Science Fantasy

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In the next issue

It should have been a very ordinary journey from Holborn to Hounslow, but somewhere West of Piccadilly the train entered another dimension — one where the Allies had lost World War II. That wasn't all either . . .

THE WRONG TRACK

By George Whitley

Illustrated by QUINN

You will have heard, no doubt, of the "Circle of the Globe." It sounds like the title of something by the late Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton—but it's not, although it might, quite possibly, have appealed to him. The "Globe" is a pub in Hatton Garden. There, every Thursday night, all those living or visiting London and in any way connected with fantasy and science fiction gather to drink and talk shop.

an intriguing novelette

AND

★ **McINTOSH**
★ **DEWEY**
★ **TUBB**
★ **BURKE**
★ **JAMES**

Science Fantasy

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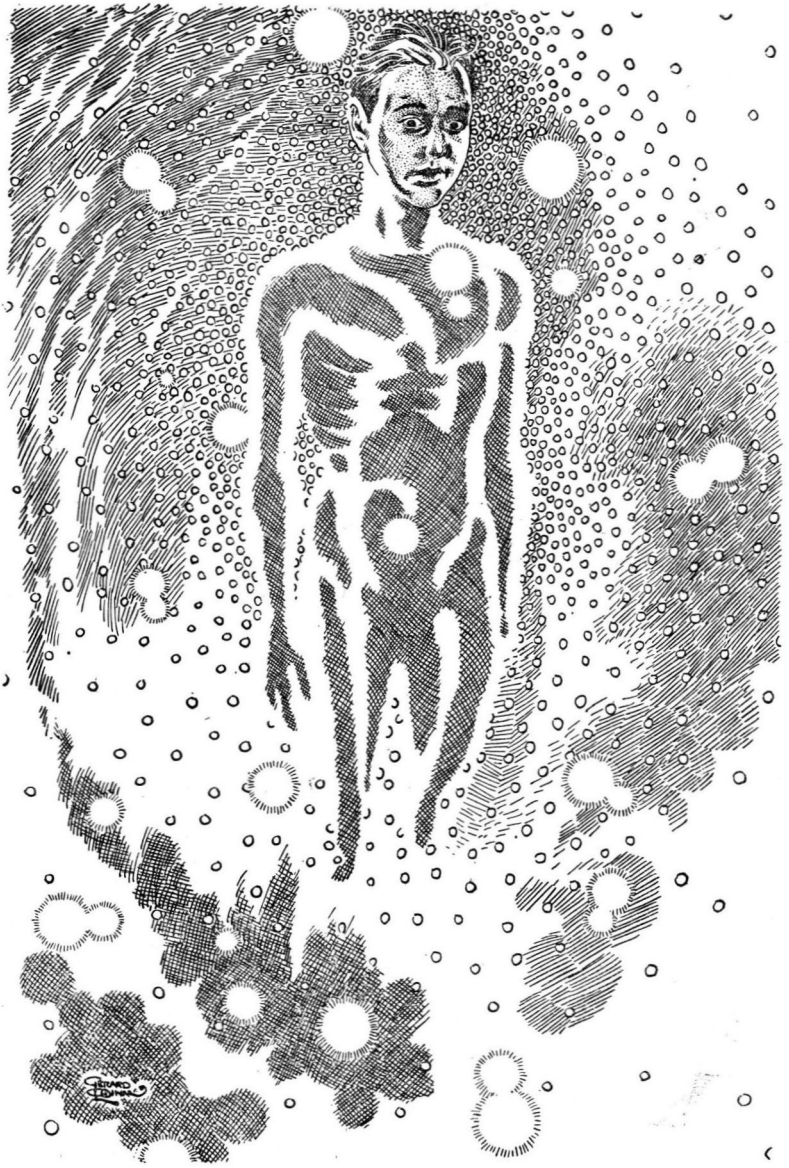


Five people entered the Matter Transmitter on Mars for transference to Earth. Nothing had ever gone wrong before—it shouldn't this time. But only four people arrived. The fifth one was—where?

FIVE INTO FOUR

By J. T. McINTOSH

Illustrated by QUINN

I

"I wonder," ruminated Mary Gorton, "if I could persuade either of you two millionaires to buy IT and run it like a public service and not a cattle market."

Frank Herbert smiled very faintly. "Interplanetary Transference is a World Senate monopoly, Miss Gorton," he said drily. "I doubt if either Mr. Bissinger or myself, or both together for that matter, could buy up the world government."

"Nonsense," retorted Mary briskly. "The Senate's tottering. You could get behind the Progressives and shove. It wouldn't cost you more than a few thousand dollars to topple the Moderates. Then the Progressives would free IT, you could step in, and with proper business methods you wouldn't take long to have IT ticking like a watch."

"There's much," said Herbert, without a great deal of interest, "in what you say."

The three of them had just met in the waiting room of the IT depot at Laccar, Mars. Herbert and Ralph Bissinger had heard of each other before, but never met. Obviously Mary Gorton had heard of them both, too. She had told them her name, no more, but the probability was that she was an agent for something. Mars was still young enough an Earth colony to be big business.

She had the hard, defiant briskness that most career women still had after two centuries of female so-called emancipation. She might mellow with time, but at twenty-five or so she had apparently found it necessary to be almost offensively sure of herself if she was to make her way on the three worlds.

She didn't have beauty to help or hinder her. She had all the attributes of beauty, but something was missing, and whatever it was it must have been very important.

They all looked up as the fourth member of the group arrived. He looked as though he were a native of Mars. That was just possible. The first children had been born on Mars nineteen years since. He came in self-consciously and sat down, clearly hoping no one would talk to him. It was a futile hope with Mary Gorton present.

"I don't know you," she said. "What's your name?"

The youth cleared his throat. "Jones," he said, more loudly than he had intended, and then very quietly: "Bill Jones."

"And a very fine name," said Mary heartily. "I used to know a fellow who had one just like it. Your first trip?"

Bill Jones nodded. He should have been a girl, Ralph thought. His skin was as clear as Mary's and his features much more delicate. His eyes were that soft, pleading brown which always made Ralph, for some reason, think of human sacrifices. People with eyes like that could be very easily hurt.

Mary seemed to realise that, and turned back to the others. "Only one to come," she said. "Then perhaps we'll see some action. You haven't much to say for yourself, Mr. Bissinger. You wouldn't be shy, would you?"

"I wouldn't," said Ralph, with a grin. "I don't have to go around proving it, that's all."

"No, I didn't think you were. It was just an idea. What's the joke?"

"I find life a bit of a joke. Any objections?"

"No. It's a point of view." Mary looked from him to Herbert, then back again. "You know, I always wondered whether millionaires were happy," she went on. "You two are no help. You think everything is great fun, Mr. Bissinger. But you, Mr. Herbert,

you seem to be looking for a convenient spot to lie down and die."

There was no harm in Mary. She spoke humorously, probably trying to charm a smile out of Herbert.

But he looked back at her and replied with complete indifference: "That's perfectly correct, Miss Gorton."

The fifth passenger arrived opportunely as Mary was feverishly casting about for something to say. Ralph looked up and said: "Oh, God."

It was Illona Alexander. She blushed as Ralph spoke, and after one quick glance at him averted her gaze.

Ralph regretted his exclamation as soon as he made it. Illona couldn't help being in love with him. She probably couldn't help following him around, meeting him as if by accident, and gazing at him with utter devotion in those beautiful blue eyes. She wasn't a gold digger—she had enough money of her own to be acquitted of that.

He rose and presented Illona to the others, avoiding Mary's curious gaze. It was all very unfortunate. He had no objection to the idea of getting married—probably he would quite soon. His wife, whoever she was, would certainly not be as lovely as Illona, and probably not nearly as likeable. But she would be far more intelligent. It wasn't Illona's fault she was dumb. It wasn't his fault, either, that he couldn't marry a girl with no brains.

When at last Ralph looked at Mary, he found she had no attention for him, anyway. Her brittle gaiety was gone suddenly, and the way she was looking at Illona gave away her secret.

Mary would have given anything to look like Illona. He could see that in her stare of longing. He frowned. Couldn't Mary see or guess that Illona was nothing but beauty and good nature? Would she really give up her own intelligence and competence to be another moronic beauty?

The door of the waiting-room opened. A man in the blue IT uniform stood and waited for their attention as if he were going to make some momentous announcement. Then:

"Please step this way," he said.

Lionel Foster wasn't due back at the Washington IT depot until twelve midnight. Like Cinderella, he was going to be late. He was with his princess, and time was standing still. Later it might be demonstrated whether time had stood still for the rest of mankind, and the depot in particular.

Between dances he devoted a few seconds' thought to the problem. No one else would arrive until one o'clock. He had made

a careful check the night before. There was no chance of anything being wrong. At least, so he told himself, looking at Sally.

Looking at Sally took his mind off the IT depot altogether.

In the new Palace of Peace not far from Washington the World Senate was in late session, a session forced by a strong Progressive party in one of their unceasing efforts to overthrow the weak controlling Moderates.

A small, unimportant war had started in China. Most of the senators, to do them justice, wanted to do something about it. But most of the senators, from all over the world, were either Moderate or Progressive. And when an opportunity offered of not doing anything about China, and supporting their party instead in the struggle to win or keep power, most senators took it.

At the moment Senator Grewer, Progressive, was on his feet demanding the end of Interplanetary Transference as a government enterprise. The actual transport of men and women between Venus, Earth and Mars was nothing to him or his party, but the Moderates had taken over IT. If the enterprise fell, interplanetary transference wouldn't stop—someone else would handle it, that was all. But the Moderates would be out and the Progressives in.

"Is the Secretary for Interplanetary Travel aware . . . ?" asked Grewer in his honeyed tones. The Secretary wasn't aware, and said so. The Senator, he said, had been misinformed. Neither the Secretary nor the Senator gave any hint that the discussion had little or nothing to do with IT, though that was the subject. It was purely a political manœuvre, but to say so would be plainer speaking than anyone wanted.

Except Senator Morrison, Moderate, who as a former counsel-at-law knew when to speak plainly and when to skate gracefully on the thin ice of hints and veiled allusion. He rose amid Progressive misgivings. His tones were much more honeyed than Grewer's. "Is the Senator aware," he asked politely, "that this subject has been raised at every session for the last three years? Does the Senator think it is really the most pressing matter before the Senate, especially in view of the conflict in China? Has the Senator any specific instance of injustice or incompetence, or mismanagement, to libel against the undertaking? If not, will the Senator kindly allow us to go home to bed?"

On Mars, five people were being weighed, medically examined, reduced in turkish baths to the lightest weight compatible with good health and undergoing all the other preparations before being sent,

incorporate, across the millions of miles of space at the speed of radio waves and reincarnated at the Washington depot as human beings.

There was much coming and going in dressing gowns. It was perfectly possible to transmit people without making them sweat off an ounce, in the clothes they were wearing, with everything they had in their pockets. But interplanetary transference was expensive as well as complicated, and no one was encouraged to pay twenty cents for a ten-cent cigar.

An IT technician had already raised his eyes to the heavens and obviously counted to ten when Illona wanted to keep her compact. Then with steely patience he had attempted to make her realise the enormous difference in her weight a fresh application of lip rouge would make.

They could smoke, however. Mary Gorton said she hoped the colossal weight of nicotine they were absorbing wouldn't bother the technicians too much. One of them waved his arm magnanimously. "Negligible," he said.

Lionel Foster arrived at the Washington depot, panting, at four minutes to one. He sighed with relief when he had his coat off and no one had arrived. He had a quick glance through the rooms, leaving all the lights on. He listened to the carrier beam, already coming in. He checked the obvious things.

He felt a little resentful that there should be a nightly checkup, his resentment a kind of extenuation of the fact that he hadn't done it anyway. When one took out a car, did one always check every nut and bolt? Yet one was trusting one's life to it. What was the use of all the safety measures at IT depots if one didn't trust them, but tested everything just the same?

He looked up as Milldew came in, looking at his watch.

"Okay, Foster?" Milldew asked.

"Sure," said Lionel. "What would be wrong?"

Milldew looked at him a little startled, and Lionel cursed himself for elaborating. There was nothing unusual about the words, but there must have been something strange about the way he said them.

However, he was able to sink himself in routine, especially when the others arrived. There were two girls to look after the women who would be arriving in a few minutes. Three male attendants, a doctor, two other technicians. Two male nurses and an ambulance driver from the conversion centre—that meant one of the arrivals had never left Mars, or had been there a long time.

He would be whisked off to the centre, where his muscles would be trained to cope with Earth's gravity. It would take weeks.

The attendants clustered round as a message began to stutter through on "B" channel. The data about the five arrivals had already been sent; this was merely the schedule—a sort of dispatch note. Cubicle A, Illona Alexander. B, Ralph Bissinger. C, Mary Gorton. D, Frank Herbert. E, William Jones, special case.

The two girls went to cubicles A and C; the conversion-centre trio to cubicle E. The attendants were merely attendants, not technicians. Their job was to give the arrivals stimulants, rub them down, make them do a few loosening exercises and help them to dress in the clothes they had left them when they went to Mars.

Milldew tapped out a message on channel "B." They were ready. Lionel stood by as he threw the switches.

The most spectacular achievement of human science was in session. Again. No flags waved, it happened three times every twenty-four hours. Depots at San Francisco, Berlin, London, Rome were linked permanently with depots on Mars or Venus. So far, one couldn't go direct from Laccar to London, say. One either went to Hostock on Mars, to go straight to London, or came to Washington and flew to London. There was no internal transference yet, from one Earth city to another. Local interference made it dangerous.

Dangerous—yes, there was still danger in transference. Two groups of five passengers had been lost altogether. That made IT very nearly one-twentieth as dangerous as flying from New York to San Francisco.

The Progressives in the World Senate could make no capital out of that.

II

Lionel lit a cigarette and nearly dropped it as he yawned. He wasn't thinking of the job, or even of Sally. He was thinking of bed. That was one thing about working through the night. Bed was never so attractive as at four-thirty in the morning.

One of the girl attendants suddenly appeared from cubicle A. She was frowning. Milldew looked up inquiringly.

"Say, did I get it right?" she asked. "Cubicle A, Illona Alexander? Because . . . "

She made an expressive gesture. Simultaneously there was a feminine scream from one of the cubicles.

"God, those fatheads at Laccar have messed it up again," said Milldew without heat. "You've got one of the men, Madge, and I expect that's the Alexander woman in D . . . "

The naked top half of Ralph Bissinger poked round the doorway of cubicle A. "Say, aren't we supposed to have company when we arrive?" he asked. "Not that I mind, but some people might feel neglected."

Another attendant came out of D hurriedly, red but grinning broadly. "Say, Milldew, you got it wrong," he said. "There's a naked dame in there out for my blood. Not that she has the slightest reason."

"If it's Illona," said Ralph dispassionately, "and she really hasn't the slightest reason, I think you might have put up a better performance for the honour of the male sex."

Such scenes were by no means unknown. Often the passengers were to blame. They saw the cubicles were all the same, and they forgot that if they were told to go to cubicle B on Laccar, they were expected at cubicle B in Washington.

There was another scream from E, but it turned into a laugh. "Good God, four of you!" came Mary Gorton's voice. "You've got your signals crossed. Run away and spare my blushes."

Ralph was still leaning out of his cubicle.

"Mary was just saying IT was run like a cattle market," he remarked. "But I thought you could at least separate the sheep from the goats. Say, am I supposed to put on Illona's panties, or run around naked?"

"No!" Milldew exclaimed. "Simpson, get Miss Alexander's clothes and give them to Madge. Madge . . . "

Order was gradually restored. Madge linked up at last with Illona, Simpson with Frank Herbert, the other girl attendant with Mary Gorton. But as things seemed to be sorting themselves out, one of the attendants spoke quietly to Milldew.

"God!" he shouted, his face going white. "Only four? But how . . . ?"

Lionel rushed into the empty cubicle. The plastic cover was up, but the case was empty. The fifth passenger, whoever he was, was gone—and no one knew better than Lionel how completely gone he was.

There was no hope of keeping it secret. For a whole transference group to be lost was understandable and not unknown. That was unfortunate and led to screaming headlines and long argument in the World Senate. But usually no one was to blame.

It was invariably pointed out on such an occasion that if interplanetary travel were accomplished by spaceship and not transference, such disasters could be expected rather more often.

For four to arrive safely without the fifth, however, was another matter. That was someone's fault; and the rapidity with which the responsibility could be fixed was indicated when Lionel, white-faced, wanted to check the installation in cubicle B. Milldew said nothing, but a glance brought an attendant to each side of Lionel. Lionel was not officially under guard. Only by sitting still, however could he maintain the pretence that he was free to go if he wished.

Milldew spent half-an-hour on the 'phone to various people. Lionel waited, trying not to think, trying to interest himself in what was going on about him.

The IT doctor went to each of the passengers in turn, making sure there had been no further catastrophe. But the four who had arrived were not only sound, they were exactly the same as usual, physically and mentally. They said so. One after another they appeared from the cubicles.

Ralph Bissinger was first. In his grey lounge suit he looked

like a film actor. Lionel envied him his looks, his money, his assurance. But most of all he envied him because he wasn't under guard for possible criminal negligence.

Bissinger glanced at him curiously, started to speak and then realised the situation. Poor devil, he thought. In this age of technology there must often be men in Lionel's situation. Men who were responsible for machines that were responsible for human lives. But machines had no real responsibility, yet. If a machine failed and someone died, it was the fault of the man who looked after the machine.

Ralph turned as Illona emerged. In sympathy for Lionel, he took her arm and led her away. She would stare at Lionel and his guards and ask questions and perhaps scream or chide him as one would a naughty child. He knew Illona.

"Who is it?" she asked. "Who's missing, I mean?"

"Bill Jones."

"Oh. We don't know much about him, do we. I hoped . . . " She shuddered. "I mean, when I knew someone was missing, I thought it might be better if it were Frank Herbert. He doesn't seem to get much fun out of life. He'd be the smallest loss."

They had reached the waiting room, a twin of the one at Laccar.

"No," he agreed, "we don't know much about Bill Jones."

"It's easy to guess about people from one glance," Illona mused, "and easier still to be wrong. Why did you drag me away like that. Was there something you didn't want me to see?"

Ralph gave her a censored explanation. She nodded.

"That's someone else to be sorry for," she said. "It seems a pity that people can't be satisfied with one tragedy. They have to drag someone else into it."

Ralph grinned grimly. "Save your sympathy. It may be tough luck on this Lionel Foster, but it's still criminal negligence. It might have been you or me who died."

"Yes, and would it have done us any good to have young Foster pilloried for it? Bill Jones is just as dead whether they throw Foster in jail or tell him not to worry about it. Poor boy, he can't be more than twenty."

"Fully four years younger than you."

"Yes, but I haven't any responsibility. Let's go back, shall we?"

They were in time for the second tragedy that Illona had hinted at. Two policemen arrested Lionel Foster on a charge of murder.

"Murder!" whispered Illona. "How can they . . . "

"The most serious charge," Ralph muttered. "They'll also charge him with culpable homicide and criminal negligence and dereliction of duty and a dozen other things."

Lionel meant to rise expressionlessly and go calmly with the police. But as his legs took his weight they suddenly buckled and he sprawled on the floor.

There was no reason to keep the four passengers at the IT depot. The affair had nothing to do with them.

Ralph's car was waiting, complete with chauffeur. He wouldn't let the others send for taxis. There was room for them all.

"Anybody know anything about the mechanics of IT?" asked Mary Gorton, as they settled themselves in the car. "How could Bill Jones go missing like that?"

"I'd heard it was impossible," said Ralph. "You know how such things are always impossible until they happen. You've heard how they can send scores of different messages at once over one wire, and split them up afterwards? IT's like that, only there's no wire. It's always a group of five, never more or less. There's only one beam. At the receiving end the five messages—for that's all we were—are separated again . . . that's why this has never happened before. If they get anything, they get everything."

"So what went wrong?"

"I don't know. But presumably the equipment in one of the cubicles was faulty, so that Bill Jones was never materialised."

"And it might have been any of us," murmured Frank Herbert.

"Yes, but it wasn't" said Mary briskly.

"I wonder what's going to happen to the poor kid who was arrested," said Illona.

"'Poor kid' is right," Mary remarked. "I can tell you what's going to happen. The Progressives will howl for his blood, and say IT is run incompetently (which it is), and demand this and that. The Moderate will either stand behind Lionel Foster and try to get him off by hook or by crook, or throw him to the lions and say it was all his fault. Either way he's just a pawn in the game, and no one cares what happens to him."

Illona stared at her in frank admiration. "I wish I could do that," she said, forgetting Lionel for a moment.

"Let's do a swop," Mary suggested. "Your looks for my low cunning." She was making a joke of it, but Ralph heard the sincerity behind her light tone.

Illona was dropped first. Ralph escorted her to her door. With the key in the lock of her flat she hesitated.

"Let's make it goodbye, Ralph, shall we?" she said abruptly. "I've thrown myself at your head long enough." She tried to laugh, with fair success. "Shall we shake hands, or could you bring yourself to kiss me?"

Ralph was too taken aback to kiss her. He stared at her in the gloom, and her pride made her open the door, slip inside and close it quietly. He considered ringing the bell, but turned away. The curious thing was, he knew she meant what she said. It wasn't only the unexpectedness of it that was disconcerting.

"You could always have dropped us first," Mary told him as he got into the back of the car again.

"It's not like that at all."

"What is it that it's not like?"

Frank Herbert sighed. "I missed all that," he murmured, obviously to himself. "I got an idea early on that any girl who showed any interest in me was after my money."

"Sure," said Mary, "but what's that got to do with it?"

The idea was clearly quite new to Herbert. But he lived only a short distance from Illona, and the car was already turning into the avenue of his house. There was no time to say more.

Ralph dragged his mind away from Illona as the car started again. "It'll soon be light," he remarked.

"You leave me nothing to say," Mary remarked, "except 'so it will.'"

Ralph grinned. "Any time you want a job, Miss Morton, get in touch with me. I'm sure you'd be very efficient."

"I don't want a job. And do you mean to tell me it's possible to sit alone in a car with a girl and call her 'Miss'?"

The street they had entered was brilliantly lit. He looked at her and almost gasped. How could he have failed to notice how attractive she was? She must be the kind of girl who improved on the second glance. Even so . . .

"You asked for it," he said, and kissed her.

Perhaps it was reaction after Illona's goodbye. Perhaps Mary knew on which side her bread was buttered, and remembered Ralph's millions.

But it couldn't be that, for when the car reached her flat she got out, shut the door determinedly, and said breathlessly: "Don't dare get out of that car!"

"Sure you don't need protection?"

"Quite sure, if you stay in the car. Goodbye, Siva."

She turned and darted into the building. She was really quite astonishingly attractive. Who was Siva?

Oh, yes. Wasn't Siva the character with a lot of hands?

Mary let herself into her flat. She felt as she had never felt in her life. She was dazed, frightened, puzzled, and so happy it was an effort not to dance. Surely the world hadn't turned upside-down because someone had made a pass at her in a car? She liked Ralph Bissinger, no more. She would rather not see him again, on the whole. Yet . . . ?

She threw her hat across the lounge joyfully, kicked off her shoes and swept in front of a mirror, her skirt swirling madly. Mary Alicia Gorton beamed back at her, the same as ever. A hazy suspicion that she had suddenly turned into a fairy princess died.

Yes, it must be because someone had made a pass at her in a car, she told herself, a whimsical gloom descending on her. It was the kind of thing that didn't often happen to her, considering. Maybe it was because Ralph Bissinger had such an air of being discriminating that a girl felt she could consider his acknowledgment of her sex, however fleetingly, as a sort of diploma.

But she would certainly prefer not to see him again. He was Illona's, wasn't he? That was the sort of competition she could never face. To use a business metaphor, she thought she might as well resign before she was fired.

III

Ralph woke about noon. "Of course," he said, as soon as his eyes were open, and jumped out of bed as if the house was on fire.

There is nothing so obvious as something which has only just become obvious. He showered, dressed and breakfasted in half-an-hour and was ringing the bell of Illona's flat at twenty minutes to one.

Illona was not only up, but dressed. After one start she managed to conceal her surprise at seeing him.

Ralph grinned. "Disconcerting, isn't it, when on says goodbye for ever and has to say it all over again the next day. Illona, do you know what's happened to you?"

"Has anything happened to me?"

"Then you don't. Bill Jones happened to you. He came with with us after all."

"I don't understand."

"No, why should you? It's not the kind of thing that happens every day. Well, look, Illona . . . "

She accepted the idea very easily, on the whole. She could remember how the world had seemed to her the day before, and compare that with how it seemed to her now. She could see that she was aware of problems that hadn't previously existed for her; and that a lot of difficulties had mysteriously disappeared.

But if Ralph hadn't quite known how she would react, he certainly hadn't expected how she did.

"Then they'll have to let Lionel Foster go," she said eagerly. Ralph stared at her. "Don't you see? If there's anything of Bill Jones in me, he didn't die, and there's no murder."

"For heaven's sake!" Ralph exclaimed. "Forget Lionel Foster. Don't you realise—"

"Forget him? How can I forget him? They're holding him for the murder of someone who didn't really die. He—come on, let's go."

"Go where?"

"To the IT depot, of course."

"What for?"

"Don't keep asking silly questions. Are you coming or not?"

This new, excited, impatient Illona was an incomprehensible stranger. Everything she said was a surprise, merely because he expected her to say something else.

"I'm coming," he said.

Milldew, having snatched a few hours' sleep, was back at the depot. He looked up at Ralph and Illona with the steely patience of one who had already said the same thing a hundred times.

"It was a purely technical error," he said. "None the less regrettable for that."

Illona looked at Ralph, and he knew that he, knowing a little more about the technical side of it than she did, was to put the questions.

It didn't do any good. Illona and Ralph nodded to each other as Milldew rustled papers and talked about nothing. They recognised the situation. It was like a doctor not telling the patient what was wrong with him. Like an old-fashioned husband saying: "Don't worry your pretty little head about business matters," and quite determined to handle them himself anyway.

It was the closed shop of the initiated being defended against

the uninitiated. They knew it was no use trying. Milldew wouldn't explain technical matters except to another technician.

"Okay," said Illona, interrupting Milldew in the middle of a sentence that meant nothing. "We've got that. Here's something for you. Part of me is Bill Jones. How does that strike you?"

It struck him, there was no doubt about that. Clearly the possibility was not entirely new to him, for he didn't show incredulity or ask questions or argue. He just wanted them to go away so that he could get on the 'phone again and tell everyone that part of Illona Alexander was Bill Jones.

Illona recognised defeat. The man wasn't even concerned with finding facts, let alone evaluating them. He wanted them to go, instead of finding out all he possible could about what might have happened, how much of her was Bill Jones, how much of Bill Jones was her, how her new personality was integrated . . .

"Just one more thing," she said, "and then we'll go away and let you 'phone the police and the Moderates and the Progressives and your girl-friend and whoever else you want to 'phone—"

"There's no need to be offensive, Miss Alexander."

"Isn't there? Anyway, answer this. Is there an possibility of reversing the process? Suppose, as I am now, I were coming back from Laccar to this depot. Would—"

"None whatever." He hesitated, then decided to give them a little lecture in the how-things-work manner for children. "You see, there's never any question in IT of sending matter through space. What we do is send a pattern—five patterns. At the other end the patterns are built up, like a picture sent by radio, into an exact duplicate of the original. Last night, for the first and last time, two patterns somehow got fused. That is, if what you say is correct. But nothing can ever be done about that. You have still only one personality pattern, Miss Alexander, not two. Any attempt to split it would only kill you."

"Thank you so much." Ralph wondered at her ironic sweetness. Twenty-four hours since, she hadn't known what irony was.

Ralph walked out of the depot under the impression that Illona was still with him, and had to go back when he found she wasn't. He found her at the booking office.

"What now?" he demanded patiently.

"I'm going back to Mars."

"What for?"

"You keep asking that. To find out about Bill Jones, of

course. If he's part of me, don't you think I should learn a little about him?"

Put that way, it did seem reasonable. "I'll come with you," he said, "I suppose that was why you were asking if the same thing could happen again?"

"Wonderful," she retorted.

There were two vacancies later that day, but Illona frowned at the delay. Ralph grinned; she had apparently forgotten that it was usually necessary to wait at least a week, and that the vacancies could only have occurred because people who had heard about Bill Jones had hurriedly decided not to go to Mars after all.

No, the new Illona was more intelligent, but not cool and calculating. She was so impatient that life with her could never be settled and restful.

