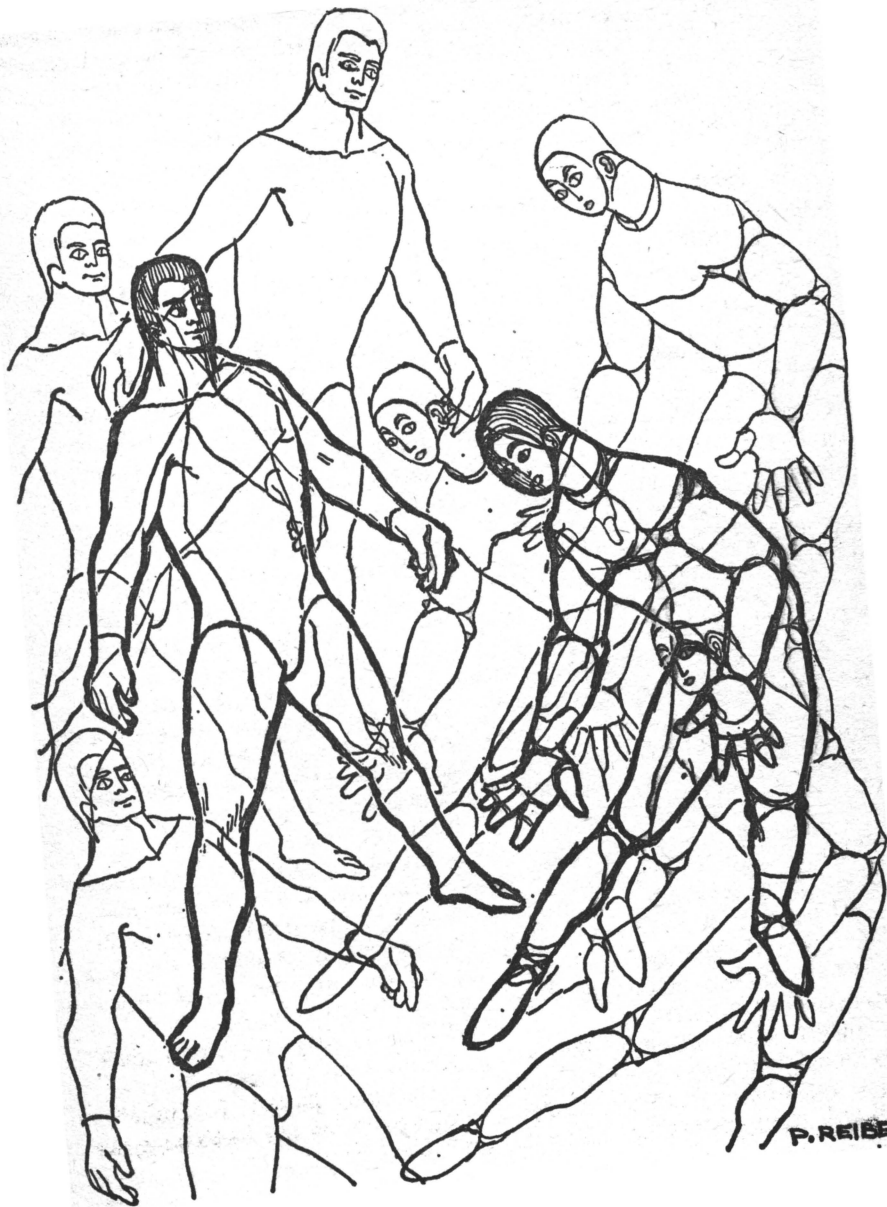
"I know nothing of him, save that he is a mighty wrestler and a master of the fugue, come to Blis in her last days before the dark tides swept over her — perhaps to hasten their coming."

"That is all you know of him?"

"That is all I know."

"And you, mighty Madrak?"

"The sum of my knowledge, also."



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"Supposing we were to awaken him and question him?"

Vramin raises his cane.

"Touch him and I shall dispute your passage. He is too fearsome an individual, and we came here to rest."

Horus lays a hand upon Wakim's shoulder and shakes him slightly. Wakim moans.

"Know that the wand of life is also a lance of death!" cries Vramin, and with a lunging motion spears the toad, which sits immediately beside Horus's left hand.

Before Horus can turn upon him, there is a quick outward rush of air as the toad explodes into a towering form in the center of the table.

His long golden hair stands high and his thin lips draw back in a smile, as his green eyes fall upon the tableau at his feet.

The Prince Who Had Been A Toad touches a red spot on his shoulder, says to Vramin, "Did you not know that it has been wrtten. 'Be kind to bird and beast?'"

"Kipling," says Vramin, smiling. "Also, the Koran."

"Shape-shifting miscreant," says Horus, "are you the one I seek — called by many the Prince?"

"I confess to this title. Know that you have disturbed my meditations."

"Prepare to meet your doom,"

says Horus, drawing an arrow — his only weapon — from his belt, and breaking off its head.

"Do you think that I am unaware of your power, brother?" says the Prince, as Horus raises the arrowhead between thumb and forefinger. "Do you think, brother, that I do not know that you can add the power of your mind to the mass or velocity of any object, increasing it a thousandfold?"

There is a blur in the vicinity of Horus's hand and a crashing sound across the room, as the Prince stands suddenly two feet to the left of where he had been standing and the arrowhead pierces a six-inch wall of metal and continues on into what is now a dusty and windy morning as the Prince continues to speak: "And do you not know, brother, that I could as easily have removed myself an inconceivable distance across space with the same effort as it took me to avoid your shot? Yea, out of the Middle Worlds themselves?"

"Call me not brother," says Horus, raising the shaft of the arrow.

"But thou art my brother," says the Prince. "At least, we'd the same mother."

Horus drops the shaft.

"I believe you not!"

"And from what strain do you think you derived your godlike powers? Osiris? Cosmetic surgery might have given him a chicken's head,

and his own dubious strain an aptitude for mathematics — but you and I, shapeshifters both, are sons of Isis, Witch of the Loggia.”

“Cursed be my mother’s name!”

Suddenly, the Prince stands before him on the floor of the chamber and slaps him with the back of his hand.

“I could have slain you a dozen times over, had I chosen,” says the Prince, “as you stood there. But I refrained, for you are my brother. I could slay you now, but I will not. For you are my brother. I bear no arms, for I need none. I bear no malice, or the burden of my life would be staggering. But do not speak ill of our mother, for her ways are her own. I neither praise nor do I blame. I know that you have come here to kill me. If you wish to enjoy an opportunity to do so, you will hold your tongue in this one respect, brother.”

“Then let us speak no more of her.”

“Very well. You know who my father was, so you know that I am not unversed in the martial arts. I will give you a chance to slay me in hand-to-hand combat, if you will do a thing for me first. Otherwise, I will remove myself and find someone else to assist me, and you may spend the rest of your days seeking me.”

“Then this must be what the oracle meant,” says Horus,

“and it bodes ill for me. Yet I cannot pass up the chance to fulfill my mission, before Anubis’s emissary — this Wakim — achieves it. For I know not his powers, which might exceed your own. I will keep my peace, run your errand and kill you.”

“This man is the assassin from the House of the Dead?” says the Prince, looking upon Wakim.

“Yes.”

“Were you aware of this, my Angel of the Seventh Station?” asks the Prince.

“No,” says Vramin, bowing slightly.

“Nor I, Lord” — Madrak.

“Arouse him — and the General.”

“Our bargain is off,” say Horus, “if this be done.”

“Awaken them both,” says the Prince, folding his arms.

Vramin raises his cane, and the green tongues come forth and descend upon the prostrate forms.

Outside, the winds grow more noisy. Horus shifts his attention from one to the other of those present, then speaks: “Your back is to me, brother. Turn around that I may face you as I slay you. As I said, our bargain is off.”

The Prince turns.

“I need these men, also.”

Horus shakes his head and raises his arm.

Then, “A veritable family reunion,” says the voice which fills the chamber, “we three brothers

having come together at last."

Horus draws back his hand as from an asp, for the shadow of a dark horse lies between himself and the Prince. He covers his eyes with one hand and lowers his head. "I had forgotten," he says, "that by what I learned today, I am also kin to thee."

"Take it not too badly," says the voice, "for I have known it for ages and learned to live with it."

And Wakim and the Steel General awaken to a sound of laughter that is like the singing wind.

VII

Osiris, holding a skull and depressing a stud on its side, addresses it, saying: "Once mortal, you have come to dwell in the House of Life forever. Once beauty, blooming fair atop a spinal column, you withered. Once truth, you have come to this."

"And who," answers the skull, "is perpetrator of this thing? It is the Lord of the House of Life that will not let me know rest."

And Osiris makes answer, saying: "Know, too, that I use thee for a paperweight."

"If ever thou didst love me, then smash me and let me die! Do not continue to nourish a fragment of she who once loved thee."

"Ah, but dear my lady, one day might I re-embodiment thee, to feel thy caresses again."

"The thought of this thing repels me."

"And I, also. But one day it might amuse me."

"Dost thou torment all who displease thee?"

"No, no, shell of death, think never that! True, the Angel of the Nineteenth House attempted to slay me, and his nervous system lives, threaded amidst the fibers of this carpet I stand upon; and true, others of my enemies exist in elementary forms at various points within my House — such as fireplaces, ice lockers and ashtrays. But think not that I am vindictive. No, never. As Lord of Life, I feel an obligation to repay all things which have threatened life."

"I did not threaten thee, my Lord."

"You threatened my peace of mind."

"Because I resembled thy wife, the Lady Isis?"

"Silence!"

"Aye! I resembled the Queen of Harlots, thy bride. For this reason didst thou desire me and desire my undoing —"

The skull's words are then cut short, however, as Osiris has hurled it against the wall.

As it falls to pieces and chemicals and microminiature circuitry are spread upon the carpet, Osiris curses and falls upon a row of switches at his desk, the depression of which gives rise to a multitude

of voices, one of which, above the others, cries out, through a speaker set high upon the wall:

"Oh clever skull, to so have tricked the fink god!"

Consulting the panel and seeing that it is the carpet which has spoken, Osiris moves to the center of the room and begins jumping up and down.

There grows up a field of wailing.

VIII

Into the places of darkness and disrepute, upon the world called Waldik, enter the two champions, Madrak and Typhon. Sent by Thoth Hermes Trismegistes to steal a glove of singular potency, they are come to do battle with the guardian of that glove. Now, the world Waldik, long ago ravaged, hosts an horde of beings who dwell beneath its surface in caverns and chambers far removed from the courts of day and night. Darkness, dampness, mutation, fratricide, incest and rape are the words most often used by the few who offer commentary upon the world Waldik. Transported there by a piece of spatial hijackery known only to the Prince, the champions will succeed or remain. They go now through burrows, having been told to follow the bellowing.

"Think you, dark horse shadow," asks the warrior-priest, that thy

brother can retrieve us at the proper moment?"

"Yes," replies the shadow that moves at his side. "Though if he cannot, I care not. I can remove myself in my own way whenever I wish."

"Yes, but I cannot."

"Then worry it, fat Dad. I care not. You volunteered to accompany me. I did not request this thing."

"Then into the hands of Whatever May Be that is greater than life or death, I resign myself — if this act will be of any assistance in preserving my life. If it will not, I do not. If my saying this thing at all be presumptuous, and therefore not well received by Whatever may or may not care to listen, then I withdraw the statement and ask forgiveness, if this thing be desired. If not, I do not. On the other hand — "

"Amen! And silence, please!" rumbles Typhon. "I have heard a thing like a bellow — to our left."

Sliding invisible along the dark wall, Typhon rounds the bend and moves ahead. Madrak squints through infrared glasses and splays his beam like a blessing upon everything encountered.

"These caverns be deep and vasty," he whispers.

There is no reply.

Suddenly he comes to a door which may be the right door.

Opening it, he meets the minotaur.

He raises his staff, but the thing vanishes in a twinkling.

"Where . . .?" he inquires.

"Hiding," says Typhon, suddenly near, "somewhere within the many twistings and turnings of its lair."

"Why is this?"

"It would seem that its kind are hunted by creatures much like yourself, both for food and man/bull-headed trophies. It fears direct battle, therefore, and retreats — for man uses weapons upon cattle. Let us enter the labyrinth and hope not to see it again. The entrance-way we seek, to the lower chambers, lies somewhere within."

For perhaps half a day they wander, unsuccessfully seeking the Wrong Door. Three doors do they come upon, but only bones lie behind.

"I wonder how the others fare?" asks the warrior-priest.

"Better, or worse — or perhaps the same," replies the other, and laughs.

Madrak does not laugh.

Coming into a circle of bones, Madrak sees the charging beast barely in time. He raises his staff and begins the battle.

He strikes it between the horns and upon the side. He jabs, slashes at, pushes, strikes the creature. He locks with it and wrestles, hand to hand.

Hurting one another, they strive, until finally Madrak is raised from

the floor and hurled across the chamber, to land upon his left shoulder on a pile of bones. As he struggles to raise himself, he is submerged by an ear-breaking bellow. Head lowered, the minotaur charges. Madrak finds his feet and begins to rise.

But a dark horse shadow falls upon the creature, and it is gone — completely and forever.

He bows his head and chants the Possibly Proper Death Litany.

"Lovely," snorts his companion, when he comes to his final "Amen." "Now, fat Dad, I think I have found us the wrong door. I might enter without opening it, but you may not. How would you have it?"

"Bide a moment," says Madrak, standing. "A bit of narcotic and I'll be good as new and stronger than before. Then we shall enter together."

"Very well. I'll wait."

Madrak injects himself and after a time is like unto a god.

"Now show me the door and let us go in."

"This way."

And there is the door, big and forbidding and colorless, within the infra-light.

"Open it," says Typhon, and Madrak does.

In the firelight it plays, worrying the gauntlet. Perhaps the size of two and a half elephants, it sports with its toy there atop an heap of bones. One of its heads sniffs at

the sudden draft of air from beyond the Wrong Door, two of its heads snarl and the third drops the glove.

"Do you understand my voice?" asks Typhon, but there is no answering intelligence behind its six red eyes. Its tails twitch, and it stands, all scaley and impervious, within the flicker and glow.

"Nice doggie," comments Madrak, and it wags its tails, opens its mouths and lunges toward him.

"Kill it!" cries Madrak.

"That is impossible," answers Typhon. "In time, that is."

IX

Coming at length to the world Interludici, and entering through the sudden green gateway the poet hurls upon the blackness, Wakim and Vramin enter the mad world of many rains and religions. Light-footed, they stand upon the moist turf outside a city of terrible black walls.

"We shall enter now," says the poet, stroking his sky-green beard. "We shall enter through that small door off to the left, which I shall cause to open before us. Then will we hypnotize or subdue any guards who may be present and make our way into the heart of the city, where the great temple stands."

"To steal boots for the Prince," says Wakim. "This is a strange employment for one such as myself. Were it not for the fact that he had

promised to give my name back to me — my real name — before I slay him, I would not have agreed to do this thing for him."

"I realize that," says Vramin, "but tell me, what do you intend to do with Horus, who would also slay him — and who works for him now only to gain this same opportunity?"

"Slay Horus first, if need be."

"The psychology behind this thing fascinates me, so I trust you will permit me one more question: What difference does it make whether you slay him or Horus slays him? He will be just as dead either way."

Wakim pauses, apparently considering the matter, as if for the first time.

"This thing is *my* mission, not his," he says at length.

"He will be just as dead, either way," Vramin repeats.

"But not by my hand."

"True. But I fail to see the distinction."

"So do I, for that matter. But it is *I* who have been charged with the task."

"Perhaps Horus has also."

"But not by *my* master."

"Why should you have a master, Wakim? Why are you not your own man?"

Wakim rubs his forehead.

"I — do not — really — know. But I must do as I am told."

"I understand," says Vramin, and

while Wakim is thus distracted, a tiny green spark arcs between the tip of the poet's cane and the back of Wakim's neck.

He slaps at his neck then and scratches it.

"What . . .?"

"A local insect," says the poet. "Let us proceed to the door."

The door opens before them, beneath the tapping of his cane, and its guards drowse before a brief green flare. Appropriating cloaks from two of them, Wakim and Vramin move on, into the center of the city.

The temple is easy enough to find. Entering it is another matter.

Here now, there are guards — drug-maddened — before the entrance.

They approach boldly and demand admission.

The eighty-eight spears of the Outer Guard are leveled at them.

"There will be no public adoration till the sundown rains," they are told, amidst twitches.

"We shall wait." And they do.

With the sundown rains, they join a procession of moist worshippers and entered the outer temple.

On attempting to go further they are brought to a halt by the three hundred fifty-two drug-maddened spearmen who guard the next entranceway.

"Have you the badges of inner

temple worshippers?" their captain inquires.

"Of course," says Vramin, raising his cane.

And in the eyes of the captain, they must have them, for they are granted entrance.

Then, drawing near the Inner Sanctum itself, they are halted by the officer in charge of the five hundred and ten drug-maddened warriors who guard the way.

"Castrated or non-castrated?" he inquires.

"Castrated, of course," says Vramin in a lovely soprano. "Give us entrance," and his eyes blaze greenly and the officer draws back.

Entering, they spy the altar, with its fifty guardians and its six strange priests.

"There they are, upon the altar."

"How shall we obtain them?"

"By stealth, preferably," says Vramin, pushing his way nearer the altar, before the televised service begins.

"What sort of stealth?"

"Perhaps we can substitute a pair of our own and wear the sacred ones out of here."

"I'm game."

"Then, supposing they were stolen five minutes ago?"

"I understand you," says Wakim and bows his head, as in adoration.

The service begins.

"Hail to Thee, Shoes," lisps the first priest, "wearer of feet."

"Hail!" chant the other five.

"Good, kind, noble and blessed shoes."

"Hail!"

". . . Which came to us from chaos."

"Hail!"

". . . To lighten our hearts and uplift our soles."

"Hail!"

"Oh shoes, which have supported mankind since the dawn of civilization . . ."

"Hail!"

". . . Ultimate cavities, surroundings of feet."

"Hail!"

"Hail! Wondrous, battered buskins!"

"We adore thee."

"We adore thee!"

"We worship thee in the fulness of thy shoeness!"

"Glory!"

"Oh archetypal footgear!"

"Glory!"

"Supreme notion of shoes."

"Glory!"

"What could we do without thee?"

"What?"

"Stub our toes, scratch our heels, have our arches go flat."

"Hail!"

"Protect us, thy worshippers, good and blessed footgear!"

"Which came to us from chaos . . ."

". . . On a day dark and drear."

". . . Out of the void, burning —"

". . . But not burnt."

". . . Thou hast come to comfort and support us."

". . . To sustain and enliven us."

"Hail!"

". . . Upright, forthright and forward forever!"

"Forever!"

Wakim vanishes.

A cold, wild wind begins to blow about them.

It is the change-wind out of time; and there is a blurring upon the altar.

Seven previously drug-maddened spearmen lay sprawled, their necks at unusual angles.

Suddenly, beside Vramin, Wakim says, "Pray, find us a gateway quickly!"

"You wear them?"

"I wear them."

Vramin raises his cane and pauses.

"There will be a brief delay, I fear," and his gaze grows emerald green.

All eyes in the temple are suddenly upon them.

Forty-three drug-maddened spearmen shout a battle cry, as one, leap forward.

Wakim crouches and extends his hands.

"Such is the kingdom of heaven," comments Vramin, perspiration like absinthe glittering coldly upon his brow.

"I wonder just how the video tapes will show this thing?"

“**W**hat is this place?” Horus cries out.

The Steel General stands braced, as for an anticipated shock, but there is none.

“We are come to a place that is not a world, but simply a place,” says the Prince Who Was A Thousand. “There is no ground to stand upon, nor need of it here. There is little light, but those who dwell in this place are blind, so it does not matter. The temperature will suit itself to any living body, because those who dwell here wish it so. Nourishment is drawn from this air like water, through which we move, so there is no need to eat. And such is the nature of this place that one need never sleep here.”

“It sounds rather like Hell,” Horus observes.