But anyway, Ralph asked himself, who wanted life to be settled and restful?

"I am informed," said the Secretary for Interplanetary Travel, "that Lionel Foster was charged with murder at the instigation of prominent members of the Progressive party."

Senator Grewer rose. "That is so," he said mildly. "But the public prosecution had no alternative but to back our charges. The whole affair is an example of the shocking mismanagement we have come to expect of Interplanetary Transference . . . "

He was compelled to withdraw that. It didn't seem to worry him. When order was restored the Secretary rose again.

"Perhaps the Senator is not aware that it is now tentatively established that the victim of this admittedly unfortunate affair is still in existence as—"

"I submit," said Senator Grewer calmly, "that that is hardly relevant. If a man, without his consent, is split apart or inserted into the life and personality of another person, or whatever has actually happened, he must surely be found legally dead. And if a man is legally dead, the person who was responsible can be tried for murder."

"This," said the chairman, "is fantastic."

"This," retorted Grewer, "is a matter of plain fact. As an individual, Bill Jones of Mars has ceased to exist. Until a special law is passed—and that would take too long to be applicable to the present case—Bill Jones is dead, and the person or persons responsible can be held under charges up to and including murder, under the International Murder Unification Law, 1967."

The Progressives were in a strong position, and everyone knew it. The fact that Grewer was allowed to make his points without a word from Senator Morrison was sufficient indication of that.

The complications of the matter were sinking into a simple problem. The Moderates had tied themselves irrevocably to IT. Public opinion liked simple issues—yes or no decisions. If Lionel Foster was convicted of murder, the Moderates were down. If he was acquitted, it was a big defeat for the Progressives.

Perhaps as Grewer coughed and sat down with usual self-consciousness he was troubled for a moment by the knowledge that World Senate strife didn't do the world any good, that this crisis might be a turning-point in history, that for the sake of a political manœuvre an unimportant technician was being made the towrope to test the strength of two huge political machines.

But then, his party was right. Grewer was as sincere in this belief as any political or religious leader in history. The Progressives had to govern the world, for the world's own good.

So there was no alternative.

And on the whole, it was much better that the China affair should be kept out of the way for a while. There would be no party disagreement on that. Dealing with China would bring an air of solidarity to the World Senate, a suggestion that party strife was unimportant. That had to be avoided at this stage. First things first. After all, China could always well afford to lose a few hundred thousand hungry souls, and such an opportunity of breaking the Moderates might not come again for a long time.

The clean, comfortable little room was nothing like a dungeon of old, but Lionel knew it was still a cell. He had already walked, he calculated, a hundred miles within its confines.

Sally had been to see him twice. On each occasion she had cried the whole period of her visit. She felt it was all her fault. At other times when he had been with her and had had to go on duty at the IT depot she had said he didn't care about her, his work was more important to him than she was, and other things of the same kind. She didn't know. She hadn't thought. It was all her fault. She should be in prison, not Lionel.

Lionel had alternated between self-pity and horror at what had happened. No one could have known, he told himself over and over again. There were millions of people all over the world who weren't quite as conscientious as they should be. People who left things till to-morrow.

A car mechanic held people's lives in his hands, just as much as he did. A job half done, and perhaps six months later someone died—perhaps several people. But probably the mechanic heard nothing about it. He went on half doing jobs.

To some people, Lionel thought bitterly, it was all so simple. He had had a job to do carefully, and he hadn't done it at all. Someone died. It was Lionel Foster's fault. Kill him, shoot him, hang him, burn him. Criminal negligence.

The same people would leave around pins that babies might swallow, skid carelessly in their cars and miss disaster for themselves and others by inches, forget to warn people of possible dangers . . . the list could go on for ever.

Did it mean nothing that he had done the job two hundred times and only twice found anything wrong?

He didn't know yet what Mary Gorton had seen at once—that he was just a pawn in a big game, and no one cared what happened to him.

It wasn't true any more, anyway. Illona Alexander cared.

IV

Reporters somehow discovered that Ralph and Illona were going back to Mars that afternoon. There was quite a crowd at the IT depot when they arrived. Illona surveyed them in dismay. "Reporters get more reporterish every day," she murmured. "Not to mention photographers . . . "

Her misgivings were justified. Ralph did his best, but tradition was against him.

Screen stars had started it. Most actresses would pose anywhere, any time, in any costume, for any picture. News pictures began to include pin-up pictures—that was back in the nineteen-thirties.

But news editors weren't satisfied. There were glamour girls who weren't screen stars, but still in the news—heiresses, divorcees, tennis players, swimmers, heroines of rescues, even doctors and business women. "Pin-up pictures," said editors tersely. "if they're worth it." Which was all very well in the case of swimmers and tennis players, but women doctors had been known to refuse to pose in bathing-suits. The photographers, however, had their orders.

Illona was news, and she was certainly worth glamour pictures. As soon as she appeared one bright cameraman dived along the floor and got his picture four feet from her knees. Two more chose the ground-level angle, although they weren't quite so reckless about it. Another cameraman, on the shoulders of two assistants, shouted until Illona looked up to see what he was doing, and then in taking his picture almost dropped the camera down the front of her dress. A girl assistant brushed against Illona, and there was an appreciative roar and a tattoo of camera clocks before Illona could rearrange her dress.

"Positively indecent," Illona complained, when they were through.

Ralph grinned. "But all in good fun."

"You think so, do you? How about next year, or the year after, if things keep on going the way they're going now?"

"Next year, or the year after, should be very interesting," said Ralph. Illona gave an unladylike grunt.

There was no flaw in the routine this time. In fact, IT was being run with more care, courtesy and despatch than they were used to. They stepped into the wide still rather tentative streets of Laccar impressed by the effect a disaster could have on the running of a public service.

They went to see Bill Jones's father. He swore at sight of them, but Illona inserted into his invective the information that they weren't reporters. That calmed him down.

He wasn't in the least like Bill. Bill had given the impression of uncertainty, of apology for existing. His father would never apologise for anything. He was a short, aggressive man, his face screwed into a permanent frown.

"If you're not reporters," he said, "who are you, and what do you want? It's about Bill, of course."

"Yes," said Illona, "it's about Bill." She realised that there was no need to be cautious and sympathetic. What Jones senior would appreciate most was directness and determination.

"I don't know if you've heard anything about this," she said, "but Mr. Bissinger here and I travelled with your son from here. Bill wasn't really lost. He became part of—"

"Obviously," said Jones. "So what?"

Ralph grinned inwardly and shot a glance at Illona. She didn't seem in the least disconcerted.

"I'm glad I don't have to explain," she observed coolly. "What we want to know—not unnaturally—is what sort of person he was. We thought—"

"He was no good," said Jones flatly. He shot a quick glance at each of them to see the effect of that. "You think I'm feelingless, I suppose. Well, you can think what you damn please. It's nothing to me." He snorted to show it was nothing to him.

"Bill had an elder brother, Tom," he went on more quietly. "The two of them were going to work on rockets. Said transference was all very well if you had ships to carry the equipment, but ships would always be needed. Built a ship, too, the two of them. But something went wrong, and that was the end of Tom."

He seemed to lose the thread for a moment, then went on rapidly, in a hurry to get it over. "While Tom was alive, Bill looked as if he might amount to something. Never was much good to anyone else, even then, but he did seem to be some good to himself. When Tom died, that finished it. Bill never got over it. Went to college here and learned everything he could find to learn, just for something to occupy his mind. But nothing mattered to him, after Tom was smashed to bits in the ship."

"When did Tom die?" Illona asked.

"Three years ago."

"When Bill was sixteen?"

Jones grunted. "If you know how old Bill was, you can surely

take three off it without having it checked. Yes, when Bill was sixteen. Anything else you want to know?"

"Doesn't it interest you at all." Ralph interposed, "that your son, all that's left of him, is here in this room with you now?"

"Not much," retorted Jones. "God, you're as bad as the reporters. Bill meant nothing to me. When I say that, people think I must have hated him and beaten him and made his life hell. I didn't. He made his own life hell. He didn't need any help from me. I didn't even dislike him. All I felt was maybe a little sorry for him sometimes, because Tom could have made a lot of him. I'm not sorry this happened. Sooner or later when he was a bit more depressed than usual he was going to kill himself, and it's cleaner this way. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Don't you wonder," Ralph pursued, rather incredulously, "how he's getting on, how much of him is left, how he—"

"To me, he's dead," said Jones decisively. "Bill's mother died in hospital here—hospital, because we didn't have an asylum then. For two years she lived there without moving, without recognising anybody and they told me she never would move or recognise anybody." He sniffed explosively, perhaps hiding another sign of emotion. "Tell me, when did she die? When her heart stopped beating, or the last time she laughed and talked and knew what was going on around her?"

He stared aggressively at them. "Bill's gone," he said. "I don't want to hear any more about him. Nor about Tom, nor Jean. Got that? Bill may still exist in some way in you, just as Jean existed . . . "

Ralph frowned. Jones looked directly at him as he said "you."

"You've got this wrong," he said. "Bill isn't in me. It's Illona—."

He was interrupted by a surprisingly gentle laugh. "Maybe I've given you the idea I never understood Bill and didn't care," said Jones, "but believe this. I know him when I see him. Sure, the girl here may be partly Bill. There's something about the way she talks. But whenever I had a good look at you I knew why you'd come. Bill looked at me through your eyes."

He sniffed explosively again.

"Now, will you let me be?" he demanded.

They were silent for a long time as they wandered about Laccar. They had to spend six more hours on Mars, but they seemed to have accomplished all they were going to accomplish with Jones.

"It's true," said Ralph suddenly. "I didn't know because I haven't changed. Not like you . . . "

He stopped suddenly and frowned. "Illona," he said, with an unrepressed excitement that made her spin round and stare at him, "do you know this place?"

"No."

"Sure? Well, I don't know it either. At least, Ralph Bissinger doesn't. But Bill Jones presumably does. I have a strong impulse to go on this way for about half-a-mile and then turn left. I don't know what I'll find, but I know I can find it."

"Then let's go," she said. A change had come over them. Now she was calm and a little amused, and it was Ralph who was excited and impatient.

They found the yard where Tom and Bill Jones had worked—derelict and deserted for three years. They found a tangled mass that had once been a ship. And they found, since Ralph knew exactly where to look, the coincidence of Tom, Bill and Lionel Foster.

Mary Gorton was at a party. She sipped her cocktail and said patiently: "No, Perry, I'm a business woman, not a model."

She didn't lower her voice, and a few others at the rather arty party she found herself attending, looked up inquiringly. One or two of them began to drift in her direction.

Mary was as near being embarrassed as she had ever been. She wasn't disobliging. She didn't mind being asked to do anything she thought she did well. But she knew that Perry's pleas and protestations must be insincere.

"Look, Perry," she said, "I've got just enough artistic appreciation to know how cruel your brush can be. You can take a beauty and capture all that's attractive in her and still show how stupid and insipid and artificial she is. I don't know what you've got in mind for me, but call me a coward if you like."

"You, a coward, Mary?" giggled the host, Helen Jessamine.

"Sure, everybody's a coward in something. I don't want to see myself as Perry sees me. He may not be able to move mountains with his tongue, but he can be pretty trenchant on a canvas. He can't be trying to find beauty, so . . . "

As Perry protested rather incoherently, Mary saw a curious expression come over Helen's face.

"Quiet, Perry," Helen said. "Folks, excuse us for a minute." Without another word she took Mary's arm. Mary allowed herself to be marched through the flat to the studio. Helen was a

commercial photographer. Only when Helen sat her on a stool did she protest.

"Quiet, you too," said Helen. "It's no use making you look at yourself in a mirror, I suppose. I'm an artist, too, Mary. Let me show you what Perry's getting at."

Mary shrugged her shoulders. Helen moved about her coldly, critically, switching on and adjusting lights, casually reaching out to shift Mary's arm, adjusting her evening gown, moving her head to a different angle. Anything Mary said she ignored. Mary had never seen Helen working before. It was a revelation.

After all her preparation, Helen spent only a few seconds with her camera. Then she said, "Wait here," and disappeared into her darkroom.

When she came back she didn't speak, but merely thrust a picture, still hot from the drying machine, into Mary's hands. Mary was never quite able, later, to disentangle her thoughts when she saw it.

Mary had been able to get most of what she wanted. But she had never found it possible to look at women like Illona Alexander without envy. Beauty was the one thing she could never have. She could be smart, but never lovely.

Now she saw she was beautiful. A photograph could flatter, of course, but in essence a camera could merely show what was in front of the lens at the time. Mary stared at the picture for long minutes. She knew that the lovely woman who looked back at her had not existed for long. She knew how long the lovely woman in the picture had existed.

It was since she came back from Mars with a young Martian student who never arrived. But she gave Bill Jones only a passing mental glance before she gave herself over to the joy of never having to envy women like Illona Alexander again.

When Frank Herbert had invited his secretary out to dinner, she had been no more surprised than he was. But rather surprisingly, in one who had introspected so much, he didn't introspect.

His secretary had, as the phrase is, been around. She took for granted things than which nothing could be further from his mind. So as he removed his shirt-studs after a long evening he might sweat at the thought of facing her in the morning; but she, hitting the hay in her flat miles away, would have thought it a rather dull evening if it hadn't been for the fact that it was much less dull than she expected.

What stopped Herbert in the middle of taking off his shoes

was the realisation that he had *enjoyed* it. He thought of the word with wonder, tasting it, rolling it around on his tongue. He thought of other words. He had been amused, he had laughed, he had experienced pleasure. They were words which he knew but didn't seem to have understood.

The wonder of it was too much to leave him any attention for the consideration of what had happened. He merely wondered why he had never taken Betty out to dinner before.

He never thought of Bill Jones. He was too interested in the fantastic consideration that Frank Herbert could enjoy certain facets of life. He must, he thought, look up Mary Gorton. Betty was a means to an end. Mary, if she would condescend to notice his existence, might be an end in herself.

V

"Funny they haven't proved there is such a thing as clairvoyance," Mary Gorton remarked. "They can't have done any experiments with newspaper men."

There was some justification for her remark. Ralph Bissinger, on his return from Mars with Illona, had asked Mary and Frank Herbert to meet them. He had booked a table at an exclusive restaurant. It was to be a quiet evening, with plenty of opportunity for talk.

But somehow the reporters and photographers and news editors had devined the fact that the four people who had travelled with Bill Jones were dining together, and guessed that there must be a story behind it. They made the original plan impossible. Ralph whisked his three guests off to dine at his house instead, but not before a score of flashguns had flashed.

In Ralph's house at least they could have privacy, though Ralph, as host, apologised unnecessarily for the fare. They agreed tacitly to leave discussion until afterwards, and Ralph spent the period of the meal flirting with Mary in a wholly futile attempt to make Illona jealous. She didn't even notice. Of them all, she was still the most interested in Bill Jones, and she remained silent and thoughtful.

When Herbert and he had lit cigars and the girls were arranged decoratively in armchairs in the lounge, Ralph opened the subject.

"You know what this is about, Mary, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded. "But I've only just learned about it. Don't spring anything on me without warning."

Ralph turned to Herbert inquiringly. "No," said Herbert, "I don't know a thing. But I know there's something strange going on." He told them why. Mary grinned at him in a way that promised well, he thought.

"The fact is," said Ralph, "that Bill Jones was divided among us all. Whether it was inevitable or merely by chance I don't know, but we all have reason to be glad it happened—except me, and I'm not sorry." He explained, while Mary nodded, Illona sat silent, and Herbert tested, weighed and accepted the truth.

"I can't understand that," said Herbert. "I can see how Miss Alexander's intelligence could be given a jolt—her mind put in order, so to speak, with some of Bill Jones's ability to think. But how about Miss Gorton? Bill Jones wasn't beautiful. How about me? He didn't seem happy, and you tell me he definitely wasn't."

"Bill wasn't split into different facets," said Illona unexpectedly. "We each have reacted to his whole personality. He was a thinker, though it got him nowhere. In some strange way he helps me to think. He knew beauty and had once appreciated it. He brought Mary grace and poise which she didn't have before, any more than Bill had. He was young, even if the joys of youth were frozen in him. You, Mr. Herbert, were shown what it's like to be young, what could be pleasant, what the world had to offer."

Mary's mind flashed back to a moment in Ralph's car. She stared at Illona in frank admiration. "I wish I could do that," she said ironically.

"Aren't you rather," said Herbert drily, "forcing the facts to fit the situation? Theorising to prove what you know to be true?"

"Yes," Illona admitted. "No one would have expected the effect that Bill has had on the three of us. But does it matter? Perhaps all the indecision and misery was somehow lost. Perhaps Bill happened to be contented at the moment of being split up, and we got his momentary state of mind imprinted on ours, not his usual state. Whatever the real explanation, the effect was good."

"And lasting?" asked Herbert wryly.

"Why not? Can I be dumb again? Can Mary forget how to move and hold herself like a queen? Can you forget the discovery that there is still pleasure in life?"

"As for me," remarked Mary, "I'll accept all that, but we've been talking only about three of us. How about the fourth?" She looked at Ralph. "You once said you found life a bit of a joke. Has it lost its savour?"

Ralph laughed. "No. I find this a bit of a joke, too. Maybe a rather grim one. You see, apparently I didn't need anything of

Bill Jones. I was quite happy as I was. I still am. So I got what none of the rest of you got. Mere facts—buried deep, but not inaccessible. I found them when I went to Mars. That's why I asked you to meet us. I can tell you what Bill Jones wants—or would want."

He had their attention. His easy, pleasant manner could be very effective, without histrionics. But he couldn't help being dramatic and keeping them in suspense a little longer.

"Coincidence," he remarked to himself. "That's what you'll say, I suppose. It's what Illona said. But I wonder. When a man's father dies in front of a truck, and years later he dies the same way, I don't think that's coincidence. A gruesome thought perhaps, but when circumstances parallel the past, you usually find if you go into it that someone was working consciously or unconsciously to produce the parallel."

He saw that he was in imminent danger of being hit over the head with a table lamp. Herbert was patient, but Mary was fingering it suggestively.

"It's very simple," he said. "Bill Jones wouldn't want Lionel Foster to suffer for his death, because he wanted to die anyway, at any time during the last three years. I think he wants or would want, to save him from the kind of misery that Bill Jones experienced himself after killing his brother by the same kind of mistake. Three years ago, Bill should have done something, didn't, and his brother Tom died. Nobody else knew about that, but Bill did. The other day Lionel should have done something, didn't, and Bill died."

He had his effect and he enjoyed it.

"Maybe what's left of Bill can't make decisions any more, and perhaps he doesn't even know that Lionel exists. But we know what his decision would be. Coincidence, if you like. Still, I have a queer, unreasonable idea that Bill was always going to die through someone else's mistake. He was going on existing, indifferently, waiting for someone to be careless and kill him. It just happened to be Lionel Foster. Now, are we going to do anything about it?"

A few words on the 'phone were enough to bring Milldew and Senators Morrison and Grewer to Ralph's house—a few well-frozen words, as Mary Gorton put it. When they arrived, Ralph played the host for a few minutes, seeing that they were comfortable and had drinks and cigars, until Grewer lost patience slightly and demanded to know what Ralph's brief 'phone message meant.

"Just what it said," Ralph told him. "It would be much better if Lionel Foster were never brought for trial."

"Is this intimidation?" asked Morrison mildly.

"I'm sure," said Mary ironically, "we could never intimidate the World Senate."

Grewer surveyed them shrewdly. He had been introduced; he knew they were the four people who had travelled with Bill Jones.

"Carry on," he said. He didn't look at Morrison. They had no objection to each other. Each would admit the other had a right to exist, he supposed.

Ralph looked at Milldew. "Did you ever find out exactly what was wrong?" he asked. "Or wasn't there the faintest possibility that Bill Jones's state of mind could have anything to do with what happened?"

From Milldew's startled look he saw he had scored a bull. Milldew collected himself. "The faintest possibility, yes," he admitted. "There was something wrong, but we wouldn't have expected . . . The plain fact is," he went on with an unexpected burst of frankness, "it's all so inexpicable technically from start to finish that we're ready to believe anything."

"That would be an interesting attitude to consider at Lionel's trial," Mary observed, and Morrison nodded, beginning to enjoy himself.

"If you still want to make a big legal case of it," said Ralph, also enjoying himself, "I don't deny it would probably be interesting. It would be the first time you had a legally dead man, in the person of four other people, as a witness for the defence."

That not unnaturally entailed a lot of explanation. Morrison sat back and smiled.

They could see Grewer making up his mind. Morrison didn't have to; as far as the Moderates were concerned, it was far better that the whole thing should be forgotten as quickly as possible.

Finally Grewer spoke. "We took the wrong stand as it happened," he admitted. "We went for the individual. We should have gone for the enterprise. Too late now. Okay, I think I can speak for my party. It's all off."

He seemed a little relieved, like a general told before fighting a battle that he needn't bother, as his side had surrendered.

"Storm in a teacup," he commented.

"A mere matter of a man's future, a war being allowed to grow, the stability of the World Senate, and the destiny of the world," said Morrison gently, nodding in agreement. Grewer grunted.

"I was afraid," Ralph remarked, when they had gone, "that

they were going to fight just the same. After all, it's illegal to commit suicide. The fact that Bill Jones wouldn't want Lionel to suffer is neither here nor there."

"No," agreed Mary, "but think how silly the Progressives would look. That's what mattered."

In the World Senate, later, the chairman came to an item of business, regarded the papers in front of him distastefully, and observed: "I understand there is now no need to go into this matter." He turned the papers over. "The next item is the question of China."

A French delegate's comment was translated as "High time."

Senator Grewer rose. "I propose that a firm stand should be taken."

Senator Morrison seconded. "With the additional suggestion," he added gravely, "that no avenue be left unexplored."

It took nearly twenty minutes to reach full agreement (disregarding the two Chinese viewpoints), and a further ten minutes to delegate the first steps in the business of stopping war to Australia, Japan, India, Pakistan, Burma and Russia.

"These things," Senator Grewer was heard to remark impatiently, "should be automatic."

Five days later Lionel was out with Sally. He was going to be late. He looked at his watch. "Sorry, Sally," he said.

"I'll come with you to the depot," she told him.

After all, while the charge of criminal negligence had been dropped, Lionel knew in a vague way that there had been some kind of political manœuvres behind that, and if he wanted to keep his job with IT he would have to be very careful for a long time.

But the difference was that now Sally seemed to know it too.

Mary Gorton laughed uncomfortably. "It would only be a marriage of convenience, Frank," she said.

"What's wrong with that? Do you really think like the heroine of a dime novel?"

"Heaven forbid. But I want you to know how I feel."

Herbert took a deep breath and made the riskiest remark of his life—on the subject of how she felt.

Mary was surprised. "With proper training," she said, "you could be interestingly lewd. Let's think about this idea of yours,

shall we, for another six months or so. I must admit I always wanted to marry a millionaire."

She considered the idea again, saw a few more attractive facets in it, and added more cordially: "Yes, let's think about it."

Ralph and Illona were on a Californian beach, quite enjoying frying themselves brown.

"Don't you ever feel," murmured Illona from under a huge sunhat that was her principal item of attire, "that three is a crowd?"

"Frankly," Ralph admitted, "it had never occurred to me. But since you mention it, I find a curious little item that must have come from Bill Jones's experience. It's something people do on Mars when they're in love."

"Strange customs from many lands?"

"That sort of thing. After all, life on Mars is very different. It's not surprising that curious little conventions creep in. Say, Illona, I don't think anyone's looking just at this moment. Shall we . . . solemnise this Martian rite?"

Illona cast aside her sunhat and looked up at him with foreboding. "I never buy a pig in a poke," she said. "Information, please."

"It would take too long to explain, but just a second to demonstrate."

He bent over and placed his lips gently on hers. It was a long second.

Just three minutes later the last shot was fired in China. As wars went, it had been an unspectacular affair. Less than a million people had died. No war had ever been stopped as neatly and decisively.

There was a lot to be said for concerted action.

—J. T. McIntosh

There is not much to the plot of this story—it deals with an old man and his memories and an old derelict spaceship, but by using the poetry of words Mr. Tubb turns it into a nostalgic saga of the fickleness of the general public.

BITTER SWEET

By E. C. TUBB

She was fifty years old but her beauty was still a pain in his heart.

She stood at the edge of the field, silhouetted against the setting sun, tall, slim, sleek in her curved lines and tapering contours, the fading light reflecting from her hull in a shimmering glory of red and gold, yellow and orange, soft pink and pale amber. At her feet shadows clustered, softening the hard lines of the three wide fins, and her small, round eyes glinted a little with glassy blankness as she stared indifferently towards the darkening blue of the sky. She seemed lonely, even a little forlorn as she stood all by herself at the edge of the scorched area, quivering a little in mute sympathy with the droning thunder of massed venturis as squat vessels lifted themselves on wings of flame and headed towards the distant worlds across the void.

She had stood there for twenty years now, blistered by summer suns and frozen by winter winds, tall and proud in her isolation and yet perhaps a little wistful as she stared at the passing crowds, sinking into the neglect and oblivion that is the fate of all who are forgotten.

But Sam Harrigan did not forget.

He stared at her, leaning heavily on his thick cane, his weak

eyes dimmed by something more than reflected sunlight or the slow passage of relentless years. They had been young together, the ship and he though he had already lived a third of his life when she was new-born, but flesh ages faster than metal and he envied her a little as he stood in the shadows at her feet.

Yet both showed the passage of time, he with his weak eyes and stooped shoulders, a heart which fluttered with a mounting pain and breath which wheezed as it entered his labouring lungs. She, too, showed the scars of age and neglect, the dented hull and dull finish of reclaimed junk, and mottled patches of careless welds and the thick coat of disguising paint where originally no paint had been. Once she, like himself, had been fresh and bright, young and vibrant, eager and ready to take the road to high adventure and unknown frontiers.

But that had been fifty years ago and for thirty of them she had lain forgotten in a scrap yard as men exploded outwards to the conquest of space. Then belated conscience had resurrected her, cleaned her up a little, mounted her on a concrete plinth at the edge of the field—and then had forgotten her.

But Sam could not forget.

He was an old man now, and tired, and his hands had lost their fine touch, his eyes their youthful brightness and his brain the power to make the split-second decision essential to any man who challenged the void. His reactions had slowed, his health had vanished and, like the ship, he was a has-been, but unlike the ship, he was not even remembered.

And so he lived in the fading afterglow of memories, paying his silent homage to the ship which had given him a moment of brief fame, sharing with it his ebbing years and bitter nostalgia.

"Gee, Dad. Look! "

The strident voice startled him, and he turned at the sound of running feet and looked down at a young boy. At first he thought the lad had spoken to him, then he saw a man, obviously the boy's father, walking slowly towards him along the wide, perimeter path circling the field.

"What is it, son? "

"This ship." The boy stared at it with critical eyes. "Look at it! Only one jet, no steering tubes, no skids, and look at the shape! I bet that couldn't carry any sort of payload at all."

"Probably an old model." The man halted by the low plinth and looked disinterestedly at the ship. "Maybe a radio-guided missile or something."

"It's a space ship," said Sam. "It went to the Moon."

"Did it? " The man shrugged. "Nothing in that—ships go to the Moon every day and to the planets twice a week."

"But it went a long time ago. Maybe you remember it? "

"Me? " The man shook his head and looked towards his son where he stood, scratching at the paint on one fin. "Hey, Junior! You were at school last. Did you learn about the early ships."

"Sure." The boy kicked at the ship and rejoined his father.

"Why?"

"You must have learned of this ship then," Sam said, eagerly. "Who was the first man to reach the Moon? "

"Carruthers."

"No, he was the third. There were two before him. One died but the other came back. Can you remember his name? "

"It was Carruthers," insisted the boy defiantly. "I know it because we had extra marks for answering correctly. It was Carruthers."

"He landed on the Moon," agreed Sam reluctantly. "But he wasn't the first man to reach it. Surely you know who that was? "

"I told you," said the boy, sullenly, and stood kicking at the plinth, his eyes scornful as he stared at the tall, slender shape of the ship. "This thing wouldn't be any good anyway. The shape's all wrong. Where would they have loaded cargo? Where would the crew quarters have been? Just look at it, all long and narrow, it's . . . it's ugly! "

"No! " Sam swallowed, half-regretting his vehemence and yet not ashamed of it, but it didn't matter, the man hadn't seemed to have heard him.

"Junior's pretty smart when it comes to space ships," he said, proudly. "Can argue exhaust velocities and capacities with the best of 'em. He wants to be a pilot when he grows up and I'm all for it." He chuckled. "There's plenty of money to be earned in space, plenty of it."