“Nonsense,” says the Steel General. “My own existence is just so, as I carry my environment around with me. I am not discomfited.”

“Hell,” Horus repeats.

“At any rate, take my hands,” says the Prince, “and I will guide you across the darkness and amid the glowing motes of light until we reach the ones I seek.”

They link hands; the Prince furls his cloak, and they drift through the twilight landscape that is empty of horizon.

“And *where* is this place that is

not a world?” asks the General.

“I do not know,” says the Prince. “Perhaps it only exists in some deep and shiny corner of my dark and dirty mind. All that I really know is the way to reach it.”

Falling, drifting a timeless time, they come at last to a tent like a gray cocoon, flickering, above/below/before them.

The Prince disengages his hands and places his fingertips upon its surface. It quivers then, and an opening appears, through which he passes, a “follow me” drifting back over his shoulder.

Brotz, Purtz and Dulp sit within, doing something which would be quite disgusting and unique by human standards, but which is normal and proper for them, since they are not human and have different standards.

“Greetings, smiths of Norm,” says the Prince. “I have come to obtain that which I ordered a time ago.”

“I told you he’d come!” cries one of the grayish mounds, twitching its long, moist ears.

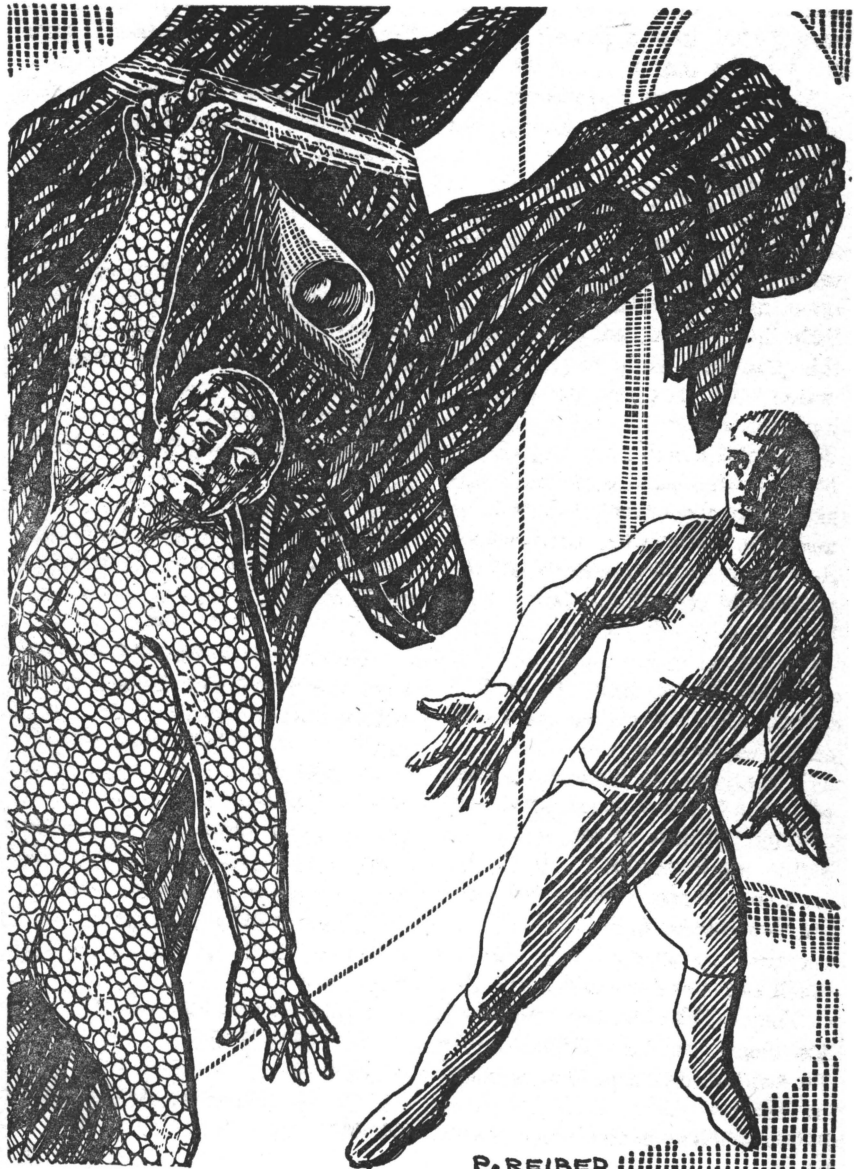
“I acknowledge that you were correct,” answers another.

“Yes. Where’s that frowlpin? I ought to refrib it once more, before . . .”

“Nonsense! It’s perfect.”

“It is ready then?” inquires the Prince.

“Oh, it’s been ready for ages. Here!”



P. REIBER

The speaker draws a length of cold blue light from a sheath of black fabric and offers it to the Prince. The Prince takes it into his hands, inspects it, nods and replaces it within the sheath.

"Very good."

"And the payment?"

"I have them here." The Prince withdraws a dark case from beneath his cloak and places it in the air before him, where of course it hangs suspended. "Which of you will be first?"

"He will."

"She will."

"It will."

"Since you cannot decide, I will have to do the choosing myself."

The Prince opens the case, which contains surgical apparatus and an extrudable operating light, as all three creatures begin to quiver in their places.

"What is happening?" inquires Horus, who has entered now and stands beside him.

"I am about to operate on these fellows, and I will require your enormous strength in assistance, as well as the General's."

"Operate? To what end?" asks the General.

"They have no eyes," says the Prince, "and they would see again. I've brought three pairs with me and I'm going to install them."

"This would require extensive neurological adaptation."

"But this has already been done."

"By whom?"

"Myself, the last time I gave them eyes."

"What became of those?"

"Oh, they seldom last. After a time, their bodies reject them. Generally, though, their neighbors blind them."

"Why is that?"

"I believe it is because they go about boasting how, among all their people, only they are able to see. This results in a speedy democratization of affairs."

"Ghastly!" says the General, who has lost count of his own blindings. "I'm minded to stay and fight for them."

"They would refuse your assistance," says the Prince. "Would you not?"

"Of course," says one of them.

"We would not employ a mercenary against our own people," says another.

"It would violate their rights," says the third.

"What rights?"

"Why, to blind us, of course. What sort of barbarian are you?"

"I withdraw my offer."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"Thank you."

"What assistance will you require?" asks Horus.

"The two of you must seize upon my patient and hold him, while I perform the surgery."

"Why is that?"

"Because they are incapable of unconsciousness, and no local anesthetic will affect them."

"You mean you are going to perform delicate surgery on them just as they are — exotic surgery, at that?"

"Yes. That is why I will need two of you to immobilize each patient. They are quite strong."

"Why must you do this thing?"

"Because they want it done. It is the price agreed upon for their labors."

"Whatever for? A few weeks' seeing? And then — what is there to see in this place, anyhow? It is mainly dust, darkness, a few feeble lights."

"It is their wish to look upon each other — and their tools. They are the greatest artisans in the universe."

"Yes, I want to see a frowlpin again — if Dulp hasn't lost it."

"And I, a gult."

"I, a crabwick."

"That which they desire costs them pain, but it will give them memories to last for ages."

"Yes, it is worth it," says one, "so long as I am not the first."

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

The Prince lays out his instruments in the middle of the air, sterilizes them and points a finger.

"That one," he says, and the screaming begins.

The General turns off his hearing and much of his humanity for the next several hours. Horus is reminded of his father's study; also, of Liglamenti, on D'donori. The Prince's hands are steady.

When it is done, the creatures have bandages over their faces, which they may not remove for a time. All three are moaning and crying out. The Prince cleans his hands.

"Thank you, Prince Who Was A Surgeon," says one of the creatures.

". . . For this thing you have done to us."

". . . And for us."

"You are welcome, goodly Norns. Thank you for a wand well made."

"Oh, it was nothing."

". . . Let us know whenever you need another."

". . . And the price will be the same."

"Then I shall be going now."

"Good-by."

"Farewell."

"Adieu."

"Good seeing to you, my fellows."

And the Prince takes Horus and the General in hand, setting all feet upon the road to Marachek, which is but one step away.

Behind him there is more wailing, and things quite normal and proper for Norns are quickly and frantically done.

They are back in the Citadel al-

most before Horus, who knows what it is, has succeeded in drawing the blue wand from its sheath at the Prince's side.

It is a duplicate of the weapon which sun-eyed Set had used against the Nameless, a thousand years before.

XI

Madrak has one chance of living through the onslaught. He throws his staff and dives forward.

The choice is the right one.

He passes beneath the dog as it leaps, snapping at his staff.

His hand falls upon the strange fabric of the glove the creature had been worrying.

Suddenly, he is comforted by a confidence in his invincibility. This is something even the narcotic had not fully instilled in him.

Quickly, he determines the cause and slips the glove upon the right hand.

The dog turns as Typhon rears.

The black shadow falls between them.

Tickling, stirring, the glove reaches to Madrak's elbow, spreads across his back, his chest.

The dog lunges and then howls, for the dark horse shadow comes upon it. One head hangs lifeless as the others snarl.

"Depart, oh Madrak, to the appointed place!" says Typhon. "I shall occupy this creature to its

destruction and follow in my own way!"

The glove moves down his left arm, covers the hand, spreads across his chest, reaches down to his waist.

Madrak, who has always been mighty, suddenly reaches forth and crushes a stone within his right hand.

"I fear it not, Typhon. I'll destroy it myself."

"In my brother's name, I bid thee go!"

Bowing his head, Madrak departs. Behind him, the sounds of battle rage. He moves through the lair of the minotaur. He makes his way upward through the corridors.

Pale creatures with green, glowing eyes accost him. He slays them easily with his hands and proceeds.

When the next group of attackers moves upon him, he subdues them but does not slay them, having had time to think.

Instead, he says:

"It might be good for you to consider the possibility of your having portions of yourselves which might withstand the destruction of your bodies, and to label these hypothetical quantities souls, for the sake of argument. Now then, beginning with the proposition that such —"

But they attack him again, and he is forced to slay them all.

"Pity," he says, and repeats the Possibly Proper Death Litany.

Proceeding upward, he comes at

last to the appointed place. And there he stands.

At the Gateway to the Underworld

On Waldik

"Hell hath been harrowed," he says. "I am half invincible. This must be the gauntlet of Set. Strange that it but half covers me. But perhaps I'm more a man than he was." *Stomach then regarded.* "And perhaps not. But the power that lies in this thing Mighty! To beat the filthy souled into submission and effect their conversions — perhaps this is why it was rendered into my hand. Is Thoth divine? Truly, I do not know. I wonder? If he is, then I wrong him by not delivering it. Unless, of course, this is his secret will." *Regards hands enmeshed.* "My power is now beyond measure. How shall I use it? All of Waldik might I convert with this instrument, given but time." Then, "But he charged me with a specific task. Yet. . . ." *Smile. (The mesh does not cover his face.)* "What if he is divine? Sons who beget their fathers may well be. I recall the myth of Eden. I know this serpent-like glove may indicate the Forbidden." *Shrugs.* "But the good which might be doneNo! It is a trap! But I could beat the Words into their heads I'll do it! 'Though Hell gape wide,' as Vramin says."

But as he turns, he is caught up in a vortex that sucks the words

from his throat and casts him down a wide, blank, cold well.

Behind him, the shadows strive, Waldik gapes wide, and then he is gone, for the Prince has called him home.

XII

On Marachek, in the Citadel, stand they all, there, as backward reel their minds.

"I've the shoes," says Wakim. "You may have them for my name."

"I've the glove," says Madrak and turns away his face.

"And I've the wand," says Horus, and it falls from his hand.

"It did not pass through me," says the Prince, "because it is not formed of matter, nor any other thing over which you may exercise control." And the mind of the Prince is closed to the inner eye of Horus.

Horus steps forward, and his left leg is longer than his right leg, but he is perfectly balanced upon the now uneven floor; the window burns like a sun at the Prince's back, and the Steel General is turned to gold and flowing; Vramin burns like a taper and Madrak becomes a fat doll bounding, at the end of a rubber strand; the walls growl and pulse in and out with a regular rhythm keeping time with the music that comes from the shuffling bars of the spectrum upon the floor at the end of the tunnel that

begins with the window and lies like burning honey and the tiger above the wand now grown monstrous and too fine to behold within the eternity of the tower room in the Citadel of Marachek at Midworlds' Center where the Prince has raised his smile.

Horus advances another step, and his body is transparent to his sense, so that all things within him become immediately known and frightening.

"Oh, the moon comes like a genie from the Negro lamp of night, and the tunnel of my seeing is her roadway.

She raises up the carpet of the days

I've walked upon,
and through caverns of the sky we make our pathway,"

says a voice strangely like yet unlike Vramin's.

And Horus raises his hand against the Prince.

But the Prince already holds his wrist in a grip that burns.

And Horus raises up his other hand against the Prince.

But the Prince already holds that wrist in a grip that freezes.

And he raises up his other hand, and electrical shocks pass along it.

And he raises up his other hand, and it blackens and dies.

And he raises up a hundred hands more, and they turn to snakes and fight among themselves and of

course he whispers: "What has happened?"

"A world," says the Prince, "to which I have transported us."

"It is unfair to choose such a battleground," says Horus, "a world too like the one I know — only a fraction away and so twisted," and his words are all the colors of Bliss.

"And it is indecent of you to want to kill me."

"I have been charged with this thing, and it is my will also."

"So you have failed," says the Prince, forcing him to kneel upon the Milky Way, which becomes a transparent intestinal track, racked by a rapid peristalsis.

The smell is overpowering.

"No!" whispers Horus.

"Yes, brother. You are defeated. You cannot destroy me. I have bested you. It is time to quit, to resign, to go home."

"Not until I have accomplished my objective."

The stars, like ulcers, burn within his guts, and Horus pits the strength of his body against the kaleidoscope that is the Prince. The Prince drops to one knee, but with his genuflection there comes a hail of hosannas from the innumerable dogfaced flowers that bloom upon his brow like sweat and merge to a mask of glass which cracks and unleashes lightnings. Horus pushes his arms toward the nineteen moons

(Continued on page 156)

OPERATION HIGH TIME

by JACQUELINE LICHTENBERG

To a Gen, the Changeover can be fatal — to himself and the hopes of all the Simes. An IF First.

Illustrated by *Brand*



I

Clad blissfully in my old shorts and sandals instead of the cover-every-inch costume the Gens required at their medical school, I headed outdoors to soak up some

Indian Summer heat. I was glad nobody was home when I got there. The privacy would let the resonant peace of the ranch heal my nerves before I launched my attack on the Retainer Laws.

I paused in the kitchen, mas-

sāging my wrists and forearms, extending and flexing all the tentacles and trying to relieve the bruised soreness and tingling that still lingered twelve hours after shedding my retainers at the Sime Territory border. At last, I'd received my M.D. and was home, the place that had haunted my dreams for the last two years at New Harvard.

The ranch had always been our week-end retreat. We allowed no life-powered services, preferring to use mechanical door locks, a petrochemical stove and heater, electrochemical lights, and a really ancient ice box — no power, just ice. We got along well without hot running water and vigorously enforced our ban on all powered communications instruments, public and private.

It was a bubble of rustic isolation perfect for Noadron, that vitally necessary Sime discipline that relieves the tension of constant transfer denial demanded by life among the non-Donor Gens, and that's what I was here for.

I went out the kitchen door onto the patio, letting the screen clatter lopsidedly shut behind me. The single-floored, rambling structure was surrounded on two sides by the patio and its roof-high, whitewashed wall. The third side was the garage; the whole back of the house was a glassed-in sun porch with a view of an ancient pine forest.

I stood on the patio, luxuriating

in the dry heat. Extending my grasping tentacles to the fullest, I jumped and caught the beam connecting the patio wall to the roof. I was shocked when I had to support my weight on my hands, the tentacles were so weakened by constant use of retainers.

Walking out into the yard, I looked back at the house with the perspective of years. It seemed to crouch in the middle of our ten acres of rocky, virgin hills like some sort of invader, not really a part of the country.

With renewed purpose, I strode toward the back, bearing left away from the pines, stepping carefully, mindful of my bared toes. Five minutes later, lying among the summer-parched grasses of my favorite hillside, I studied wisps of cloud roiling in stratospheric breezes and relaxed into the vaulted infinity with no field gradient other than my own to distract me.

Would it really be a good thing to walk among the Gen life-potential fields unprotected by retainers? As a QN-1 class channel, I wouldn't be bothered as much as a simple Q-class Sime, but still, I did rely on retainers for comfort in the steep field potentials of non-Donors.

The Gens, the Generators, the normal humans, invented retainers about four hundred years ago so that the Sime mutants they cap-

tured during the Sime Wars could not attack and kill them by stripping them of life-energy. As contact developed into integration, any Sime not wearing retainers was shot on sight.

Then the channels appeared. They were like the ordinary Sime in every respect except that they could take life-energy from a Gen without killing, and later transfer it to the ordinary Sime, satisfying his desire for a kill.

Now many Gens donate life in return for the life-powered services only Simes can provide, and the penalty for not wearing retainers in Gen Territory is deportation to Sime Territory.

The time for change had again arrived.

I held up my right arm and extended the moist pink-gray laterals. Used only in life-transfer, but they loved freedom and sunshine, not the confining and heavy retainers. I extended the two dorsal and two ventral gripping tentacles, touching the tips of my fingers. By contrast, these were sinewy ropes with a smooth, dry, ordinary skin. Their strength and dexterity were the joy of Sime musicians and artists everywhere except in Gen Territory, where, needlessly immobilized in retainers, they became weak and clumsy.

I was determined to present my argument and my inventions to Grandpa Digen tonight. If I could

convince him that the time was right to force the issue. . . .

After dinner, Grandpa Digen and I sat alone on the sun porch watching darkness engulf the pine forest. Aunt Clar was puttering in the kitchen as women do, and nobody else was about. Cousin Dori-en and his family wouldn't come until later.

Grandpa Digen is really my great grandfather. A hundred and twenty is old even for a Sime, so I wanted to broach the subject gently and keep the talk quiet.

"Did you hear about the Sime, Ray Bilton I think his name was, who tripped on a crowded walkway a few days ago and knocked a Gen into the path of a truck?"

"No, I didn't. What happened?"

"The Gen was hospitalized. The Gen police didn't hold Bilton responsible, but the Sime investigation turned up that he'd been wearing retainers, more than twelve hours. They blamed his carelessness on the cumulative effect of the pain and discomfort and let it go at that."

"There ought to be a law against wearing retainers more than twelve hours."

"I disagree. There ought not to be a law requiring retainers when they are not needed."

"I should live to see the day!"

"Well, you've lived to see the invention of revolutionary, com-

fortable retainers, so why not?"

"I have?" Grandpa was really interested now.

I reached into my pocket and brought forth my ring. It glittered red-gold in the dying sunlight. "It's crude because I didn't have tools to make real jewelry." I pointed out the half-inch rounded crown where the stone would be. "The mechanism is here. I call it an attenuator because it attenuates field gradients by several dynopters with absolutely no cumulative discomfort. Here, try it."

He took it and put it on his ring finger a bit gingerly.

"Ho! How about that! It really does." He took it off to look it over carefully.

"It's my own invention. I want to market it, but I don't know where to begin. I have something else, too." I took out my other prize. Grandpa looked at it.

"Looks like half a sleeve. The bottom half."

"I call it a damper and I believe it will replace the retainer. You slip it on like this, fasten this strap below the elbow and hook this loop around your middle finger to keep it from twisting. Now this material strip hugs the lateral and completely cuts off field sensation from that lateral only." I showed him closely in the fading light. "There is none of the discomfort and disorientation of the regulation model, and it leaves all handling tentacles

free. You only wear it on one lateral at a time so there's no problem of over sensitization, and it's quite comfortable.

While Grandpa gave it the same careful inspection, I continued, "It will provide as much protection for the Gens as the retainers; and used with an attenuator, it can make any Sime reasonably comfortable in any field gradient, even direct skin contact. No time limit. No agony. No torture. The problem is to convince them of that."

No family patriarch was ever more respected than Grandpa Digen. What he said went. I waited anxiously while he pondered. With family help, the first step of my crusade would be easy. To market my inventions for private use of Simes — for instance exchange students living with all-Gen families, or for medical therapy — and then get accepted by the Gens. The second step — to put the use of them completely at the discretion of the individual Sime — would take much longer and be more difficult.

At last Grandpa spoke. "That will require convincing the Gen public that transfer cannot possibly take place without all four laterals in skin contact. We'd have to get their congress to legalize the things. We'd have to get our congress to define criteria for need of them.

It would mean a tremendous public relations campaign to drum up Gen sympathy for their suffering Sime friends. . . . ”

He trailed off, and I sat perfectly still holding my breath as it became completely dark. The old man still had a quick intelligence, a lightning grasp of the heights and depths of a problem.

When he spoke again, it was with a fired enthusiasm. “What a fight that would make! What a crusade! I’m going to do it. My last crusade, my last project.”

I leaned back with an explosive high. Now to business.

While I spent the next ten days in Noadron, relaxing, quietly motionless for hours at a time, Grandpa Digen made plans and contacted people. Each evening we’d sit and watch the sunset and he’d tell me how it was going.

The first night he reported that he had spoken to several Sime manufacturing firms and a patent attorney. My inventions would be on the market in all Sime territories within the month.

A few days later, he had arranged for a publisher to put out a book about transfer mechanics and field-gradient sensing written in an easy, popular style. Also, he had someone working to change the image of the Sime in Gen fiction from the aloofly non-participant — which was the least explosive he’d

been able to manage when he was running his integration crusade — to sensitive, long-suffering, understanding, human type people. In a few weeks we’d start pushing stories about retainer incidents.

He organized the whole thing so well that I began to feel it wasn’t my project. But on the tenth day, we were sitting on the porch again, after dinner.

“Well, son, have you had enough Noadron to last you a while?”

“Yes, quite enough.”

“That’s good. Feel up to a little trip into Washington?”

“Washington? The Gen capitol?”

“Hmmm.” He nodded affirmatively.

“I suppose so. Why?”

“Operation High Time is your baby. It’s time you took over. I’m too old to travel and too weak to button hole, browbeat, cajole, argue and plead. That’s your job and you’re scheduled to start with some lobbying in Washington.”

The next morning, I was still saying to myself, over and over, “Me? Lobby? In Washington?” I felt unsure as I boarded the special helicopter Grandpa had arranged for me.

It just didn’t fit my self-image. What does a young doctor who should be interning in somethingor-other Memorial Hospital know about politics? Still, I’d asked for it when I started this whole thing.

As I climbed into the chopper — life-powered, not petrochemical — the pilot, a Q-class Sime, began to modulate the three dynopter fields that twirled our blades, and we were off.

Cross country from the Pacific Ocean to Washington-on-Potomac in a two-seat whirly would be impossible if we couldn't hop from one Sime island territory to the next for re-fueling, that is taking on new life-packed batteries.

We arrived at the Sime Reserve just south of the Potomac border of Washington about dark, and I decided to stay at the Harvington Ward for the night before plunging into the Gen area. The Sime Reserve is not really a Sime Territory. It's a legal fiction, like a foreign embassy. Its borders are sacrosanct and it's internally under Sime law, but it's only the size of a small city, not the usual few hundred miles across. From my room in the Ward, I could see the Gen capitol afire with colored lights designed to make the buildings look impressive, which was unnecessary. They were. What was impressive to me was that of all that electricity, probably sixty percent was life-powered.

The next morning I claimed the car Grandpa had reserved for me and drove into the Gen Capitol. It was one of those magnificently alive fall days that can following misery of a Washington summer.

I had a ten o'clock appointment with Jon Izak whom Grandpa had only identified as a professional lobbyist. Izak's plush suite was across the street from the Senate offices. His private office cowered behind three rooms full of secretaries and stenographers. In his office, I waited for him while gloomily contemplating how I'd stopped every machine in the place simply by walking in the door. Evidently, they weren't expecting a Sime.

"So you're Mairis Farris!"

The voice that came from behind me would have boomed fifty years ago. Now it croaked huskily. I was startled enough to jump to my feet. I hadn't felt the field gradient increase because I was wearing retainers, of course.

"Well, turn around, let me have a look at you."

I turned obediently while examining the speaker. He was a Gen. Maybe eighty or eighty-five. A little shorter than my five-foot-eleven, portly but not obese. He looked like an elder statesman, complete with silver-knobbed cane.

He snapped a formidable-looking lock on the door and hobbled to his polished desk, gesturing at me. "Take them things off and make yourself at home. You're the spit-tin' image of your grandfather, you know that?"

"No, sir, I didn't," I said, so sur-

prised I actually started removing my retainers. Then, I realized what I was doing and stopped, horrified.

"Go on! Go on!" the old man prompted. "Your grandfather and I worked together many years ago. I'll never forget it. Crusades he called 'em! Hah! I'll never forget the time. . . . No, not now. Digen got me out of retirement to give you a hand, not a lecture. You comfortable?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Well, I'm going to give you a hand. In fact my whole organization is going to give you multiple hands, but we won't do your work for you. You've got about three weeks of good hard leg work to do. Think you're up to it?"

"Yes, sir," I said, not at all sure I was.

"Good! Now, my son generally runs this place these days, but he's off helping his wife have a baby, so we'll just have to get along without him." He started hunting, through drawers.

"I don't know anything about this sort of work, sir, I'm just an intern."

"Well, you can talk can't you?"

"Yes," I said, bewildered.

"Retainers drive you crazy, don't they?"

I nodded again. He seemed to know all about me.

"All right. All you have to do is be yourself. Project your sincerity for your cause. Tell 'em like they

never heard it before. You'll do all right.

"Ah. Here they are!" he produced a stack of papers.

"Briefly, the situation is this. There's a bill up before the Senate." He handed me a paper. "Says that public establishments, restaurants, theaters, even buses, have the right to designate areas where Simes may enjoy the services without having to wear retainers. It's been up in one form or another several years now, but always dies in committee. You're going to see every member of that committee, and you're going to talk that bill onto the floor. Here are your appointments." He handed me another paper.

"Next year, when the public has been softened up a bit, we'll get a bill legalizing your inventions. Meantime, you've got to convince these men that retainers are painful, therefore dangerous, and public rest areas should be provided for those who want 'em. Here's a bunch of statistics. Memorize 'em and use 'em. Good luck."

I found myself on the street, my head whirling like the blades of the copter that had brought me here. It didn't stop whirling for three weeks. I talked. I saw everyone on the list several times. I learned to recognize influential Senators and catch them in restaurants, corridors, even the mens'

room. Soon everybody knew me; in fact they and their secretaries knew me better than I knew them. Which sometimes wasn't so good.

Then it was the big morning, the day the committee would either report the bill out or table it for the year. I figured it had a good chance. I'd convinced a majority of the committee. But Senator Fieldman, the chairman, was still the Opposition.

Oh, he'd made a lot of public noise about how he was all for "humane treatment of our fellow humans, the so-called Simes." And the public swallowed it. I'd looked up his voting record and I knew what to expect.

So it was with some apprehension that I entered the pseudo-Grecian building that served the Senate. The inside was as modern as tomorrow while the outside was kept archaic. "As a link with our revered ancestors," it said over the door. I marched self-consciously down the long, carpeted, and hush-ceilinged corridors, avoiding the occasional Gen and hunting conference room A-35.

I had become quite adept at finding my way around government buildings, so I walked right to it and swung my weight against the door as if I knew where I was going.

I bumped my nose on the newspaper clipping tacked to the locked door.

It read in part, "Senator J. P. Fieldman and his fifteen-year-old son, Ronald, were kidnapped last night from their Washington apartment. Mrs. Fieldman says that no ransom note has reached her. The Washington police . . ."

There was a handwritten note attached saying that the committee meeting was postponed. I must have stood staring at the clipping for several minutes reading it over and over.

All it said was that they knew nothing. Dazed, I wandered back to the lobby and sat in my favorite chair in a tiny alcove almost hidden behind a huge potted frond. I stared at the oiled leaves and thought furiously.

From my viewpoint, the motive was easy — to stop my bill. I'd convinced a lot of people of the need for the bill, but they wouldn't necessarily stay convinced. Perhaps the Opposition believed Senator Fieldman's public stand. Or perhaps they wanted time to do some counter-lobbying.

It didn't matter; they had stopped the bill by stopping the vote by removing the key figure. If they kept him isolated for a few days, the committee would elect a new chairman and proceed. By then, the situation would be less favorable to me.

So the kidnapers would have instructions to hold the Senator,

probably without hurting him, in as unlikely a place as they could manage, but not too far from Washington so he'd be available.

Perhaps taking the son was an accident, or perhaps they planned to release the Senator while holding his son to insure co-operation.

I asked myself over and over, "Where wouldn't the police look?" It was two o'clock and I was still asking myself when hunger drove me to the nearest restaurant. I didn't like eating in Gen restaurants because retainers were required; but after six years of school cafeterias, I'd learned to handle utensils without pinching my laterals too often. Pain like that spoils digestion.

Naturally, I was shown to a corner table. Nobody wants to eat with a Sime at the next table. After I'd ordered, the waiter silently presented the Sime beverage list and I chose Porstan, the vaguely sweet Sime beer. To a Gen it tastes like iodine.

I sat back and observed the restfully dim, wood-paneled, carpeted room. Each table had an elegant white tablecloth that seemed to glow in the shadows, reflecting more than its fair share of the light from the ancient crystal chandelier. Most of the tables were empty now, but some were surrounded by neatly dressed Washingtonites conducting the real business of government.

I watched that waiter. He hadn't spoken a word to me. He'd known immediately that I was Sime. There was no outward difference between us, but he'd known — or assumed — simply on the basis of my retainers, that I was Sime.

I ate slowly, mulling that thought over, turning it every which way. Somehow, it was important, but I couldn't quite see how. That's the way it always was. Why did it attract my attention now?

With the last swallow of Porstan, it suddenly hit me.

Suppose, wild as it might sound, just suppose a Gen walked in wearing retainers! Every Gen in the place would *know* he was Sime. Only another Sime would know different, provided he was close enough to sense the field gradient and was not wearing retainers. In one huge inductive leap, I knew where they had taken Senator Fieldman!

I made for my car and was on the road for the Sime Reserve before I'd had time to question the validity of induction.

The Sime Reserve border was not guarded by both Simes and Gens like Sime Territories. It had a Gen military guard only. Any Sime could pass inward without challenge, any Gen could pass outward without challenge. Vice-versa you needed papers and counter-signatures. Any Gen audacious enough to snap retainers on his wrists like

medieval gauntlets could pass the Gen guards with a breezy wave, just as I was doing. A Sime who happened to look like Senator Fieldman would not be noticed or reported.

Now, where would they put up? In the city itself where no Sime wore retainers and no Gen non-Donor was allowed, they'd be discovered immediately. As soon as I'd asked the question, the answer loomed obvious. I turned onto the main reserve boulevard, setting myself in the through lane in step with the traffic lights heading due south.

There were a couple of hours of daylight yet, and I knew where I was going. If they were indeed there, it would be the interracial incident of the century. Gens would demand rights of search of Sime Territory instead of granting us greater freedom. I decided to look over the situation and see if I couldn't break it up quietly.

My destination was an abandoned copter port built before the development of ground-effect landing made it reasonable to set a chopper down in town. My pilot had pointed it out on our way down. The Sime Reserve extended five miles south of the town to include the copter port and, on its far side, a wild life preserve and picnic area.

I shot past the field, scarcely daring to look for signs of life. At the first turnoff under the trees, I parked next to a dark blue sedan.

There were no other cars about, and nobody in sight.

My heart leaped into my throat. It could be their car! I wiped my palms on my trousers and removed my retainers. As far as I could tell, I was alone.

The October foliage was a furious riot of color, and the early evening breeze was brisk with the promise of winter. I took a deep breath, buttoned my coat, and crept into the forest in the direction of the copter field.

A kind of forboding dread settled over me as I crept through that forest. I hadn't been so scared since I went into the QN-1 placement test when I was thirteen. The placement was designed to strain resources, to determine limits. I'd had nightmares for six months after. I had that same nightmarish feeling now.

Finally, I reached a tremendous oak and peeped around its gnarled trunk at the whitewashed, decrepit passenger terminal, square and lonely on the cracked concrete apron. The starkness of the scene was relieved only the the huge poles that had held lights and Reeves projectors.

"This is silly," I said to myself. "You're being melodramatic. Now, take yourself back to the car and go talk to the police if you think there's anything in it."

By the time I yielded to good

sense, it had turned full dark. When I noticed that, I noticed the Gen standing behind me.

I must have been lost in a revery akin to Noadron. I had not felt him approach, but he was definitely a non-Donor. I started to turn around.

"Hold it!" the man said. "I have a gun primed right in your back. Now march! Right up to the front door."

I had no choice. I marched.

III

They had pitched a tent in the waiting room and had camp lanterns, a stove and a small heater going. There was the smell of boiled coffee and a staleness of onion and garlic. Each of these alone was enough to turn my stomach; together they almost made me vomit.

My captor jabbed the gun barrel in my back and marched me to the dispatcher's office, a small shack in the rear corner. He threw a makeshift bolt they had nailed to the door and shoved me in with the stock of his rifle.

I sprawled on the floor weakly, fighting nausea and the backwash of fear. Only when my head stopped spinning did I realize I was imprisoned with Senator Fieldman and his son.

There was enough moonlight through the small duroplast window

to see the boy lying on a blanket in one corner and the Senator standing by the window staring at me. His prematurely bald pate reflected the moonlight, creating a halo for his distinguished features.

"Mr. Farris?!" I'm sure he did not know what to think.

"Yes, sir." I got up and brushed myself off.

"What . . . ?"

He was entitled to an explanation so I told him everything. All the time I was talking I was nagged by a queer discomfort, but didn't pay much attention. But when I'd finished, that prick came into sharp focus. I went over to the boy, "What's the matter with your son?"

"Ronald suddenly took sick this morning. I think he's sleeping off a fever. These . . ." He searched for a sufficiently strong term as I searched for words to tell him the news. "These criminals won't pay any attention."

I bent down and felt Ronald's forearms, extending a lateral behind his ear and checking his temperature and the field gradient. I knew already — it's an instinct to recognize it — but I went through the motions anyway.

"Senator, sit down, sir."

It was beginning to dawn on him. He sat on the floor. There was no furniture.

"Ronald is. . . ." I took a

breath and started again. "Ronald is going through changeover." As a QN-1 I'd delivered that news hundreds of times, but it had never been so hard.

He just sat there and stared. I imagine he felt as if the elevator had gone down and left his stomach on the fifth floor. He sat perfectly still, perfectly silent for about five or ten minutes; then he took a deep breath and began to sob.

I gave him a handkerchief, but I didn't touch him. He might have misunderstood. He was a non-Donor. What could I say? In a Sime family, changeover is a celebration.

At last he blew his nose and said, "Never before in my family, never!"

"Senator," I said more to be talking than to say anything, "thirty percent of the children of two Simes are Gens and thirty percent of the children of two Gens are Simes. It's no respecter of family. Your son is not lost to you. He's growing up. But he'll always be your son. Possibly, if you're willing to make some adjustments, he may come back to live with you."

He heaved a great sigh; he knew I meant he'd have to become a Donor. It would be a complete change of philosophy. Many parents in this situation still react with violent hatred. A generation ago, it was common for a Gen parent to murder his child during the

first helpless stage of changeover. Now, from our educational campaigns, they generally accept the situation. But some who have strong anti-Sime feelings, disown the child. I was relieved when Fieldman spoke with dazed neutrality.

"What can we do for him here?"

I turned to my patient, trying to sense the exact stage of his condition. "Would you move back, please, sir? I want to check him over more carefully."

He moved to the far corner of the room, and the gradient eased off so I could separate out Ronald's. I checked the forearms again. The tentacles were tiny ropes beneath the skin, so small you had to know what to look for. His temperature was rising; it was almost Sime normal, so his hormone balance was almost achieved. I checked the back of his neck, and the Remott gland was swollen nearly to changeover maximum; no wonder he was unconscious. He was well into Sequence four and so far so good, but I could see trouble.

The life-energy supply he was born with would run out before his laterals would be developed enough to receive more. It was a common problem with the children of Gens. Fear eats life at a stupendous rate. Before the QN channels, these children died. Today, a channel backed by a Sime hospital could usually save them. Practically nobody died in changeover these days.



Roger Brand

I was not backed by a Sime hospital, but I was supposed to be an extraordinary skilled channel, a QN-1. Bunk! Without certain drugs, there was nothing I could do.

I got up, stuck my hands in my pockets and stared at the only door to our prison.

"There are six men out there with guns," Fieldman said, "and they're the type who'd use them."

"But they don't want your son to die."

"Die!"

"Relax. He won't if I can help it." I pounded the door trying to sound imperious and humble.

Presently, a gruff voice, full of gravel . . . or maybe buckshot . . . said, "What 'cha want?"

"I said, 'We've got a very sick boy in here. He'll die without medical aid. I'm a doctor, I can save him, but I need a few things.'"

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Extra blankets. He's got a high fever. And some medicines. In my car, in the glove compartment, there's a flat metal case. It has everything I need except water."

"And you want us to let you go get your case and whatever Sime weapons is in it? You think we're nuts?"

"The car is unlocked. Get the case yourself. Don't try to open it, though. I'll open it for you. It's life-locked and you'd only destroy the contents."

"Huh. Well, I'll think about it."

He left, and I laid my jacket and coat over the boy. Fieldman shook his head and started to take off his coat.

"No, no, sir," I said. "Don't. It isn't necessary. I can keep warm other ways."

He understood I meant by using my stored life-energy. As a channel, I always carried far more than I needed just to stay alive. I was entrusted with public property, to be dispensed to Simes in need, and to be used in the public interest.

I took to staring out the window. After a while, I noticed Fieldman kneeling quietly by his son, holding his hand and rocking back and forth. I hated to do it, but I had to. I said, "Sir, don't go near him. You're very high field, and it only makes matters worse."

It must have been almost two hours later that I heard the bolt of the door slide.

"O.K. Sime, come on out of there. Make it slow."

Gravel voice was back. There was a slight glow from the tent, but I'm sure it wasn't visible from outside. Three men were silhouetted against that glow, their faces pale in the moonlight from the observation windows. They were all Gen non-Donors, wearing mismatched hiking clothes and knee-high boots and pointing rifles at me.

"Into the tent." Gravel voice

gestured, and they closed in behind me.

A fourth man hulked over a small table illuminated by a suspended lantern. He was at least a head taller than the others and maybe fifty pounds heavier. The tent held six cots and a couple of stools. The emergency kit from the car lay on the table.

"There's your miracle box, 'Doctor.' Open it!" said the big one.

His voice was about two octaves higher than expected from a man that size. He shoved it at me and moved back, obviously taking no chances.

I thumbed it open. As I had expected, it was almost the standard kit containing the thirty-six chemicals used to aid changeover — pills, liquid and aromatics.

"As you can see, it contains nothing but medicines," I said as steadily as I could.

"Sime medicines! How's that and a Sime doctor going to help him?"

"I'm a Sime doctor, but I've had some training in Gen medicine." I wasn't going to admit that Ronald was one of us. "In addition to this, I'll need extra blankets, and, in the morning some boiling water."

The big one seemed to be the boss. He sat there and squinted at me for an eternity before flicking a finger at gravel voice, who picked up a bundle from the nearest cot while the others prodded me out the door.

The moonlight had shifted, and this time I spotted the rest room sign. "Hey," I said to gravel voice, "Does that work, or do we go find a tree?"

"It works . . . You get a turn in the morning."

The rest of the way back, I wondered what would happen if I insisted on taking a turn right now.

I found Fieldman pacing anxiously across the far end of the room from his son. Retrieving my coat, I covered the boy with the extra blankets and started him on an aromatic sedative. He gave a few tosses of the head and then relaxed completely.

"He's sleeping now, sir, the way he needs to sleep. In the morning, you'll tell him that you accept him, that you still love him and you'll give him courage." I held my breath waiting for his commitment.