"Is that why he wants to be a pilot? "

"Why not? " The man seemed surprised. "What other reason could there be? "

Sam shook his head, not attempting to answer, but deep inside he remembered how he had felt when he first heard he had been chosen to pilot the vessel. They hadn't talked of money then, hadn't even thought about it, and somehow, to him, it was disgusting to think of it now. Space flight was too clean to be soiled. The thing should be done for the thrill of exploration, the knowledge that man was pitting his flesh and his knowledge against a universe, not for what could be got out of it.

From the centre of the field sound murmured as a rocket blasted on schedule, the rolling thunder sending flat echoes whispering over the level plain. Instinctively Sam turned and glanced at the mounting ship, feeling a dim return of his old ardour in the sight. The other two didn't bother to look.

"Better get moving, son," said the man, and glanced at his wrist-watch. "We can always come out to see the ships land some other time."

"Gee, Dad, must we? "

"Yes. We don't want to miss the serial do we? And your mother has some Venusian swamp fruits for us." He frowned as the boy continued to stare at the tall ship. "Come on—what do you want to waste time with this junk for? "

"It was a good ship," said Sam, stung by the undisguised contempt in the man's voice. "It did something which had never been done before, and it's part of history now."

"Is it? " The man glanced at his wrist-watch again.

"Yes."

There was a plaque at the foot of the ship, a round bronze medallion, and he hoped that they would take the trouble to look at it and read of what the ship had done. Read also the name of the man who had done it with her.

"My name is Harrigan," he said, hopefully, and stared hard at the plaque. "I was young when this ship was built."

"I guess you must have been," agreed the man politely, but he didn't look at the plaque, and neither did his son.

"Well, old timer, sorry, but we've got to go now."

"Wait! " Desperation sharpened the old tones and the man hesitated, one hand gripping the boy by the shoulder as he stared at the old man.

"Yes? "

"Don't you want to know about the ship? I know all about it and I can tell you if you like." He forced himself to smile at the boy. "It would interest your son."

"I don't know," said the man slowly, and glanced at his wrist again. "Do you want to hear it, son? "

"No thanks, Pop. Let's get home and watch the serial. What could be interesting about that heap of scrap anyway? "

He began to walk away and his father, after a moment's hesitation, strode after him. Sam stared after them, sick with the knowledge of what was happening.

"But it was the first! " he cried, fiercely. "The very first space ship of all! "

They didn't stop. They didn't turn and stare with new respect at the slender shape, half-ashamed of their ignorance and eager to glean from the lips of the one man who could tell them best the true facts of that momentous flight. They merely increased their stride, hurrying away from a loquacious old man who might bore them with tales of no value and waste their precious time.

They just didn't care.

Sam watched them go, staring after them until his weak eyes could no longer make them out in the thickening twilight, and bitterness rose within him as he watched them.

"It was the first, the very first," he repeated in a whisper, "and I was the first too."

He leaned against one of the wide fins, his gnarled fingers caressing the scarred metal as other men would caress a woman, and night thickened around him as his eyes filled with tears.

"They've forgotten us," he whispered. "They don't even want to know how it all began. They're too interested in their comic serials, the wages of a pilot, the regular, scheduled runs. They call you a heap of scrap and sneer at your shape, and no one's got time for an old man and what he could tell them." He stroked the metal again. "It'll be over for me soon, but what about you? How long will they let you stay here, a monument that no one bothers to look at, a relic no one wants? They'll kill you, tear you apart and melt you down, clear you away and forget you. Maybe we'll be together then, the two of us, driving together towards the last frontier of all."

His fingers traced a pattern on the painted metal, hesitating as they came to an obstruction, following it as if with a life of their own.

Out, along, down. Out, along, down. Out from the metal of the fin, along for several inches, then back down to the metal. He blinked, stared at it, and smiled as memory returned.

He was standing at the foot of the built-in ladder leading to the entrance port in the nose.

He looked at it for a long time.

Fifty years ago he had run up that ladder, turning at the top to wave to the crowds clustered below, smiling at them, happy and eager to be off on the great adventure. A frail, light-weight ladder of spidery rungs, running from the base of the fin to . . .

What?

Youth again, perhaps? The vicarious pleasure of treading over the same path he had trodden so long ago? Or the arousing of too-bitter memories and the disturbing of ghosts long dead? He didn't know, he didn't care, but suddenly, as if his body had grown impatient and had decided for itself during the slow processes of his weary thoughts, he was climbing the ladder.

Seventy-five steps, each a foot apart, and each seeming to represent a year of his life. He mounted them with a numb desperation, his heart pounding against his ribs, sickening him with its mounting pain, and the sound of his breathing was horrible in his ears.

It had been so different in the old days. Then he had raced up the rungs with winged feet, not noticing the climb, his heart strong with youth and excitement. Now, though he felt the excitement, he lacked the youth, and the way was long.

He was almost fainting by the time he reached the top.

The hatch was closed as he knew it would be, but he grabbed at the external control, praying desperately that they hadn't welded it shut. He tugged at it, tearing his hands on weathered metal, grunting as he fought the control, and, just as he was ready to admit defeat, the hatch swung open with a harsh grate of neglected mechanism. He rested for a moment, hanging on the edge of the door, then, trying to ignore the pain tearing at his chest, he entered the control cabin.

There had been no need for an air lock. The ship had been designed merely to circle the Moon and weight had been cut to a minimum, and he could see the dim shape of the acceleration couch, the ravaged control panel, the gaping holes which had once held essential equipment. He stared around him, feeling the savage pangs of disappointment tear at his soul, sick with the realisation that, like himself, the ship was an empty shell with all that had once made it what it was gone as his own skills had gone.

Tiredly he sank on to the acceleration couch, stretching himself as he had on a day so long ago, and in the dim light streaming through the round, direct vision ports, imagination replaced the missing equipment and restored the control room to the smooth perfection it had once been.

Imagination too, restored the lost years and the vanished strength so that half a century became a thing yet to happen and time reversed itself so that he forgot what he was and remembered only what he had once been.

Ghosts filled the dim-lit control room. The ghosts of machines and men, of muted crowd-noises and whispered instructions, words from the lips of men long dead echoing from imagined receivers and stirring the memory banks of his mind.

"All set, Sam?"

"All set."

"God, but you're lucky! Think of it, the first man to circle the Moon! You'll make history, Sam. I wish I was coming with you."

"Only room for one, Jeff."

"I know, and you are the best we've got. But I can't help envying you. When we're all dead and forgotten, kids will read about you in school. You'll be famous, Sam. You'll never be forgotten."

"Maybe."

"It's a certainty."

"I hope that you're right. How long now?"

"Stand by! Prime jet!"

"Right!'

Invisible levers slid beneath the impact of memory. Muted sound throbbed through the silent ship, quivering the hull, and stilling the drone of crowd-noises, turning the ghost-voice from the ghost-radio into a thin whisper of memory-sound.

"Minus ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Good luck, Sam! Three. Two. One. Now!"

"What the hell are you doing in here?"

The shock was such that he couldn't grasp it and he wavered for a moment, half-way between reliving the surging thrust of take-off and the cold reality of the present. Imagination recoiled on itself, the memory-equipment vanished, the vicarious thrill lost itself, and he stared numbly at the gaping holes and ravaged panels surrounding him.

"Didn't you hear me?" A burly field guard stamped across the ringing metal of the floor and glared down at him. "What's the big idea?"

"I . . ." Sam stared at him, twisting with the pain from his shocked heart. "I . . ."

"I spotted you climbing the ladder and guessed what you were after." The guard scowled as he stared around the bare metal walls. "Some people will steal anything. I suppose you thought that you could pick up a piece of equipment to sell in town. Well, you can't, it's all been taken away."

"I didn't think that," protested Sam weakly. "I . . ."

"What's the matter, aren't you well? " The guard softened his voice a little as he stared at the old man. "Maybe you didn't intend to steal anything after all? Maybe you just thought that you'd flop down in here for the night? "

"No, I . . ."

"Well you can't do that either." The guard jerked his thumb towards the open hatch. "Come on, Pop. Out."

"Yes, I . . ." Sam gulped as he left the couch and moved slowly towards the gaping hatch. The guard went first, steadying him on the long, downward journey, and Sam was glad of his supporting shoulder. They reached the base just as the sun lowered itself behind the horizon and the tip of the sharp nose stood, limned against the thickening shadows, painted with bright colours and warm hues. Sam stared at it as he waited for his heart to ease its painful fluttering, and his rasping breath made even the burly guard wince.

"You all right, Pop? "

"Yes."

"I'll see that they weld that hatch shut tomorrow. If I hadn't seen you you might have stayed up there until you died, or fallen and smashed yourself up." He grunted. "Climbing like that at your age. You should have more sense."

"I've done it before," said Sam defiantly. "A long time ago."

"Is that right? "

"Yes."

"Well you can't do it now and don't forget it." The guard stared at the old man. "Come on, I'll see you off the field."

"There is no need for that," said Sam with quiet dignity. He looked at the big man. "My name is Harrigan."

"So what? " The guard shrugged. "Let's get moving." He glared at the tall shape of the rocket, dim now and ghost-like in the thickening dusk. He kicked at one of the wide fins, his heavy boot making the metal ring as if in crying protest. "Damn junk," he said, contemptuously. "I'll be glad when they get rid of it."

He looked at Sam, wondering why the old man should be staring at the ship with his eyes full of silent tears, then shrugged and took hold of a thin arm.

Together they walked away.

—E. C. Tubb

It was a peculiar type of war—Youth against Age—and neither side dare exterminate the other. It was necessary to find an amicable solution without either side losing power. But how?

ZONE OF YOUTH

By MARTIN JORDAN

It was not a road—there were no roads on Ceres—it was the merest scoring of the rock to tell that troops had passed that way, and we followed it up the hill that was not a hill. This was like the fang of a tiger; yet a sort of groundweed grew that crackled like peanut shells when you trod on it.

Here the front line of Youth was not continuous but had degenerated into a series of posts on the outcrops—sometimes big enough to be called forts, but often little more than gunpits—each with its piled sandbags and the orange flag flying. You could smell the smoke of their fires as well as your own, but most of all, maybe over the whole front, you could smell the garbage smells of both sides—the excrement and the dumps of rotted foodscraps—the smell of war which our forefathers must have known well enough, but which had not been savoured in the Solar System for a hundred years.

When we reached the fortified shelf near the top the men we were relieving greeted us silently. They had been there several weeks and had beards, and almost every beard was grey or greying. Their uniforms were unspeakable; for although it doesn't rain on Ceres enough to make mud, there is plenty of dust. The lieutenant in command came out of a dugout. He was a middleaged man called

Skoncett. He didn't look at me, although he must have been wanting to. A bullet or two whined overhead. The shelf was about twenty yards wide with a parapet of sandbags, and there were several dug-outs hollowed out of the cliff behind.

Skoncett said to our officer: "About time." He was anxious to get away—from the front, I imagine, but also from the responsibility of having me sergeant-majoring around. The ferry ship would be taking him and his company to Mars, where they would have a delouse and a bath. That bath was interesting. They put upwards of five hundred men through each fifty-gallon tub, purifying the water each time by electrolysis. In theory the fifty gallons should last for ever. Where did it go? Tiny, lost splashings, evaporation, capillary action—those were the answers. Water was like well-being; it vanished as you stretched your hand.

Hurriedly Skoncett took us round the post. There were narrow trenches in front of the parapet and then barbed wire. A dozen sentries were posted, serving their last hour before relief, all doubtless thinking of the water-tub waiting on Mars. Beyond the wire the ground fell sharply until it rose again to form the crag in front held by Youth. It all looked black and sharp, like an earth-landscape just before a thunderstorm; yet this was high noon, the best of the day that Ceres could offer. Overhead the sun was a small coin that you could look at without eyestrain. The cold found a chink in your neck-scarf like a sudden application of a knife.

I peered at the enemy position—at all the crazy tops in front that seemed to tumble away from me over the humpbacked horizon. "Where are they?" I asked. Then I saw the small shape of the Youth post on the opposite crag, the orange flag hanging limp.

"Long range," I said, adding, ". . . sir." Skoncett looked at me sharply for the first time. Then he snatched a rifle, as if looking at me had made him nervous, and let fly at the position, barely taking aim. I could see two figures scrambling against the hillside over there. All the sentries joined in until the noise was deafening; for the packed hills, coupled with the effect of the dense, artificial atmosphere of the asteroid, conspired to make it so. The enemy were incredibly close; I could glimpse the boy-faces, like buttons of flesh. The two had obviously been caught laying wire and had a long way to go to reach their parapet. I took my own rifle. As I put in a new clip and cocked it I felt a terrible weight, so that lifting the antique weapon to the aim was a groan-making effort. This was not due to Ceres gravity—like myself the rifle weighed next to nothing and its mass had been "topped up" for the campaign—it

was the sheer weight of moral reluctance. I got something that moved in the backsight and fired. But I think I missed. I was trembling: it was the first time that I had ever fired at a human being.

In war there are four things to think about—keeping warm, keeping fed, keeping in tobacco and keeping in touch with the enemy. On Ceres the enemy came last. There was a routine watchfulness, of course—surprise attack was always a possibility—but in general no one thought much about the enemy. They were just children one tried to shoot now and then and who sometimes fired back. Warmth, food and tobacco were real; these made the drama and the rest was a slightly irrevelant backcloth. It was not an eventful life—just guard duty, patrol, trench-digging, in a recurrent cycle. On each crag-top, Government or Youth, a crowd of shivering, dirty soldiers crouched. The small calibre rifles sent their bullets to and fro. The deadly spray of modern atomics would have cleared the battlefront; but Ceres (said the press reports), was no place for such weapons; the missiles from a twenty-third century fire-ramp would have reached escape-velocity and gone into orbit for eternity round the asteroid. Again, any large-scale explosion might have deflected the asteroid from its already eccentric path. Hence the antique rifles, the prototypes of which had been taken from museums; hence the paraphernalia of primitive war. *Hence?* Let me be honest here; the pretence mustn't become a habit. Science would have found a way to annihilate Youth—if we had let it. But who wants the suicide of mankind? And what else is the annihilation of Youth?

As time passed I caught myself in wry-faced awareness of futility. The futility of scrambling about the surface of this small world, of gaining and losing its bits of rock, back and forth, inch by inch. Earlier there had been fierce battles for all these crags; then, in view of the lack of modern weapons and the impossibility of decision, each side had fortified and settled on the rocks it had gained. The line so formed circled the asteroid. Every crag was held by troops and was therefore a distinct hell of cold, dirt and monotony, denied even the distraction of a landscape, for the curvature of the asteroid was too steep to reveal one. Sometimes the opposite hillside was blurred by a massing of atmosphere too slight to be called a cloud, out of which the Youth parapet rose like a thing in a bad painting emphasised for no particular reason. The surfaces of the rocks looked in the remote light like diseased skin,

mortifying ever so slowly under a freezing sky specked with daylight stars.

During the half-hour or so of night we sent out patrols to explore the Youth positions. I never knew why: perhaps it was for the sake of something to do. It was a different aspect, you saw the rocks from another angle; and there was also the spice of hazard to be had from the bullets that whined around when you were spotted. If you climbed the enemy hill close enough to see the rents in their sandbags you had to move as slowly as lava and risk the fall of displaced rock that would bring the fire of a dozen rifles in your direction. One "night" I crawled close enough to listen to the Youth as they lay behind their parapet. I had a new heat-capsule in my pack; I knew it was warming my clothes for me, but still I was so cold that I feared they might hear the chattering of my teeth. As I listened, a queer fatherly-benevolent feeling came over me: I wanted to give them the Solar System. Or at least my tobacco. They were talking of their parents and home towns. The queer feeling grew, until I crawled back to our lines trying to harden my heart like the ice that stiffened my beard.

The fires had to be kept going, and that meant fuel.

It was really a war of fuel. The side that could stay warmest longest was going to be . . . I was going to say the winning side, except that there could have been no winning side.

On arriving to relieve the Company we had handled five drums of fuel up the crag, and that was barely enough. They had used up their stock before we appeared and we lost half a drum thawing them out. You see, they had to conserve the heat-capsules of their suits to get themselves back to base without freezing to death.

Sometimes we made real fires that consumed things with flames that crackled—the kind of fires people had in their apartments in olden times. We burned microfilm, old boots and the labels of ration cylinders.

Then there was the groundweed. It was permissible to risk your life for a sackful of weed that burned for two minutes. Our crag had already been picked clean as a bone, but the weed still grew patchily between us and the Youth and when we were not on night duty we were out on our bellies gathering it. When the Youth heard us they seemed to concentrate their fire by a sort of telepathy, but unless we had rather bad luck we were usually safe.

Nothing mattered except the cold—not dirt, or thirst or the lice that were hourly expected and, sure enough, came. It was a mad

life—an incredible kind of war. Everyone wanted to be anywhere except on Ceres; failing that, everyone wanted to storm the Youth positions and get things moving. But it was quite clear that little could be done. We were equal—the Youth and us—the Asteroid Belt was impregnable, decisive modern weapons couldn't be used; there was nothing to be done but what we were doing. The system couldn't get itself out of this impasse, and, as I kept telling myself while I crawled in the rock-strewn blackness for a handful of weed, the brains back Earthside had already given up and were leaving it to me.

As the time passed and the crazy old rifles spat their bullets amongst the rocks I knew with my secret knowledge that nothing else was to happen until we all packed up and left the Asteroid Belt and presented Youth with our big gravity-normal planets, keeping back just a corner wherein to die the fussy and querulous death of age.

There were about forty in our Company, including one or two yellow men and a couple of negroes—the youngest about forty-five and the eldest around seventy. For a long time nothing much happened as far as we knew all along the line; then we got an issue from base of five tommy-guns.

They were wonderful things compared with the rifles; once they must have made wars much shorter. We had a tape with them to say they fired at less than escape velocity on minimum parabola. We used to laugh at the insistence on slow missiles. It was true that any object fired from a modern ramp would have become a meteorite. The danger was not in that; it lay in the large number that would have gone into orbit; for someone had produced a math to prove that a war of only two years' duration would have made the asteroid unapproachable for years in such circumstances. Further, there was the question of parabola. Anyone firing standard weapons at a certain angle against the little world's rotation would as like as not get his own bullet in his neck half a minute later!

Still, even the old-fashioned tommy guns were a godsend; especially as word came from Battalion that there was to be an attack. *An attack!* "Don't fire the machine-guns yet," they added, "they're to be a surprise."

The days went by with no order to attack. The machine-guns lay untested. Would they fire? No one knew. Then came more word from headquarters: they had discovered another antique weapon,

and one ideal for Ceres—a thing called a hand-grenade. Supplies had been issued and were on the way.

At last they came, together with a thin captain from base to explain them. They were small eggs of metal filled with explosive. You pulled out a pin and then you had seven seconds before the thing blew. It was a thoroughly nasty conception.

One day Westoby told us that the attack was to be that night, i.e., during the two-hour period of darkness. Westoby was a lieutenant, the only officer on our post. He knew who I was, and I suppose he was nearly dead with the responsibility. He had a round puddingy face, round eyes with deep bags under them and the general look of a Saint Bernard dog. He was bald except for a few strands of grey hair. And he was a diehard. The only hope for the system (had there *been* hope), would have lain with men like Westoby—men proof against Youth, men willing to commit suicide rather than give Youth a nickel.

The attack was to be made by a dozen from each post on our sector, directed against the Youth fort about a mile to our left. When the abrupt transition from day to night had taken place Westoby led us down the crag. The rocks burned with absolute cold; you could feel their bite as you touched them with a gloved hand. In the pitch darkness we found the rear signals pit where a lot of men were waiting. A captain shone a torch into his own face and said, "I'm Kleebe, and I'm going to tell you the plan of attack." He was a very old man with white hair, and he didn't know me from Adam. The Youth line, he said, made a concavity hereabouts and the fort we were to take lay at the innermost point of the "bay." The Youth posts on either side, which would otherwise have an almost dead range of enfilading fire, would be dealt with by the other companies of our brigade. About twenty of us, under Westoby, were to sidle in and cut the wire. Westoby would then throw the first grenade, and then the rest of us were to take the fort, helped by the tommy-guns and grenades. The sound of Westoby's grenade would also serve as a signal to our flanks.

Someone handed out cylinders of whisky which we stuck in our pockets to join the grenades. Then they formed us into line and we set off, Westoby in the lead, leaving the white-haired captain to ruminate alone in the darkness.

That darkness seemed to increase as we advanced and to grow glutinous like black jelly. The rocks were crazy: it was like a microbe must feel wandering over a heap of sand. Inside a few minutes every man had fallen down at least once, and we began to

feel pensive about the grenades. Soon Westoby stopped and we were aware of a platoon of the medics about us with kit-cylinders and stretchers. That was a whale of a send-off. We left them and went on. The Youth parapet was about two hundred yards away and our only chance of making it was to avoid any sort of noise. I was in front with Westoby, and every time anyone made a clatter with a tommy-gun he hissed like frying fat. It didn't help the silence any.

But it was really impossible to move quietly. The only way was to explore each footstep with a tentative boot before you took it, and at the rate we were going the asteroid would have completed its hemi-rotation before we had reached the lines. There was one moment when I slipped roundly onto my rump and brought my gun butt against a rock with a crash. I thought every Youth on the asteroid would have heard it. But nothing happened.

So much time passed that I thought we had turned completely round by mistake and would shortly fetch up at Grand Base and see the assembled spaceships. Then something loomed up even blacker than the background—the outer Youth wire. I reached out my cutters and fondled it, making slack with every cut; it was one of the things I had practiced. The company closed up, making enough noise to stir the hair on your head. Then onwards through the gap until Westoby found the inner wire. This was a bare sixty feet from the line. I bent and started to cut, my whole body shouting out, "Deploy!" But no sooner had I finished than a spurt and a bang came from the Youth line; their sentry had heard us. Westoby threw his grenade; I did not hear the explosion and I think it must have landed quite a way beyond the fort. What I heard was the perfect din of twenty or thirty rifles from the parapet, and what I saw was the flicker of neutral light they made. The men behind us were throwing their grenades and soon the hell of noise became so continuous that I ceased to hear it, so that the rifles flamed in silence and the ground heaved out of illogic. Then there was a crashing explosion and a red glare, and I found myself on my face with my arms round something soft that I discovered afterwards to be Westoby's leg. Westoby was still attached to it, but he never moved; I think the explosion killed him. I remember thinking, "They've got grenades too," and that's all.

Only an hour or two must have passed before I opened my eyes and saw light. I was in a cave with a crowd of others from my company, and one was saying, "You okay, sergeant-major?" and

poking at me as if I were a trussed chicken. "I guess so," I muttered; at which he smiled in a not-funny way and said, "Well, that's too bad, because we're all going to be shot."

So the attack had failed and a goodsized file of us had been killed or captured.

The cave had an entrance, all steely-bright in the diminished Ceres light, and silhouetted against it was a figure wearing the heavily insulated suit of Youth—a vaguely feminine figure holding a tommy-gun.

I stood up; felt like a swatted fly must feel on a window pane; staggered across to her. She stiffened, and I said:

"I am George K. Fathom, President of the Solar System. Will you please tell your commanding officer?"

She answered clearly, "And I'm Cleopatra. Will you tell that to your commanding fanny?"

I clawed off my face-guard so that the cold leaped at the exposed skin and my eyes poured water.

"There. Will that satisfy you?"

"You'll get frostbite," she said. "But we've a firing squad that'll cure that."

I opened up my holdall, took out a shaver and started to remove my beard. The men stared and said nothing—mutes of embarrassment in the presence of lunacy. At last the shaver had nibbled the reluctant hair out of my cheeks and chin. Again I invited. "There . . ."

This time she peered and said nothing.

"I am the President," I said. "I understand that your leader, Randel Helm, is in the Belt. I wish to meet him."

This time she blew a whistle.

It stirred them up as I had thought it would. I was passed from hand to hand; the custodians grew in number with every check and the hostile respect grew as well. At length they clamped on the security; there were no more questions like, "What are you doing here, Mr. President?" I sat for eight hours in the stateroom of a grounded ship, three silent and armed teenagers with me.

I do not know which of the five hundred habitable asteroids had contained Helm, but my presence on Ceres brought him. The infant trio were dismissed. Helm himself sat in the armchair facing mine.

"You're the President all right."

"Yes," I agreed.

"What's the big idea?"

Looking at him I recognised my son. He was definitely not a stranger. Strangers affect you as static appearances—lumps of flesh sticking out of holes in clothing. But familiar people like your son you see as *processes*—they are part of the present that has arisen out of your own past.

Of course, Helm was not my son. It was just the common features of all Youth that gave me the feeling—the skin living so easily on the bone, the sense of coiled energy in torsion, and above all, the look about the eyes that criticised all historical answers.

At last I said, "I'm here because everyone's mixed up, and I wanted to be sure that didn't include you and me."

"You're here to make peace? You know the conditions."

"This isn't war," I said wearily. "It's blackmail."

"It's war," Helm said. A blonde curl on his forehead was pushed back with blunt technician's fingers. "It's war like the siege of Troy or the Battle of Bunker's Hill."

"Who wants the asteroids?"

"It's war for principles, not territory."

"There are no new principles."

"There are always new principles. Six hundred years ago in Europe and America, Earth, they discovered the Rights of Man. A hundred years ago, on Blue Continent, Venus, they realised the law of Common Sovereignty. Now it's the Rule of Youth."

He believed in his new principle. He said "Rule of Youth" with the familiar certainty of two thousand years of tradition, as people said "Catholic Church." But Youth had no tradition—the new principle was scarcely ten years old. I found myself wondering for the hundredth time what really had started it. Perhaps the writers were wrong. According to the common version it boiled down to prosperity. A long period of security and good living leads to a fall in the birthrate. That is what had happened. The population of the Solar System was almost entirely aged over fifty. I knew the figures—nearly a billion past middle age—a mere five million between twenty and thirty!

But the reasons were complex. There had been the infant mortality after the atomic wars of the twenty-first century; the fashion for "only" children following the decay of the family unit; the spread of promiscuity, coupled with the ease of much-publicised birth-control.

It remained that the worth-while jobs, from my own as President to the merest foreman-tech in an electronics plant, were held by

grey-haired men. That was the name Youth gave us when they formed their league—the Grey-haired Men.

Looking at Randel Helm I saw the spirit of the revolution. Every boy or girl under thirty was now a disciple of Greuthe, that dead-and-gone synthopsychologist. Their manifesto? Nothing less than control of the Solar System. Helm for President. The key jobs for Youth. The farmer should run the farm rather than the sheep. To them it was as evident as that.

"What do you mean by blackmail?" Helm asked.

"This. You've seized the Asteroid Belt. Youth has walked out on the worlds of the System. The geneticists say the rest of humanity—the odd billion you call the Grey-haired Men—will be extinct in ten generations. That is, unless you come back to us. We could blow these asteroids out of space if we wanted to. But that would be suicide, or rather genocide. We fight you with antique weapons. Our physicists say those are the only weapons for such tiny worlds as these. That's bunk. The real reason is that modern arms would wipe the System clear of Youth and condemn it to death. But everyone pretends that the ballistics bunk is real. Even you—even Youth—you use the antique weapons too. You try to blackmail us with your indispensability. You know we could destroy you tomorrow so that not a wisp of hair or sinew remained in the whole Belt. And you know that we daren't."

"Yes, we also use the antique guns," Helm said. For the first time he smiled. "But we don't pretend."

"Why, then—"

"I'll tell. It's the girls."

"You mean, the women won't let you . . . "

He pointed significantly to the bulkhead. "Mars. Up there. And Terra, and after that Venus. We could wipe them clean as boulders. But the girls say not, because they're fond of their dads. I'll explain that. You Grey-heads keep your women at home. Youth has no home; its women fight. It's a new situation. When it comes to questions of knocking out whole planets the women say, "What about our dads?" Women are soft on their dads. So it's only a token war . . . "

"But not token deadlock," I said. Against his silence I went on: "You'll grow old, here in the Belt; you'll look at your children one day and know yourselves for old."

"Our children will banish us all to the Grey-haired Worlds—they'll have learnt that. The asteroids will always be Youth's."

"And wealth—property?"

"A sliding scale. Affluence at eighteen, dwindling to a pittance at forty. Then banishment."

I remembered that fundamental of Youth: the end of the familiar figures of the doddering millionaire and the hard-up youngster. I sighed. I looked at Randel Helm. I think he realised that he had won, because he got up from his chair and stood there with the sudden ease in power of a conqueror. It was perhaps as the ancient Alexander must have looked, and it was an aspect that sat on his slight years like a great weight easily balanced. I got up too, and I took the microfilm from my hollow ear-lobe where the Youth searchers had missed it.

"As Ex-President of the Solar System," I said, "and plenipotentiary of the Inner Worlds, with absolute discretion, I hereby confirm the abdication of myself and the Solar Council. And here is the instrument of abdication."

He bowed slightly and took the tiny spool. The grave diplomatics wavered and he shook them off. He said:

"Where do we go from here?"

"You're the boss," I told him.

And after the visicasts and the speeches and the slow lifting of spaceship after spaceship, the new President said to me: "Why did you come the long way round, through the front line and over the parapet with a grenade?"

"Because I thought I might get killed," I answered, "and then the plenipotentiary would have been someone else."

"Is it so hard to give in to a law of nature?"

"Listen," I told him, "the time when you are forty will be the time for you to give in to that law yourself—to resign and take a pittance and make way for Youth. The law will then seem to you a law of nonsense, like drinking hemlock for no reason." I pointed a finger at him. 'You have power. *Could you ever surrender it?"*

He seemed to hesitate for a second; seemed to be listening to something in his body saying no. He stiffened and looked at me.

"Yes," he said, "Yes. I could."

—Martin Jordan

One of the most controversial points relative to Time travel is that of a man going back into the past and killing his grandfather. Mr. Wyndham's story, published for the first time in magazine form below, has an even neater twist which involves marriage instead of murder.

THE CHRONOCLASM

By JOHN WYNDHAM

I first heard of Tavia in a sort of semi-detached way. An elderly gentleman, a stranger, approached me in Plyton High Street one morning. He raised his hat, bowed, with perhaps a touch of foreignness, and introduced himself politely:

"My name is Donald Gobie, Doctor Gobie. I should be most grateful, Sir Gerald, if you could spare me just a few minutes of your time. I am so sorry to trouble you, but it is a matter of some urgency, and considerable importance."

I looked at him carefully.

"I think there must be some mistake," I told him. "I have no handle to my name—not even a knighthood."

He looked taken aback.

"Dear me. I *am* sorry. Such a likeness—I was quite sure you must be Sir Gerald Lattery."

It was my turn to be taken aback.

"My name *is* Gerald Lattery," I admitted, "but Mister, not Sir."

He grew a little confused.

"Oh, dear. Of course. How very stupid of me. Is there——" he looked about us, "—is there somewhere where we could have a few words in private? " he asked.

I hesitated, but only for a brief moment. He was clearly a gentleman of education and some culture. Might have been a lawyer. Certainly not on the touch, or anything of that kind. We were close to *The Bull,* so I led the way into the lounge there. It was conveniently empty. He declined the offer of a drink, and we sat down.

"Well, what is this trouble, Dr. Gobie? " I asked him.

He hesitated, obviously a little embarrassed. Then he spoke, with an air of plunging:

" It is concerning Tavia, Sir Gerald—er, Mr. Lattery. I think perhaps you don't understand the degree to which the whole situation is fraught with unpredictable consequences. It is not just my own responsibility, you understand, though that troubles me greatly—it is the results that cannot be foreseen. She really must come back before very great harm is done. She *must,* Mr. Lattery."

I watched him. His earnestness was beyond question, his distress perfectly genuine.

"But, Doctor Gobie—" I began.

"I can understand what it may mean to you, sir, nevertheless I do implore you to persuade her. Not just for my sake and her family's, but for everyone's. One has to be so careful; the results of the least action are incalculable. There has to be order, harmony; it must be preserved. Let one single seed fall out of place, and who can't say what may come of it? So I beg you to persuade her—"

I broke in, speaking gently because whatever it was all about, he obviously had it very much at heart.

"Just a minute, Doctor Gobie. I'm afraid there is some mistake. I haven't the least idea what you are talking about."

He checked himself. A dismayed expression came over his face.

"You—?" he began, and then paused in thought, frowning. "You don't mean you haven't met Tavia yet?" he asked.

"As far as I know, I do. I've never even heard of anyone called Tavia," I assured him.

He looked winded by that, and I was sorry. I renewed my offer of a drink. But he shook his head, and presently he recovered himself a little.

"I am so sorry," he said. "There has been a mistake indeed. Please accept my apologies, Mr. Lattery. You must think me quite light-headed, I'm afraid. It's so difficult to explain. May I ask you just to forget it, please forget it entirely."

Presently he left, looking forlorn. I remained a little puzzled,

but in the course of the next day or two I carried out his final request—or so I thought.

The first time I did see Tavia was a couple of years later, and, of course, I did not at the time know it was she.

I had just left *The Bull*. There was a number of people about in the High Street, but just as I laid a hand on the car door I became aware that one of them on the other side of the road had stopped dead, and was watching me. I looked up, and our eyes met. Hers were hazel.

She was tall, and slender, and good-looking—not pretty, something better than that. And I went on looking.

She wore a rather ordinary tweed skirt and dark-green knitted jumper. Her shoes, however, were a little odd; low-heeled, but a bit fancy; they didn't seem to go with the rest. There was something else out of place, too, though I did not fix it at the moment. Only afterwards did I realize that it must have been the way her fair hair was dressed—very becoming to her, but the style was a bit off the beam. You might say that hair is just hair, and hairdressers have infinite variety of touch, but they haven't. There is a kind of period-style overriding current fashion; look at any photograph taken thirty years ago. Her hair, like her shoes, didn't quite suit the rest.

For some seconds she stood there frozen, quite unsmiling. Then, as if she were not quite awake, she took a step forward to cross the road. At that moment the Market Hall clock chimed. She glanced up at it; her expression was suddenly all alarm. She turned, and started running up the pavement, like Cinderella after the last bus.

I got into my car wondering who she had mistaken me for. I was perfectly certain I had never set eyes on her before.

The next day when the barman at *The Bull* set down my pint, he told me:

"Young woman in here asking after you, Mr. Lattery. Did she find you? I told her where your place is."

I shook my head. "Who was she? "

"She didn't say her name, but—" he went on to describe her. Recollection of the girl on the other side of the street came back to me. I nodded.

"I saw her just across the road. I wondered who she was." I told him.

"Well, she seemed to know you all right. 'Was that Mr. Lattery who was in here earlier on? ' she says to me. I says yes,

you was one of them. She nodded and thought a bit. 'He lives at Bagford House, doesn't he? ' she asks. 'Why, no Miss,' I says, 'that's Major Flacken's place. Mr. Lattery, he lives out at Chatcombe Cottage.' So she asks me where that is, and' I told her. Hope that was all right. Seemed a nice young lady."

I reassured him. "She could have got the address anywhere. Funny she should ask about Bagford House—that's a place I might hanker for, if I ever had any money."

"Better hurry up and make it, sir. The old Major's getting on a bit now," he said.

Nothing came of it. Whatever the girl had wanted my address for, she didn't follow it up, and the matter dropped out of my mind.

It was about a month later that I saw her again. I'd kind of slipped into the habit of going riding once or twice a week with a girl called Marjorie Cranshaw, and running her home from the stables afterwards. The way took us by one of those narrow lanes between high banks where there is barely room for two cars to pass. Round a corner I had to brake and pull right in because an oncoming car was in the middle of the road after overtaking a pedestrian. It pulled over, and squeezed past me. Then I looked at the pedestrian, and saw it was this girl again. She recognised me at the same moment, and gave a slight start. I saw her hesitate, and then make up her mind to come across and speak. She came a few steps nearer with obvious intention. Then she caught sight of Marjorie beside me, changed her mind, with as bad an imitation of not having intended to come our way at all as you could hope to see. I put the gear in.

"Oh," said Marjorie in a voice that penetrated naturally, and a tone that was meant to, "who was that? "

I told her I didn't know.

"She certainly seemed to know you," she said, disbelievingly.

Her tone irritated me. In any case it was no business of hers. I didn't reply.

She was not willing to let it drop. "I don't think I've seen her about before," she said presently.

"She may be a holiday-maker for all I know," I said. "There are plenty of them about."

"That doesn't sound very convincing, considering the way she looked at you."

"I don't care for being thought, or called, a liar," I said.

"Oh, I thought I asked a perfectly ordinary question. Of course, if I've said anything to embarrass you—"

"Nor do I care for sustained innuendo. Perhaps you'd prefer to walk the rest of the way. It's not far."

"I see, I am sorry to have intruded. It's a pity it's too narrow for you to turn the car here," she said as she got out. "Goodbye, Mr. Lattery."

With the help of a gateway it was not too narrow, but I did not see the girl when I went back. Marjorie had roused my interest in her, so that I rather hoped I would. Besides, though I still had no idea who she might be, I was feeling grateful to her. You will have experienced, perhaps, that feeling of being relieved of a weight that you had not properly realized was there?

Our third meeting was on a different plane altogether.

My cottage stood, as its name suggests, in a coombe which, in Devonshire, is a small valley that is, or once was, wooded. It was somewhat isolated from the other four or five cottages there, being set in the lower part, at the end of the track. The heathered hills swept steeply up on either side. A few narrow grazing fields bordered both banks of the stream. What was left of the original woods fringed between them and the heather, and survived in small clumps and spinneys here and there.

It was in the closest of these spinneys, on an afternoon when I was surveying my plot and deciding that it was about time the beans came out, that I heard a sound of small branches breaking underfoot. I needed no more than a glance to find the cause of it; her fair hair gave her away. For a moment we looked at one another as we had before.

"Er—hullo," I said.

She did not reply at once. She went on staring. Then: "Is there anyone in sight? " she asked.

I looked up as much of the track as I could see from where I stood, and then up at the opposite hillside.

"I can't see anyone," I told her.

She pushed the bushes aside, and stepped out cautiously, looking this way and that. She was dressed just as she had been when I first saw her—except that her hair had been a trifle raked about by branches. On the rough ground the shoes looked even more inappropriate. Seeming a little reassured she took a few steps forward.

"I—" she began.

Then, higher up the coombe, a man's voice called, and another answered it. The girl froze for a moment, looking scared.

"They're coming. Hide me somewhere, quickly, please," she said.

"Er—" I began, inadequately.

"Oh, quick, quick. They're coming," she said urgently.

She certainly looked alarmed.

"Better come inside," I told her, and led the way into the cottage.

She followed swiftly, and when I had shut the door she slid the bolt.

"Don't let them catch me. Don't let them," she begged.

"Look here, what's all this about. Who are 'they'? " I asked.

She did not answer that; her eyes, roving round the room, found the telephone.

"Call the police," she said. "Call the police, quickly." I hesitated. "Don't you *have* any police? " she added.

"Of course we have police, but—"

"Then call them, please."

"But look here—" I began.

She clenched her hands.

"You must call them, please. Quickly."

She looked very anxious.

"All right, *I'll* call them. You can do the explaining," I said, and picked up the instrument.

I was used to the rustic leisure of communications in those parts, and waited patiently. The girl did not; she stood twining her fingers together. At last the connection was made:

"Hullo," I said, "is that the Plyton Police? "

"Plyton Police—" an answering voice had begun when there was an interruption of steps on the gravel path, followed by a heavy knocking at the door. I handed the instrument to the girl and went to the door.

"Don't let them in," she said, and then gave her attention to the telephone.

I hesitated. The rather peremptory knocking came again. One can't just stand about, not letting people in; besides, to take a strange young lady hurriedly into one's cottage, and immediately bolt the door against all comers—? At the third knocking opened up.

The aspect of the man on my doorstep took me aback. Not his face—that was suitable enough in a young man of, say, twenty-five—it was his clothes. One is not prepared to encounter something that looks like a close-fitting skating-suit, worn with a

full-cut, hip-length, glass-buttoned jacket, certainly not on Dartmoor, at the end of the summer season. However, I pulled myself together enough to ask what he wanted. He paid no attention to that as he stood looking over my shoulder at the girl.

"Tavia," he said. "Come here! "

She didn't stop talking hurriedly into the telephone. The man stepped forward.

"Steady on! " I said. "First, I'd like to know what all this is about."

He looked at me squarely.

"You wouldn't understand," he said, and raised his arm to push me out of the way.

I have always felt that I would strongly dislike people who tell me that I don't understand, and try to push me off my own threshold. I socked him hard in the stomach, and as he doubled up I pushed him outside and closed the door.

"They're coming," said the girl's voice behind me. "The police are coming."

"If you'd just tell me—" I began. But she pointed.

"Look out!—at the window," she said.

I turned. There was another man outside, dressed similarly to the first who was still audibly wheezing on the doorstep. He was hesitating. I reached my twelve-bore off the wall, grabbed some cartridges from the drawer and loaded it. Then I stood back, facing the door.

"Open it, and keep behind it," I told her.

She obeyed, doubtfully.

Outside, the second man was now bending solicitously over the first. A third man was coming up the path. They saw the gun, and we had a brief tableau.

"You, there," I said. "You can either beat it quick, or stay and argue it out with the police. Which is it to be? "

"But you don't understand. It is most important—" began one of them.

"All right. Then you can stay there and tell the police how important it is," I said, and nodded to the girl to close the door again.

We watched through the window as the two of them helped the winded man away.

The police, when they arrived, were not amiable. They took down my description of the men reluctantly, and departed cooly. Meanwhile, there was the girl.

She had told the police as little as she well could—simply that she had been pursued by three oddly dressed men, and had appealed to me for help. She had refused their offer of a lift to Plyton in the police car, so here she still was.

"Well, now," I suggested, "perhaps you'd like to explain to me just what seems to be going on? "

She sat quite still facing me with a long level look which had a tinge of—sadness?—disappointment?—well, unsatisfactoriness of some kind. For a moment I wondered if she were going to cry, but in a small voice she said:

"I had your letter—and now I've burned my boats."

I sat down opposite to her. After fumbling a bit I found my cigarettes and lit one.

"You—er—had my letter, and now you've—er—burnt your boats? " I repeated.

"Yes," she said. Her eyes left mine and strayed round the room, not seeing much.

"And now you don't even know me," she said.

Whereupon the tears came, fast.

I sat there helplessly for a half-minute. Then I decided to go into the kitchen and put on the kettle while she had it out. All my female relatives have always regarded tea as the prime panacea, so I brought the pot and cups back with me when I returned.

I found her recovered, sitting staring pensively at the unlit fire. I put a match to it. She watched it take light and burn, with the expression of a child who has just received a present.

"Lovely," she said, as though a fire were something completely novel. She looked all round the room again. "Lovely," she repeated.

"Would you like to pour? " I suggested, but she shook her head, and watched me do it.

"Tea," she said. "By a fireside!"

Which was true enough, but scarcely remarkable.

"I think it is about time we introduced ourselves," I suggested. "I am Gerald Lattery."

"Of course," she said, nodding. It was not to my mind an altogether appropriate reply, but she followed it up by: "I am Octavia Lattery—they usually call me Tavia."

Tavia?—Something clinked in my mind, but did not quite chime.

"We are related in some way?" I asked her.

"Yes—very distantly," she said, looking at me oddly. "Oh,

dear," she added, "this is difficult," and looked as if she were about to cry again.

"Tavia . . . ?" I repeated, trying to remember. "There's something . . ." Then I had a sudden vision of an embarrassed elderly gentleman. "Why, of course; Now what was the name? Doctor—Doctor Bogey, or something? "

She suddenly sat quite still.

"Not—not Doctor Gobie? " she suggested.

"Yes, that's it. He asked me about somebody called Tavia. That would be you?"

"He isn't here? " she said, looking round as if he might be hiding in a corner.

I told her it would be about two years ago now. She relaxed.

"Silly old Uncle Donald. How like him! And naturally you'd have no idea what he was talking about? "

"I've very little more now," I pointed out, "though I can understand how even an uncle might be agitated at losing you."

"Yes. I'm afraid he will be—very," she said.

"Was: this was two years ago," I reminded her.

"Oh, of course you don't really understand yet, do you? "

"Look," I told her. "One after another, people keep on telling me that I don't understand. I know that already—it is about the only thing I do understand."

"Yes. I'd better explain. Oh dear, where shall I begin? " I let her ponder that, uninterrupted. Presently she said: "Do you believe in predestination? "

"I don't think so," I told her.

"Oh—no, well perhaps it isn't quite that, after all—more like a sort of affinity. You see, ever since I was quite tiny I remember thinking this was the most thrilling and wonderful age—and then, of course, it was the time in which the only famous person in our family lived. So I thought it was marvellous. Romantic, I suppose you'd call it."

"It depends whether you mean the thought or the age—" I began, but she took no notice.

"I used to picture the great fleets of funny little aircraft during the wars, and think how they were like David going out to hit Goliath, so tiny and brave. And there were the huge clumsy ships, wallowing slowly along, but getting there somehow in the end, and nobody minding how slow they were. And quaint black and white movies; and horses in the streets; and shaky old internal combustion engines; and coal fires; and exciting bombings; and trains running on rails; and telephones with wires; and,

oh lots of things. And the things one could do! Fancy being at the first night of a new Shaw play, or a new Coward play, in a real theatre! Or getting a brand new T. S. Eliot, on publishing day. Or seeing the Queen drive by to open Parliament. A wonderful, thrilling time! "

"Well, it's nice to hear somebody think so," I said. "My own view of the age doesn't quite—"

"Ah, but that's only to be expected. You haven't any perspective on it, so you can't appreciate it. It'd do you good to live in ours for a bit, and see how flat and stale and uniform everything is—so deadly, deadly dull."

I boggled a little: "I don't think I quite—er, live in your *what?*"

"Century, of course. The Twenty-Second. Oh, of course, you don't know. How silly of me."

I concentrated on pouring out some more tea.

"Oh dear, I knew this was going to be difficult," she remarked. "Do you find it difficult? "

I said I did, rather. She went on with a dogged air:

"Well, you see, feeling like that about it is why I took up history. I mean, I could really *think* myself into history—some of it. And then getting your letter on my birthday was really what made me take the mid-Twentieth Century as my Special Period for my Honours Degree, and, of course, it made up my mind for me to go on and do postgraduate work."

"Er—my letter did all this? "

"Well, that was the only way, wasn't it? I mean there simply wasn't any other way I could have got near a history-machine except by working in a history laboratory, was there? And even then I doubt whether I'd have had a chance to use it on my own if it hadn't been Uncle Donald's lab."

"History-machine," I said, grasping a straw out of all this. "What is a history-machine? "

She looked puzzled.

"It's, well—a history-machine. You learn history with it."

"Not lucid," I said. "You might as well tell me you make history with it."

"Oh, no. One's not supposed to do that. It's a very serious offence."

"Oh," I said. I tried again: "About this letter— "

"Well, I had to bring that in to explain about history, but you won't have written it yet, of course, so I expect you find it a bit confusing."

"Confusing," I told her, "is scarcely the word. Can't we get hold of something concrete? This letter I'm supposed to have written, for instance. What was it about? "

She looked at me hard, and then away. A most surprising blush swept up her face, and ran into her hair. She made herself look back at me again. I watched her eyes go shiny, and then pucker at the corners. She dropped her face suddenly into her hands.

"Oh, you *don't* love me, you *don't*," she wailed. "I wish I'd never come. I wish I was dead! "

"She sort of—sniffed at me," said Tavia.

"Well, she's gone now, and my reputation with her," I said. "An excellent worker, our Mrs. Toombs, but conventional. She'll probably throw up the job."

"Because I'm here? How silly! "

"Perhaps your conventions are different."

"But where else could I go? I've only a few shillings of your kind of money, and nobody to go to."

"Mrs. Toombs could scarcely know that."

"But we weren't, I mean we didn't— "

"Night, and the figure two," I told her, "are plenty for our conventions. In fact, two is enough, anyway. You will recall that the animals simply went in two by two; their emotional relationships didn't interest anyone. Two; and all is assumed."

"Oh, of course, I remember, there was no probative then—now, I mean. You have a sort of rigid, lucky-dip, take-it-or-leave-it system."

"There are other ways of expressing it, but—well, ostensibly at any rate, yes, I suppose."

"Rather crude, these old customs, when one sees them at close range—but fascinating," she remarked. Her eyes rested thoughtfully upon me for a second. "You—" she began.

"You," I reminded her, "promised to give me a more explanatory explanation of all this than you achieved yesterday."

"You didn't believe me."

"The first wallop took my breath," I admitted, "but you've given me enough evidence since. Nobody could keep up an act like that."

She frowned.

'I don't think that's very kind of you. I've studied the mid-Twentieth very thoroughly. It was my Special Period."

"So you told me, but that doesn't get me far. All historical

scholars have Special Periods, but that doesn't mean that they suddenly turn up in them."

She stared at me. "But of course they do—licensed historians. How else would they make close studies? "

"There's too much of this 'of course' business," I told her. "I suggest we just begin at the beginning. Now this letter of mine —no, we'll skip the letter," I added hastily as I caught her expression. "Now, you went to work in your uncle's laboratory with something called a history-machine. What's that—a kind of tape-recorder? "

"Good gracious, no. It's a kind of cupboard thing you get into to go to times and places."

"Oh," I said. "You—you mean you can walk into it in 21something, and walk out into 19something? "

"Or any other past time," she said, nodding. "But, of course, not anybody can do it. You have to be qualified and licensed and all that kind of thing. There are only six permitted history-machines in England, and only about a hundred in the whole world, and they're very strict about them.

"When the first ones were made they didn't realise what trouble they might cause, but after a time historians began to check the trips made against the written records of the periods, and started to find funny things. There was Hero demonstrating a simple steam-turbine at Alexandria sometime B.C.; and Archimedes using a kind of napalm at the siege of Syracuse; and Leonardo da Vinci drawing parachutes when there wasn't anything to parachute from; and Eric the Red discovering America in a sort of off-the-record way before Columbus got there; and Napoleon wondering about submarines; and lots of other suspicious things. So it was clear that some people had been careless when they used the machine, and had been causing chronoclasms."

"Causing—what? "

"Chronoclasms—that's when a thing goes and happens at the wrong time because somebody was careless, or talked rashly.

"Well, most of these things had happened without causing very much harm—as far as we can tell—though it is possible that the natural course of history was altered several times, and people write very clever papers to show how. But everybody saw that the results might be extremely dangerous. Just suppose that somebody had carelessly given Napoleon the idea of the internal combustion engine to add to the idea of the submarine; there's no telling what would have happened. So they decided that tampering must be stopped at once, and all history-machines

were forbidden except those licensed by the Historians' Council."

"Just hold it a minute," I said. "Look, if a thing is done, its done. I mean, well, for example, I am here. I couldn't suddenly cease to be, or to have been, if somebody were to go back and kill my grandfather when he was a boy."

"But you certainly couldn't be here if they did, could you? " she asked. "No, the fallacy that the past is unchangeable didn't matter a bit as long as there was no means of changing it, but once there was, and the fallacy of the idea was shown, we had to be very careful indeed. That's what a historian has to worry about; the other side—just how it happens—we leave to the higher-mathematicians.

"Now, before you are allowed to use the history-machine you have to have special courses, tests, permits, and give solemn undertakings, and then do several years on probation before you get your licence to practice. Only then are you allowed to visit and observe on your own. And that is all you may do, observe. The rule is very, very strict."

I thought that over. "If it isn't an unkind question—aren't you breaking rather a lot of these rules every minute? " I suggested.

"Of course I am. That's why they came after me," she said.

"You'd have had your licence revoked, or something, if they'd caught you? "

"Good gracious. I could never qualify for a licence. I've just sneaked my trips when the lab. has been empty sometimes. It being Uncle Donald's lab. made things easier because unless I was actually caught at the machine. I could always pretend I was doing something special for him.

"I had to have the right clothes to come in, but I dared not go to the historians' regular costume-makers, so I sketched some things in a museum and got them copied—they're all right, aren't they? "

"Very successful, and becoming, too," I assured her. "—Though there is a little something about the shoes."

She looked down at her feet. "I was afraid so. I couldn't find any of quite the right date," she admitted. "Well, then," she went on, "I was able to make a few short trial trips. They had to be short because duration is constant—that is, an hour here is the same as an hour there—and I couldn't get the machine to myself for long at a time. But yesterday a man came into the lab. just as I was getting back. When he saw these clothes he knew at once what I was doing, so the only thing I could do

was to jump straight back into the machine—I'd never have had another chance. And they came after me without even bothering to change."

"Do you think they'll come again? " I asked her.

"I expect so. But they'll be wearing proper clothes for the period next time."

"Are they likely to be desperate? I mean would they shoot, or anything like that? "

She shook her head. "Oh, no. That'd be a pretty bad chronoclasm—particularly if they happened to kill somebody."

"But you being here must be setting up a series of pretty resounding chronoclasms. Which would be worse? "

"Oh, mine are all accounted for. I looked it up?" she assured me, obscurely. "They'll be less worried about me when they've thought of looking it up, too."

She paused briefly. Then, with an air of turning to a more interesting subject, she went on:

"When people in your time get married they have to dress up in a special way for it, don't they? "

The topic seemed to have a fascination for her.

"M'm," mumbled Tavia. "I think I rather like Twentieth Century marriage."

"It has risen higher in my own estimation, darling," I admitted. And, indeed, I was quite surprised to find how much higher it had risen in the course of the last month or so.

"Do Twentieth Century marrieds always have one big bed, darling? " she inquirerd.

"Invariably, darling," I assured her.

"Funny," she said. "Not very hygienic, of course, but quite nice all the same."

We reflected on that.

"Darling, have you noticed she doesn't sniff at me any more? " she remarked.

"We always cease to sniff on production of a certificate, darling," I explained.

Conversation pursued its desultory way on topics of personal, but limited, interest for a while. Eventually it reached a point where I was saying:

"It begins to look as if we don't need to worry any more about those men who were chasing you, darling. They'd have been back long before now if they had been as worried as you thought."

She shook her head.

"We'll have to go on being careful, but it is queer. Something to do with Uncle Donald, I expect. He's not really mechanically minded, poor dear. Well, you can tell that by the way he set the machine two years wrong when he came to see you. But there's nothing we can do except wait, and be careful."

I went on reflecting. Presently:

"I shall have to get a job soon. That may make it difficult to keep a watch for them," I told her.

"Job? " she said.

"In spite of what they say, two can't live as cheap as one. And wives hanker after certain standards, and ought to have them —within reason, of course. The little money I have won't run to them."

"You don't need to worry about that, darling," Tavia assured me. "You can just invent something."

"Me? Invent? " I exclaimed.

"Yes. You're already fairly well up on radio, aren't you? "

"They put me on a few radar courses when I was in the R.A.F."

"Ah! The R.A.F.! " she said, ecstatically. "To think that you actually fought in the Second Great War! Did you know Monty and Ike and all those wonderful people? "

"Not personally. Different arm of the Services," I said.

"What a pity, everyone liked Ike. But about the other thing. All you have to do is to get some advanced radio and electronics books, and I'll show you what to invent."

"You'll—? Oh, I see. But do you think that would be quite ethical? " I asked, doubtfully.

"I don't see why not. After all the things have got to be invented by somebody, or I couldn't have learnt about them at school, could I? "

"I—er, I think I'll have to think a bit about that," I told her.

It was, I suppose, coincidence that I should have mentioned the lack of interruption that particular morning—at least, it may have been: I have become increasingly suspicious of coincidences since I first saw Tavia. At any rate, in the middle of that same morning Tavia, looking out of the window, said:

"Darling, there's somebody waving from the trees over there."

I went over to have a look, and sure enough I had a view of a stick with a white handkerchief tied to it, swinging slowly from side to side. Through field-glasses I was able to distinguish the

operator, an elderly man almost hidden in the bushes. I handed the glasses to Tavia.

"Oh, dear! Uncle Donald," she exclaimed. "I suppose we had better see him. He seems to be alone."

I went outside, down to the end of my path, and waved him forward. Presently he emerged, carrying the stick and handkerchief bannerwise. His voice reached me faintly: "Don't shoot! "

I spread my hand wide to show that I was unarmed. Tavia came down the path and stood beside me. As he drew close, he transferred the stick to his left hand, lifted his hat with the other, and inclined his head politely.

"Ah, Sir Gerald! A pleasure to meet you again," he said.

"He isn't Sir Gerald, Uncle. He's Mr. Lattery," said Tavia.

"Dear me. Stupid of me. Mr. Lattery," he went on, "I am sure you'll be glad to hear that the wound was more uncomfortable than serious. Just a matter of the poor fellow having to lie on his front for a while."

"Poor fellow—?" I repeated, blankly.

"The one you shot yesterday."