"Yes, yes, I can do that. At least that. I . . ."

Relieved, I said, "In the meantime, we ought to try to help ourselves out of this situation."

"There's no way out," Fieldman gave a hopeless little shrug. "I've tried everything. The window does not break, the floor's cement, the guards are un-trickable."

"Of course the building is strong. It was deigned to protect people from a crashing helicopter. But there must be some way . . ."

"If we wait long enough, we'll be found . . ."

"We can't wait. By tomorrow afternoon Ronald's condition will be obvious, even to them. If they believe that this will bind you to the Sime viewpoint, they may kill us and run."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I don't know. I must admit I'm embarrassed. A Sime trapped in a Sime building in Sime territory by Gens. Most embarrassing."

Through our tiny window, I studied the landing apron and its border of undisciplined forest which one day would obliterate this relic of modern civilization as it had countless pre-Sime structures. My mind whirled like the vanes of an idling copter, throwing up five or six plans to arouse my eagerness to be away from here, free to take my patient to the facilities he really needed.

And, like a Judo expert, I used that figurative centrifugal force to rid myself of those plans because each one involved newly discovered QN-1 abilities. I could not betray our secrets to the Gens merely to save a few lives. Any premature hint of these superior or odd talents of Simes would only be fuel for the anti-Simes who would burn us at the stake.

Presently, the Senator said very quietly, "A man whose touch can kill doesn't need a gun . . ."

"Senator!" I whirled on him tru-

ly shocked. That hadn't occurred to me. "Every Sime is pledged to die by attrition or suicide rather than kill in transfer. That's what I've been telling you for weeks. This is no longer the dark ages. Gens can trust Simes. What use is life without stable society?"

After a long pause he said very faintly, "It was only a thought."

I returned to staring out the window. Moonlight glinted off the tops of the light standards. For the first time, I noticed the Reeves projector casings humped at the tops of the poles like frightened monkies.

I said, "Isn't it strange that the toilets were left operative?"

Fieldman looked at me a moment, then shrugged accepting the oddment, "Perhaps they turned them on?"

"Perhaps," I said searching the room with renewed interest. "And then again, perhaps not."

How had the dispatcher's furniture been placed? The chart table at that end where Ronald now lay, atlas case, radiophone, and the dispatcher's desk in this corner opposite the door. I ran my hand down the join in the walls.

The Reeves control box was mounted to be reached from the desk, life-locked, about as big as my hand.

Not daring to hope, not daring to think, I opened the box and

threw the switch. A surge of power! Somewhere charged life-batteries still fed the projectors.

"They work!"

"What work?"

"The Reeves projectors."

"Fine. What are Reeves projectors?"

"Standard markers used to supplement lights by creating an interference pattern any Sim can sense. They take hours to warm up, but with any luck, they may be noticed by tomorrow noon. When a field's in use, they're kept warm on standby, but these were turned completely off. Odd they weren't removed, but very lucky for us."

"Now all we have to do is survive until tomorrow afternoon."

"And to do that we better get some rest."

"I couldn't sleep."

Even without examining the deepening circles about his eyes I could sense the fatigue in him. "Sir, tomorrow is going to be a very hard day. You'll need all your faculties. you really must sleep, at least a few hours." I hesitated a couple of breaths and then decided, "If you wish, I could help you sleep . . ."

Instantly, I regretted it. He gasped and stiffened in panic. Simes are ultrasensitive to a Gen's fear and react with instinctive aggressiveness. I suppressed my animal response with gritted teeth and clenched fists, and tried to calm

him, "Senator, I won't touch you without your permission . . . ever."

Then suddenly it was over. He said, "Yes, there's no time like now. If only for Ronald's sake . . . what do I do?"

Arranging a couple of blankets in the farthest corner from Ronald, I said, "Lie down here, push your sleeves up and try to relax."

I sat on a blanket on his left side and began to talk softly, "Now, this will work only if you co-operate. Listen to my voice, relax, think very hard about sunrise. You don't want to know anything until sunrise when the light will awaken you. I'm going to touch you, lightly just with my hand."

I brushed the palms of his hands. "Now, I've got an accurate reading, I'm going to even the field gradient. Relax, don't pull away, just lie still. You won't feel a thing; next you know it will be dawn and you will wake refreshed.

I leaned forward and made wrist contact with my laterals. Then I brushed his lips with mine ever so gently for the instant of transfer and made time sense adjustment so he would sleep.

It was his first, so I only took the first level of his life-store. He was a General class Donor now.

I bedded down next to my patient, linked to be roused instantly by any minor change in his condition.

I woke to pre-dawn grayness and checked Ronald over. Now he needed exercise. When I waved a second aromatic under his nose, he stirred restlessly. Then I sat him up, supporting him against my chest as I chose a small vial of liquid.

"Ronny, Ronny, I'm your friend Ronny, I'm going to help you feel better. He looked at me, bleary-eyed, with changeover's instinctive hostility, the withdrawal, the need for total privacy during this vulnerable phase warring openly with the docile suggestivity induced by my drugs. "Here, drink this down. It will clear your head. I know you don't want to swallow, but this won't upset your stomach."

The drugs prevailed, and he drank. While we huddled together, waiting for it to take effect, his father woke. Ronald had buried his face in my shoulder and was breathing heavily to the waves of sensation from the drugs and from his condition. I motioned his father to be still and waited.

Finally, Ronald drew a shuddering sigh and looked up to my face, down at my arms, and then shrank away in trained reflex.

Our eyes met. I said, "You too, you know?"

Hesitantly, he nodded.

"Ronald." I took his hands. "Don't fight it any more. Your life

depends on that. I can help you only if you relax and accept it. You do what I say and you'll live. I promise."

I mentioned his father over. "Talk to him a while." And I went to the window to give them privacy.

The Reeves projectors were drawing power, but I knew they were still imperceptible. The building was insulated, so I wouldn't know when they established a pattern, but I could guess.

Suddenly, my stomach remembered it hadn't had any dinner and only a light lunch yesterday. I pounded on the door and kicked it until gravel voice husked sleepily, "What 'cha want?"

"Breakfast, and that pot of hot water. Or are we to be starved to death?"

It was a crude jibe. Simes always fed their prisoners well. But it was effective. Half an hour later we received boiled eggs, bread, cheese, milk, coffee and a pot of hot water.

I sent the Senator to eat while I poured some of the hot water in a cup, added a powder from the emergency kit and took it to Ronald. I turned him to the corner and sat in front of him, taking out my other handkerchief.

"This is going to be painful, but it's necessary. I fear, you've used too much life-energy. So you'll re-

quire more before your laterals are fully developed. If I weren't here, that would be deadly. But I am here. And I'm a QN-1. I can force a transfer to you with a minimum development of your tentacles, but I need at least that minimum.

"This is old-fashioned and very crude, but effective." I dipped the handkerchief in the steaming water and applied it to his forearms. He bore that torture with staid courage until, finally, I wiped the tears of pain from his eyes.

Then I tested the brew I had prepared and made him drink it all. It was pure nourishment in a form his disturbed metabolism could accept.

I spent the rest of the morning alternately walking Ronald around the room and instructing him in the channel's transfer technique. Gen-Sime transfer is instinctive, but Sime-Sime transfer has to be learned.

With lunch, I demanded more hot water and got it without comment. Surprisingly, our captors did not look in on us more often. I suppose they depended on the outside guards. I knew that at this time of year only the rangers and the border police used this road, so I didn't care to calculate the probability of the right man noticing the Reeves' field and reacting the right way.

About mid-afternoon, I began routine sedation for Ronald's first

transfer, an effective tranquilizer that would nevertheless sharpen his new senses. It was getting dark when I could put it off no longer.

I engaged the life-lock on the door to insure our privacy, "Sir I'm going to ask you to stay back in the corner again. The less interference the better. "

"He's going to be all right?"

"Definitely. But this is the critical point."

That was more confidence than I felt. I'd never done it outside a hospital before. Nothing is quite like your first field test. Reminding myself that I was far over-qualified for this simple job, and that any QN-3 could have done it, I worked through the routine very slowly, talking the half-conscious boy into confidence, reminding him of what I'd taught him that morning, and slowly building a tremendous field gradient between us. I watched for his first instinctive reaching toward the apex of that gradient, the sign that I really had my 'minimal development.'

I got it after two heartstopping minutes, made contact, gave him enough to see him through to full development, and withdrew.

Just in time, too. I sensed somebody at our door. Hastily, I disengaged the life-lock and tried to pull myself together. After that operation, I needed about five minutes to return to normal.

It was only our dinner, the same un-inspiring fare. And another pot of hot water . . . unasked.

"How's the kid?" gravel voice inquired.

"Sleeping. I think he'll be fine."

Gravel voice looked me up and down once, very slowly, "Yeah . . . he better be." I was afraid he'd look for himself, but he left with only a glance at the heap of blankets in the corner. Perhaps he thought it was contagious.

I sat down, poured myself a cup of hot water, added a little something from the emergency kit, and drank it all. It helped. I stopped shaking.

Then, I noticed Fieldman. I poured another cup of water and added a mild Gen sedative from the beginning of the sequence. I'd been treating Ronald from the middle of the array and I'd taken mine from the end. "Doctor Farris prescribes." I offered him the cup.

He hesitated. I smiled. "Come on, sir, this is good for you."

With a sigh, he sat beside me and took the cup. "Rescue's late."

"Not too. I think we're safe until morning. I don't know about you, but I've had a day. I'm going to sleep."

"How can you sleep?"

"I don't know, but I'll manage."

I woke to the sound of rifle fire. The Senator stood by the window, moonlight splashing the floor

around his shadow. Ronald was soundly unconscious.

"Rescue?" I asked

"I think so. I think they're trying to get away."

I joined him to watch for the sporadic flashes among the trees. Presently, it tapered off and ceased. Fifteen minutes later the bolt slid, and the door opened.

Grandpa Digen stood there leaning on his cane and chuckling.

Four days later, Grandpa and I sat on our porch watching the sunset.

"So they finally rounded up all the people responsible as well as the kidnapers themselves. Credited solely to the Sime police. And you have got yourself a Senator for a friend. What more do you want?"

"What did you mean about Izak? Did he have me followed? I don't want someone snooping on me."

"Hah! No, he didn't have you followed. He has more savvy than you'll ever know. When you didn't check back, he got worried and started worrying others. If you'd thought to turn on the Reeves sooner, we'd have got there sooner."

"Well . . ." You can't argue with Grandpa, so I changed the subject, "We got the bill out of committee, recommended for passing. So where do we go from here?"

This set him to wheezing and chuckling and mumbling. "Got myself a real trooper for a grandson!"

END

IN THE SHIELD

by DEAN R. KOONTZ

Illustrated by REESE

*There were three to shape destiny
with the Shield's ancient Prisoner:
a Poet; a Mue; and — perhaps — a Man.*

I

When he woke from a featureless dream of silver, there was nothing but endless blackness on three sides, a blackness so intense that it almost coughed out a breath and moved. And when

he woke, he did not know who he was.

The control console's flashing told him that this was a spaceship under and behind him. That explained the darkness through the viewplate of the guidance nipple. And his misty reflection in the

thick plastiglass told him he was a man, for he had the blue eyes of a man and the face of a man, severe but handsome, topped by a dangle of coal-dusted hair. But these things were general. When he tried to concentrate on specifics, but there were no answers.

Who was he ?

What had been his past?

And where was he bound?

He could remember that this was the year 3456, and he knew all about the society it had, or a good deal of it, anyway. Yet his personal history was a blank. He got up, walked behind the chair, away from the viewplate and toward the rear of the chamber. A quick search of the gray chamber showed that there were no written logs. The logtapes only roared and screeched when he turned them on.

When he turned them off, the silence was even more penetrating.

He tugged at the circular wall hatch at the rear of the chamber, swung it inward. Beyond lay a corridor, narrow and low ceilinged. At the end of it, he knew, lay a room of shielding before the drive chamber. Along the sides were two rooms that he could enter without being burned to cinders by hard radiation.

In the room to the right, there was a complete laboratory with robo-surgeons hanging from the ceiling like bloated spiders. Di-

rectly under the machine doctors was an operating table with a flexo-plast mattress that clutched a patient firmly and held him as if it were alive. He shuddered and walked into the hall. He did not entirely trust machines like that — machines that were so much like men but had neither mercies nor faults of men.

Across the corridor, the other room was an armory. Crates of construction explosives sat on the floor, enough to level a city. There were racks of guns on the wall. Vaguely, he knew there were no guns in the world any more. Men of this age did not kill anything but game animals. Guns were mainly for collecting. But these were too new for collecting, and deep within him he knew he possessed the ability to use each of them. Against the far wall and next to the cargo portal, a ground car with broadcasting nubs studing it. With its invincible shield turned on, it was, in effect, another weapon.

There was something bothering him, something more than the mere presence of weapons. Then, as he gazed at the ground car, he knew what it was. Nothing here carried a tradename! The car was void of brand, model and make. So were the rifles and the throwing knives and the explosives. These things had been produced to provide anonymity. But who

made them? And for what purpose?

Bong-bong-bong!

At first, he ignored the ship's alarm, trying to think. But the ship grew more insistent. He put back a rifle he had been examining and left for the control room.

UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT APPROACHING. CLARIFICATION IN THIRTY SECONDS. The computer's squawkbox grated the words out much like sandpaper being drawn across sandpaper. CLARIFICATION. IT IS A MAN.

"A man? Out here without a ship?"

THERE IS A HEARTBEAT.

Like a grotesquely misshapen fruit, the body in the red suit floated in the blackness, directionless, moving with a slight spin that brought all sides of it into view.

UNCONSCIOUS.

He brought the ship in as close as possible, studied the crimson figure. What was a man doing this far from a ship, alone, in a suit that could not support him for more than twelve hours? "I'm going to have him brought in," he said to the ship.

DO YOU THINK YOU SHOULD?

"He'll die out there!"

The ship was silent.

Like small animals, his fingers moved. A moment later, the cylinder

IN THE SHIELD

drical body of the Scavenger appeared in the viewplate. It was another almost-alive machine. He shivered. The single eye of the Scavenger focused on the body. On the console screen, there was a closeup of the stranger. Then the lens caught the face inside the helmet, and he was no longer so sure it was a man.

There was a face with two eyes but no eyebrows. Where the brows should have been, there were two bony ridges, hard and dark and glistening. A mane of brown hair streaked with white lay as a cushion about the head. The mouth was wide and generous, but not the mouth of a man. The lips were a bit too red, and the teeth that stuck over them at two places were sharp, pointed, and very white. Still, it was more of a man than an animal. There was a look about the face that suggested soul-tortured agony, and that was very human. He directed the Scavenger to begin retrieval.

When the Scavenger was locked into place, he opened the floor hatch, drew up the body, and carefully unsuited it. The helmet bore the stenciled name HURKOS . . .

He was in a great cathedral. The red tongues of candles flickered in their silver holders.

Belina was dead. No one died anymore, but Belina was dead. A rare case. The monster in her womb

had slashed her apart. Nothing the doctors could do. When you can't turn to blame other men, there is only one entity to blame: God. It was difficult finding a temple, for there were not many faithful these days. But he had found one now, complete with its holy water tainted with sacrificial blood and its handful of ancient Christians — ancient because they refused the man-made immortality of the Eternity Combine: they grew old.

He was in the great cathedral, climbing the altar railing and clutching the feet of the great crucifix. On the kneecap, slipping . . . Grasping at the loincloth, pulling himself up, weeping . . . A foot in the navel, shoving up . . . Screaming into the ear. But the ear, after all, was wooden. Rocking, swaying the giant monument. Finally, he toppled it . . . and pushed away from it as it fell . . .

There were sirens, and hospital attendants.

The last thing he remembered seeing was an old man, a Christian, cradled between the broken halves of God's face, mumbling and content with his sanctuary . . .

He pulled himself away from Hurkos, shook his head. This was the stranger's dream. How had he experienced it?

Hurkos opened his eyes. They were chunks of polished coal, dark jewels threatening many secrets.

His mouth was very dry, and when he tried to speak, the corners of his lips cracked and spilled blood. The nameless man brought water.

"It didn't work then," Hurkos had a voice deep and commanding.

"What didn't work? What were you doing out there?"

Hurkos smiled. "Trying to kill myself."

"Suicide?"

"They call it that." He sipped more water.

"Because Belina died?"

Hurkos bristled. "How could you know — " After a moment, he nodded. "I guess I told you."

"Yes. How could I hear your dreams like that?"

Hurkos looked puzzled for a moment. "I'm a telepath, of course. Sometimes I project, some rare times I read thoughts. Unstable talent. I project mostly when I'm asleep — or under pressure."

"But how did you get out there without a ship?"

"After I was released from the hospital — after Belina's death and the crucifix incident — I signed on the *Space Razzle* as a cargo handler. When we were in relatively untraveled space, I went into the hold, disconnected the alarms from the pressure chamber, and left. I won't be missed until pay day."

"But why not step out without a suit? That would be quicker."

Hurkos smiled an unsmile. "I

guess a little of the healing did take hold. I guess we can recover from anything." But he did not look recovered. "Right now, my talent is fading. I can't see a name in your mind."

The other hesitated. "You can't see a name . . . because I have none."

Briefly, he recounted his sad story, the amnesia and the strangeness of the ship.

Hurkos seemed interested. Here was something to submerge his melancholia.

"We are going to make a real search of this tub, you and me. But first, you ought to have a name."

"What?"

"How about — Sam? After a friend of mine."

"I like it. Who was this marvelous friend?"

"A dog I bought in Calileo."

"Thanks!"

"He was noble."

With the preliminaries out of the way, Sam could no longer contain his curiosity. "We both have names now. We know I am a man — but what are *you*."

Hurkos looked startled. "You don't know what a Mue is?"

"No. I guess maybe I have been gone too long. Maybe I left before there were Mues."

"Then you left a thousand years ago — and you want damn far away!"

Hurkos padded down the corridor and into the main chamber. "Absolutely nothing!"

They had been searching for six hours and still had no clue to Sam's or the ship's origin. Hurkos had manged, somehow, to fill him in on Mue history. Once, well over a thousand years before, man had tried to make other men with the help of the Artificial Wombs. After hundreds of attempts, nothing very worthwhile had come of it. They had been trying to produce men of psionic abilities valuable as weapons of war. Sometimes, they came close. Never did they have complete success. Then, when the project was finally junked, they had five hundred mutated children on their hands. This was at the time when mankind was laying aside weapons for plowshares. Most looked upon the Wombs as a hideous arm of the recent war efforts, and they looked upon the Mue children with pity and shame. There was a great public outcry when the government hinted that the Mues might be "put to sleep." They were allowed to live. In fifteen years, they had equality. They mated, had more of their own kind, but often produced normal children. Today, there were fourteen million of them — only a fifth of one per cent of galactic population. Fourteen million. And Sam could not ever remember

having heard **anything** of them.

"Food's **about ready**," he said.

"Smells **good**," Hurkos replied as the trays slid from one wall slot.

They sat on the floor to eat. "It's damn eerie," Hurkos muttered around a mouthful of synthe-beef.

"There should be at least *one* brand name. He paused, swallowed, then said, "The food!

Sam waved him down. "I already looked. The food basics below the synthesizer are in unmarked containers."

They made a list of their known facts and found it small. They pondered over it as they ate. "What's the matter?" Hurkos asked a few moments later. "You hardly ate a thing."

Sam grimaced, waved a hand vaguely, let it fall into his lap. "I'm sort of afraid to eat, because —"

"Go on!"

"Because it has been made by machines. The food isn't natural."

Hurkos swallowed. "That's another piece of data. You're afraid of machines. I thought so earlier — judging by your reaction to the robo-surgeons.

"But I could starve!"

"I doubt it. You ate enough to keep you going. You just won't get fat."

Sam opened his mouth to speak . . .
. . . and felt lightning sear his brain. Thunders crashed. Chaos

swirled. He pushed from the floor, found his seat, strapped in, unable to control his actions.