"I *shot?* "

"Probably tomorrow or the next day," Tavia said, briskly. "Uncle, you really are dreadful with those settings, you know."

"I understand the principles well enough, my dear. It's just the operation that I sometimes find a little confusing."

"Never mind. Now you are here you'd better come indoors," she told him. "And you can put that handkerchief away in your pocket," she added.

As he entered I saw him give a quick glance round the room, and nod to himself as if satisfied with the authenticity of its contents. We sat down. Tavia said:

"Just before we go any further, Uncle Donald, I think you ought to know that I am married to Gerald—Mr. Lattery."

Dr. Gobie peered closely at her.

"Married? " he repeated. "What for? "

"Oh, dear," said Tavia. She explained patiently: "I am in love with him, and he's in love with me, so I am his wife. It's the way things happen here."

"Tch, tch! " said Dr. Gobie, and shook his head. "Of course I am well aware of your sentimental penchant for the Twentieth Century and its ways, my dear, but surely it wasn't quite necessary for you to—er—go native? "

"I like it, quite a lot," Tavia told him.

"Young women will be romantic, I know. But have you thought of the trouble you will be causing Sir Ger—er, Mr. Lattery? "

"But I'm *saving* him trouble, Uncle Donald. They *sniff* at you here if you don't get married, and I didn't like him being sniffed at."

"I wasn't thinking so much of while you're here, as of after you have left. They have a great many rules about presuming death, and proving desertion, and so on; most dilatory and complex. Meanwhile, he can't marry anyone else."

"I'm sure he wouldn't *want* to marry anyone else, would you darling? " she said to me.

"Certainly not," I protested.

"You're quite sure of that, darling? "

"Darling," I said, taking her hand, "if all the other women in the world—"

After a time Dr. Gobie recalled our attention with an apologetic cough.

"The real purpose of my visit," he explained, "is to persuade my niece that she must come back, and at once. There is the greatest consternation and alarm throughout the faculty over this affair, and I am being held largely to blame. Our chief anxiety is to get her back before any serious damage is done. Any chronoclasm goes ringing unendingly down the ages—and at any moment a really serious one may come of this escapade. It has put all of us into a highly nervous condition."

"I'm sorry about that, Uncle Donald—and about your getting the blame. But I am *not* coming back. I'm very happy here."

"But the possible chronoclasms, my dear. It keeps me awake at night thinking—"

"Uncle dear, they'd be nothing to the chronoclasms that would happen if I did come back just now. You must see that I simply *can't*, and explain it to the others."

"*Can't—?* " he repeated.

"Now, if you look in the books you'll see that my husband—isn't that a funny, ugly, old-fashsioned word? I rather like it, though. It comes from two ancient Icelandic roots—"

"You were speaking about not coming back," Dr. Gobie reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Well, you'll see in the books that first he invented submarine radio communication, and then later on he invented curved-beam transmission, which is what he got knighted for."

"I'm perfectly well aware of that, Tavia. I do not see—"

"But, Uncle Donald, you must. How on earth can he possibly invent those things if I'm not here to show him how to do it? If you take me away now, they'll just not be invented, and then what will happen? "

Dr. Gobie stared at her steadily for some moments.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I must admit that that point had not occurred to me," and sank deeply into thought for a while.

"Besides," Tavia added, "Gerald would hate me to go, wouldn't you darling? "

"I—" I began, but Dr. Gobie cut me short by standing up.

"Yes," he said. "I can see there will have to be a postponement for a while. I shall put your point to them, but it will be only for a while."

On his way to the door he paused.

"Meanwhile, my dear, do be careful. These things are so delicate and complicated. I tremble to think of the complexities you might set up if you—well, say, if you were to do something irresponsible like becoming your own progenetrix."

"That is one thing I can't do Uncle Donald. I'm on the collateral branch."

"Oh, yes. Yes, that's a very lucky thing. Then I'll say au revoir, my dear, and to you, too, Sir—er?Mr. Lattery. I trust that we may meet again—it has had its pleasant side to be here as more than a mere observer for once."

"Uncle Donald, you've said a mouthful there," Tavia agreed.

He shook his head reprovingly at her.

"I'm afraid you would never have got to the top of the historical tree, my dear. You aren't thorough enough. That phrase is *early* Twentieth Century, and, if I may say so, inelegant even then."

The expected shooting incident took place about a week later. Three men, dressed in quite convincing imitation of farmhands, made the approach. Tavia recognized one of them through the glasses. When I appeared, gun in hand, at the door they tried to make for cover. I peppered one at considerable range, and he ran on, limping.

After that we were left unmolested. A little later we began to get down to the business of underwater radio—surprisingly simple, once the principle had been pointed out—and I filed my applications for patents. With that well in hand, we turned to the curved-beam transmission.

Tavia hurried me along with that. She said:

"You see, I don't know how long we've got, darling. I've been trying to remember ever since I got here what the date was on your letter, and I can't—even though I remember you underlined it. I know there's a record that your first wife deserted you—'deserted,' isn't that a dreadful word to use: as if I would, my sweet—but it doesn't say when. So I must get you properly briefed on this because there'd be the most frightful chronoclasm if you failed to invent it."

And then, instead of buckling down to it as her words suggested, she became pensive.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I think there's going to be a pretty bad chronoclasm anyway. You see, I'm going to have a baby."

"No! " I exclaimed delightedly.

"What do you mean, 'no'? I *am*. And I'm worried. I don't think it has ever happened to a travelling historian before. Uncle Donald would be terribly annoyed if he knew."

"To hell with Uncle Donald," I said. "And to hell with chronoclasms. We're going to celebrate, darling."

The weeks slid quickly by. My patents were granted provisionally. I got a good grip on the theory of curved-beam transmission. Everything was going nicely. We discussed the future: whether he was to be called Donald, or whether she was going to be called Alexandra. How soon the royalties would begin to come in so that we could make an offer for Bagford House. How funny it would feel at first to be addressed as Lady Lattery, and other allied themes . . .

And then came that December afternoon when I got back from discussing a modification with a manufacturer in London and found that she wasn't there any more . . .

Not a note, not a last word. Just the open front door, and a chair overturned in the sitting room . . .

Oh, Tavia, my dear . . .

I began to write this down because I still have an uneasy feeling about the ethics of not being the inventor of my inventions, and that there should be a straightening out. Now that I have reached the end, I perceive that "straightening out" is scarcely an appropriate description of it. In fact, I can foresee so much trouble attached to putting this forward as a conscientious reason for refusing a knighthood, that I think I shall say nothing, and just accept the knighthood when it comes. After all, when I consider a number of "inspired" inventions that I can call to

mind, I begin to wonder whether certain others have not done that before me.

I have never pretended to understand the finer points of action and interaction comprehended in this matter, but I have a pressing sense that one action now on my part is basically necessary: not just to avoid dropping an almighty chronoclasm myself, but for fear that if I neglect it I may find that the whole thing never happened. So I must write a letter.

First, the envelope:

To my great, great grandniece,
Miss Octavia Lattery.
(To be opened by her on her 21st birthday.
6th June 2136.)

Then the letter. Date it. Underline the date.

My sweet, far-off, lovely Tavia,
Oh, my darling . . .

—John Wyndham

With world population increasing steadily year by year the problem of feeding the masses becomes more grave. If machinery can solve the problem might not Man's mind need an antidote to the overwhelming cacophony of sound such machines would entail?

DARK SUMMER

By FRANCIS G. RAYER

Illustrated by QUINN

Bill Ashton sat with his elbows on the breakfast table and thought that Judy was as beautiful as when he had married her eleven years before. Smart, neat, bright, she was what he would call ideal womanhood.

"Mark had the nightmare again last night, Bill," she said, suddenly.

He realised that she had been quiet, perhaps worried. "Over-trying his brains at school?" he mused. "Sometimes they push the bright ones."

Judy shook her head. "Don't think it's that. He's almost top of the age group class. They haven't pushed him up with the eleven-year-olds."

"Doesn't seem worried about school? "

"No." Her voice was convinced. "Always glad to go. Never complains."

Such was his own opinion, Bill thought. Mark was a good all-rounder, clever at most things, including sport. Not the sort to be bullied, or get scared of failure.

"If it happens again we'll take him round to have a check-up." he suggested. He got up and kissed her lightly. "Don't worry."

Outside his flat, lofty in a ten-high block, he let the spring air flow into his lungs and the sun bathe him. Many men would envy

him, he thought. At forty, he had a home and family to be proud of; was strong and sane; got as good pay for being 2nd Assistant Computer in the Computer South Block as any man of forty could expect, and liked his work. Who wanted more?

He noted it was early and took the slow external lift. A glass-walled cube, it sank down past the seven lower floors. Plants and shrubs grew on the balconies. People were astir, bright, cheerful inhabitants of a bright, cheerful city. There should, he thought, be no reason why anyone should have nightmares.

As he descended he thought of Mark. Perhaps it would be as well to look in at the New General as he passed. Dr. Young had been sympathetic before; had said, "If your boy gets these nightmares again, Mr. Ashton, don't hesitate to tell me."

Young was in his office examining case-papers and put them aside, rising. He shook Bill's hand. "You've become quite a stranger, Mr. Ashton."

Bill wondered why it was that something in the other's manner hinted his visit had not been unanticipated.

"It's about Mark, doctor."

"Ah, your boy."

That, too, seemed almost an anticipation, Bill thought. He sat down.

"He had nightmares before, doctor. They're returning. I wondered whether it was perhaps—perhaps hereditary." He hesitated. It was hard to say. Harder, still, to fear that Mark might grow up having to combat the same—*unevenness* of mentality that he, Bill Ashton, had fought all his life. An unevenness that was shown in one way only: by certain nightmares . . .

Dr. Young shook his head. "No fear of that, Mr. Ashton. You're sane as any man. Psychoneuroses like yours aren't transferable to offspring." He pyramided his long fingers under his lean chin. "He's always taken his tablets regularly?"

"Yes. At least I think so. We've been trusting him to take them himself, lately." Bill felt a new fear in his heart. "He's not —not epileptic, doc?"

"No." Young's voice rang with confidence in his words and the backing of medical science. "His electroencephalographs are wholly normal. Check that he's taking what I ordered. If the trouble recurs, let me know at once. You'd be surprised how many similar cases I have."

Bill rose and left. He strove to remember any incident in Mark's childhood that could have caused any irrational fear, and failed. They must hope Mark would grow out of it.

Outside, he hurried on towards the Computer South Block. Though the city was calm and beautiful, there was no room for drones. Everyone worked according to his skill, training and ability. In the Computer Block a hundred units always stood hungry for data, calculating the factors of production, economy and efficiency.

Major Kenigan, Head Computerman, was already in the cream and chrome halls, each as silent and aseptic as a hospital room, except for a faint background hum, just audible, as of a thousand scribbling mechanical fingers. Scribbling fingers there were, Bill thought. But the scribblings were ephemeral cathode-ray traces, automatically photographed, or the jewel-pivoted, temperature-corrected pantograph arms of the differentials.

Brisk, perhaps fifty, Kenigan's uprightness told of his military training. His hair was grey, brushed flat, his face lean as a youth's.

"I've a special series for you to set up, Ashton." He strode across the floor, feet ringing on the metallic surface. "Berry is away —another case of stress illness, I suppose." He snorted his annoyance and pushed through swing doors.

"Bad?" Bill asked. Berry had been a good man. Stress illness —neurosis—simple inability to face everything. Call it what you would. Shell-shock, neurosis, crack-up. All the same.

"Don't know yet," Major Kenigan stated crisply. "Report on him isn't in."

They passed through into the vacant setting-up cubicle and Kenigan opened a folder. "Here's the problem—"

Alone, Bill began to translate the data into terms comprehensible to the computer mechanisms. Long figure series and fractions into bi-numerals; intelligence and stupidity factors into graphs; hopes and faces of other men into irregular dots on spooled paper . . .

He worked automatically, his mind on Mark. Then thoughts of Mark drifted, his brain concentrating on the data, drawn by a score of isolated facts which meant nothing, when isolated, but which *might* mean something, when co-related. After an hour he was no longer working abstractedly, but with close concentration, plotting sheet after sheet and filing them into the machine.

Unexpectedly a sheet from a scribbling pad appeared between two pages in the data folio. In Chris Berry's scrawling hand was written: *All nightmares—*

Bill froze, read it again, screwed it into a ball, and abruptly left the cubicle. Outside, in a wall niche, was an inter-room communicator and he dialled the co-ordination desk. The girl's reply came soon.

"I wish to enquire about Chris Berry, of Computer South Block," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"When did he go off sick?"

There was a long pause. "Late last night, sir."

Bill remembered the marking on the folder he was handling. "Had he been working exclusively on the XC71C series data?"

The delay was longer. Finally her voice sounded. "Yes, sir. He had begun, but abandoned the work, feeling ill."

"That's all you know?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks."

He returned to the cubicle. Just begun, perhaps. Chris had just begun . . . it might mean anything, like the note. Or nothing . . .

It was late when Bill rode the elevator to his 8th floor flat. At midday he had dined in the Block Staffroom, going out only to call Judy.

"I looked in on the Doc on the way up, Judy. He says Mark's most likely all right, but we're to see he doesn't miss up on his sedatives. Maybe it's just over-excitement—"

Her reply had been relieved. Now, as he opened the door her voice sounded again, this time more annoyed than he remembered hearing it for years.

"It's for your own good, Mark!"

The half open second door gave a sliced view of the next room. Mark stood by the window beyond which the city lights flashed. His face was set in a scowl—and that, too, Bill seldom remembered seeing.

"Don't see why I should take it, mum."

"It's for your own good, dear."

"But—," Mark seemed to struggle for words. "But—Sam at school says it—if I don't take them I—I'll know what it's like out *—out there—"*

The last words came with a rush and the boy's hand indicated the window. Bill stepped through the door.

"What's this?"

"He won't take his sedative." Judy's voice had a note of helplessness.

"I don't want to, dad!"

Eager young eyes stared at him. Bill looked at the floor. Mark's words had been odd. *I'll know what it's like out there.* Only that morning Major Kenigan had risen at the staffroom table like a man about to drink a toast.

"All our past, all the struggling, striving and building up, that was like spring, Ashton," he had said. "This is summer now. Mankind's summer. Out there is our reward." He had indicated the window. "A fullness, a plentitude—"

The words had stuck in Bill's mind. Mankind's summer. A glowing, glorious summer grown from the spring of striving. Yet Mark had shuddered when he had said those same words, *out there.*

Bill licked his lips, suddenly dry, and closed the door quietly. "Try to tell me what you mean, son. I want to help."

But from the look on Mark's face he felt it would be hopeless.

"It—it's only what Sam said, dad."

"That with no sedative you'd know what our city is really like?"

"Yes."

Bill drew him round to face the window. The daylight was fast going and mellow street lights snapping on. "And what do you see, son?"

Mark hesitated. "Streets. Lights. It's quiet. Somewhere there's music—perhaps down by the sea front—"

"In short, a nice city—?"

Mark nodded emphatically. "Sam's just a silly," he stated with conviction.

Bill tucked him into bed. For a long time he gazed from the window of his own room. A bright moon rode through tranquil clouds that only hid the stars in patches. The city did not sleep, but was quiet. It was beautiful, restful—and an ideal city in which to live, he thought.

It was an hour before he turned in, and sleep came easily . . .

He awoke clutching his ears. About him the city screamed, howled, vibrated and roared with a torment of machinery. The walls shook. The ceiling was like the underside of some huge engine. Burnt oil made the air stink and rumblings tore at his eardrums. He reached blindly for a sedative capsule, kept near his bedside for just such an occasion. Damn, he thought. The last nightmare had meant a psycho and change from his usual sedative to the next higher in the list. This could mean he'd not got clear of the trouble, as he had hoped. It could mean another psycho, another change . . . or was it that he had forgotten his evening tablet, talking to Mark?

Tranquility spread through his veins as the rapid-acting drug took hold. Sweating at the memory, he lay in the dark, trying to recall what had first caused the nightmare. He could not remember. Its first coming had been long ago, beyond the limit of remembering, in childhood. It was always the same. Terrible while it lasted. Terrible. He wiped his face. Gone had been the peace, the quiet room, the nice city. Instead was a city wholly functional, wholly mechanical, roaring, screaming with a million machines. And it always seemed so real. That was the worst of the nightmare, when it came. *It was so real.*

Perhaps he should tell them at the hospital on the morrow, he decided.

It was early morning when he opened the door to a man six feet tall, lean and yet knobbly as a cactus. The sight banished some of the fatigue from his mind. "Chris! Thought you were hospitalising!"

Chris Berry made a face expressing disgust. "They gave me a shot and told me to have a week off. Said I'd been over-working."

Bill saw the look in his eyes. "You're not resting—and are a man overwork would never kill."

"Perhaps."

Bill closed the door, somehow glad Mark and Judy were still in bed. He had risen early, worrying.

"You're working on that special series," Berry stated. 'You've read it?"

"Only half. Takes some setting up."

The other relapsed into a chair. "Only half. You're lucky. I ceased setting up and read the lot."

His eyes were haunted and Bill hid his growing tension. He closed the other door unless Mark or Judy should hear. "Not many men could do that, Chris. It would mean nothing—"

"To Kenigan, for example. Though he's alright at his job."

Bill nodded. "He sees that we work." He knew that he was wilfully avoiding the uppermost thought. He let the question come.

"You read the series?"

"Yes." Berry rose, walked needlessly round the table, and sat down. His face twitched. "I got two kids," he said.

Bill looked for the connection of thought and was afraid to find it.

"Boy and girl, aren't they?"

"Yes. And both have nightmares! Both have since they were born. They were practically born having nightmares, and have had nightmares ever since! Why?" He jerked a finger at Bill. His cheeks were white. "Why? Answer me that! Is it natural? There's no cause—or seemed no cause." He halted, licked his lips. "You got a boy, Bill. Does he—"

Bill nodded slowly. "He does."

"And you?"

The room was silent a long time. "I also, Chris."

They stared eye to eye. Berry drew in his lower lip.. "Listen," he said. "I have nightmares too—and the same one my wife and kids have. I read that series, too. Cut out exact calculation and mathematics, it means that we and our children are not alone—"

"Not alone?" Bill could only refuse to understand, echoing the words to gain time.

"No. That series covers such experiences. Far as I read, it tabulates abstractions covering five hundred thousand people."

Bill's breath hissed. "The population of this city!"

"So I believe." Berry unwound his knobbly knees. Two spots as of inner fever burned on his white cheeks. "They called it stress illness," he said bitterly. "Heaven help us! "

The emphasis of his words remained after he had gone. Bill stood on the balcony, watching the cage descend. The city was cool, fresh, quiet with morning, her five hundred thousand people only beginning to stir. He scratched a cheek. Five hundred thousand cases of stress illness. Or, put another way, five hundred thousand nightmares . . . It was surely impossible.

He got a drink and decided to look in on Mark. The boy sat with a book propped on the coverlet. He started, guiltily, tried to conceal the volume, recognised he was already discovered, and looked rebellious.

"Couldn't sleep much," he said.

He placed the book front down on the bedside table. The action was too casual. Bill picked it up and nibbled a lip.

"An odd book for a lad, Mark."

"Sam lent it me."

Mark's playfellow. Bill sat on the bed. "Where would he get a book like this Mark?" He put a finger on the title: *Post-Hypnotic Suggestion and Use of Drugs in Obtaining Persistence of Illusionary Suggestion.* Below the long title was the author's name: Dr. Emanuel Zeker.

"He had it from an uncle—"

Bill slid it in a pocket. "Think I'll see what Zeker says myself," he said.

An hour later he left the flat and descended to the awakened streets. A public vehicle bore him to the centre of the city, and to the entrance of the public library, mellow and clean in the dawn sunlight.

He passed through the silent halls, ignoring the 3D books, the illustrated stories, the vividly presented text-manuals. In the back of the library were old histories, travel books and volumes in flat printing and he followed them to Z. There was no book by Emanuel Zeker. The library catalogue showed many volumes under Z, and three by Zeker. His interest stirred and he sought the librarian.

"Are all Emanuel Zeker's books out?"

The man, white-haired and stooped, examined him. One finger on his desk depressed a button. "You are interested in his work?"

"Of course." Bill somehow felt the man was intent on wasting time. "I'd like the volumes when they're returned."

A door behind the desk opened and Bill met cool grey eyes, wide-set in a strong face, as a man came through.

"We'll discuss that elsewhere," the man said crisply.

So the button and delay had meant something, Bill thought. Two other men, equally erect as the newcomer, equally military in bearing, came through the door, round the desk, and halted. The grey eyes flickered from them to Bill. "You'll come with me? I am Commander Renton. The name may be familiar. I wish to ask a few questions—merely routine—"

The voice was authoritative, factual. The others moved smartly and Bill found them each side of him.

"As you wish, Commander."

They marched through the halls, down a corridor, and into a private room. The door closed and Renton stood alone by the desk.

"The library has no books by Emanuel Zeker," he murmured.

"But the lists . . . " For the first time Bill let his surprise show.

"We find it a convenient method of knowing if anyone wishes to read Zeker. They find no books, and naturally enquire."

"But *Post-Hypnotic Suggestion—"*

The grey eyes grew intense. "So a copy still exists!"

"Certainly, but . . . "

Renton silenced him with a gesture. "It will be destroyed." He pondered. Big in body and brain, he obviously had the character and mind to think for himself.

"For various reasons we like to know when anyone is interested in Zeker," he said more evenly. "As a point of interest, he has been dead this several hundred years, but his observations are not out of date. For various reasons which I cannot discuss, I most strongly recommend you abandon your search for his further works, or anything connected with them or him. I repeat—*most strongly recommend . . . "*

Bill looked round the office. It could have been a prison, he, the prisoner. "You arose my curiosity, Commander Renton," he said.

Renton sighed. "I was afraid the warning would do just that. You look the type. But there are things it is better not to know."

"Such as . . ."

Renton considered his finger-tips, then looked up. "Perhaps if I tell you a little it will make you give up this search. How shall I put it? Let us say that—that things are being made a trifle easier for people, and that it's best it should remain so."

Something in the other's eyes halted Bill's questions. The silence grew until Renton slid from the desk.

"My men will show you out."

Outside, Bill wondered at the words. *Things are being made a trifle easier for people . . .* It was an odd thing to say. In his heart stirred a deep and inarticulate uneasiness. Such words could mean many things.

That day he almost completed setting up the series Major Kenigan had given him. He admired Chris Berry's ability, born of long computer work and aided by something akin to genius. The data, by their very numbers, were effectively incomprehensible to a human. The multitude of facts hid the overall picture. But to a minute extent Chris Berry had seen through the mass of information, discerning a shadow of its meaning. In a city of five hundred thousand there were five hundred thousand cases of stress illness—so called.

How and when had it all begun? He decided that evening should be spent trying to find out. There were approaches other than through Emanuel Zeker.

With evening, the library was busy. Bill wandered among the children and adults in the self-talk and 3D book sections, and passed the sprinkling of students seeking information. Only half-a-dozen people were in the history room and he settled down to search. If there was a beginning—an abrupt transition from normality to the present circumstances—some record of it must exist.

He systematically waded into the past, choosing social history as the best line. Fifty years before, the city had been much as it was. A hundred years before, very similar. Two hundred years before, basically the same. Two hundred and ten years before—he frowned, his grip creasing the old flat-type page.

Two hundred and ten years before there had been much discontent, apparently justified. It centred on working and living conditions. Buildings were too cramped, work too regular, food too monotonous. He turned back the pages slowly. Leaders had arisen, tried to better conditions, and failed. At the root of it all was one cause: production. Things once luxuries for the few became regarded as necessities by the masses. Wages rose, production rose, buying power rose—above all, the complication of living rose. Mankind was becoming swamped in his own productions, and ousted by the factories necessary to pour out the goods he

desired. Natural resources failed, making roundabout methods necessary. Every city was a factory-swamped chaos.

He turned on again. "The installation of the great new computer will undoubtedly better conditions," the historian had written. "Many commercial processes may be shortened, better methods found. Human happiness must be put above mere production."

Ten short years after, the city had become virtually a paradise, the book claimed. But it did not say how. Bill compared passages and decided the later sections had been prepared by a different author.

"Still interested?" a voice asked.

Bill raised his head and met cool grey eyes. Renton's gaze dropped to the page.

"No, I haven't followed you. It was chance—half a guess, half hope—"

Bill closed the book. "Hope?"

"That you're tough enough." For long moments Renton studied him, then he sighed. "Maybe I'm guilty of wishful thinking. Maybe, perhaps, it's simply best I do my duty."

Bill froze. "Your duty?"

"To warn you again. Forget Zeker. Forget history—especially

that period." A finger tapped the closed volume. "If not, you may regret it."

"You're making threats," Bill stated.

"No, Ashton, only statements. Other men have puzzled over Zekor—and history and bitterly regretted it. You have a wife and boy. For their sakes, forget it."

Bill rose jerkily, face flushing. "You threaten them!"

Renton sighed. "No, Ashton." He suddenly looked very old. "But, as you love them, let this matter rest! It is you who would threaten them—*you*—"

He dropped silent, breathing heavily. His breathing subsided and the spots of hot colour went from his cheeks, leaving him impersonal as before.

"Tranquility is worth a lot, Ashton. Your tranquility—that of your wife and son—everyone's tranquility."

He turned smartly and strode from the history room. Bill watched his back pass from view beyond the doorway, grew conscious of his tensed muscles, and relaxed.

What had the historian written? "Human happiness must be put above production." In an odd way the phrases fitted Renton's parting words. Yet production had certainly not eased. In many processes bewilderingly roundabout methods were required to make up for lost natural resources. Elements had to be manufactured, instead of scooped by the ton from natural strata. Oil there was none, nor coal, nor metal ores. Mineral beds were exhausted. With infinite pains metals were reclaimed from the waters of the sea. No Bill thought, production had not lessened. Every human being had every material thing he could want.

When he left the library it was quite dark except for the tasteful city lights and a rising moon. A breeze fanned his cheeks, coming in from the sea. The past winter has been short and mild, scarcely noticed, more an affair of weather bulletins than personal experience. Now, summer was approaching. By day the city glowed under spring sunshine neither too hot, not too bright. By night moonlight lit the peaceful street bringing rest to the city's workers. He thought of Berry. Chris could have made a mistake. No single human was infallible.

A mere block away Chris Berry trembled at the nightmare surrounding him. Fumes obscured the reverberating night sky and all the heat and stinks of a thousand chemical and factory processes caught his lungs. Stars there were none, nor moon. The city howled and shook, screamed and wailed, wolf-like, machine-like,

so that he was a mite in the heart of a vastness of spinning wheels, whining bearings and flaming mechanical wrath. He clutched his ears, praying to awake. Stumbled, shielding his eyes against the fiery glows projected against the sulphurous sky. He fell, fingers scraping the filthy road. He wept, consciousness going.

Moments later two men stood over him. "Looks like a medical case," one said. "Stress illness."

"Yes. Bet he missed up on his sedatives."

Expert, two of an unobtrusive medical corps, they picked him up and put him in a nearby vehicle.

"Waving his arms like a loony," the first man said. "Funny how it takes them. And on a night like this too!"

He started the motor, and his companion nodded. He had seen many cases of untreated stress illness, and was accustomed to the sufferers' foolish panics. "Peaceful enough for a saint," he agreed.

He looked up through the open vehicle roof. The moon hung clear and lovely in a sky barely marked by cloud. Stars shone and soon the city would sleep. It was a nice city, he thought. Peaceful, tranquil, pleasant—yes, no man could want a better.

Bill slept little and went out early. At the first corner he almost collided with a man who was walking briskly, smiling to himself.

"Chris! "

Chris Berry smiled. "Thought I'd come along, and maybe look in to help you on that series, if you haven't finished it."

"You're better?" Bill asked.

"Fine. I'm cured! No more nightmares. Oh, but I had a bad one last night." A frown came; vanished. "They took me in for a psycho, I gather, and stepped me up one in the sedative series, but it was worth it." He grinned, filling his lungs. "Makes me glad to be alive, a spring morning like this!"

He walked at Bill's side. "Guess I was getting into the habit of worrying," he confided. "That special series you were doing for the Computer—nothing to it, really, you know."

Silent, Bill walked on. That morning an official message had come from the medical centre, signed by Young. Mark was to go for a check-up. It was worrying, though things had turned out well enough after past checks, Bill had to admit.

"A morning like this reminds me of what Major Kenigan is fond of saying," Berry stated chattily. He waved a hand. "Think of it, Bill! Thousands of cities, all beautiful as this! Clean, warm,

happy . . . Mankind's summer, Kenigan calls it. A favourite expression of his." He patted Bill's shoulder. "Why look glum?"

"Worried over my boy."

Berry seemed not to have heard. "Swell how it's all arranged. It's the Computer, you know—works out everything for the best. And sees it's done. Bet we'd never have a nice city like this without it."

Bill's step faltered. "Everything for the best—"

"Sure," Berry declared loudly. "For the happiness of mankind, and all that, you know."

They walked on through the sunlit streets. At the Computer Block, Bill finished the series and the figures, graphs and dots disappeared into the equipment. The squiggled history of five hundred thousand souls, he thought.

When he got home he found Mark sitting on the balcony smiling. Judy came out, her face radiant.

"They say he's all right," she said to his questioning brows. "We're to see he takes his sedative."

He looked at Mark, who grinned.

"What's that thing they put over a fellow's head before they put him to sleep, dad? They say the Computer invented it."

"I don't know. We must ask Dr. Young some day."

Bill looked at the phial in Judy's hand. Number four. The previous lot had been number three. They had stepped Mark up in the sedative series.

"Glad I shan't have any more nightmares," Mark said.

Bill remembered the last time he himself had been stepped up one in the sedative series. His was number six, and yellow. He had studied the first yellow pill with spiritual hate, said "Damn!" and swallowed it. If one forgot, by accident or wilfully, there was the nightmare—the rapid-acting capsule—the hangover the capsule left . . .

He went for a walk, arriving at a favourite spot just as the moon rose. The pale light danced on the waves which rolled placidly over the silvery sands. About him breathed the sweetness of the spring evening. Behind was a faint murmur from the city, scarcely as loud as the sea upon the shingle.

For a moment he felt content. He smiled to himself, trying to recall words he had read somewhere. Part of a poem, though he was usually too busy to give time to things outside Computer work. But tranquil words, fit for such a moonlight night—*There is peace in dreaming.*

He stretched, rising from the seat. It would soon be time to

go home. A single gull was flying low over the water. He watched it go, and stretched again.

Once before, day dreaming there, he had forgotten his sedative. Time had passed. His illusionary fears had returned . . . the gulls and sea had vanished. A complex mechanical city had drifted like a nightmare into his mind, screaming, vibrating, howling with plant and machinery. So complex and compact no man could live long in it and keep his sanity. He wondered why the illusion was always the same. He had suffered it, on and off, since childhood—since the first remembering.

He sighed, gazed for the last time at the curling sea, and turned back into the city.

There is peace in dreaming.

Morning came. He watched Judy pour coffee. "Nice to know Mark won't have those nightmares," she said.

He nodded, his face showing nothing. He had slept little, instead lying with eyes open in the night. He could only agree, while in his mind was a conflicting bedlam of possibility and terror. For the twentieth time since rising his gaze passed out upon the scene below.

The sun was up. A few patches of light cloud suggested showers later in the day. An idyllic morning, for spring. Only faintly did the hum of the awakened city come to them. Opposite, a couple stood on their balcony. Laughter drifted across. Above the clouds the sky was the watery blue of spring, fresh and clean as the air breathing in through the opened glass door.

"I'm glad Chris is better," Judy said. Her eyes were content.

Bill rose quickly, awkwardly, afraid that his emotions would stand revealed upon his face. She glanced up.

"You look tired, dear—"

"Been rather busy." He sighed to punctuate the lie. "Nothing to worry about."

He turned to hide his face, staring through the open door, hating the city—hating its sunshine, its gentleness, its quiet contentment. *Damnable city,* he thought. *Most damned inferno of stinks and machines*!

"I'll get your raincoat," Judy said. "Looks showery—but sunny, too. A nice day."

Nice, he thought. *Like hell it's nice*!

He kissed her, leaving, eyes averted. At street level he knew that he was going to follow the idea which had played around his mind since the night before. See Renton. Renton knew of

Emanuel Zeker; knew of the break in history. Knew, therefore, other things—things yet unknown to most people. A person wanting to know about those things should thus see Renton. It needed no high-level logic to decide that.

He walked, sometimes doubting, sometimes accusing himself of childish fancifulness. Leave well alone. Yet leaving well alone could be the coward's way out. In it would be no peace of mind for him.

He breathed deeply. The air smelled good. He let his gaze wander over the sunlit streets, creamy buildings and cloud-dotted sky. Then he screwed shut his eyes momentarily, lowered his gaze and strode on. Though ten armed secretaries and ten barred doors lay between himself and Commander Renton, he would see him!

When at last he faced Renton the Commander studied his fingertips, his elbows on his desk, as he listened. Finally his eyes rose. "Is that all, Ashton?"

Bill let his physical tension relax. His fingers were numbed from pressure on the chair arm. "Almost all! How did it begin! Why is it permitted? "

A hand halted him. "You assume the truth of your guess is admitted."

"Isn't it? And is it guessing?"

Renton doodled on his pad. "Let us put it another way. Suppose that most of the things you infer are correct. If men have to work in hell because that's the way things have turned out, do they lose from believing it's near heaven? "

"But there could be other ways!" Bill interrupted. "Radical changes in industrial technique, replanning—"

"Could there? We have a Computer whose partial responsibility is to look into things—and I have no doubt it has done so accurately and well. No man living or dead could improve any of its techniques." He paused. "The processes in our industries are the best, conditions on this planet now being as they are. There is no ore for the digging, no oil, no natural resources of any mineral. Energy we have—20th century science provided that. But energy alone cannot feed humanity. Fertilisers are manufactured with vast plant and incalculable energy from other intractible elements. A hundred-thousand kilowatts are dissipated in nuturing a day's food for one man. Metals have to be made—re-created from rust and the sea. We have nothing but the dust and leavings of our spendthrift ancestors—ash from which to build a city—"

He sank back in his chair, much of the fire going from his

voice. Bill drew in his cheeks, his breathing momentarily stilled in the silent room.

"So it's true," he said.

Renton rose, not answering. "Time you were going, Ashton."

Bill got up, leaning with palms spread on the desk, staring at him. "Is that the way it's to be? Is earth to be a madhouse, drugged to quiescence? Is it to be drug after drug, always stronger. Hypnosis after hypnosis, always more deep? Babies cry. Kids wake screaming. Heaven alone knows what's in the pills you give the old! "

"There are only twenty-five formulæ," Renton said thinly. "At present after those comes—death. The Computer is working on a twenty-sixth. There are difficulties—acquired immunity—"

Bill scarcely heard. "Bedlam! " he said. "A drugged madhouse! Only the Computer knows!" He struck the desk. "Where does it end?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Bill's hand went into his pocket. It emerged with the phial. "Number six," he said. "I suppose the need for changes speeds as we age!" He dropped it to the floor and ground it and the contents to yellow powder. "That's where it ends for me! Maybe there are some with guts enough to live in the world as it is, not as they dream it is! If so, then they'll fight to change it! If men don't know, how can they fight?"

He only halted when his hand was on the door. "I'll find men with guts enough!"

"There are such men, Ashton."

The words sank in. "You mean—?"

"Yes. Ten of us now—eleven, with you. Remember my words? I asked you if that was all. I was hoping it was not. But *that* denial could not come from me." His finger indicated the remnants on the floor.

Bill put his back to the door. The room momentarily seemed to sway. "What shall you do?" His voice was a whisper.

"We're planning. When I said the Computer's industrial processes couldn't be improved I wasn't lying. But there are other planets—one other planet, in particular, and not so many million miles away."

Bill felt relief, elation; anxiety, deep and biting. "How long?"

"Perhaps five years."

"My son could come?"

"Perhaps."

"My wife?"

Renton nodded slowly. "That's up to her." A bleak smile crossed his face. "The other road would have been easier for you, Ashton. You'd have been psychoed, drugged, hypnotised, drugged again. Likely enough you'd have been happy for another ten years. This can be a nice city."

The tone of the last words made it clear and final. Commander Renton hated the city with all his being. Hated it for its insidious deception—for being a counterfeit, a lie. No oath could express that more clearly.

Bill opened the door. "I feel like that too, Commander," he said.

A clear, inner calm had come. But he knew it would not last. This moment was the easiest part. There would be other moments, with no sedative to reawaken comforting images from drugged layers of unconscious memory, or to kill the impact of reality.

It was late when he reached home and Judy was drawing the curtains. "Pity to close them a night like this," she said regretfully, "but I don't want Mark to feel the chill."

He watched her. The worst part was beginning. The draperies only shut out some of the flickering red of the furnaces transmuting the stones of the world into elements in which plants could grow. But steel doors could not have shut out the tearing rumble that shook the air, or quietened the maw of the screaming city. It helped to know that he was not alone—there were eleven others. But he prayed that the five years would prove enough.

Deep in the heart of the throbbing city a new-born baby howled. Dr. Young slid a needle into its arm, put away his instruments, and gave the mother a phial marked "Sedative Number One, For The New-Born."

Odd how they always cried like that, he thought as he left. They screamed and shook their tiny fists as if to fight off some nightmare bedlam of noise and terror. He frowned, pensive, and buttoned his coat. The action made him aware of an unaccustomed object in one pocket. Of course, the book, he thought. The old volume the previous patient had unaccountably pushed into his hand. He looked for the author's name. Dr. Emanuel Zeker. An unusual name, he decided. Possibly the book would prove interesting after all . . .

—Francis G. Rayer

The so-called march of Progress always tramples something out of existence. Extend technology to an ultimate degree and it will eventually cancel out individualism.

STONE AND CRYSTAL

By JOHN ASHCROFT

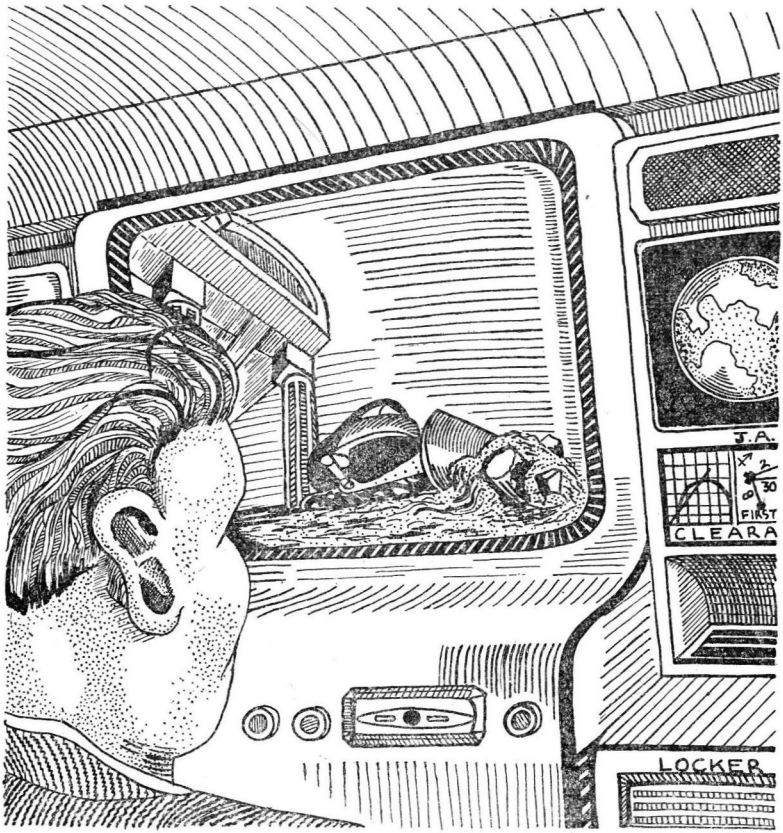
Illustrated by ASHCROFT

"This can't go on," C-483-David told himself. "And how many millions of times have I decided that?" he wondered bitterly.

He was sitting in a deep chair before a vast panel that bristled and glowed with switches and screens. The panel seemed to say: "You come here at least once a day, and what do you do? Sit there; press this button, that button, the other button; check the progress graphs to see if work's behind schedule—which it never is: then go home, trying to forget it all."

He loathed his job and despised himself for doing it. But there was no real choice: he could be like the others, or he could be Stabilized; and when he had been Stabilized, he would be like the others. His only hope lay in pretending to conform.

Caution nagged him. The office might well be fitted with hidden encephalo-recorders; he called them "Sponges" because they sucked up a man's thoughts and were later squeezed dry over analysis flasks. He tried to direct his mind elsewhere, but in vain, and found himself glowering once more at the graphs on the panel. Tomorrow,



those lines would be slightly longer. It was completely inevitable. It was utterly horrible.

David grew restless. He shifted in his chair. Frowning, he asked himself the same old question:

Why was he so different?

His mind went flitting silently in caves of yesterday, winging through dust and darkness, a lonely phantom . . .

There was a classroom. The teacher indicated an image formed by a projector. "This," he said, "is Sirius VI. When first explored,

a century ago, it was a jungle world. Such conditions had to be changed before colonization was possible—we altered the climate —that thinned the vegetation; and that world, its colossal refineries in ceaseless operation, now supplies three elevenths of all our iron. Isn't that wonderful?"

"No!"

Delighted laughter erupted. One boy yelled, "Look out, it's the misbreed!" and the uproar was doubled.

"Really, David this is too much . . . even from you . . . "

"I'm not a misbreed! I don't think we ought to grab all these planets. We should leave the trees and flowers alone; they're better than any old machinery. It's wrong, wrong, wrong!"

The teacher sighed in exasperation, pulled the rebel from the room and had him sent to be examined. First came the interrogation: impatient men asking, "How long have you felt like this? What, all your life? You should have come to us before! Now, David, look at this pattern and tell us what it reminds you of." Do this, do that, why this, why that. . . . All the questions, questions, questions! Then came the cures. He was still trying to forget them; he wondered if he ever would.

That taught him a lesson. Never reveal your deepest feelings. He pretended to reject his mad beliefs, but he knew that the treatments had failed. He was convinced that what men were doing was very wrong, in the old times before Budizum, Kristyanity and the other primitive superstitions were replaced by rationality, it would have been like spitting on your mother's grave or breaking a window in a cathedral.

So he lived a haunted life.

And the years went slinking by.

Later came the instructional flight that bore him from system to spinning system to see looming worlds and strange suns and meteor swarms like shoals of glinting fish gliding in cold black waters round cosmic lighthouses. It had been beautiful, but . . . it was goodbye to Earth; he knew he could never return. So in the final days he tried to see all the things he would miss. Not the glowing cities with their fat, contented, conceited men and women. No, not those; he hated them. Instead, he stored the cool winds in his memory for a rapidly approaching time when the sun itself could be one yellow grain in a swirling sandstorm gusting down infinity. The grasses and the leaves, the petals and the trees, he had said a sad farewell to all of them, and then—

Into a gleaming starship after the very last look at his home-

world as the great lock hissed behind him; the vicious tearing away, the dayless nights of biting grief, the despair that had to be hidden; and the wild boundless wailing of the vessel towards another star, brushing dusty light-years from its black and glittering path.

He had leapt from one world to the next, learning his trade by watching craftsmen as they carved rough real planets into smooth, artificial colonies; by listening in hollow halls to lectures given by pastmasters of mutilation, while outside an orange sun warmed exotic flowers that were being swept away and burned to make room for clanging factories.

Then, his training completed, he was sent to the Dead Worlds. There was a hot white sun with twelve planets. The inner three were molten; the fourth had choking clouds that mourned on lifeless crags; but the next three were triplets, with good air, wide seas, and deserts containing ancient cities of some long-forgotten race that had stepped from the sixth world to its neighbours; the outer planets were frozen globes of snow and methane, limping icily round thousand-year orbits.

David felt the peace of the sixth world as it swelled to meet him, as the sleek starship slid into its rustling air. After the landing, two years of solid toil began. Out of those years rose First City and the similar cities on the fifth and seventh planets. Fleets of starships brought supplies; metal worms went groping through the dead rock flesh for valuable minerals. The basic settlements were ready, food being grown under solar lamps in cavernous vaults. More cities would rise, and torrents of people would pour into them; the Workers would then move on to yet more distant systems, keeping one stride ahead of the marching colonists. Their task never ceased.

Clearance was continuing. Labour was being diverted to the demolition of the old ruins; day by day the bulldozers crawled like silver beetles, the temples fell into heaps of rubble and were scooped aside. David had watched on the big screen, feeling his heart writhe. Only a few cities remained now, including one sixty-four miles from First City itself—David had never been to it, but he knew what it was like—a dream of Eternity in silent sands, a stone and crystal wizard in a flowing cloak of yellow dust, weaving secret spells in the enchanted solitude of a world of whispering winds.

"It's no use to us, get rid of the thing."

That was the official attitude. It was also the attitude of all

the Clearance Workers; all, that is, except C-483-David, the freak whose mind was un-Stable.

And the old cities had one more day to exist.

He scowled at a progress graph. "Blueprint for murder!" he muttered. The graph grinned like a distorted mouth. And then the idea clamped on his brain. One day to go: one swift day after ten thousand years . . . Soon it would be too late—it was almost too late now! Countless times he had considered the idea, not daring to think seriously about it. This was the last chance he would ever have; but if anyone found out . . .

Stabilization!

He sweated with fear and longing. His eyes darted about, seeking a spying menace in every screen. It was cold and quiet. Somehow, in this silence, he felt that the ruins were waiting for him; and they could not always be waiting—

"I'll go," he decided abruptly. His knees jerked as he stood up. With exaggerated care he drew his liftpack from the locker. His hands shook and the straps unrolled loudly. His face went damp; he wiped it. "Pull yourself together, fool!" he thought; "you leave at all hours, so no one will be suspicious if he sees you going. Act naturally!"

He poked his arms through the harness and clipped the wide control belt about his waist. Then, after an involuntary glance out of the window at the pale towers plunging seven hundred feet to the carway, he slid back the door and stepped out into emptiness. The liftpack hummed softly as he hovered by the sheer wall to close the door behind him. A few heavy transport vehicles crept far beneath. With a twist of a switch he was away, buzzing like a fly among vast pillars of icing sugar.

"I'll take a drifter; they're slow, but it's the best I can do."

He swung above the plastic paradise of First City. It was beautiful, he admitted, but it was in the wrong place. Building a shining new city in a dead land was so typical of human progress: like digging up a corpse and filling it with steel bones and an electric brain to make it walk again. And how would its soul feel?

Also, part of his bitterness was due to the fact that First City, with its luxurious rooms and amusement palaces, was not for him: he was only a fool, a Worker separated at birth from parents who did not want him. He slaved to erect fine cities for the rich colonists—then went off to do the same thing elsewhere. Even the Officers fared no better. That was why they acted as they did: their spite had only one outlet.

David reached the hangar. It was an enormous cube of pink icing amid the pillars of white and light blue, with its entrance ten yards above carway level. He swooped down and into it like a bat entering a cave, stumbled, switched off the liftpack and turned to examine the drifters. They were small, oval, made of clear glastic, with silver motors inside them. A layer of them hung as a magic carpet above the floor; over them hung a second layer, and successive layers rose to the remote ceiling, each machine eight inches from its neighbours on all sides. As leisurely pleasure-craft the drifters were perfect; their design had not changed in a hundred years.

"And what are *you* doing here?" demanded an authoritative voice.

David spun round. An Officer stepped from a side door and stood before him, head thrown back arrogantly. "Well? I asked you a question; don't just stare at me. Are you deaf?"

Dread of Stabilization swamped David's mind. He managed to stammer that he wanted to borrow a drifter.

The other snorted, clenched his fists and strode closer. "I'd guessed that, *Worker*! 'I want to borrow a drifter' won't satisfy me; where are you —"

David punched him with all his force. It was a wild swing born of panic and blessed by luck; the man dropped backwards and his head thudded against the wall. He slumped like a limp rag doll. David leapt to the nearest drifter and wrenched open its blunt nose, clambered in and pushed on the control lever. Nothing happened. Then he saw the door; he hadn't closed it properly. He slammed it, completing the safety circuit. Ah, now the drifter would move. Again he pushed on the lever. Again nothing happened.

He almost battered on the glastic, almost screamed at the thing to fly—and almost shrieked in relief as he realized what was wrong. The drifters were removed in strict order; the bottom one at the extreme right was taken first, and those above it were lowered accordingly until that column had gone; then the same procedure with the adjacent column, and so on, until the front of the "block" had vanished, leaving a new front to be removed similarly. The regulator beneath the hangar held the machines in position magnetically.

"I'm in the wrong one!" He scrambled out and ran madly to the correct craft. His palm clung sweatily to the lever. With a whisper of air the glastic egg wafted gently forward. Behind, the entire

vertical row eased itself down to fill the space. The Officer sprawled untidily, motionless. And a solitary drifter soared into the blue air from the wedding-cake city.

There was no pursuit, that was what worried him. As soon as he was on course he had scoured the sky; he had pressed buttons that made parts of the hull twist and bulge themselves into lenses; but there were no other drifters to be seen.

"What a mess," he reflected. "I could have sneaked out to the ruins and returned easily, if only that Officer hadn't come prying around. What in the world was he doing there, anyway? The place is self-operated." After a few moments the truth struck him: once a year the hangars were inspected, and, as ironically as anyone might wish, this was the second inspection day. He could have kicked himself for having been so careless.

But why was there no pursuit? Even if the Officer had not recovered, someone must have found him by now. Or must they? His hopes suddenly bloomed. Perhaps the hangers would not be visited for some time; the Officers had no reason to suspect that their colleague had been attacked; they would conclude that his work was delaying him. Which meant that David was safe until the man came to his senses.

He looked back. First City had lowered itself from sight, and the desert was a mottled plain spreading as far as the eye could see. The ruins were still forty miles away. The drifter was heated and the evening was warm, but he trembled slightly.

Then—

"No!" he cried aloud. "No, I didn't hit him *so* hard; he can't be . . . " He tried not to think of the word, tried to force his thoughts away from it, tried to forget it. He shuddered.

But he felt half pleased at having done it. He had hated the Officers for too long; his fury would have erupted soon in any case. Even so, it was a nasty affair. And it destroyed whatever chance he might have had of escaping with nothing worse than a lot of very rough treatment. All that mattered now was to do what he had set out to do, before . . .

The two of them stood over their friend's body, looking down at it. One of them said, "I wondered what that egg was doing in the air on an inspection day. I'll swear, too, that it was heading for the Camp . . . or the ruins! Does he think he can hide there? We'd better warn them at the Camp; they'll attend to the dog."

"No," said the other. "We'll grab him ourselves. Call Jan and the rest. I want to watch what he does before being caught. But don't worry, we'll get him. Ken was my friend."

"Right! the Worker's going to pay for this."

The desert was quiet in the sunset. In a year or two the whole world would be a riot of careless hedonism, its ignorant settlers drowning ten millenia of memories as they spat on the ancient sands. But now there was one drifter in the evening heights, swinging silently towards a city of echoes.

The sun blushed, sank slowly, and the fiery air became ice in the calm west. The nearest moon rose as a hot copper crescent and floated over the heavens, growing into a sphere before vanishing like a snuffed candle as it slid down the east into the planet's shadow. David could sense the world turning, rolling into the night. It was not dark, nor would it be. The giant moon climbed grandly up the sky, a tremendous pitted snowball with its own tiny satellite a sullen ruby moving visibly around it. The pools of gloom were filled to the brim with silver radiance, and the entire desert basked in a ghostly glow. An even deeper silence gathered about the oval drifter as it went speeding on like a spirit of the hours of sleep.

"Ah," sighed David. "There it is . . . "

Far away appeared a pattern on the sand that expanded to resolve itself into the ancient city. A high wall encircled it, and there were—

David started. Beyond the city, glittering coldly in the clear light, was an army of metal soldiers, hard and sharp and cruel.

The wrecking machines.

He had forgotten about the Camp. Hastily he twisted the controls, and the drifter dived, resuming level flight when the ruins came between it and any possible observers. His shoulders prickled at the thought that he might have been seen; then the ruins dominated his mind. He could see nothing but the wall, the huge, grey wall, a sheer cliff with white waves frozen at its massive base. Over the pale sand sea the drifter rustled and hummed, a crystal hush in a dream of soft dust, cool shades and solid stone that bumped its hollow hull. It came to rest, fifty feet from the ground.

"At last!" He left the flyer and hung beside it. He drew an unsteady breath and stroked the wall surface. It was so old, incredibly old, smoothed and polished by the unhurried ages.

"This has stood for thousands of years," murmured David,

"and parts of it will remain when the world is frigid and the sun is a dying cinder."

A harsh scream rang across the desert, a shriek of splitting gases; a volcano hurtled from the stars with a roar of iron thunder, an avalanche of flame and silver crashing from the void to shatter the peaceful soundlessness.

Then the tumult dwindled and the ground quivered as the titanic supply vessel landed at the Clearance Camp.

Clearance!

David felt sick. There he was, trying to imagine the future of the city; and less than twelve hours remained. He sighed; his desire to see the ruins intensified, became a biting passion. He gripped his studded belt and the wall fell past while a draught ruffled his shorts and blouse. "I may need a torch," he decided; "Ah, wait: there's one in the liftpack."

The wall tilted beneath him. And there lay the city! Rows of houses, grey and white with flat roofs; fairy palaces with slim towers; and in the centre, a slender spire pointing high into the falling snow of moonlight; all still, quiet, slumbering under blankets of feathery dust.

He laughed aloud in pure exhilaration as he sent himself racing into deepness within the wall, as the breeze blustered in his face, as a sand-heaped street leapt to meet him. He hovered above it and floated along, peering at the dwellings that drifted by. He was a child in dreamland, enjoying it before it vanished with the morning. Age! It was a mist in this haunted city, breathing yesterdays upon him as he ghosted between crumbling monuments and spectral halls.

"What sort of people were they," he wondered, "who kept all the magic of their early days, and yet had space-travel?"

He looked up at the moon-filled sky. "And did they go to the stars? If so, why?" There was no answer.

He stopped. The cosmic pendulum stayed its ponderous swing. Before him a vast dome rose from the stone, its upflung spire piercing the vault like an artist's wish transmuted by the gods to masonry and glass.

The door was open.

"Why, it seems weightless! Those buttresses are anchors holding it down . . . "

It was dark inside.

He drew the heavy torch from the liftpack compartment and switched it on.

The cathedral was a sphere, with rings of carved seats descend-

ing into its hollowed basin already half-full of sand that had crept in and poured down flights of steps. The walls were richly ornamented, and thin ribs curved within the roof.

"This is beautiful," thought David. "The others could never appreciate it; I . . . feel sorry for them . . . I can . . . forgive them, in a way . . . "

Peace prayed voicelessly in his ears. Humility hummed sweetly. A celestial hand pulled aside the curtain that was time, and the dust, the emptiness, the desolation, they were gone. People entered, priests performed holy rites round low altars, and golden tapestries rustled. The air sighed with scents and spices; incense burned as fires breathed redly. Music tinkled, choirs chanted and a hymn rose, swelled, boomed in glory around the singing walls that held the warmly throbbing heart of——

Clang!

The torch had slipped from his fingers. Undamaged, it went clattering down the steps, exploding the dream into a thousand jangling echoes. Dust sifted from ledges in slow, powderly cataracts. A colossal sheet of glass toppled in a crimson blaze and crashed across the stone seats in a shower of ringing splinters.

And the cathedral was a lifeless mockery in a dead city.

David thought bitterly: "What men are doing is wrong, like spitting on your mother's grave or breaking a window in a . . . in . . . " He wept.

And the drifters rolled like glistening tears from the blind eye of the moon down the cold cheek of the night and melted into a shimmering pool on the hard, hard stone. Men soared from them into the glaring light within the useless building. They dragged David from it. The light went out.

A rocket screeched eagerly up the ripped skies to bring more cacophonous machines to grind down the last cities of the Dead Worlds and erect great metalworks on the scarred desert.

"Let me go," sobbed David, in a speeding drifter. "Let me go! I don't want to be balanced; I don't want my emotions to be cut out of my brain—Stop! *No!* No!"

"Shut your slobbering mouth," snarled an Officer, smashing David's teeth with his fist.

David moaned, spat blood, and was silent.

But he shrieked and shrieked and shrieked when he reached the surgery and they Stabilized him.

Without anæsthetic.

—John Ashcroft

It could well be that there are civilisations in the Galaxy mentally superior to our own. With a little help from one of them we could ultimately reach the stars. Perhaps they are already guiding our experiments along the lines they think we should investigate for our own good—or theirs.