Hurkos was beside him, shouting. But he could not hear the Mue. Something had a fist around his mind, and his world was a world of thunders. He slammed toggles.

Behind the command chair, Hurkos wrapped himself in the flexoplast mattress they had removed from the surgeon's table. There was no second seat in the ship, and the resilient living foam was an adequate replacement. He was almost into it.

Sam slammed the ship into hyperspace . . . and they collided with something . . .

The thunders were gone, and he was in control of himself. Hurkos was rolling all over the floor, bouncing off the walls as the ship walloped from the impact. Sam reached the viewplate, saw another ship hanging only a mile away. The collision had jolted them back into real space. He tried for radio contact but got no response.

"What the Hell were you doing?" Hurkos shouted, freeing himself from the mattress and staggering to his feet.

"I don't know! Someone took over my body, told me to set a course for Hope —"

"The capital?"

"Yes. I can't argue."

Hurkos rubbed a bruise on his arm. "Recognize the voice?"

"It wasn't exactly a voice. It was more like — "

There was a sudden pounding noise. They whirled toward the viewplate and saw a giant pounding on the plastiglass. "Open up and leave me in!" He had his helmet pressed to the viewplate and was threatening to tear the ship apart if they didn't open up. He looked as if he just might be able to carry out the threat. They let him in.

If the stranger from the other ship had been an imposing figure seen through the viewplate, he was overwhelming seen at first hand. Six-foot-six if an inch, two hundred and seventy pounds if an ounce. He pulled his helmet off, spewing a stream of vivid curses. His blond, unruly hair fell into blue eyes like sky chips. "What the devil are you, some sort of moron? Morons have been bred out of the culture! You're the last living moron, and I have to — "

"I guess you're angry about the collision," Sam began, "and — "

"You guess I'm angry about the collision! You guess!" He paused, let his jaw drop, picked it up without losing his expression of disbelief, and continued "Of course I'm angry about the collision! You hyperspaced without checking to see if there was another ship in hyperspace within the danger limit. Your field locked with mine and jolted both of us into real space.

What if our ships had collided instead of just our fields?"

"That's rather unlikely," Hurkos said. "After all, the fields are five miles in diameter, but our ships are a tiny fraction of that. The odds — "

"A moron spewing logic!" The big man struck his forehead with a palm.

"If you'd just listen for — "

"I'm listening! I'm all ears! I want to hear your excuses for — "

"Wait a minute!" Hurkos shouted suddenly, his eyes bright. "I know you! Mikos. You're Gnosso Mikos — the poet!"

The rage was swept off the face by a smile. The huge hand came forth to be shaken. "And I have not had the pleasure," the giant said politely.

Hurkos shook the hand vigorously.

Relief swept through Sam's frame. He wanted to fold up his legs, tuck them under his belly, and fall onto his face. He fought it.

"My name is Hurkos. A nobody, but I love your poetry. Especially *The Savagery of Old!*

*"Spill the blood across the
savage face,
Raise the axe, the bow, the gun,
the mace — "*

Gnosso finished the quatrain:

"Scream the scream that breaks

*apart the chest;
Killing man is what you know the
best.' "*

"Humpphh!" Sam managed to say.

"Oh! Mr. Mikos, this — "

"Gnossos," the poet interrupted.

Hurkos beamed. "Gnossos, this is Sam."

The giant engulfed Sam's hand in his giant paw. "Glad to meet you. Now what malfunction of your vessel caused this recent unpleasantry?"

Later, after the poet had heard the entire story of the amnesia and strange voices in Sam's head, he rubbed his hands together, and said, "What a mystery! You won't get rid of me until we solve it!"

"Then you aren't angry?"

"Angry. But whatever for?"

Sam sighed.

"Well," Hurkos said, "what do you make of it?" He hunched forward like a small boy at his father's knee.

Gnossos rolled his tongue over his wide, perfect teeth, thought a moment. "It sounds," he said at length, "as if someone is trying to over-turn the galaxy."

Sam shifted, waited for more, shifted when the poet didn't speak. "What do you mean?" Hurkos asked.

"Consider the weapons. Weapons have been illegal — except for

sport and collecting — for over a thousand years. You say these are obviously not for sport because of their design and power, yet no one collects explosives or new guns. Someone, it seems, plans to use them on humans."

Sam and Hurkos exchanged looks. This was a fear they had not voiced.

"The tradenames," Gnossos continued, "are missing because the owner of all this wants his part kept secret. Sam is a tool, a tool being used to overthrow the current order of things."

"Then at any moment he might get orders to kill us because we know too much!"

Sam was perspiring .

"No," the poet said. "The order to hyperspace sounds as if it was post-hypnotic." He waited for them to register relief. "Sam was kidnapped, and his memory was wiped out. Then they — whoever they may be — implanted a series of hypnotic commands. When that was done, they shipped him off to do whatever they commanded. Perhaps the first order was designed to be triggered by the first meal he ate. The remaining commands may now be geared to a time sequence — regular or irregular intervals between each."

"So whatever gave him the orders would not be aware of our presence."

"Correct."

Sam wiped his forehead dry. "Good. I like both of you too much to kill you."

"One thing," Gnosso said. "Why didn't you acknowledge my radio message just after the collision?"

"We didn't receive any," Sam answered perplexed. "We tried to reach you but got no answer."

"Broken radio?" Hurkos asked.

Sam went and checked the control console.

WORKING PROPERLY.

"That shoots one theory. But how could Sam's secret master get control of the radio if all his commands are post-hypnotic?"

Gnosso shrugged, stood. "Maybe they *do* know we are here. Maybe they're just waiting for the right moment to knock us off. We'll have to wait and see. Right now, let's check your laboratory. I have an idea."

The three of them went below to the robo-surgeons. "Someone could have machined the cases for these," Gnosso said, "but there are only a few companies that have the facilities to produce the interiors. Whoever put this together would have to use factory-made parts."

Sam flicked the control knob, lowered the spider-like, many-armed machine, rotated it so that the access plate of the main component faced them. Gnosso rubbed his palms together. "Now we'll see if we can find a few clues."

He threw back the latches that

held the plate on, dropped the cover to the floor. "Every company keeps a list of purchasers. One serial number, and we can find this tub's owner." He bent over and peered into the darkness of the globe's interior. He looked puzzled.

"Awful dark in there," Hurkos said.

Gnosso put a hand inside, reached in, up to his elbow.

"There's nothing in it!" Sam said.

"Oh yes there is!" Gnosso shouted. "And it has hold of my hand!"

III

Gnosso tore his hand from the machine, rubbed it against his chest. It was red and bleeding in a few spots.

"What the Hell is in there?" Hurkos asked.

Sam stifled a low-key scream that began slithering up his throat.

As if in answer to Hurkos's question, a jelly-mass began dripping from the open plating onto the table. It collected there, amber spotted with areas of bright orange. It trembled, quivered. There was a skin forming over it, the amber and orange changing to a pinkish-tan hue that made it look a great deal like human flesh — too much like human flesh. The skin expanded, contracted, and there were pseudopods pulling the mass

across the table toward the warmth of their bodies.

They had backed nearly to the door. "The machine had no insides!" Gnossus said, rubbing his wounds.

"But it moved," Sam said. "It operated like a machine. How could it do that without moving parts?"

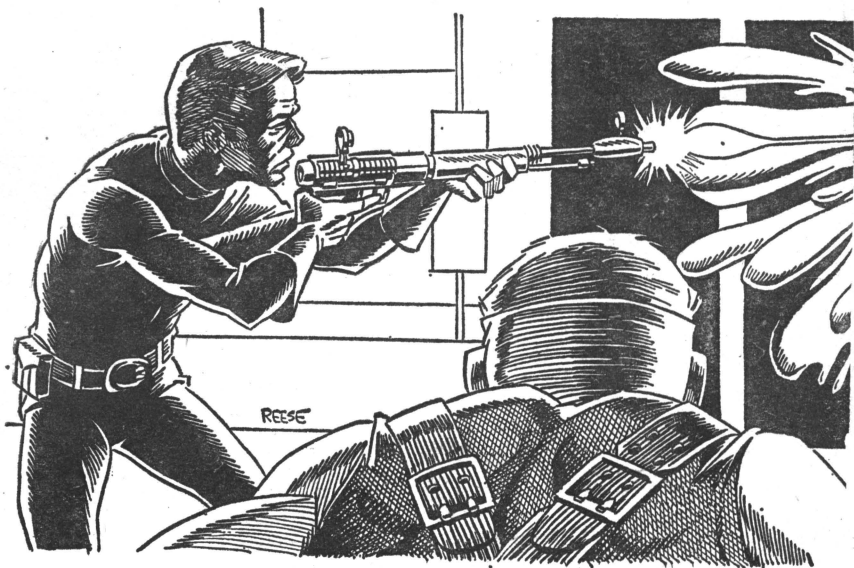
"That — that thing was its insides, its working parts, Gnossus said. "That jelly-mass operated the shell like a machine."

The last of the mass dropped from the bowl of the main segment. There was more there than could have been contained in the main sphere; obviously, all the sections had been filled and were now drained and empty. The jelly-mass,

shapeless, plunged over the end of the table, struck the floor with a sickening squashing sound, and rolled toward them, arms of simulated flesh lashing out for purchase on the cold floor.

"The armory!" Sam shouted, turning into the hall and flinging the door to the other room wide. Perhaps it had been the hypnotic training with the weapons that made him think of the armory. He knew how to kill; he could stop the amoeba, the super-cell. He stepped back into the hall, a rifle in his hands, brought up the gun, and sighted. "Move away!"

Gnossus and Hurkos stepped behind him, moving toward the control cabin. Aiming for the center



of the mass, Sam pulled the trigger. Blue lightning flashed outward, sparkling, and illuminated the passageway like a small sun going nova. Despite the light, there was no heat. In fact, the flame seemed to radiate coolness. It struck the writhing mass of jelly, sank into it. There was something like a scream, though it was not a voice. It sounded as if the very molecules of the mass had closed gaps and were rubbing one another. The jelly halted.

Sam released the trigger, started to let the air out of his lungs.

And the jelly leapt.

He fired, caught it in mid-jump, sent it crashing backwards, blue fire coursing through it. He

aimed again, depressed the stud.

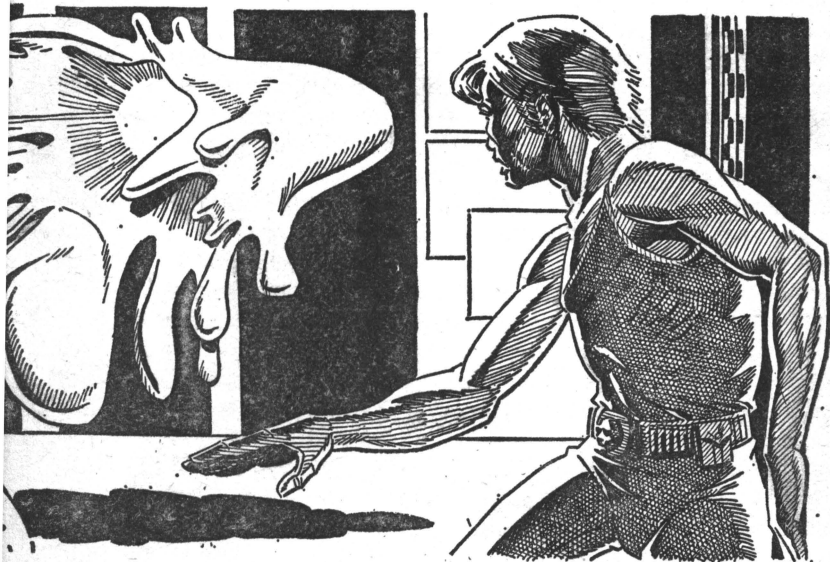
Nothing.

Nothing!

No blue flame. No cool flame. Not even a click. He raised the weapon to look at it, to see if some latch or bolt had not been thrown properly by the automatic mechanism. Then he saw the amber goo beginning to pulse out of the tip of the barrel. Suddenly his hand was burning furiously, and there was amoeba slopping out of the powerpack casing inside the handle. He threw the gun down, wiped his hand on the wall.

"Explosives!" Gnosso shouted.

Sam turned, dashed into the armory once more. When he came out, he had three grenades. He ran to



Gnossos and Hurkos, panting, his eyes wide, heart furious.

The jelly-mass was recovering and had slopped into the hall where it joined up to the smaller clump of stuff that had been the insides of the gun.

"I think I see why the radio didn't work, Gnossos said. "It did not *want* to work."

"The entire ship is alive," Sam agreed.

Hurkos wrapped a hand on the wall. "It's steel. I'll be damned if it's anything but steel!"

"Inside," Sam said, keeping an eye on the amoeba pulsating at the end of the passageway. "Deep inside the plating, there's more jelly."

"But the hyper-drive — "

"There is no hyper-drive," Sam said. "At least, no mechanical hyper-drive. The jelly can hyperspace somehow — naturally. There are no machines on board — just jelly-cored shells.

"Your fear of machines — " Hurkos began.

"Was gained from whomever built this — this ship-thing."

The lump had begun to move again. It was six feet high, a good three hundred pounds.

"You two get into suits," Gnossos said, taking the grenades. He still had his own suit on and the helmet lay within easy reach. "We will have to go across to my ship. This one won't let us live long, now that we know part of its secret."

Sam and Hurkos struggled into their suits, fitted the helmets to the shoulder threads, attached air tanks. When they were dressed, Gnossos pulled the hatch shut, sealing the main cabin from the hallway where the thing was advancing warily. "Let's see it get through that," the poet said, putting on his helmet. "Now let's get out of here."

"I'm afraid there isn't much hope of that," Sam said from his position next to the control panel. "I've pressed all buttons to depressurize the cabin and open the exit chamber, but I can't see any response from the ship."

Hurkos jumped to the console, flipped on the comline to the computer that wasn't a computer. "Let us out!"

There was a deafening roar from the wire and plastic voice. There were screams, thunders, explosions. It sounded like a thousand rats burning alive.

"Shut it off!" Gnossos shouted.

Hurkos slammed the switch off. The noise continued. At first it swept them in irregular waves, shredded them and put them back together. Then there was not even a pattern of waves but a constant din. And there was jelly spewing out of the speaker grid . . .

Jelly spewing out of all jack-holes . . .

In a moment, the speaker grid was gone, thrust away by the surg-

ing pressure of the thing behind it. Parts of the console began to sag as the supportive gum that had filled it drained away.

Still the noise persisted. "It's the same sound," Sam shouted into his suit phone, "that I heard when I was obeying the hypnotic commands."

"The grenades!" Hurkos shouted as the jelly began to collect on the floor, change from amber to pink-tan, and rise in a pulsating mass. The other glob pressed against the hatch from the hallway. There was the screeching of metal being strained to its limits. Soon the hatch would give, and they would be trapped between two shapeless jelly-things. It would cover them and do whatever it did to flesh and blood and bones.

Gnossos flipped the cap that dissolved the anti-shock packing in the outer shell of the grenade. He tossed it. There was no result.

"The grenades are jelly too!" Hurkos shouted.

Sam snatched one of the remaining bulbs from the poet. "No. They aren't machines. It's a natural chemical that explodes without mechanical prompting. It just needs a jar; you didn't throw it hard enough." He sailed the second against the glass viewplate.

All the world was a sun. A light-bulb. Then the filament began to die — the light went completely

out. The force of the explosion had gone, mostly, outward. What had pressed in their direction had been caught by the mass of jelly that rose to snatch at the grenade, unsuccessfully. Miraculously, they were tumbling through the shattered front of the ship, moving into the darkness and emptiness of space toward the *Ship of the Soul*, the poet's boat that lay silently a short mile away.

Behind them the jelly came, boiling away in the vacuum, tumbling and sputtering. Steaming, it lashed out with non-arms. The thunder of its non-voice was definitely not sound but thought. It bombarded their minds.

Hurkos was out ahead, his shoulder jets pushing him swiftly toward the ship's portal. Then came the poet. Finally, Sam. A hand of false-flesh streaked around the latter, curled in front of him, attempting to cut him off from the others and devour him. He choked, maneuvered under the whip before it could sweep around and capture him.

And still it came. It grew smaller, boiled and bubbled itself away. But there was always a new central mass moving out from the hull, trying to leap the blackness. Yet finally there was nothing left except a speck of pinkish-tan. Then it too puffed out of existence. With it went the noise.

Inside the *Ship of the Soul*, they

stripped and collapsed into soft chairs without animate padding. This was a ship of comfort — not one of destruction. This was a ship built for six people if necessary — not for one man, one tool of an insane unnamable entity without a face or time. For a while, then, they were silent, composing themselves for what must be said. The moment the composing ended and the talking began was signaled by a quiet suggestion from Gnossoes that they get some wine to help loosen their tongues.

The wine was warm, green.

"It was the same sound I heard under the hypnotic commands," Sam said.

"That means," Hurkos said, starting into his wine as he talked, "that it was the ship itself that was ordering you around. That jelly-mass was the plotter behind the scheme."

Gnossoes downed one glass of wine, poured a second from the decanter. "I don't agree. If the ship were responsible for Sam's actions, there would be no reason for post-hypnotic suggestions. It was close enough to use a more direct method. And when he shot it, it should have been able to order him to throw the gun down. No, the ship was just a cancerous mass of goo that was to convey Sam to Hope. Nothing more."

"But what kind of man could make a thing like the jelly-mass?"

"I think," Gnossoes said, "that there is a chance you are the dupe of an extra-galactic intelligence."

"That's absurd; that's —"

"That's frighteningly possible," Hurkos reflected. "There are thousands and millions of galaxies out there. How do you know a bunch of jelly-masses didn't kidnap you, take you away, and decide to train you to overthrow your home galaxy?"

Sam finished his wine in a gulp. Heat flooded through his flesh. Still, it could not ward off the chill in him. "Because," he answered in even, measured tones, "that would be one helluva backward way of invading the Federation. If these extra-galactics have all this skill — can use something like the blob back there for hyper-spacing and making food and operating robo-surgeons — they could overturn the galaxy in a month. A week! Hell, that blob even talked to me in a computer voice. Probably forms some crude set of vocal cords when it needs them. And it operated like a radar set; it —"

"It's a living machine," Gnossoes said, almost to himself.

"That's another thing," Hurkos added. "Your fear of machines. You got it, obviously, because whoever — or whatever — hypnotized you fears machines also. Because, he, it or they do not use machines. They have blobs, living

things that are machines. That almost proves they're extra-galactic. We have nothing like this."

"One couldn't live in the Federation without the aid of machines," Gnosso agreed. "One would have to be from — Outside."

"No." Sam set his glass on the floor. "No, if there were extra-galactics with this sort of thing, they wouldn't need me."

"Agreed also," the poet said. "Looks like there is a stalemate in this conversation." He heaved his bulk to a more comfortable position. "Well, I for one am sticking with you until this mystery is unraveled. I couldn't bear to quit yet. This could be the most important, most dangerous event of the last thousand years. Warring man might have been crude, but he sure as Hell had his fill of danger in a lifetime. Today we travel on, living hundreds of years, and everything is so safe and perfect that we rarely ever experience danger. I'm ready for some excitement!"

"Me too, I guess," Hurkos said. Sam had the feeling the Mue was not terribly comfortable since the jelly-mass had attacked them. But he would not — could not — back down in front of the poet.

"So what next?"

Gnosso rubbed a hand across his chin, wrinkled his nose for a moment. "We set this tub on a course for Hope. When we get there, we wait for your next command. We're

going to find out just what this is all about."

"But," Sam said uneasily, "suppose I *am* to overthrow the galaxy?"

"Hurkos and I will be right behind you to stop you before you have a chance."

"I hope so," he said.

Later, after more wine and much conjecture as the *Ship of the Soul* plunged through the thick river of the void, they retired, leaning back in their chairs, belting themselves in, and shutting their mouths so that they could neither consume nor converse. And eventually they fell into sleep . . .

IV

There was a darkness, save for the pinpoint of the stars dotting the entire roof of the night. Then, as the breezes shifted, dawn came crawling over the horizon, tinting the blackness with yellow. . . . Then orange . . . And there was a hill with a cross atop it; there was a man on the cross. His hands were dripping blood.

And his feet were dripping blood. The wounds had festered.

The man on the cross raised his head, looked to the dawn. He seemed very weary. There were clumps of matting at the corners of his eyes. His teeth were yellow.

"Damn it, let me down!" he shrieked.

The words rebounded from the low sky.

"Please," he said, begging.

The sun was a flaming eye. When it was at its zenith, there came angels, beings of light and majesty. They flocked about the man, administered to his needs. Some carried water which they poured between his cracked lips, and some brought oil with which they anointed him. And some sponged away the oil while others fed him. Then they were gone.

The sun was setting. It seemed only minutes since it had risen.

"Please," the man said. The angels had missed some of the oil in his beard. It glistened there.

With darkness came the demons. Crawling from under brown stones, slithering out of crevices in the earth, they came. There were dwarfs, slaving, eyeless yet seeing. There were wolves with sabers for teeth. There were things with tails and horns, things with heads that were nothing more than huge mouths. They screamed and cawed, muttered, shrieked, and moaned. They came at the cross, crawling over one another. But they could not reach the man. They clawed the wood of his prison but could not claw him. One by one, they began to die . . .

They withered and became white ghosts that the cool wind bore away. They collapsed into dust. They dribbled into blood pools.

Then there were stars for a time.

And again came the dawn . . .

And the angels . . .

And the night and the demons and the stars and the dawn and the angels and the night . . . It continued at a maddening pace. Days became weeks; weeks turned to months. For years he hung there; for centuries, he remained. And finally, all time was lost as the sun spun madly across the sky and night with its devils was barely a blink of the eye.

"Please!" he screamed.

The last scream brought them out of sleep, breathing hard. Sam pushed himself up, looked about the ship to reassure himself. Then he turned to Hurkos. "What sort of dream was that?"

Gnossos looked curious.

"He's a telepath," Sam explained. "Irregular talent. But what the Hell kind of thoughts were those?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Hurkos said. "I was getting them from you!"

"Me?"

"Well, not really from your mind.. Through your mind. The generator of those thoughts is very distant, no one in this room. And the mind is horrifyingly large. This was a fraction of its thoughts, a small corner. In this case, I picked up this trace of thoughts and — for some reason — my subconscious talent began boosting their vividness

and also re-broadcasting them."

"But I wouldn't have dreamed this without your help."

Hurkos smiled sadly. "You wouldn't have been aware of it. You would have been dreaming it nonetheless."

"But what was it? It's like the man on the cross you toppled."

"It's the Christ legend," Gnessos said. They turned to stare at him. "I make legends my business. Poets work in all sorts of mythologies. There have been a large number of wild ones too. The Christ legend is not so ancient. There are still Christians, as you know — though damned few. Most of the religion died out about a thousand years ago, shortly after the Permanent Peace and the immortality drugs. According to legend, the god-figure, Christ, was crucified on a dogwood cross. This dream seems to be a re-enactment of that myth, though I do not recall that the man hung there that long or that there were administering angels and tempting demons."

"This could be another clue," Hurkos offered.

"How so?" Sam was ready to clutch at any straw.

"Perhaps your invisible hypnotist is a neo-Christian, one of those who refuse the immortality drugs. That would certainly explain why he would want to overthrow the Federation. He would want to convert the pagans. That's us."

"Good point," Gnessos said, "But that doesn't explain the blob."

Hurkos lapsed into silence.

Bong-bong-bong! PREPARE FOR NORMAL SPACE AND MANUAL CONTROL OF THIS VESSEL!

"We're almost to Hope," Gnessos said. "Perhaps we will soon be having more clues."

The flight-control system of the planet-wide super-city locked them into its pattern and began bringing them down to a point of its own choosing, since they had not requested any particular touchdown spot. Ships fluttered above and below them. Bubble cars spun across the great elevated roadways, between the buildings, sometimes slipping into tunnels in the skyscrapers from which they often emerged going another direction or did not emerge at all. They settled onto a gray pad where the flames of their landing were soaked up, cooled, dissipated.

Beyond the pad, on all sides, Hope lay sparkling. They stood at the open portal and waited while the attendant marked their check-slip so that they would have the proper ship returned to them and gave them half.

"Well," Gnessos said, "where to?"

"No orders yet," Sam said.

Let's just wander around a bit," Hurkos suggested.

And they did.

He sat before the thick window that was not really a window at all, and he looked at the thing beyond. It raged, lashing, screaming, roaring. How long? How long had it fought against the Shield, trying to get out? Breadloaf peered deeper into the Shield, leaned deeper into his chair. The massive desk nearly concealed his slumped form. Over a thousand years. That was how long. His father had constructed the barrier, the chamber beyond which dipped into another dimension. No, not another dimension — a *higher* dimension. And when his father had died in a freak accident from which the medics could not undo the damage, *he* had come into possession of the family fortune, the family buildings; the family office structure in the center of Hope, the Shield and tank beyond. The last two were things that one did not advertise. It was a family secret — a big, hoary skeleton in the family closet. The burden was his — and his only.

For six hundred years, he had come here every week, sometimes for stretches that lasted days, most often for just a few hours. He came to look at the Shield. It was a weight that rested heavily on his shoulders at all times. It was insane to worry. The shield had held for a thousand years; it would hold forever. It could not fail. It was

maintained by machines, and machines had not been known to fail since his grandfather's time. These machines were not tended by unreliable men, but by other machines that gained their power from still more machines. It was fool-proof.

Still, Alexander Breadloaf III came once a week, sometimes staying a long time.

Crimson exploded across the Shield, washed down and turned to ocher at the bottom. Explosions would not shatter the Shield, no matter how violent they might be. Didn't it understand this by now? A thousand years of explosions, and still it did not understand. That thought left a sorry spot in his soul, but he reminded himself of what his father always said — said so often that it became the family motto: "There is no longer ignorance in men." Maybe. Evidently. Although he feared ignorance lurked just below the surface, waiting for a chance . . .

There was a lovely pattern of blue and silver as it applied certain stress pattern sequences to the shield. But it had tried that before. It had tried everything before . . .

He pushed himself from the chair, and walked toward the door that led into the hallway. He would get some simple foods, some coffee. And he would return. This was one of those times when a brief glance at it was not going to be enough. It was going to be one of those

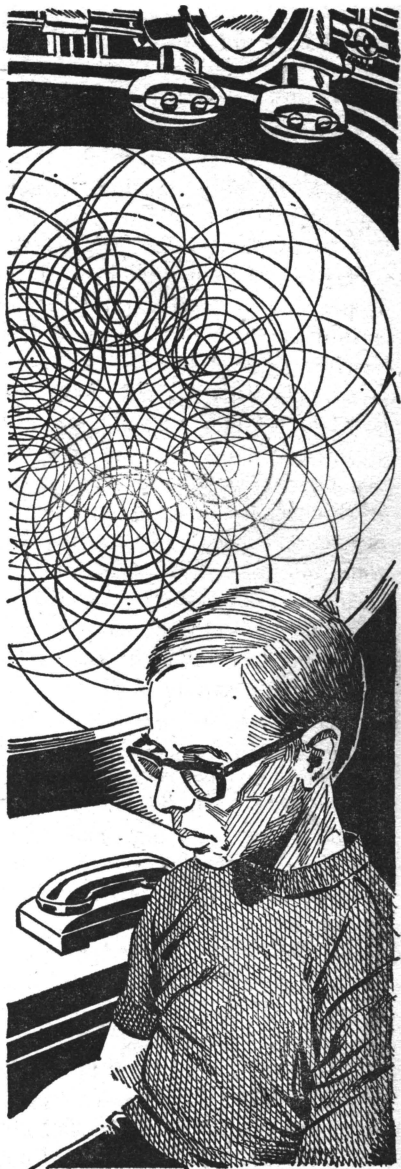
weeks. One of those *long* weeks.

V

In their wandering, they had gone to the light shows, the total-experience places. They had seen the parks, the avenues of art. Gnos-sos knew the city well, that being one of the qualifications of a true poet to know the beating heart of megalopolis. He explained all things they did not understand, clarified things they thought they knew. It was rather a gay time, save for the constant awareness that another hypnotic trance and order could be on the way, minutes from them, ready to swallow Sam into a noisy chaos and use him.

So it was, in the course of their aimless ramblings, they came upon the Christian. Sam noticed that Hurkos bristled at the sight of the man — not because of this individual, but because of the heedless god behind him.

The Christian was old. He was fifty, ancient in a world where all were eternally thirty or younger. He had obviously been the child of a strong Christian family, for he had not received even anti-beard elements; the heavy shadow on his face gave him a metallic look. His teeth were yellow. His skin was wrinkled. Across his chest and back hung the halves of a sandwich sign. The front said: GOD MUST BE ASHAMED!! When the man saw



them coming, he executed a small heel turn to reveal the words on his back sign: HE SHALL COME AGAIN TO JUDGE!!

"I can't understand them," Hurkos said.

Gnossos smiled a thin smile. "Some day they will all be gone."

"But why are there these people?" Sam asked. "Don't the medics prevent mental infirmities in babies?"

"Well," the poet said, trying to shorten his giant strides to match the smaller steps of his companions, "the original concept of the Federation was complete freedom. Mental infirmities were weeded out, true. true. As a result, the numbers of religious people dropped over the years. But one cannot limit another man's beliefs under a system of complete freedom. So religious persons were allowed to practice their beliefs. Though their children might be born mentally sound, the parents raised them and passed their superstitions on to their offspring. The number of religious dwindled. But as long as they procreated — and this is a strong part of their religion, these Christians — they would always have children to indoctrinate, to warp. It's a shame. But, after all, it is their life. A man, I guess, can waste his own life if he chooses."

"**K**now the word," the Christian said as they drew abreast

of him. He handed Gnossos and Sam pamphlets — yellow paper with red print.

"I'll take one too," Hurkos said.

There was no reply from the Christian, and Hurkos asked again.

"Will you ask this person of tainted blood to cease speaking to me?" the boarded one asked Sam. He was obviously distressed, running his thin, bony hands up and down the edges of his chest sign.

"Tainted blood?" Sam asked.

"They don't like Mues," Gnossos explained. "They would never speak to one."

"Why?"

"A Mue is not a creation of God, but the work of man," the Christian said. "A Mue is a violation of God's holy power of creation." His eyes gleamed fanatically.

"Prejudice," Gnossos said. "It's part of the dogma of every religion — sometimes heavily disguised, but always there. Do you know the history of your church, old man?"

The Christian shuffled his feet. "Of course. In the beginning —"

"It doesn't start that far back," Gnossos laughed. He licked his lips. "It doesn't start with the darkness and light and the first seven days. It comes along much later. There's no church until man decides he needs a means of social climbing, something to make him superior to his neighbors. So he forms a church, a religion. By forming it, he can say that he knows what and why

God is. He can say he knows the purpose of things and can — therefore — be a cut above other men.”

“God chose Saint Peter to start the church, to be above other men.”

Gnossos smiled patronizingly. “I doubt that. History is studded with men who said God had chosen them to be leaders. Most of them fell flat on their faces. Most of them got trampled down and smashed in the flow of time and history — which are two things bigger than any man.”

“False Prophets,” the sign-carrier said.

“So why don’t you call Saint Peter a false prophet?”

“What he began is still functioning.”

“Duration does not prove worth. Wars lasted a helluva lot longer than your religion has, but they were finished and done away with because they were not good things. It seems to me that your faith is facing a similar end.”

Sam made a face. “But why hate Hurkos just because he is not directly God-created? If God gave men the power to invent and use the Artificial Wombs, then he was involved in the creation of the Mues, though — ”

“Men *usurped* the power,” the Christian said.

“But if God is all-powerful, men could not usurp — ”

Gnossos put a hand on Sam’s

shoulder. “It is not for this reason that Christians hate Mues. As I said, they have to feel superior. There are so few people they can look down on anymore; the Mue offers a perfect scapegoat. Because he is so often abnormal physically, they have something visible to feel superior about.”

A crowd had begun to gather around the debate. This seemed to please Gnossos, though it irritated the Christian.

“And my dear fellow,” Gnossos continued in a friendly tone, “do you know who started many of the wars in the past three thousand years?”

“Satan’s forces.”

“No. Christians. In — ”

The bearded man showed his teeth in what could have been a snarl if he had added sound. “I will not pursue this argument any longer. You are in Satan’s employ.” He moved quickly, pushing at the crowd that had gathered. They hesitated, then parted to let him through. He was gone into the breast of night to be suckled by its darkness.

“You don’t imagine you did any good,” Hurkos said as the crowd around them dispersed and they began walking again. “You don’t imagine you got through that bony structure he calls a head, do you?”

“No. But I can’t resist trying. He is unreachable by this time. Besides, even if he doubted his

faith, he would not allow himself to give that doubt prominence in his thoughts. He had forsaken concrete eternity via the immortality drugs, and now he has nothing to cling to but the hopes of his religion, the promises of God."

"Gives me the shivers," Sam said.

This is getting too morbid," Gnessos said. "Let's find a hotel and settle down. My feet are killing me, and there is no telling how much running we might have to do to catch Sam if he gets another order."

Breadloaf finished the last pieces of his sandwich, took a swallow of black coffee and leaned back in the chair. The room was dark, for the thing behind the Shield was not the thing for well-lighted rooms. Its details were brought out too fully in light. Blackness allowed obscurity.

Cinnabar horsemen riding green stallions exploded across the screen, were gone in a wash of lavender . . .

He liked to pick out patterns in the explosion of color, choose and name them as some men do with clouds.

A Dragon's mouth holding the broken body of an amber knight . . .

Alexander Breadloaf III wondered whether his father had sat like this, watching the patterns and trying to make something of them: it was a seeking after order; certainly that was the purpose of watching

them. Had his father sat here, his great leonine head bowed in contemplation, his heavy brows run together from the forehead-wrinkling concentration? Had he laced his thick fingers behind his waterfall of white hair and watched — actually studied — the Prisoner of the Shield as the family had come to speak of it?

He doubted it. His father had been a man of hard work and action. He had built *his* father's small fortune into a very large fortune. When his engineers accidentally stumbled across the Shield while looking for a non-matter material for construction purposes, when they had discovered what lay beyond, the old man took the practical angle. He knew there was a fortune to be made here, more than his already formidable masses of wealth. He had only to enslave the powers behind the Shield and turn them to work for himself. The Shield was maintained. But the powers could never be enslaved. To agree to slavery, the slave must have fear of his master. And there was no fear in the Prisoner. None.

Brilliant flashes of white rippled like fish through a sudden sea of smoked burgundy . . .

His heart thudded at the bright light, even though he knew the Shield was impenetrable. Take one molecule and expand it. Expand it some more. Make it bigger

and bigger and bigger — but don't disturb its natural particle dimensions. A barred doorway — really a window. But that window turns the higher dimension into a prison, squeezes it into a confined space — a law of opposites which equalizes the pressures created by expanding the first molecule. The higher dimension is then bound within tiny limits. It and its inhabitants are trapped, unable to move or get out.

Brilliant white flashes . . .

No, his father had never sat here like this. He was too practical for melancholia. Along about the second hundred years of the Prisoner's confinement, the old fellow had realized he could never enslave it. And as the years passed, he came to maintain the Shield only because to let it die out would mean the end of his family and possibly all human life. The Prisoner would be seeking revenge. By the days of Alexander the Third, this fear of the Prisoner had been compounded by a feeling of moral obligation. The sanity and progress of the Federation depended on keeping the Prisoner imprisoned. Always, in the rear of his mind, was the fear that the thing would escape. Sometimes, that fear surged to the fore. At times like these he wanted to run into the street and scream about his charge behind the Shield. But the Breadloafs had done this thing, had trapped it. It would be up to the Breadloafs to watch it for all eternity.

Finally, when watching was not quite enough, Alexander walked to the Shield, stood with a hand upon the coursing energy. "How did you," he said to the thing beyond, "become like this?"

It could only thought-speak to him when he was touching the Shield. And even then the words were tiny and distant: "Letmeout, letmeout . . ."

"How did you become like this?"

"Letmeout, letmeout, letmeout."

That was its constant cry. Sometimes there were threats. He knew — and it knew — that the threats could not be carried out. Not as long as the Shield was there. But it seemed reluctant now to answer his question: "How did you become like this."

He knew the answer anyway: "*I have always been like this . . .*"

On hydro-mattresses, reclining, they opened their ears. The hotel room was pleasant. Gnosso lay before the door so that Sam would have to crawl over him to get out. The lights were warm, the wine sweet upon their tongues. It was certainly a time for verses.

*Look through the window
to the streets below;
it's the age of sorrow,
babies freezing in the snow;
Look through any window
across a sea of lust;
it's a time for grinding*

every bone to dust.

Look through my window . . . ”

Then it was time for sleep. The wine had been drunk, the verses spoken, and the darkness crept over them.

For a time, at least . . .

A dream. A dream of an empty tomb and rotting bodies. Except for one single body which stood and walked toward the doorway. And the dream was one of demons that grasped the body and flung it down among the corpses and commanded it to stay dead. Always and everywhere, there were slaver-ing, keening demons . . .

Then Hurkos lost the thread of the alien thoughts and the trio awoke as one. They were all perspiring.

“Not mine again?” Sam asked.

“Relayed from somewhere im-
planted your hypnotic commands.
Very far away.”

But the smell of spoiled meat had carried over into reality.

“Well,” Gnosso said, grumbling and standing, “I certainly can’t sleep now.”

They agreed.

“So let’s go sight-seeing again. Maybe the next command will be coming along soon now?”

“Where to?” Hurkos asked. “Is it far? My feet still hurt.”

“Not far,” Gnosso said. “There are a number of them. This one is called the *Inferno*.”

VI

The *Inferno* was a bar. But more than a bar. Everything here was geared to some sensory stimulation. Ebony and silver clouds drifted through the rooms of the place, carrying nude performers. Floor panels popped open, spewed forth clowns in imagi-color costumes that were purple, yellow, red, or green according to one’s mood. The floor revolved at a different speed than the walls and in a different direction than the ceiling. Strobe lights flashed. Smello-symphonies treated the patron’s senses to moments of synaesthesia where music was an olfactory sensation. The erotic cygian perfumes seeped through the misty air, seeking nostrils to inflame.

They took a table in the corner one almost hidden by shadows. The robo-tender in the center of the table delivered their drinks once Gnosso had compiled an order, punched it out and deposited the proper coins. They sat sipping the cool liquids and watching the two dozen or so characters in the place.

“What’s so special about this bar?” Sam asked, almost choking on a particularly heavy breath of perfume.

“Look at the people,” Gnosso said.

Sam did. He could see no way in which they differed from Federation norm in dress or habit.

"Look more closely. Look at their faces."

Sam swung his gaze from the rudimentary face to the more distant visages. But it *was* their faces. The longer he watched, the clearer he saw it. But what was it? He searched his mind, looking for some comparison. He was just about to give up when the perfect simile sprang into his mind. The look in their faces was much like the look in the faces of scooterbeasts when they were penned in zoos. In a natural state, the scooterbeasts moved as quickly as lightning across a storm sky. Penned, they pressed their faces to the glass walls and looked mournfully toward freedom, wishing to move, to travel, to do something denied them. "I see it," he said to Gnos-sos.

"They're Unnaturals."

"The ones —"

"Who would like to kill," Gnos-sos said. "They are defects born with many of the old faults — with the desire to kill, an overwhelming greed and bent toward self-gratification. There is nothing the government can do but make them sensitive. If they hurt someone, they also feel pain. If they aid someone, they feel the other's person's joy and pleasure. It is wiser for them to aid than harm. If they killed someone, they would feel the death spasms ten times more intensely than the victim. None of them would dare that."

"He knows about the Unnaturals," Hurkos said, "but he did not know about the Mues."

"Or my own past," Sam reminded them.