UNBORN OF EARTH

By LES COLE

Illustrated by HUNTER

The greying, rigidly-contained man leaned back in his chair. His eyes assumed a speculative look and he said, "The natives of this planet call it, as usual, 'Earth.' We *all* call them 'Earth.'" He sighed and continued. "You know, if and when I retire, I'm going to do some basic research on why nine out of ten of the developing two-legged, two-armed races in the galaxy go through that agrarian stage in their early history which leads to the naming of their particular bit of cosmic dust as 'Earth.' Why—"

"Chief!" the petite blonde broke in impatiently, "I'm sorry, but I wish you'd get to the point. You've begun to tip-toe all around it, just like my First Partner did the day we took our vows. What about Earth?"

"It's populated by a race—" he opened a desk drawer and began leafing through papers in it "—which our field agents there tell me *could* supplant us. We're not going to allow that to happen. Ah!" He found what he was searching for, a small glossy square, and

threw it across the desk. "Take a look, Dalva, a good look. That man is important."

She picked up the picture and studied briefly the mild-mannered visage and crop of black hair; the rather thin, spare frame. Slowly, as though she had to concentrate on the action, she raised her head to stare at the man with her in the office. "Chief!" Dalva's voice was low with surprise and awe. "Chief, this race isn't humanoid—it's *human!*"

The other nodded, almost grimly.

"I've seen other people close to us in appearance," she went on, "but never any this close. Are there differences?"

He nodded again. "Enough so as to separate the two into species, but our biologists were worried there for a bit."

"Why is this particular specimen of importance?"

"Because," he explained, "he represents, at least potentially and possibly actually, the best that this race has produced. The inhabitants of this planet are in the first stage of a materialistic culture based upon atomics—and they are as imperialistic as any race of which I know. Add to this the fact that they are working towards the release of energy in the lighter elements, and you have a dangerous situation as far as we are concerned."

"Why?"

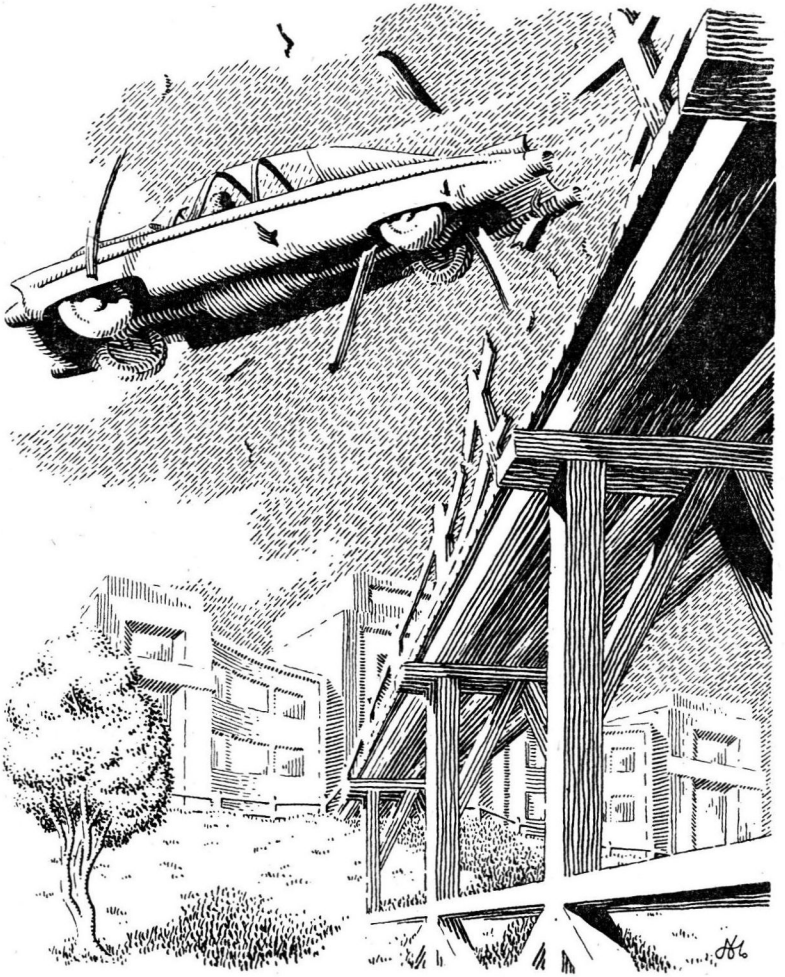
"Simply this: they could derive the interstellar drive."

"Have they colonised their local system yet?"

"No. They are only now on the verge of going to their own satellite," he answered.

"No?" She frowned and asked, "Aren't you expecting quite a bit from these people to go star-hopping without exploring their own system first? I simply can't visualise them as that blasé or that advanced. I've seen other races that have just developed the new toy, space-travel, and—"

"They'd do their exploring concurrently if they had the chance," he interrupted. Noticing her look of disbelief, he continued. "That's the kind of a race we're dealing with, Dalva. I was sceptical at first, too, but—my job here won't allow me to take chances. It's true; we're handling a people different from any other with which we've had experience. The peculiar genius of these people seems to be not in their low-level technology of which they are so proud, but in their knack of having the right person do the right job at the right time. Their whole history has been a series of fumbles through a given situation—and then finding an individual or group which solves the problems they have themselves created. It's fantastic,



but this has happened enough times to preclude any possibility of luck. Apparently they have developed an instinctive survival mechanism."

The woman shook her head. "I'm still not sure of the significance of all this."

"I implied that our field agents on Earth were worried. Statistical Sociology is even more so. Statsoc reports that if they *had* the drive, they'd be out of their system within a period of three to five years. They are extremely aggressive and represent an unknown factor as far as our own plans go. We have to stop them."

She smiled with a certain confidence and asked: "Have you evaluated free thought in this problem? Or are you going to tell me this race has also developed dimensional telepathy as we?"

"No, they haven't. That's one major advantage on our side."

"Something else, Chief. You said that these 'Earthians' are aggressive and imperialistic. Doesn't that mean intra-specific warfare?"

"Yes," he replied in a wry voice. "Too much of it from their standpoint but not enough from ours. Right now they're at a crossroads, or so the gentlemen in Statsoc tell me. First of all, they might put themselves out of the way for a matter of a hundred years or so, which is all we'd need to complete our own plans. Second, they may indulge in a war which will only superficially damage their society. And finally, they may have no war at all. However, our boys are betting on the second choice."

Her laugh was sarcastic. "Fine! That's all we'd need, having them flounder onto the drive and their war carried out here. All right, you win, what's the job?"

He pointed again to the picture. "They are launching a programme of work on what they call 'the lithium bomb'—a war weapon—and the man shown there is, or will be, one of the important factors in accomplishing the goal. Their research lines are varied, of course, but he is doing the work which can lead to the drive.

"The field agents on Earth have planned the thing out in detail. You'll get a job working along with Brewer there—" he nodded at the picture "—as a laboratory assistant or secretary. Let him get the 'bomb' if you wish; just see to it that he stays away from anything that could accomplish the drive as a by-product . . . "

Brewer was only mildly annoyed by the presence of the investigator. He had come to accept these periodic interruptions of his thinking as part of the conditions of living; he'd been interrupted for some reason or other ever since he could remember, and he'd found things no different working for the government.

He looked at the man and was suddenly struck by the feeling of averageness which the other evoked. Here was a person who would

be indistinguishable in a crowd; slightly taller than average and with sandy hair, composed features, and a drab, dark blue suit, he was the type of person, Brewer was sure, whose name would be forgotten instantly after an introduction at a party. And, Brewer realised, he was therefore perfectly fitted for his job.

The man smiled, breaking Brewer's reverie, and said: "My name is Nelson. I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Dr. Brewer. This is my commission." He waved the rectangular leather cover in the other man's face and then pocketed it.

Brewer had time to catch a flash of a picture which bore a resemblance to Nelson and time to catch the usual signature. However, the perfunctory manner in which it was offered bothered him. He was meticulous himself and automatically extended that state to everyone.

Nelson went on: "You requested aid in your work. As I understand it, you wanted someone to act as secretary, laboratory assistant, and general jack-of-all-trades. Because of the—" he paused, searching for a word, and finally settled, strangely, on 'delicate,' "—delicate nature of the work here, many people have been interviewed and rejected. I think though, that we've finally got someone for you. With your approval, I'll make an appointment here for the interview with her."

Brewer cocked an eyebrow. "Her?" he questioned.

The investigator nodded. "A woman, educated on the Continent, of Franco-American parentage. Spent a lot of time travelling between here and there. She finally settled in this country four months ago."

"I hadn't really thought about having a woman here," Brewer said. "Still, I suppose there's nothing wrong. You're satisfied with her background?"

"Ye—es," mused the other.

"You say that as though you're not," said Brewer.

Nelson looked at him in an embarrassed way. "As a physicist, Doctor, you deal in perceivable fact. It's that way with investigators, too. We can't afford to deal with ideas based upon emotion. I've had others check this girl's background, and they've found her perfectly all right."

"But you?" questioned Brewer.

"I have the vaguest feeling of suspicion. That's all."

Brewer was silent for a moment, wondering why in the world he had begun to dislike the man opposite him. "Aside from this feeling," he said, emphasising slightly the last word and feeling

rewarded when he noted the flush on Nelson's face, "there's nothing wrong?"

"No, in every respect she meets all the qualifications. It's almost as though she was educated with this job in mind."

"All right." Brewer consulted a desk calendar. "Send her here next Tuesday, in the morning. And now, Mr. Nelson, I'm rather busy . . ." His voice trailed off significantly.

Nelson mumbled the conventional formula about being sorry to have taken so much time and left.

The following Tuesday, Brewer was in his office as he idly watched, through the window, the automobile make the long climb up the hill and then, with renewed power, roll forward across the wooden bridge to the security-check gates outside the laboratory. He lost interest when it pulled to a halt there. His interest was not regained when the telephone informed him that his appointment had arrived. By the time he had recalled her name and the purpose of her visit, she was before him.

Brewer was healthy and relatively young, and his interest was violently re-stimulated when he saw her. Blonde and cute she was, and with a patrician air that gave her a certain finesse. When his questioning of her elicited the necessary educational background and training for the work, he was more than pleased. Suddenly he recalled the story about the young man who met a beautiful, shapely, and rich actress. The actress wanted nothing more than to settle down—she read science fiction and Thorsten Veglen with equal facility; held the same philosophic views and was his intellectual equal. The young man was unable to believe such a perfect woman existed, and then found she kept dead horses in her living room. Brewer, even while he was wondering if there were anything wrong with this girl he was interviewing, began to grin.

"Can you start work tomorrow?" he asked.

("Chief?"

"Clear. All right, Dalva, go ahead."

"I've been there a week now. This is going to be a lot harder than I thought; he resists suggestion like mad."

"I'd rather not say I warned you. Have you got anything yet?"

"No, just routine stuff. Guess I'll have to work into things slowly."

"All right. Don't push too hard though; my information is that he is pretty intelligent for a barbarian."

"Check.")

Nelson strode toward the office with a certain amount of trepidation. He sensed Brewer's dislike of him; for that matter, he wasn't at all sure he himself felt anything but dislike for the physicist. He didn't like smug people, and Brewer was that. Child genius type. Wet-behind-the-ears, for all the quantum mechanics. How cynical will *he* be at my age? Probably not very, actually. Won't have the chance to meet as many different personalities. Common pattern: the unaggressive intellectual, lacking the social drive and actually afraid of the people—the laymen—to whom he feels superior, and who'd rather solve a puzzle by himself than be at a party. Still, it's common knowledge now that his type is the United States' first line of offense. Guess I'd better placate him.

And he opened Brewer's door.

The physicist was sitting at his desk, tapping his fingers on it, and looking impatient. "Yes, Mr. Nelson?"

"I'd like to speak to you about Miss D'Aliel."

"Again?" the young man questioned wryly. "But I should have guessed. Ever since she came here—a month and a half ago, isn't it?—you people haven't let up. *You're* causing more trouble than any enemy agents I know."

Nelson laughed dutifully, tiredly. It wasn't the first time that charge had been thrown at him. "You'd be surprised at what investigation preceded her employ here, if you think these last few weeks have been bad. All this has been final clearance, as it were. However, you'll be happy to know that we're calling off the dogs."

Nelson watched the tension lessen on Brewer's face.

"That is a relief. And thank you very much for telling me, Mr. Nelson. I—"

"There's one other thing, Dr. Brewer," Nelson interrupted. "It's about that 'feeling' of mine."

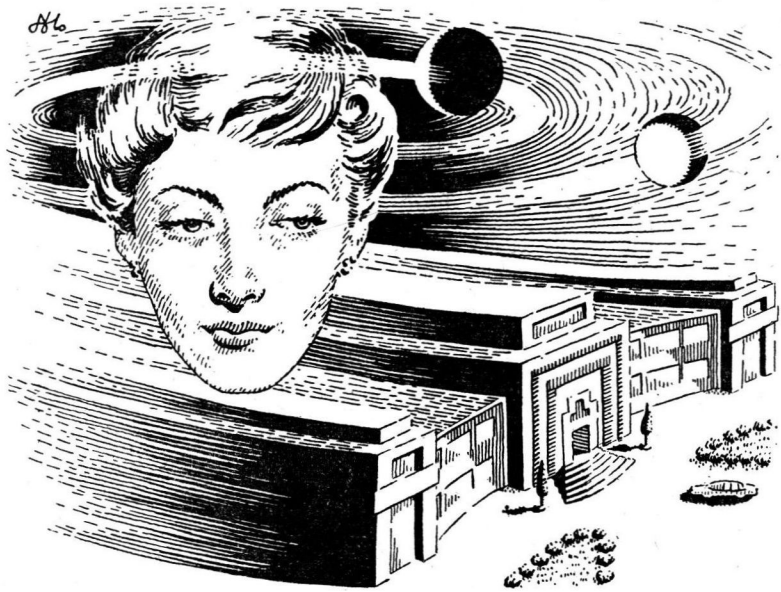
Brewer frowned. "Yes?"

"I know you disapprove of the idea. But, on a personal level, I feel it's my duty to bring it up.

"Look, I've been doing investigation work the best part of my life. You develop an instinct after a while; you have to. There's something about this girl that doesn't ring true to me."

Brewer said: "I thought you only dealt in facts."

"I do," was the reply, "but instinct can be based on fact. When you become familiar enough with a job, a thousand little facts are unconsciously observed and become 'instinct.' However, I may be wrong; what do you think about her?"



"I find nothing to substantiate your belief," Brewer replied stiffly.

"Well," Nelson said lightly, "it just goes to show how wrong it's possible to be."

Brewer wondered whether the man was being cocky or simply making the best of a situation he'd got himself into. As Nelson was leaving he said to the other: "But I'd still keep my weather-eye open," and was gone before Brewer could reply.

He sat there a moment, vaguely angry, and then went into the lab where the girl was working. "What was?" she asked.

He was on the point of telling her, but instead he snarled: "Nothing!"

"If 'nothing' puts you into such a state, what are you like when you're waiting for your morning coffee?"

He smiled slightly and said: "More government-investigation-red-tape sort of deal. Lord, how they will tie us up. We've become so busy watching the watchers watching the watchers we're losing sight of what the watching is about."

"Which watching?" she asked. "I got lost—"

"But what's worse," he interrupted her, "is this loss of freedom

that's accompanying it all." He was wound up now, striding back and forth. "Where do you draw the line between 'security' and plain, old-fashioned research? Or is all research eventually to be considered 'top secret'? If so, the police state cometh. Is *that* the logical outgrowth of a society based on scientific materialism?"

"Wait a minute," she said. "That 'security' you decry is necessary right now, regardless of philosophic implications."

"And when won't it be necessary?" he grumbled. "Sure, sure, I know the theory. I'm even contributing to it. But if we're not careful, somewhere along the line we'll reach a point from which there'll be no return to the old days; we may even have passed it already. And then what happens to your 'informed citizenry'?"

He stopped, wiped his brow, and noticed the surprised look on her face. "Ahh, I guess I'm just in my cups today. Let's see what you've done."

She handed him the work sheets, and he began looking them over, munching a battered pencil. Within moments he slammed the pencil onto the table top. "Good God, woman! You're off by a yard of the whole cloth from which you made that up. What do you think you're doing, dealing in millimicrons?"

And then he noticed the quick tears which had sprung to her eyes. "Annette?"

"It's all right, Dick." Her voice was low. "I'm more distressed at my own stupidity than your righteous yelling at me."

He stepped back and mused: "You *are* different from other women. Too bad Eve wasn't like you; maybe we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now. And off the record, you didn't deserve that much of a calling down. I guess I'm just disturbed about the red-tape business."

She smiled. "Prithee, thank you, sir. Shall I try again?"

"Yea, sistren! Once more, and we'll . . ."

("Dalva?"

"Clear. What is it, Chief?"

"Your report was a little overdue. I was wondering if you were hung up," he thought.

"I am and I'm not. I haven't anything really but the run of the place. Either he's playing it cagey, or he hasn't got anything himself. But, after six weeks, I am pretty sure I have his confidence. He's been 'protecting' me against the local law officers here."

"What about Brewer?"

"I like him; he is rather more pleasant than the average specimen

of this population. He likes to think. I'd like to see what he could do if he had some real tools to work with—"

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "Don't get any ideas about pushing his research along. You might upset the Statsoc figures."

"Don't worry, I won't. Oh, yes. He's asked me out. The shy type always throws me; I get worried that I'm slipping."

"I'll bet you do."

"And right in the middle of some calculations on the eta radiation factor, he suddenly asked, 'Annette, do you like watermelon? And picnics?' Watermelon is a disgusting, nauseating vine-fruit they grow here, by the way. But I discovered a sudden overpowering love of watermelon . . .")

Where the sunlight was allowed to touch the ground by the heavy growth of tangled branches and leaves, it stood in sharp contrast to the amorphous, vari-shaded, grey shadows which caused it to be discontinuous. As they walked upstream the spots of sunlight fell across them and moved on, in kaleidoscopic fashion.

Brewer shifted the lunch basket into his other hand, and then, as he felt her struggling against the wet, mossy footing on the banks of the stream, he tightened his grip on her hand. He found the action not entirely unpleasant.

"Don't give up," he laughed, "it's not much farther. And by the way, if you hear a noise like a twig rubbing two Boy Scouts together rapidly, don't move. That'll be a rattlesnake."

She moved closer to him. "Big rattlesnakes?"

"Big enough," he smirked, and noticing her look, went on, "but don't let me worry you. I've never yet seen one that wouldn't run if you gave him—or her—half a chance. The bite, incidentally, has been exaggerated by the layman, too; it's painful but only very rarely fatal. And finally, I just happen to have a snake-bite kit with me—it's guaranteed good for everything from the cobra to the fer-de-lance."

She slipped again, recovered, and said in a slightly annoyed tone, "Are you always so meticulous?"

"It depends upon what I'm doing," the young man replied with something approximating an Honest-to-God leer, "but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," she parroted his tone of voice.

He laughed. "No, it's not the rattlesnakes I'd worry about if I

were you. You just don't want to sit under oak trees in this neck of the woods."

"Why not?"

"Pajahuelas."

"Pajahuelas?"

"Little bugs," he explained, "related to the tick family, I think. Look like curled up oak leaves. They have a pleasant little habit—they bite and inject poison. Nasty infection, think I'd rather have a mix-up with a rattler."

She brushed some wisps of yellow hair from her eyes and sighed. "It must be the Scientific Mind at work. I have sat with men in softly-lit bars being plied with liquor; there have been incidents in convertibles—yellow, red, and cream-coloured—with a big moon—yellow, red, and cream-coloured—rising over the horizon; there have been parties and football games, and all the men I've been with have eventually got round to the romantic setting, intent upon making me defend myself against a fate worse than death. But you? *You* thrust me in with snakes, nasty bugs, and rocks that are just waiting for the chance to break my ankle. How'd you happen to discover this little garden-spot?"

"I used to hike in these hills," he replied. "I've never shown this to anyone else . . ." The words seemed to tumble out, and he blushed and went on. "Must have been a ranch house here in the old days. We've been paralleling an abandoned wagon-trail; in fact, shortly before we get to the spot you'll see an old buckboard that was left off the trail. The place was burned out, and I guess that's what decided the people to move away. Probably couldn't get help here fast enough."

The abrupt, nearly box-canyon walls had begun to widen out. The vegetation changed, too, and began to thin. They were able to move up onto the trail, and their progress was faster. Within moments they had passed the old wagon; moments after, they reached the spot.

"It's lovely, Dick," she said in a low voice, with no trace of the mockery which had characterised her conversation up to that time. The stream, in some crazy quirk of erosion, had cut the canyon walls back in a large semi-cylinder on their side of the bank. Because of the steepness of the walls, the sunlight was able to reach only the rough centre of the area, producing a spotlight-like effect. Over to the side, the skeleton of the burnt home nestled in the shadows, blackened and old, but still smiling benignly. Around it in randomness grew blackberry vines, once neat and orderly, and now,

as though to compensate for rapid growth, clutching the remaining timbers of the house in support. Fruit trees were bearing, in rows set off a short distance away. And in front, the tree-lined stream rolled its cool water past the level clearing, ringing out a frothy salute to the house.

Brewer stood there for a moment, grunted, and then walked down to the stream. He began picking rocks from the bank and placing them into a pattern in the water. Annette followed down beside him and watched for a bit. "I am forced to the conclusion, sir," she said, "that you are either a frustrated engineer or part beaver and are trying to dam up this stream."

He growled over his shoulder, "Wrong on all counts, you silly creature. I am erecting a barrier in this body of water, against which I shall put the watermelon, so that it—the watermelon—will get palpably cool. But enough of your feminine logic, and I use the word laughingly. Go carry out your womanly duties and prepare the feast. I grow hungry."

She fell to her knees, salaamed, and backed away.

"Watch where you're going," he laughed after her, "and remember the snakes."

Lunch over, they sprawled out in the shade of one of the trees. "Sorry for all the nasty things I thought earlier," she said. "This place is really idyllic. It gives me the feeling that the world is cut off from us, and with that cut go all the problems and worries. You can escape here."

"Umm," he muttered.

"Nickle for your thoughts," she said, adding, "post-War American."

He replied: "I wonder if I have the right to 'escape' or whether you have the right, either. A dozen times this afternoon things have popped into my mind, things that I should be thinking about along the lines of research. I've suppressed them, but maybe they're what we need—"

She interrupted, putting her hand on his. "Dick, not this afternoon. Think about the weather, but leave the work back in the labs."

"All right," he smiled, "so let's escape. Where?"

She didn't answer, but he became aware of the intent way she looked at him, of the pressure from her hand. His mouth grew dry, and background noises faded out before his increased awareness of the loud thud of his pulse. The ache in the back of his throat suddenly informed him in which direction escape lay. He became a

creature of instinct and was surprised to find that he'd already kissed her.

"That wasn't a scheduled performance for today," he said throatily.

"I think I believe you," she breathed softly.

The break in the emotional medium caused by what he said—the break that told him he was being clumsy—began to close in again as he watched her relax in his arms. His low-spoke "Damnation!" was a last measure as he tried to fight against the force moving him. Then he pulled her to him.

Down in the stream the watermelon grew colder, much colder.

To Nelson the light looked dim and cold reflecting off the white concrete walls. It always did, and it was part of the usual pattern with him: the melodious hum of the other agents' voices in the background; the smell of tired, stale cigarette smoke mixed with another, more acrid odour; the feeling of pressure across his forehead at the hair-line where the beads of perspiration were beginning to gather, and the moist feeling of his hand where he gripped the butt hard; the unbalanced feeling as he lowered the barrel from the vertical . . .

"Eight!" The yell was dispassionate, uninterested.

He holstered the weapon in disgust and walked back from the firing line. With only one part of his mind he was aware of the wisps of conversation around him: ". . . fifty thousand dollars of the tax payers' money and had the gall to suggest . . . hunched over the bench—y'know the way he does—with his glasses sitting on his forehead and his judicial robe spread out like a bat . . . the one about the gal who walked into the doctor's office . . . " Ordinarily he would have joined the conversation and kidding; now he was too preoccupied. He sat down in the shadows next to another figure.

"Hey, Dead-eye! With firing like that, if Dillinger ever comes back, he'll be gunning for *you*."

"Hello, Pete." Nelson's voice was glum. "Stank, didn't I?"

"The year's understatement, Al. That last set: seven, nine, ten, eight, nine, eight—whooh! If you can't do better than that on the practice range, they'll retire you."

"I don't like these night firing sessions; upset me—"

The other broke in. "Al, this is *me*, Ely. Remember the von Hagel shooting match? Or the Janathin kidnapping? You're not going to tell me night firing bothers you now. What is it, the D'Aliel case?"

"Yes. It's over two months now. Just can't get rid of the feeling that something isn't right."

"Can't admit you're wrong, can you? Why don't you lay off the lady, Bulldog? She checked out in everyone's book. Relax."

"Maybe you're right, Pete." Nelson shook his head and sighed. "I've thought about it a lot. Maybe this is the way it's going to hit me. An investigator gets too old, starts cracking. His instinct or data-collecting mechanism or call it what you will goes haywire, and all he's got to do is be wrong on *that* score once, and he's retired—or dead."

Ely smiled and said: "I think you've a couple of good years yet."

"So do I, Pete. But I'm requesting a change of jobs. Going to give my mind a rest. Administrative rather than actual field. What about you?"

"Me?" The round-faced agent grinned his delight. He looked around in exaggerated fashion and stage-whispered: "High-level classified stuff. I'm off for L.A.; one of those wild-eyes nuts down there has been spreading unfortunately-too-accurate tales about—"

"—about Project Luna?" Nelson carried the thread.

Ely looked surprised. "Bulldog, you're getting psychic. How'd you know?"

Nelson was smiling. "The way you said, 'wild-eyed nuts,' Pete. Well, see you."

"Night, Al."

(" . . . long enough to know something definite. How old are you, Dalva?"

"One hundred six, Chief."

"And how long have you been one of my agents?"

"Fifty-six years, ever since I qualified on minimum-age requirements. Why?"

"And in that time, Dalva, do you mean to tell me that you have not yet learned how to get information from a man?"

"Why Chief! What can you possibly mean?"

"Stop being funny!" His thoughts were snarled.

"I've been trying to tell you—the little action you imply has been taken care of. His confidence I now have completely. That's how I know the work at the labs hasn't gone as far as we were afraid it had. This should, in turn, make my work easier. But Dick can be awfully stubborn."

"Are you doing anything about that?"

"Doing? But yes, as my spurious ancestors would say. I am

taking an action which, I've observed since being here, will change the most stubborn, independent man into a meek, suggestible child. It appears I'm to be made an honourable woman. He wants to 'marry' me—it's something like the vows."

"Good! That *should help."*

"It's just one more facet of a peculiar people, Chief. They pay lip-service to an idea that runs contrary to their very nature. They're extremely sanctimonious about this 'marriage' and yet probably over 60 per cent. of them ignore its ramifications in some fashion or another. Apparently the idea grew as a desideratum for the protection of the young; and yet, if they can conceive of the necessity of protection of the young, why set up false standards? This race needs a good talking to."

"How does this affect Brewer?"

"Dick? He is capable of carrying an idea to its logical conclusion, even if it is based on false data. He'll work at making this a success —when I tell him I'll accept. Right now I'm worrying him; it'll help establish his indulgence of me when I want my way."

"I see the same pattern works in both his race and ours," the man thought.

She continued. "It's an odd thing, but in a vague way Dick reminds me of my First Partner. He is entirely self-sufficient as far as these people are concerned—and completely blind in some situations. I guess the resemblance to my Partner isn't so odd. A woman of this planet could—and probably would—lean with complete reliance on Dick, just as I was afraid I would with First. Incidentally, that's why I ended it. But this situation reminds me of the other."

"I hadn't known that, Dalva." There was a pause. "You're not developing an emotional tie, are you? Do you want to be relieved from the assignment?"

"No, Chief, it's not at all that serious. Don't worry, I can handle this. Frankly, what bothers me more is the close parallel of the two races. You are *sure that we're different species? There won't be any cross-mating?"*

"I can't guarantee it, Dalva; I learned long ago not to bet on a fixed gamble, and this isn't even that sure. However, the probabilities are all in your favour; in any event, I remind you that you are a Free Agent who is used to taking calculated risks," he thought.

"Yes, but neither probabilities nor calculated risks grow in the general stomach region. Can you imagine what the results would be? How would you like me to return with a dripping-nosed little

monster? How does *that go? 'There was a young—' No, never mind."*

"I know the one you were going to think, Dalva. Nice women don't."

'Uh, huh," she thought at him. "But how can you be a Free Agent and *a nice woman?"*

"Check, Dalva.")