Gnos-sos ordered another drink from the robo-tender, deposited his coins and waited for the liquor. None came. He pounded it once, then bellowed for the human tapkeeper polishing glasses behind the bar. He was growing red-faced as he had been when his and Sam's ships collided — a false anger put on merely for the pleasure of appearing furious. The tapkeeper opened the gate in the bar and crossed the room with strides as sure and quick, almost, as those of Gnos-sos. In his eyes glittered the tenseness, the trapped expression.

"This thing is broken!" Gnos-sos roared. "I want my money back!"

"Here," the human bartender said, flipping a coin to the poet. "Now all of you had better leave, please."

"Why?" Sam asked.

"This is not a Natural bar."

"You're a Natural if I ever saw one," Hurkos mumbled.

"We are allowed service anywhere. Naturals and Unnaturals are not segregated."

Shuffling his feet, suddenly a little cowed — or taking a new line of tact, perhaps — the bartender said, "It's just for your own

safety." There was a mixture of fear and general uneasiness in his eyes now.

"Was that a threat?" Gnossos boomed. "Am I with the uncivilized?"

"Not a threat. It's just him — that one."

They followed the tapkeeper's thumb as it jerked toward the fellow standing at the far corner of the bar. He was clutching a glass of yellow liquid, taking large gulps of it without effort. He was huge, nearly as huge as Gnossos, red-headed and red-eyed. His giant hands clenched into fists, unclenched again. Though physically a bit smaller than Gnossos, he had muscle where the poet had run somewhat to fat. The corded masses of tissue that were his arms seemed able to snap anything or anyone to pieces.

"Who's he?" Gnossos asked.

"Black Jack Buronto."

"You've got to be kidding," Hurkos said, slumping farther into his chair. "You must be."

"Henry Buronto's his name, but he wins all the time at the gaming tables, so they call him Black Jack. And he carries one too — a blackjack."

Many Unnaturals carried crude weapons, wishing they could use them, but never daring to because of the pain echoes that would engulf them. Clearly, Gnossos was fascinated by Buronto. Here was

someone a bit different. Here was someone smiled on by Fortune, someone perhaps stronger than himself. And someone, for some reason, to be feared.

"He's dangerous," the tapkeeper said.

"Dangerous because he carries a blackjack and wins at cards?"

"No. Dangerous because he would use the blackjack. He could kill all three of you just like *that!*" The tapkeeper snapped his fingers. He cast a glance at all three of them, then looked back to Buronto.

Almost as if he had seen a signal, Buronto started across the room toward them.

"Please leave," the tapkeeper said.

"I think maybe we had better," Sam agreed.

"Why?" Gnossos asked. "He won't hurt us. Remember, every pain we feel, he feels ten times over."

"But — " the Tapkeeper started.

"You're talking about me," Buronto said, stepping up to their table. And his voice was like the voice of a canary — high and sweet and melodic. The trio stared at one another for a moment, astounded. The tiny voice again seeped from the massive throat. "Were you talking about me?"

Sam tittered, then let go and burst out laughing. Gnossos followed with his laugh like thunder.

Hurkos fought it, seeming to be comfortable in his recently self-imposed melancholia.

Buronto spoke again: "Stop laughing at me!"

The order was so high-pitched that his voice cracked in the middle of it. And Hurkos too burst out laughing, spraying the table with saliva he had been fighting to hold back with the laugh.

"Stop it! Stop it," Buronto shouted.

But the tension within the three of them had been at a peak. They had been restless, nervous, on edge since the encounter with the jelly-mass. The constant state of expectancy had honed their nerves to sharp, thin wires that were ready to vibrate whenever even slightly plucked. And Black Jack Buronto's voice had been the tuning fork that had set them all roaring as the tension drained. They laughed all out of proportion to the joke.

"Oh no, no, no," the tapkeeper said. He moaned it over and over like a litany.

"Shut up!" Buronto roared, squeakily. His mouth was foaming. He brought a colossal fist down on the simu-wood table, knocked all the glasses off. But this too sent them into paroxysms of laughter. Hurkos was leaning on Gnosso's, and Sam had his head thrown back, howling.

Black Jack muttered something nearly incomprehensible. Clasp-

ing one fist in the other, he smashed the wedge of his flesh onto the table top, shattered the thing into two halves that stood separately for a moment until the weight of the broken top pulled the lamented leg apart and the table collapsed into the laps of three Naturals. They ceased their laughter.

Black Jack Buronto now had a face like a jungle animal. Great swatches of ugly blue slashed the once uniform red of his face. His teeth were bared. He snarled and spat foam and screeched unintelligible things between his teeth. He was mad as all Hell. He latched onto Hurkos's chair, ripped it out from under the Mue and sent him crashing to the floor.

"What the Hell?" Gnosso said to the tapkeeper. "He's an Unnatural, but he's also a Sensitive!"

"He's a Sensitive, yes," the tapkeeper shouted as Black Jack smashed Hurkos's chair into the wall again and again. "He's a Sensitive and feels his victim's pain. But he was more Unnatural than the doctors knew. He's also a masochist!"

The color drained from the poet's face. "Then he likes being a Sensitive —"

The bartender finished: "Because he likes to feel pain!"

Buronto had finished with the chair. There was nothing left of it that could be pounded against

the wall; and the wall was worse for the wear too. Black Jack Buronto, obviously, would not care if he killed a hundred men. A thousand. He turned to them and plodded through the mounting wreckage. Anything that was in his way, he tossed aside, knocking over tables, smashing chairs and lamps and robo-tenders. He lashed out at Hurkos, struck a blow that sent the small Mue tumbling across another table and crashing to the floor in a cloud of broken glass.

Gnossos stepped up to take a swing at Buronto, but he was a Natural. It was impossible for him to strike out at a fellow man. Had Buronto been an animal, the case would have been simple. But he was not. And a thousand years of sanity made Gnossos check his blow even before he started it. Buronto delivered a punch that set the poet down hard. As Gnossos and Hurkos struggled to gain their feet, Black Jack heaved a table out of the way and came for Sam.

And at that moment, the second hypnotic order came . . .

A chaos of noise obliterated the noise in the bar: Sam's eyes glossed. He wobbled for a moment, then determinedly set out for the door. Buronto, seeing the move, snarled and leapt over fallen furniture, reaching the door first. "Not yet. I hurt you first!"

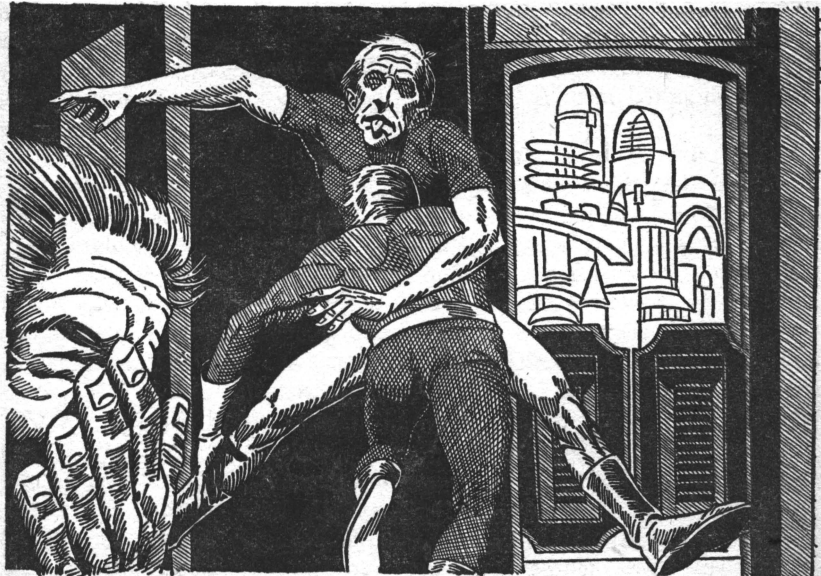
He reached for Sam with great hands . . .

And suddenly doubled up as Sam struck him a blow in the stomach that would have crumbled a wall — because a wall would not have given as did Buronto's stomach. And Buronto's stomach certainly gave — gave up to Sam's wrist. The giant *oofed*, stumbled, but still managed to clutch Sam's shoulder. Sam brought up a foot, twisted away, and slammed the foot into Buronto's gut, sending him to his knees. Then he was past the Unnatural and through the door.

"After him!" Gnossos shouted. "He's gotten another order!" The two of them ran past the gasping Buronto and outside. But in the dimness of the night, the streets were empty. Sam was already gone.

VII

The water, chemicals, and lubricants flowed about him in invisible pipes. No. Not invisible. Nonexistent. There were tubes of force that clothed the liquids rather than metal piping. The fluids flowed from one part of the giant mechanism to another, covering the block-by-block machine quickly and efficiently. This was the machine that kept the Shield up, however, and it was frightening because it seemed so flimsy. Breadloaf knew that forces, adapted and shaped, were better than actual material parts that could wear out or fail from structural flaws. Still, all those liquids



flowing through nothingness, and all of the vital to the maintenance of the Shield . . .

Click!

Breadloaf whirled around — around again. The noises bothered him; he interpreted every sound as the beginning of a breakdown. Okay, he had seen it. Now he should leave.

He walked to the door, hesitated and looked around. There were other *clicks* and a muffled *clank*. He would go insane just listening to it operate, he told himself. Before the horror of a possible failure should flood his mind again, he stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind. He went back to his office.

The orders were coming in a swift series now. Between the accomplishment of one demand and the next order, there were only seconds when Sam had control of himself. He could never remember what it was he had just done and was engulfed by the next order before he really had a chance to investigate.

He was standing in a great chamber full of machines. That made him — or whatever was controlling him — feel uneasy. He had broken in. The street doors had not been locked, for hardly anything was locked any more. But this floor had been sealed. So his last order had been to break in here where things flowed through invisible pipes and

machines hummed. But what had he done before that? What would he do next?

Then chaos and noises came, swallowing him . . .

When he came out, a package he had been holding under his arm was gone. He did not know what he had done with it. Or what it had been.

Then chaos and noises came, swallowing him . . .

Breadloaf rubbed fists in his eyes, pulled open a desk drawer and fumbled in it for anti-snooze tablets. He found the bottle, popped two pills in his mouth, swallowed without benefit of water. Recapping the bottle, he withdrew a second container of tiny nerve pills. He was in the process of swallowing one of these when the door flew off its hinges, crashed inward with a terrible roar. There was a man standing there — eyes like vacant marbles — with his hands flung outward like the hands of a stage magician the tips of his fingers vibrating with some hideous power.

And from the nails came the darts.

Needles of sleep.

They bit into him spread their red warmth and pulled him into darkness before he could scream . . .

When Sam was in control of his body again, the first thing that struck his attention was the man

slumped in the chair behind the desk; the man was sitting in a relaxed position but with every muscle taut in a sort of forced relaxation. Secondly, there was the screen. It was to the side of him, and for a moment it had been in a low-key color series of magenta and black. But abruptly it spewed forth oranges and whites and creams that splashed across the room and grabbed his attention.

He walked to the screen, stared into it. Something sent a chill up and down his spine. It was as if the colors were alive and wanted out.

"What do you want? Who are you?"

The voice startled him, and he leaped, his heart pounding. But it had not been the colors; it had been the man. Sam turned and walked to the desk. "My name is Sam. I — "

"What do you want? Why did you do this to me?"

"Do what?"

"I can't move, damn you!"

Sam hesitated, looked about the room, sensing a ghost scene of what had happened. "I paralyzed you."

Breadloaf's lips moved, and his eyes revolved like ball bearings in well-oiled grooves. "You — and the darts beneath your fingernails. What the Hell kind of man are you!"

Sam lifted his hands and looked at them. The nails were discolored as if fine bits of flesh had puffed

into ashes beneath them. He rubbed one, but the color was definitely not on the surface.

"What kind of a man are you?"

Breadloaf roared this time, panic flashing through every word.

"I don't know," Sam said finally. "Is there some way I can help you?"

Breadloaf was breathing heavily.

"Yes. Go get help!"

"I can't do that," Sam said. He stood on the carpet, shuffling one foot over the other.

"Why? Why can't you?"

"It won't let me."

"It?"

Briefly, he recounted his story — the jelly-mass, the hypnotic commands. When he finished, the other man's eyes were wide — too wide to contain anything but horror. "The Prisoner," he croaked.

"What?"

"The Prisoner of the Shield. You are under its direction!"

Sam turned instinctively toward the portal of colors. "Then they are alive!"

Breadloaf was laughing, and Sam could not get him to stop. But neither could he leave to get help. His feet would carry him toward the doorway but not through it. There was a block that kept him in the room — a mental block. His memory began to clear slightly, and he could remember what else he had done in this building. He had

planted some sort of bomb in the machinery below. And it must be the machinery that kept the Shield going.

"A thousand years," Breadloaf shouted between whoops of laughter. "For a thousand years it tried the same things, and we thought it was too dense to try anything. Instead, it was pretending stupidity, making us lax. And it worked. Just when we're feeling safe and secure — " he burst into another fit of laughter. "Just when we're feeling secure, it takes you and breaks in with ridiculous ease." He laughed again, harshly.

There was sweat on Sam's upper lip. He wiped it off and became aware of sweat all over him. He was frightened. A thousand years had been as nothing to it. He shivered, watching it. Were the colors its true appearance or merely the effects of it filtered by the Shield? A blue splotch of color rippled up from the bottom, seemed to form a question mark such as one would find no a large tronic sign —

Tronic sign!

He suddenly remembered seeing the huge tronic sign band that ran around all four sides of the Breadloaf building with letters twenty feet high. Perhaps the control console was up here. If it were, he could spell out a message for Gnosos and Hurkos. Surely they would be looking for him. And it was almost a certainty they could see the

towering tronic sign from anywhere in this part of the city. If they were in this part of the city . . .

"The tronic sign controls," he said to Breadloaf.

"What?"

"The light letters. Where are the controls for the light letters?"

"Why — "

"Where are they?" There was a tone of command in his voice that he had not known he possessed.

"There's a master set in the main lounge, but I have a secondary plug-in set in the wall cabinet — over there."

He found it, plugged it in, began typing out the message that the big boards would hold in glowing red?amber?blue? — letters. He decided on crimson words against a black background. GNOSSOS/HURKOS . . . "What floor is this? he asked Breadloaf.

"Top."

TOP FLOOR. EXECUTIVE OFFICE. COME QUICKLY. SAM

There was a while to wait, and he paced the carpet. But they came. And they demanded explanations.

He gave them the few he could, told them about the bomb planted below, the bomb that would wreck the machinery, shut down the Shield, and set the Prisoner free. He gave them the location of it, told them how to remove it and how to handle it — gently. And they ran to get it. They were gone

what seemed like a very long time. Just when he was ready to count them as deserters, they returned with the bomb and the timer, carrying it like delicate crystal.

Carefully, Sam disconnected the times, lifted the halves of the casing apart, and poured the volatile liquid out of the single window behind the desk.

Four breaths were released simultaneously when he turned and said, "It's okay."

"Then this is it!" Gnosso said, the first to recover completely. He paced back and forth, looking at the Shield. "This is the thing that has been directing you. But if it is trapped behind this Shield, how did it get to you to hypnotize you? And how did it whip up that jelly-cored ship?"

"I think I can shed some light on that," Breadloaf said. He was still paralyzed, but his fingers were tingling, and he could move his thumbs. The effects were beginning to wear thin.

They turned to him. Gnosso crossed the room. "What light?"

"He — " Breadloaf began.

"Sam," Sam identified himself.

"Yes. I think you are operating on a false assumption. The Prisoner did not 'get to' Sam. He did not kidnap Sam. Sam is the Prisoner's creation."

"Creation?" Gnosso snorted.

"Yes. The Prisoner imagined Sam, built him into a concrete en-

tity. Probably with a last burst of his energies."

"That's absurd."

Breadloaf tried to shake his head, only succeeded in making his lips quiver. "No. The Prisoner concentrated his efforts, summoned all his resources and shaped a man and a ship. The ship was not a machine, for machines are alien to the Prisoner's mind. In some places, the dimensions are rather close, due to the warping of the higher dimension. Perhaps at one of these places he forced his thoughts through the thin barrier and made Sam and the ship."

"But why not force himself through at one of these spots?" Hurkos asked.

"He could not do that with what energies he has left. You see, he is much larger than the ship and Sam put together. *He is the entire higher dimension.*"

"One creature is an entire dimension?"

Breadloaf coughed. "If that creature is God, yes. And that is precisely who the Prisoner is."

VIII

"God!" Gnossos shouted.

Hurkos wandered next to the Shield, pressed his face to it, looking into the colors that swirled, folded upon themselves and became new colors. Here, brought to him

through modern science, was the thing that prayer could not yield.

"The Dreams," Gnossos said, turning to look at the colors. "The dreams Hurkos took from it were the dreams of a paranoid, then; they were the dreams of a being obsessed by demon-persecution."

Sam's mind was whirling too. "And the machines were not machines at all, for God is not the father of machines. He is the father of life, the father of man who makes the machines. God could imitate the exterior of a machine, but the only way he could make it last was to create a life-form that could imitate the workings of one."

"And God feared machines because they were something above his abilities. And he feared Mues and chose to ignore their existence because they were things beyond his powers — they were results of men usurping his rights."

"A thousand years," Breadloaf said.

"How could you stand it?" Gnossos asked, turning from the Shield. "How could you sit there, knowing?"

"Sometimes I thought I could never come back. But when I thought of how much worse it would be if he escaped — "

"Of course," Gnossos said. "For a thousand years, men have grown gradually saner, have broken connections with their past history. It's because he's been trapped in

your warped dimension and can't influence anything. Isn't that it?"

Breadloaf sighed. He was able to make fists of his hands, and he sat exercising them. "Yes. My father thought he could enslave the Prisoner and make him work for the family. We knew who he was. He was no time at all in telling us, in demanding to be freed. But we could not master his powers and use them. Then it became clear that we could never let Him out. At first, of course, it was for the family's safety. He would wipe out every Breadloaf if given a chance. Then, after a few hundred years, when we saw what the Federation was becoming, how much better it seemed, we realized that much of the chaos of life had been God's doing. We had even stronger reasons for keeping Him locked up.

"If He ever is released — " Breadloaf wriggled an arm at last. "War will come again, famine, pestilence, and disease. We have no choice but to contain him."

"You have no choice but to release him."

They turned toward the door. The man standing there was a Christian. There were a dozen others behind him — dirty, unshaven, dressed in rags of self-denial. One of them was the sign-carrier Gnossoes had berated on the street. He was smiling now. He stepped into

the room. "Strange who God should choose as His liberators."

"How did they — " Breadloaf began.

"I told them!" Sam shouted. The series of hypnotic orders flashed through his memory now. What God had ordered him to do was a breathing clarity. He recited the post-hypnotic commands that had followed the landing on Hope: "Find a temple and tell them that God is being held prisoner by the Breadloaf family in the Breadloaf building; I will give you flames upon your tongue as a sign to convince them. In the Sell-all Hardware store, purchase these chemicals and pieces of equipment — ester of glycerin, nitric acid, a watch, a spool of number twenty-six copper wire, and a small construction detonator. Next, prepare a bomb of glyceryl trinitrate. Next, break into the Breadloaf Building, plant the bomb by a force pipe in the basement. Render Alexander Breadloaf helpless by drug darts." He had told the Christians, then. They were here on his word.

"It's not your fault," Gnossoes said.

Then the echo of an explosion rumbled through the floors of the buildings, shook the walls. The Christians were destroying the machinery.

A second explosion . . .

And the Shield blinked . . .

. . . Was gone . . .

Breadloaf screamed a piercing scream, a thing that he had only half finished with when the black bird with the forty million eyes and the claws of brass swept from the vacant spot in the wall, swooped out on the cold winds and descended on him. The room had expanded, it seemed, to the size of a dozen galaxies. Yet all of it was filled with them and this thing from beyond their dimension so that it seemed — in another way — only as large as a small closet,

There was no up nor down.

The stars had lost their glitter.

And the darkness ate the light.

Sam was tumbling around yet within God, smashing against the pinions of the huge feathers, caught alternately in winds as cold as ice and as hot as volcano hearts. Now and then, as he fought the overwhelming expanses of blackness that clutched at him with a million oiled fingers, he saw Alex Breadloaf. He saw him first without skin — peeled and bloody. Then he saw him blackened and a thing of ash. He saw lightning flaring from charred nostrils and worms eating the man's black tongue. He saw him undergo all the punishments of all imagined Hells. And he feared greatly the moment when God would turn upon the rest of them, come with claws and with fangs to eat out their livers with silver-plated teeth.

There was no warmth; neither was their cold.

And everywhere there was Fear.

Then, suddenly, there were words in his mind. The familiar tones of Hurkos. *Listen. Listen, I can see him. I can see God.*

I can see him too, Sam's thought screamed.

No. I mean, I can see him with my psionic powers. There is nothing to him. He's so damned small!

Clarify yourself. This from Gnos-sos.

He is puny. He is not this large or forceful. The room is not expanding. Breadloaf is not being charred or eaten. God is trying to frighten Breadloaf to death. Fear is the only weapon he has left. He has lost his greatest powers. Perhaps from years of confinement and the last surge of creating Sam he has drained himself.

But all this, Sam thought.

A damn fake. I'll send you the true picture. I'm looking right through his illusions and delusions. I can see. I'll broadcast.

Abruptly the room was normal. Breadloaf was uncharred. But he was dead. His eyes were blank, fish-dead things. His hand clutched his heart. The tiny transmitter in his chest would be yelling for the medics. He would be reached in time — here in the city — to be given a new heart before brain damage occurred. He would live again.

"Where — " Gnossos began.

Then they saw it. It was poised on the rim of the Shield itself. It was a small, pink, formless thing. It had not transferred itself because it was too big; it had created Sam, because Sam would be more effective than it would have been in breaking down the Shield. For a moment, the dreams surged back, but Hurkos fought them off. Then the Mue raised a chair, smashed it into the pink slug. Again, again, and again. He mashed with a fury Sam never guessed him to possess.

And Hurkos killed God.

Breadloaf came through the door of the saloon, stopped a moment to search them out, then smiled as he found them. Only three hours had passed since he had died, but he looked healthy and cheerful. More cheerful, in fact, than he had ever looked before. He made his way through the crowd to their table, sat down. "I passed the church on the way. The Christians are moving out of their homes in the basement, bundles on their backs. In a way, it is a shame. Their lives have been nothing."

"They can take the shots now," Hurkos said. He was relaxed for the first time. He had gotten his revenge — more revenge than any man could hope for. Sam had wondered, at first, if Hurkos could be deranged, for he had, after all, killed. But he had not killed a man. What he *had* killed was a rung low-

er than Man and, therefore, might be called an animal. "They can live eternally."

"Some of them probably will. But they are old, remember. Fifty, some sixty, while the rest of us are thirty or under. It will not be exactly pleasant to be eternally old in a time of eternal youth."

"Tragic and ironic both," Gnosos said, sipping his drink. "How do you feel?"

"Better than ever," Breadloaf answered.

"I guess so," Hurkos said. "Gnosos, I killed God tonight. How's that for an epic poem?"

"I've been thinking," the poet said. "But it would have been better if He had been a Goliath. There is nothing particularly heroic about smashing a helpless slug to pulp."

Sam finished his drink. "I'm going for a walk," he said standing. "I'll be back in a while." Before anyone could speak, he turned for the door, struggling through the crowd, and stepped outside. Night was giving way to day; a touch of golden dawn tinted the horizon already.

"You all right?" Gnosos asked, stepping out beside him.

"I'm not sick. Not exactly."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean."

"The purpose of life: to overcome your creator."

"But what can a walk do? Me — I'm getting drunk."

"Yeah," Sam said slowly. "Maybe I will later. But now, I'll walk."

"Want me to come along?"

"No."

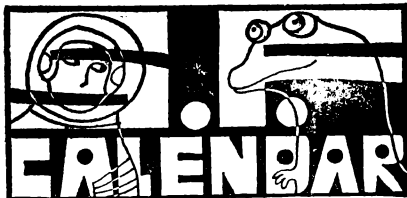
But there were questions.

Who was he?

What had been his past?

And where — oh where! — was he bound?

END



February 14-15, 1969. BALTICONFERENCE III. At Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore, Maryland. Theme: Swordplay and Sorcery, with speeches by Lin Carter, L. Sprague de Camp. Membership: \$2.00. For information: Jack L. Chalker, 5111 Liberty Heights Avenue, Baltimore, Md. 21207.

March 2, 1969. ESFA Annual Open Meeting. At YM-YWCA, 600 Broad Street, Newark, New Jersey 07104. General theme: "Looking Backward: 1969-1939," Changes in the SF Field in the Last Thirty Years. Admission: \$1.25. For information: Allan Howard, 157 Grafton Avenue, Newark, New Jersey 07104.

March 22-23, 1969. BOSKONE VI. At the Statler-Hilton, Boston, Massachusetts. Guest of Honor: Jack Gaughan. Membership \$2.00. For information: New England Science Fiction Association, Box G, MIT Branch Station, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139.

March 29-30, 1969. MARCON. At the Holiday East Motel, Columbus, Ohio 43227. Guest of Honor: Terry Carr. Features: Panel Discussions, Open Party, Banquet. Registration fee: \$2.00. Banquet Ticket: \$5.00. For information: Bob Hillis, 1290 Byron Avenue, Columbus, Ohio 43227.

April 4-6, 1969. MINICON TWO. At the Hotel Andrews, 4th Street at Hennepin, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Guests of Honor: Charles V. De Vet, Gordon R. Dickson, Carl Jacobi, Clifford D. Simak. Membership: \$2.00 — register now and

receive two progress reports. For information: Jim Young, 1948 Ulysses Street N.E., Minneapolis, Minnesota 55418. Make checks or money-orders payable to Mrs. Margaret Lessinger.

April 4-6, 1969. BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION. At Randolph Hotel, Oxford, England. Guest of Honor: Judith Merril. For information in the USA: Sam Russell, 1351 Tremaine Avenue, Los Angeles, California 90019.

April 11-13, 1969. LUNACON. Guest of Honor: Robert (Doc) A. W. Lowndes. At the Hotel McAlpin, New York City. Advance membership \$2.00, or \$2.50 at the door. Two Progress Reports will be sent to members. For information: Franklin M. Dietz, 1750 Walton Avenue, Bronx, New York 10453.

July 3-6, 1969 WESTERCON XXII/FUNCON II. At Miramar Hotel, Santa Monica, California. Guest of Honor: Randall Garrett. Fan Guest of Honor: Roy Tackett. Toastmaster: Harlan Ellison. Membership: \$3.00 in advance, \$5.00 at the door. A supporting membership of \$1.00 entitles you to all publications. For information: FUNCON II, Box 1, Santa Monica, California 90406. Make checks payable to Ken Rudolph.

August 29-September 1, 1969. ST. LOUISCON: 27th World Science Fiction Convention. At Chase-Park Plaza Hotel, 212 N. Kingshighway, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. Guest of Honor: Jack Gaughan. Fan Guest of Honor: Ted White. Features: Project Art Show; Masquerade Ball; All-night movies — every night; Rock Band; Panels and speeches featuring all your favorite writers, editors, and artists; Auctions; Awards Banquet and the Presentation of the Hugos. Memberships: \$4.00, attending; \$3.00, supporting. Join now and receive all the progress reports as they are published. For information: St. Louiscon, P.O. Box 3008, St. Louis, Missouri 63130. Make checks payable to St. Louiscon.

THE STEEL GENERAL

(Continued from page 98)

which are being eaten by the serpents his fingers and who calls out oh god but conscience his father is birdheaded on the sky's throne and weeping blood. Resign? Never! Go home? The red laughter comes as he strikes at the brotherfaced thing below.

"Yield and die!"

Then cast . . .

. . . far forth

. . . where Time is dust

and days are lilies without number . . .

and the night is a purple cockatrice whose name is oblivion denied . . .

He becomes a topless tree chopped through and falling. . . .

At the end of forever, he lies upon his back and stares up at the Prince Who is his Brother, standing at all heights with eyes that imprison him.

"I give you leave to depart now, brother, for I have beaten you fairly," come the green words.

Then Horus bows his head and the world departs and the old world comes again.

"Brother, I wish you had slain me," he says.

"I cannot."

"Do not send me back with this kind of defeat upon me."

"What else am I to do?"

"Grant me some measure of mercy. I know not what."

"Then hear me and go with honor. Know that I would slay your father, but that I will spare him for your sake if he will but aid me when the time arises."

"What time?"

"That is for him to decide."

"I do not understand."

"Of course not. But bear him the message, anyway."

". . ."

"Agreed?"

"Agreed," says Horus.

When he regains his feet, he realizes that he is standing in the Hall of the Hundred Tapestries, and alone. But in that last, agonizing instant, he had learned a thing.

He hastens to write it down.

XIII

"Where is Horus?" inquires Madrak. "He was here but a moment ago."

"He has gone home," says the Prince, rubbing his shoulder. "Now let me name you my problem —"

"My name," says Wakim, "give it to me. Now."

"Yes," says the Prince, "I will give it to you. You are a part of the problem I was about to name."

"Now," Wakim repeats.

"Do you feel any different with those shoes upon your feet?"

"Yes."

"How so?"

"I don't know. Give me my name."

"Give him the glove, Madrak."

"I don't want a glove."

"Put it on, if you wish to know your name."

"Very well."

He dons the glove.

"Now do you know your name?"

"No. I —"

"What?"

"It feels familiar, very familiar, to have the mesh spread across my body."

"Of course."

"It can't be!" says Madrak.

"No?" the Prince inquires. "Pick up that wand and hold it, Wakiim. Here, hang its sheath about your waist."

"What are you doing to me?"

"Restoring what is rightfully yours."

"By what right?"

"Pick up the wand."

"I don't want to! You can't make me! You promised me my name. Say it!"

"Not until you've picked up the wand."

The Prince takes a step toward Wakim. Wakim backs away.

"No!"

"Pick it up!"

The Prince advances further. Wakim retreats.

"I may not!"

"You may."

"Something about it It is forbidden that I touch that instrument."

"Pick it up and you will learn

your name — your true name."

"I — No! I don't want my name any more! Keep my name!"

"You *must* pick it up."

"No!"

"It is written that you must pick it up."

"Where? How?"

"I have written it, I —"

"Anubis!" cries Wakim. "Hear my prayer! I call upon thee in all thy power! Attend me in this place where I stand in the midst of thy enemies! The one whom I must destroy is at hand! Aid me against him, as I offer him to thee!"

Vramin encircles himself, Madrak and the General with elaborate spikes of green flame.

The wall at Wakim's back slowly dissolves and infinity is there.

Arm hanging limp, dog-face jeering, Anubis stares down.

"Excellent, servant!" come the words. "You have found him, cornered him. But the final blow remains and your mission is done. Use the fugue!"

"No," says the Prince, "he will not destroy me, even with the fugue, while I have this thing for him. You recognized him when first you saw him, long ago. His true name is now near to his ears. He would hear it spoken."

"Do not listen to him, Wakim," says Anubis. "Kill him now!"

"Master, is it true that he knows my name? My real name?"

"He lies! Slay him! Now!"

"I do not lie. Pick up the wand and you will know the truth."

"Do not touch it! It is a trap! You will die!"

"Would I go through all these elaborate motions to slay you in this manner, Wakim? Whichever of us dies at the hands of the other, the dog will win. He knows it, and he sent you to do a monstrous act. See how he laughs!"

"Because I have won, Thoth! He comes to kill you now!"

Wakim advances upon the Prince, then stoops and picks up the wand.

He screams, and even Anubis draws back.

Then the sound in his throat turns to laughter.

He raises the wand.

"Silence, dog! You have used

me! Oh, how you have used me! You apprenticed me to death for a thousand years, that I might slay my son and my father without flinching. But now you look upon Set the Destroyer and your days are numbered!" His eyes glow through the mesh which covers his entire body, and he stands above the floor. A line of blue light lances from the wand that he holds, but Anubis is gone, faded with a quick gesture and an half-heard howl.

"My son," says Set, touching Thoth's shoulder.

"My son," says the Prince, bowing his head.

The spikes of green flame fall behind them.

Somewhere, a dark thing cries out within the light, within the night.

END

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AUTHORGRAPHS

We recently asked Roger Zelazny some questions about himself, his stories, his feelings about science fiction and the world. His responses were transcribed directly from the tape, without polishing or second thoughts. We think they are of interest to science-fiction readers, and we are pleased to present them here.

I first got interested in science fiction with the *Doctor Doo-little* stories in the first or second grade; I was a fantasy fan when I was very young. Then, when I was in the sixth grade, I got hold of a book — I can't think of the name of the author right now, but it was called *The Angry Planet*. I was eleven years old at the time. That was the first exposure I had to science fiction, and then I ran into a fellow who had also read it. We got to talking about it, and he said, "Gee, there's lots of other good stuff in the school library," so I went through the whole school science-fiction library shelves. I read all the Heinlein and everything else there. About two years later this fellow was in my same class, by which time I was reading science fiction in hard covers in the local library, and he told me about the magazines. I had never read any of them because I didn't



like the covers, they looked awfully garish. But he loaned me some and I read them, and as a result I started buying them. Once you get interested in the science fiction magazines, of course, you read backwards as well as forwards. So I started going around to all the bookstores.

Then my friend — who was about fifteen years old at the time — sold a story to Ray Palmer. I looked at it and thought, gee, I can write better than he can. *I'll try it.*

So I tried it, and I couldn't do it. I got a bunch of rejection slips. I wrote about two hundred stories,

and every one of them was rejected. I was sixteen when I entered a National Scholastic high school story contest — Harlan Ellison also entered it; he won it in his time, and I sold them a story in mine. They paid me twenty-five bucks for it, and they printed it. That inspired me to go out and write about another hundred stories. They were all rejected, but occasionally I'd get a little nice note. I had a sentence from Fletcher Pratt once, saying try again. Ray Palmer dropped me a couple notes saying, "Comes close this time," "Didn't quite make it." Then I went to college and stopped writing altogether; I had too many courses even to read science fiction.

I went through college and grad school, and finished all my courses for my master's degree, but I had to write a thesis before I could get it. It would take me about six months to write it, and I was afraid I'd be drafted in the meantime; so rather than writing my thesis, I joined the Army Reserve and served six months. After I got out I drew unemployment compensation.

You had to prove that you'd asked for a job at least twice a week in order to get the check, so I'd call up a plant and say, "I'm after a graduate degree and I only want to work for a little while, but if you need a person with an English degree to work at your lumberyard

I'd be glad to work for you. They would always say no and I'd put their names down in my little book.

The third week, I think it was, I was running low on lumberyards so I tried Civil Service. I took the test, and unfortunately they gave me a job.

In the meantime I'd finished my thesis and had it accepted, so all I had to do was wait for the next time to come around to take my tests and get my degrees. So I did that, and got it.

Then, having the degree and the job, I decided that the one thing I'd really always wanted to do was to write. Thinking about the best way to break in I started reading again, out of the usual academic area; and I went back to science fiction. I figured I knew science fiction; I'd read thousands of stories in the area; and since I had this much knowledge I might as well try science fiction. So I started batting out stories, for about three months; and finally I sold one to Cele Goldsmith. I remember the date of the first sale; it was very vivid. It was March 28th, 1962. Before the year was up I'd sold seventeen stories.

Stanley Weinbaum was my favorite science-fiction writer at first; then came Heinlein; when I got a little bit over him, I decided it was Sturgeon I liked best. I liked some of Ray Bradbury's stuff. . . . It's a funny thing; I always used to

look at the author's name. But I've noticed that there are a lot of people who, when you say, "Who do you like?", don't remember anything but the story.

Weinbaum's characterization was something special. Just the way he treated man-woman relationships wasn't like science-fiction stories prior to that time. Weinbaum had witty people, and his women were real people as well as his men; I thought that was important. Some of his ideas were exciting, too; I must have read *A Martian Odyssey* six or seven times. *The Black Flame* had one of the few female central characters that I thought was handled well; I haven't read it for many years now, but it impressed me.

In my own work, *Lord of Light* was a purposeful thing. I used various mythologies; I like to take a mythology that hasn't been used much in science fiction and see if I can satisfy both the science-fiction fan and the fantasy fan, throwing in enough fantasy to satisfy the fantasy fan and putting in enough the way of underpinnings to satisfy the science-fiction fan.

The Creatures of Light and Darkness, on the other hand, is just a sort of a hobby story, a fun thing. I wanted to try every radical writing technique I could think of at the moment and write a way out story. I really intended it to be a parody of what is sometimes refer-

red to as the "New Wave." Probably it won't be considered that. I guess I've used up all the mythologies now. I'm going to try something different next time.

I liked *Damnation Alley* very much. I feel very comfortable with the "man against the elements" sort of theme; I was also very fond of Antoine de St. Exupery's stories about the early days of airplane traffic: *Wind, Sand and Stars* and *Night Flight*. I thought it would be nice to put something like that into a science-fiction setting, turning somebody loose against all the forces of nature. At the same time I had been thinking about anti-heroes; I considered using someone who had been sort of trapped into being a hero and reached a point where he couldn't turn back. I'll probably do more of that kind in the future.

I owe a debt to an English teacher I once had named Ruby Olson. She was a fine woman who knew a lot about writing, and she picked out about five kids who she thought showed some promise and tried to nurture this.

Everything influences me. It usually shows up transmuted or changed into other forms in my stories, but I don't think a good piece of fiction should really be pushing any particular position. I'm not too fond of the "thesis" type story. I'd rather write the story and let the moral follow.



Dear Editor:

I think science fiction for many years has needed *style* such as the "New Wave" introduces. What really matters anyway is how Life reacts to itself. For the past few years a small number of science-fiction writers has really gone through some changes, seen and felt what the mind actually is; astronauts of inner space and science-fiction writers discovered they may have many more inner dimensions to work with. And what you do is write about it. After all, the most mind-blowing alien is Man. — Bill Wolfenbarger, 602 West Hill, St., Neosho, Mr. 64850.

● Correction: To science fiction, what really matters is how Life *will* react to itself. Or do all advocates of the "new" form really feel that man's thinking must remain forever static? — *Editors*

* * *

Dear Editor:

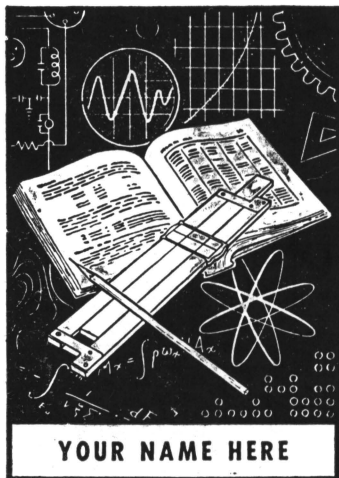
Regarding the letters printed in *Hue and Cry* on the subject of *Doc Savage Magazine*, the information so far printed is somewhat lacking in detail. There were exactly 181 Doc Savage novels, written from March

1933 to the last issue, dated Summer 1949, in which the superhuman Doc Savage does battle against the minions of Satan himself. Of these, 165 were penned by Lester Dent, who died in 1959. Dent created and developed the character Doc Savage for Street & Smith Publications. Nine of the novels were done by Norman A. Danberg, four by Alan Hathway and three by onetime editor William G. Bogart. For most of the series, Dent was writing one Savage novel a month, and he turned out some fantastic material at that rate, always with a realistic background and style. All the stories were published under the house name of "Kenneth Roberson". Bantam Books is now reprinting the novels at the rate of one per month, with James E. Bama doing the covers.

When are you going to publish another Berserker story? — Lohr McKinstry, 668 Park St., Bloomsburg, PA 17815.

● And that should settle the issue of Doc Savage. Fred Saberhagen is busily at work on stories for us, and we hope to have more of his Berserker stories shortly. — *Editor*.

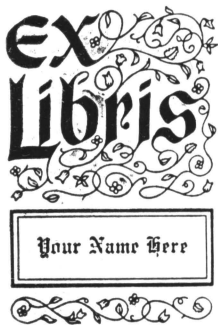
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