The door was flung open by the moon-faced, smiling man. "Bulldog!" he yelled. "How are you?"

Nelson looked up, broke into a welcoming grin, and arose from the desk with outstretched hand. "Hi there, G-man Ely? How's the new GS-13? Say, that was a fine job you did in L.A.! I heard about it."

"Oh, that. Think nothing of it," Ely replied almost modestly.

"O.K., if you say so." They smiled at one another in silence.

Ely sighed deeply, screwed up the corner of his mouth in disgust, and sat on the edge of the desk. "All right, louse, we *will* talk about it. You haven't heard the whole story; it's a corker . . . Oh, thanks, Al." He took the other's proffered cigarette, inhaled, and let the smoke spill out of the corners of his mouth as he continued to speak.

"There was a leak, a veritable gusher. You'll never guess, so I'll tell you: the head of Design and Production at The Plant down there talks to his wife. That isn't a crime, most of the time. But he should have been more careful with a fourteen year old son in the house who also happened to be one of the wild-eyed nuts. The kid was getting a big bang—'egoboo,' I think he called it—out of telling the rest of the nuts when and where. I used the usual methods; I don't think we'll have much trouble from that angle again. But it certainly took me enough time to track the whole thing down. Of course, things were complicated by the murder."

"Murder?" Nelson was startled. "I hadn't heard about that."

Ely grinned. *"Thought* that would wipe the bored expression off your face. No, and there's a good reason why you hadn't heard about it. It was kept very much confidential; there's something awfully odd about the whole business that isn't yet explained the way I'd like it to be."

Nelson arose and said: "Look, Scheherazade, before you start on the thousand and first night, let's get some coffee. O.K.?"

"I'd rather not talk about it outside the office, Al."

The other man whistled. "We'll pass the coffee, then. But *what* have you got hold of?"

"I wish I knew, but until I do, it's strictly a locked-mouth affair. I'll give you the run-down quickly. As a result of the talking the kid was doing, rumours started circulating in the local area. Crazy stuff, like we had *already* been to the Moon, that it was a settled base, and that what we were using it for was experiments on a mechanism that would move a space ship faster than light."

Nelson snorted.

"Sure, it's funny until a man is killed over it. One of the junior engineers in the design end—who probably loved to coyly let drop the idea that he was engaged in super-secret stuff—was even singled out as one of the top men in this exceeding-light-speed project. He was found dead. We got the men who did it; there were two."

"Russian agents?" asked Nelson.

"They didn't admit it directly; it was strongly implied in their attitude. We checked 'em through the local R. & I. Nothing. And there was nothing on them in Washington. They escaped the next day—slugged a guard—and we haven't found them yet, as far as I know. To all intents and purposes they've disappeared into thin air. But for one good reason which I'll tell you about in a minute, I keep wondering whether Russia isn't being a scapegoat in this case. Suppose someone—and I couldn't begin to tell you who—wanted this engineer dead. In these times it'd be awfully easy to blame the affair on the Commies. As a matter of fact, it couldn't be a personal reason, like a gambling debt for example, and a hood killing."

"Why not?"

"That reason I told you about. On the body I found a hunk of paper that had the damndest collection of mathematical symbols you ever saw written over it. If these two had been after it, they wouldn't have left it there. I questioned 'em; they knew nothing about it. So, the question now is: how'd a junior engineer arrive at such stuff as was written there?"

"Would you mind telling me *what* was written on the paper?" Nelson asked.

"I can't, I don't know," was the reply. "It has nothing to do with the level of engineering going on at the Plant; that much even I could see. So I hung on to it. And I've been asking a few confidential questions of my own. Here, take a look." He withdrew the paper from an inner pocket and handed it to Nelson.

Nelson took it, studied it momentarily, and looked at the suddenly grinning Ely. "You'll never crack it that way, boy," said the latter. "You've got it upside down." Nelson hrrumphed and righted the paper. "Even with it rightside-up, I'm afraid it goes a good way past Freshman Physics." He shook his head and went on. "What a mess. You *have* got yourself something. What now?"

"I was told that Brewer might be the man to show this to," said Ely. At the other's wordless nod he said: "Which reminds me—I hear your girl friend married the guy."

"Yes, about three months ago."

"It's been about half a year now. Is your instinct ready to concede yet?"

"I'm not sure, Pete."

Ely said: "What about you, Al? I've been monopolising too much of the conversation."

Nelson frowned. "Jesus! If only you knew how tired I was of reading reports from hot, new agents on the progress of their investigations of old AYD members who have applied for low-level government jobs! Won't these bloodhounds *ever* learn that we're not interested in the applicant's sex-life or his favourite movie star or any one of a dozen different extraneous matters? But no, so into the files it all goes.

"And those letters I send out to the Personnel Directors are charming—" His voice assumed a sing-song pitch—"Dear-sir-as-a result - of - investigation - under - Executive - Order - 9835 - the person - named - below - has - been - rated - eligible - on - loyalty - for . . . "

His friend smiled sympathetically. "Al, as I remember, we both thought it would be a good idea for you to give your mind a rest. You wanted the assignment."

"Admitted, and I'm sure ready to get off it now. But I'm tired of talking about it. You ready for that coffee yet?"

("Chief?"

"Not clear. Wait."

nocl . . . urgt . . . pa—n

"Dalva?"

"Clear. Go ahead."

"I haven't much time, so pay attention. I'm taking a chance contacting you. The Opposition has pulled off a beaut; as an old politician I can appreciate what they're doing even though I don't

like it. It's a power grab, and they're investigating this office. They'll have a tracer on me constantly; I won't be able to contact any of my field agents until we've made enough of a counter-move to distract them. Don't try to reach me. I'll get to you. I'm breaking now."

hu-rhe . . . wor . . . pa—n . . . pa—ne

"Check, but this is urgent.")

The two men got into the shining, black Pontiac with the white-and-black licence and official seal on the door. With Nelson driving, they soon left the city and began the climb into the foothills.

"This is the first time I've ever been up there," said Ely, his head twisted and his eyes trying to take in too much at once.

Nelson grunted as he shifted gears. "The Hill? Not much to see."

"You've been there before; it makes a difference. Much farther?"

"No," was the reply. "Just up that long grade and over the bridge."

They were silent then as Nelson urged the vehicle up the steep incline. The surrounding hills were grass-covered with sparsely settled trees. The slopes had been baking under the summer and autumn sun, and the yellow-brown colour of the grass made the slopes appear slick and steeper than they actually were. Where the first rains of the season had moistened some areas of the parched ground more heavily than others, the first, new green shoots were barely beginning to show. Then they breasted the rise and shot forward over the bridge.

"Feels like we've a Heavy Weapons Company attached," Ely ground out between jolts. The car was bouncing; they could hear the springs protest.

"It's a lousy bridge . . . always has been . . . Fortunately, it's short," finished Nelson as they pulled to a halt before the Clearance Station. He extracted the Q-Clearance from his wallet, handed it to the guard.

Ely looked at the squat, nearly terrifying buildings before him. "What a contrast! The modern—" he nodded towards the labs, "—and the mediæval," he said, looking back at the wooden bridge.

"Some structure, eh?" grinned the guard. "Funny thing about that: the construction stiffs built one as a temporary. They had to replace it when traffic got heavier: they finally were allowed to put this one together, working long hours to do it. Then someone

started screaming about too much overtime for government construction men. They were never allowed to touch it again."

Nelson asked: "Why don't they do something about it now?"

"I don't know. Though I'm layin' odds that they're trying to figure out whether the Army Engineers or the Bureau of Reclamation gets it." He grinned again. "But you can be sure that whenever it does get built, it'll probably be the tallest, longest bridge of its kind!"

Nelson thanked him and started the car. "A jokester! Hope he doesn't stop to tell saboteurs the latest he's heard." But he laughed nevertheless.

Moments later they walked into Brewer's office. A youngish-looking lab technician asked: "Doc Brewer? He's over at the restaurant. But Mrs. Brewer's inside. Want her?"

"Never mind," said Nelson. They left, and walked to the restaurant. The buildings—the grey concrete and frame, shoe-box like—obviously impressed Nelson's companion with a certain morbidity; he himself didn't seem to notice. Within their destination, they quickly spotted Brewer. He was seated by himself, reading while he ate, and oblivious to his surroundings. It was only when they had practically reached him that he became aware of their approach. He quickly slipped the book into his pocket, and a half-smile of recognition lit his features.

"Have you people orders always to travel in pairs," he asked, "to protect you from our enemies or our outraged citizenry?"

"I don't think the gentleman likes us, Al," said Ely.

"He might have sufficient reason not to," was the other's statement.

Brewer smiled again, more broadly. "Sorry. There was no call for that remark of mine."

"Forget it," said Nelson. At the physicist's request, they seated themselves.

Ely said: "When we gave you that scrap of paper at our office, you implied you'd get to work on it. I've been rather anxious to hear what you've dug up."

"I guess I should have contacted you sooner. I can make almost nothing of it, and since you have my bond that no one else would see it—" at Nelson's sharp look, he interjected, "—not even my wife —I haven't been able to get any other opinions."

"Your statement was 'almost nothing.' What did that mean?" asked Nelson.

"Some of the symbols I recognise," was the reply, "but they don't seem to be used correctly. Some of the others look artificial. Frankly, it looks to me like someone was playing a gag; someone who knew enough basic physics to bluff his way through and was intelligent enough to make up the rest. Where did you get that paper?"

Ely told him. When he'd finished, Brewer said: "The engineer *could* have been playing a joke of his own. I admit that it would be coincidence to have him killed while he had the data on his person, but—" His voice trailed off questioningly.

"How do you explain the murder, then?" asked Ely.

"That's more your department than mine. However, if you wish, I'll hang on to the paper and work it over some more."

"Thanks very much, Dr. Brewer." They stood up to go. "How're you progressing?" asked Nelson, indifferently.

"That's my department!" was the reply.

Back in the car, as they were leaving, Ely groaned. "It's too much in one day. To start, this place gives me the willies. Secondly, the man thinks that paper represents somebody's humour; if it is, I'm going to have to reorganise completely my thinking. And finally—you're trained in observation as well as I. Did you see what it was he put in his pocket as we came up?"

"Yes," grinned Nelson. "I was wondering if you caught it."

Ely groaned again. "Of all people, Brewer—another wild-eyed nut!"

("Dalva?"

"Clear, Chief."

"It's over with. We got them: walked right into their little trap, cut a hole in it, and kept on going. It will be a long time before they try anything like that again.

"Imagine, they tried to use as a front one of the crackpot organisations; I think this *one says we should give up all drives toward planetary aggrandisement. And go back to intramural warfare? Anyway, we hit them hard all the way down the line; as a result we've now got one of our own personnel in as the Administrator's right-hand man where before he was one of theirs—"*

"Chief?"

"Sorry, Dalva. It must be the relief from tension that's making me hog the conversation. You'd stated it was urgent, and I haven't given you a chance."

"I hardly know where to begin. But here's some data for you: the differences are on a variety level and are not *specific."*

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Watermelon, that's what! Lucky for you I'm not there now; I'd be kicking you around that office of yours."

"Watermelon? Oh, that vine-fruit you dislike."

"Disliked, not dislike. Last week, when it was absolutely unobtainable, I had the taste of that awful stuff in my mouth. I needed *it, I had a craving for it . . ."*

pain ... **pain** ... **pain** ... **"Dal"** ... **hungry** ... **pain** ... **"wahtrmeln"** ... **hungry** ... **hungry** ... **pain**

" . . . Chief, I'm—I'm pregnant!"

"What?" He felt an emotional impact, more from the knowledge that his best agent was so distraught than the actual causative fact itself.

"What shall I do?"

"Do? You'll be a good mother," he thought, trying to be gentle. She beamed angrily, "That better not be a smile on your face."

"I am *smiling, Dalva," he replied. "This should do the trick. There's nothing that distracts a man so much as having his Partner pregnant—unless, of course, it's the Partner herself."*

"This isn't funny. Chief, in all the years I've been an agent of yours—starting with those first fumbling steps—I've been in a good many scrapes. I've got myself out of all of them, too, without ever having called upon you. That's one of the reasons I am *a good agent, and it's based on two factors: my ability to carry out a mission and return with little or no assistance from you. I've stolen and cheated and even murdered occasionally, and in turn I've been stolen from and almost-murdered more than occasionally. I may be wrong but I think that entitled me to ask a favour. I don't want to carry this child to term." She added, distraught, "I* won't!"

"You will, Dalva." He was firm.

"I've never been pregnant before; neither, quite obviously, have you, or you wouldn't make statements like that. There are physio-glandular changes, psychological changes that have an almost mellowing effect—"

"Listen to me! Moral responses inculcated in you as an integral unit of the society from which you sprang were conditioned out *of you when you trained for your job: that's why you were able to steal and cheat and murder.*

"Psycho-sexual training you had, too, but you aren't aware of it; it was accomplished under hypnosis. You have done things which

your sisters would look upon with distaste—even in our 'enlightened' society. But no matter; even this million-to-one odds gamble that has paid off in your case—this cross-mating—was thought of and prepared for. Part of your training includes a body-chemistry conditioning which will become apparent to you in time."

"In view of this 'cross-mating,' isn't it possible that here we have a race which could be co-partners with us in galaxy control? Can't they be absorbed rather than held back? Isn't it—"

"I'll excuse that outburst on the grounds of your upset condition. And I also point out to you that this race will *be absorbed, but on our terms, not its. This is a crisis point, Dalva. Here are your alternatives: one, you can return now, leaving your job. We have another plan which can be put into effect. Two, you can stick it out along the original lines. You have my personal guarantee that the body-chemistry conditioning I mentioned will begin to work, and soon. You will find yourself relatively unaffected. Or three, you can stay there and try to work things out according to what you think is best. Should you do that, however, and the other agents catch you, your punishment is pre-determined. A fairly simple brain operation will remove all your technical knowledge; you will then live out the rest of your hundred years or so in banishment upon that planet, in utter and complete frustration. I don't mean to threaten you, and I'm sorry to be so hard, but you threaten more of the general plan than even you realise. I want your answer, Dalva—now!"*

tired ... **tired** ... **"galaks"** ... **"frst—frustray"** ... **tired** ... **ti—red** ... **ti** ...

"All right. You win. I'll do your job; it'll be the last job I do for you."

"We'll talk about that when you bring this one home. You'll have a different viewpoint on this matter within the next month or two, believe me."

"Check.")

Brewer sat in the easy chair, trying to derive some comfort where there was none to be had. No amount of body-shifting helped. He sighed, feeling that old, familiar inertia-against-taking-action mood creeping up. He got up, almost savagely switched off the radio, and returned to the sofa. It, too, was of no help.

His wife glanced up. "All right. Now?" she asked.

"Now what?" he asked in reply.

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you?" he asked.

"You'd be wonderful as a parrot," she said dryly. "Dick, you insult my intelligence. I haven't lived with you this long without understanding some of your moods. This one involves something unpleasant. Tell me."

He laughed nervously. "I was wondering. Aren't you planning to quit work soon?"

"Me? Why?"

"Isn't it a fairly common practice for pregnant women?"

"Yes," she mused. "But then, child-bearing is a fairly common practice. It isn't accomplished in only one way. Different people, different customs. Some working women quit as soon as the ear of the rabbit ruptures a la the Friedman test; some I've heard about work right up to the day before delivery. I should imagine it depends on the woman."

"*I'd* feel better about it if you quit. Your presence at the labs isn't really as necessary as it was."

"But why can't I keep working?" the blonde asked.

He answered curtly. "Because women in their fifth month have an efficiency drop-off, because you've been getting more and more skittery and nervous, because—if you must know—your work has been lousy lately."

"And what about me?" she flared up. "I have an active interest in this project; I would like to see it progress. I don't like this child interfering with work I enjoy. That arouses my resentment. What are you going to do, move . . . "

Shoulder hurts. Stop hurting. "Don't like this child." Don't like the shoulder. "This child," me is this child. Don't like—me? Bad shoulder. Shoulder stop the hurt. Me will hurt shoulder. Shoulder must—shoulder must—"move."

" . . . move me out of the lab, lock, stock, and barrel? I won't permit—oh!" She broke off suddenly and sat down.

He rushed over to her. "What's the matter?"

She inclined her head and said, in a vaguely surprised tone, "It . . . kicked . . . me!" Brewer relaxed visibly. "They do, you know," he said laughingly. "What did it feel like?"

"Extra-terrestrial flying worms," she answered. "Butterflies. A fluttering. I don't know." She frowned at him. "But you are changing the subject."

"The work is progressing satisfactorily. It will continue to do so whether you are there or not. And 'not' is the way it's going to be."

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked, rising.

"I've said it!" He was angry. He was even angrier when she strode from the room. Brewer shook his head, undergoing a feeling common to all fathers-to-be. It gets them all, that strawberries-at-midnight, pickles-at-noon routine. No matter what the background or environment. And if it isn't peculiar timing on food tastes, it's peculiar timing on any number of intangibles. Some days you can't make a penny. The request this evening wasn't *that* unreasonable; from the way she acted you'd think I was the pregnant one. It can't be I—B.I.?—F.B.I.? Could those two agents have finally shaken my trust in Annette? Am I rationalising my loss of confidence into a protective-husband act so that she'll leave? That's silly. Nelson and Ely are typical, suspicious cops-and-robbers boys . . .

Brewer shook his head, undergoing a feeling common to all fathers-to-be.

("Chief?"

"Clear. Go ahead, Dalva."

"I'm growing more and more worried. It's been two months since I left the labs. Dick is, at best, uncommunicative, but I know he's on the right path—the wrong one for us. The stupid fool has rejected all my ideas; he just isn't suggestible . . ."

Post-partum beings are paradoxical. Why do you tell father you love him when you don't? Why do you hurt me? I hate you! I hate you!

" . . . and I'm afraid that I may have to do something desperate."

"Your statements differ considerably from those you made a few months back."

"My feelings differ considerably, also. The information Dick is working towards must not be gained. I know these people better than I did when I saw you last; they simply must not be allowed into the galaxy, even if it means wiping them out!"

Into the galaxy? So that's what "galaxy" means? My understanding of the problem involved grows . . .

"Wait a minute," he replied. "You're running into a moral problem there based on social pressure. In our whole history we've never outwardly or by force influenced a maturing race. If such a solution appealed to us, it would not *appeal to our own 'progressive' race—and the crackpot organisations would have an overflowing membership. I doubt if we could do it even in the event that our over-all general plan had to be changed. I am, frankly, surprised at you. You are developing certain Earth-like traits which I find distressing."*

"I am also developing an understanding of the Earth peoples; and Chief! they *made up the expression, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans.'"*

"Check, Dalva!")

Nelson hurried past the crowded tables, skipped around a party which, sheep-like, was preparing to leave the restaurant—and by virtue of that fact had spilled out into the aisles, thus making easy access impossible—and then he dropped into a chair opposite Ely.

Without looking up, and continuing to eat, Ely said: "The curried lobster is good tonight, Al." Then he began to laugh. "And so am I. Didn't I remind you of a B picture out of Hollywood? Did you check that nonchalance? Without even breaking the rhythm of shoveling food into my mouth, I had analysed all the necessary data and come to the conclusion it was you—aided by the fact that I'd seen you a couple of seconds before." He laughed again. "Now here's the gimmick. We're a couple of FBI men in Bulgaria working against the Iron Curtain boys. We've never seen each other before, but we exchange hand-and-arm signals or something. Of course, we can't let *them* know we know each other, so you come over to the table and ask me for a light, see? For the next twenty minutes I light your cigarette while I tell you all the secret information I stole from the Kremlin. Boy, it'll be a natural!"

"Will you shut up and eat your lobster," interjected Nelson. "I wish to observe one moment of silence."

"For what?"

"For—the curried lobster and coffee, please."

"What!" Ely's exclamation was startled; then he became aware of the waitress standing beside them. "Well," he muttered sheepishly, "I can still light cigarettes for twenty minutes at a crack!"

"Pete—" Nelson began as the waitress left.

Ely became aware of the subtle change in Nelson's attitude. His face had become relaxed; the wrinkles on his forehead, the deep scours present for the past few months which Ely had thought were permanent, had smoothed out; the corners of his mouth were not drawn back nearly as far; and his whole presence exuded an air of well-being. All the signs were present which he, unknowing, had learned to recognise many years past. Peter Ely, investigator, trained and experienced in observable fact, brought his emotional judgment—based upon instinct based upon unconsciously-observed increments of the total—to the fore and said: "Al, you've got something!"

The other nodded, curtly, sharply.

"Brewer File?"

"And hot," came the confirmation.

"Bulldog!" The interjection was uttered with admiration.

Nelson leaned forward and softly said: "Pete, remember the phony birth certificate case on the Coast a few years back? It was the one involving Chinese aliens who claimed to have been born in San Francisco prior to the fire. The case was cracked when an immigration inspector of ours discovered that one of the claimants, who had stated the name of the attending physician at birth, named a man dead before the presumed birth.

"The same thing happened here: Miss D'Aliel was delivered by a doctor who died ten years before she was born. The stupid, blundering fools!" For the first time now his voice also showed the relief from the pressure under which he had been working. "How *could* they have made a mistake like that after such a beautiful cover-up job? I almost feel as though they've deliberately insulted my intelligence. Well, they *have* made that one mistake we needed."

The other, in tones of mingled respect, awe, and amusement, asked: "And now?"

"This is just the beginning. More checking; the whole damned file is going to have to be re-checked. Meanwhile, I have asked the Surete to make some discreet inquiries . . . "

It was when breakfast was nearly over that Brewer accidentally set in motion a disastrous chain of events. He glanced at his watch. "I'd better hurry," he said, "my ride will be along soon."

"You were late last night," his wife said. "I was too tired to wait up."

His brow wrinkled. "I was working on something; I'm not exactly sure what. Seems to be a power effect, but we're having a conference this afternoon, and I'm kicking it around then. What frightens me is that scrap of paper—it's beginning to make sense."

"What scrap of paper?" she asked.

He realised that he had made a slip. He felt that the mistake he'd made was in not telling her sooner of the paper and what was written on it. With a sigh he then explained the circumstances surrounding his acquisition of it, finishing with: "I thought it was some form of joke. I'd tossed it in a drawer and forgotten it. Recently, I took another look. It made sense. Too much sense. If the rest follows—"

He didn't notice the shocked expression on her face. "Anyone else know about this?" she asked.

"No, as I say, the paper was kept in strict confidence at the request of the two agents, and the idea is just an idea so far. I'm going to work on it today."

Careful! Be careful of what you say. She is unscrupulous.

He gathered together his brief-case and overcoat and prepared to leave.

"You'd better wrap up," she admonished flatly. "It's raining heavily."

Brewer bent down and kissed her. "'Bye, hon, I'll see you tonight."

Listen to me! She's planning your death! Death! Why can't you understand?

"Goodbye, darling."

Wait—

He was gone only a few minutes when she relaxed in her chair.

("Chief?"

"Clear. What is it, Dalva?"

"I've failed. He's onto the drive—got some information accidentally that is beginning to crystalise things in his own mind. Within a few hours at most he'll be disseminating the information to others. He has to be killed very soon. It's a rotten ending to a poorly-done job," she thought dully.

"All right, you did your best. Frankly, I've been expecting such a development ever since you left the laboratories. Your effectiveness was thereby cut down. And don't forget: I'm equally to blame here. I guess we made the mistake of not knowing enough about the culture. Forget it.

"The mere physical act of killing—" his thought now seemed brisk, decisive "—is fairly simple, but in your present state it may not be so easy. However, you've got to do it: I don't know whether I can get another agent there in time."

"I'll do it."

"Check.")

Brewer arrived at his office an hour after leaving his home; impatiently awaiting him was Nelson. Brewer eyed him, recognised him, and grew belligerent. "Again, Mr. Nelson?" he asked.

"This is important."

"All right, come inside." Brewer led the way into the small office and indicated a chair to the other.

"This may come as a shock, Dr. Brewer. It's about your wife," said Nelson.

"I'd gathered that already," Brewer replied wryly. "It's almost a conditioned reflex when I see you."

Nelson cleared his throat. "About a month ago I stumbled across the information that your wife's birth certificate was a forgery . . ."

"What!" interrupted Brewer.

Nelson nodded and ploughed on. "And checking has revealed more. Schools in France she was supposed to have attended have falsified records. It can also be proved that places she's supposed to have lived, she hasn't. All in all, the whole thing adds up to a very neat cover-up job, with your wife's true origin unknown."

Brewer was white. "This is fantastic. Where is she from?"

"Mars, for all I know," replied the other. "But what is even more important: what does she know of your work here?"

"Nearly everything I've done—for God's sake, this is impossible. Can you be wrong?"

Nelson shook his head.

"We can find out. Can I get her over here?" At Nelson's affirmative he picked up the telephone and dialed fumblingly. "Annette? . . . Yes, me. . . . Can you come over? . . . Now . . . There's a man from the FBI with an odd story . . . All right . . . Goodbye."

She replaced the phone, and went to her dressing table. From a drawer she withdrew a small, metallic, U-shaped solid . . .

Can I do anything? Wouldn't it be easier to forget? I don't really hate her. Is there any validity in these abstruse concepts of "justice" or "impartiality"? Still, I must follow what I believe. Am I strong enough? Am I?

. . . and then moved, purposefully now, about the house preparing for her departure.

Finally, then, she was in the car and driving towards a meeting and an action against which her whole inner fibre—in spite of the training she had received—was repelled. It was stronger with her than the Earthian moral precept "Thou shalt not . . ."; it was as though she had to drive, consciously, every atom of her being.

The rain pelted down over the windshield of the car, hammering it, she thought impatiently, with so much wasted energy. Energy

which Dick and his people had not yet learned to harness. She felt choked and restricted; the child was making her uncomfortable . . .

I bother her, poor thing, I bother her. It is unfortunate, but no one has yet conceived a method for better reproduction. I could have.

. . . and it was with a certain sense of relief that she saw, in the headlights, the bridge over the ravine which was just before the labs. *"You following me, Chief?" she asked.*

"Clear. I'm here, with you, Dalva," he thought in reply.

"It won't be long, now . . ."

No, it won't be long, now. Dalva—for the first time the child contacted her on a conscious level—**goodbye, mother!**

Instinctively more than intellectually Dalva grasped, instantly, the entire situation, and she screamed in mental anguish. In that moment of stress she fell back into an abandoned habit. *"First Partner—"* it was half-yelled, half-beamed and wild. *"First Partner, the child is a . . . conscious . . . entity . . . It's . . . blocking . . . me—"*

On a planet light years away the man was swept with fear. "Dalva!" he called—and received no response.

Against her will, Dalva's foot came down hard on the car's accelerator. The vehicle slipped for a moment, the back wheels spun on the wet pavement, and then it shot forward. Her left hand tightened on the steering wheel and turned it quickly to the right. The car shattered through the weak, wooden guard rail on the bridge and arced out into space. It seemed to hang there for a fraction of a second; then, it collapsed toward the rain-swept, dark hillside below.

Inside the offices, the two men watched with horror as the car finished the long fall. Brewer jumped to his feet then, screaming, "Annette!" and broke for the door.

Nelson sat and, as the hubbub died away in the background, scanned the scene through the window with suddenly intent eyes. Then he relaxed against the chair.

(You there?" he asked.

"Clear. Report," came the answer.

"The Lireen Agent just died. It was an accident, but it saved me from a nasty job; I thought I'd have to eliminate her—in 'self-defence'—after I unmasked her before the Earthman.

"Actually, I don't think we have too much to fear, even if Earth and Lireen are numerically superior, together or separately. Observe: in Los Angeles, I—unknown to them, of course—suggested to the two other Lireen agents that the junior engineer was really the incognito key man who had nearly arrived at the interstellar drive. They killed him, and I planted the equations. And then I had to stew while I worried whether Ely—one of the better examples of Earth's 'wonderful' training—would follow the ideas I'd been giving him for some time before. He did, but slowly.

"I thought surely that once the paper was in Brewer's possession, he'd have all the clues he'd need. It took him a matter of months—another of Earth's best—and he still is only on the verge of understanding.

"Or the Lireenian! She *should have been able logically to figure out that there was an opposing force, even if she was unaware of us. The frustration she felt at being constantly blocked should have caused her to think—and to realise that there was too much coincidence at play.*

"In any event, Earth is *now going out, and Lireen won't be able to stop her. However,* we *will be able to play Earth against Lireen, dissipating the energies of both to a point where our own plans for Galaxy domination . . ."*

—Les Cole