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Fantasy fiction lends itself admirably to satire and everyone who has read Richard Wilson's novel The Girls From Planet Five *knows that he is one of the foremost experts in this particular vein. His short novel herewith is a brilliant debunking of his fellow-countrymen and up to the standard of Thurber's "The Greatest Man In The World" recently played on ITV.*

SUPER CITY

BY RICHARD WILSON

I

The town of Superior, Ohio, disappeared on the night of October 31.

A truck driver named Pierce Knaubloch was the first to report it. He had been highballing west, making up for the time he'd spent over a second cup of coffee, when he screeched to a stop. If he'd gone another twenty-five feet, he'd have gone into the pit where Superior had been.

Knaubloch couldn't see the extent of the pit because it was too dark, but it looked big. Bigger than if a nitro truck had blown up, which was his first thought. He backed up two hundred feet, set out flares, then sped off to a telephone.

The State Police converged from several directions. Communicating by radiophone across the vast pit, they confirmed

that the town undoubtedly was missing. They put in a call to the National Guard. The Guard surrounded the area with troops to keep people from falling into the pit.

The Pennysylvania Railroad complained that one of its passenger trains was missing. The schedule called for it to pass through Superior at 11:58. The truck driver had made his discovery shortly after midnight.

A National Guard officer volunteered to take a jeep down into the pit.

When he came out the other side he reported that the pit was concave, relatively smooth and did not smell of high explosives. He'd found no people, no houses—no sign of anything except the pit itself.

The Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission denied that they had been conducting secret experiments.

A United Airlines pilot found Superior early on the morning of November 1. The pilot, Captain Eric Studley, who had never seen a flying saucer and hoped never to see one, was afraid now that he had. The object loomed out of a cloudbank at twelve thousand feet and Studley changed course to avoid it. He noted with only minimum satisfaction that his co-pilot also saw the thing and wondered why it wasn't moving at the terrific speed flying saucers were allegedly capable of.

Then he saw the church steeple on it.

A few minutes later he had relayed a message from Superior, formerly of Ohio, addressed to whom it might concern :

It said that Superior had seceded from Earth.

Don Cort had been dozing in the club car when the train braked to a stop. He looked out the window, but all he could see were some lanterns jogging as trainmen hurried along the tracks. The conductor looked into the car. The redhead across the aisle in whom Don had taken a passing interest earlier in the evening asked, " Why did we stop ?"

" Somebody flagged us down," the conductor said.

The girl's hair was a subtle but false red. The cheeks were full and untouched by makeup. There were lines at the corners of her mouth which indicated a tendency to arrange her expression into one of disapproval. The lips were full, like the cheeks, but it was obvious that the scarlet lipstick had contrived a mouth a trifle bigger than the one nature had given her.

Her glance upward then interrupted his examination. If the girl had given Don Cort more than a glance, she would have

seen a man in his mid-twenties—about her age—lean, tall and straight-shouldered, with ex-blonde hair now verging on dark brown, a face neither handsome nor ugly and a habit of drawing the inside of his left cheek between his teeth and nibbling at it thoughtfully.

But it was likely that all she noticed then was the brief case he carried, attached by a chain to a handcuff on his left wrist.

" Will we be here long ?" Don asked the conductor. He didn't want to miss his plane at Columbus. The sooner he got to Washington the sooner he'd get rid of the brief case. The handcuff it was attached to was one reason why his interest in the redhead had been only passing.

" Can't say," the conductor told him. He let the door close again.

Don hesitated, said " Excuse me " and followed the conductor. About a dozen people were milling around the train as it sat in the dark, hissing steam. Don made his way up to the locomotive. Some sort of barricade had been put up across the tracks and it was covered with every imaginable kind of warning device.

Don saw two men who must have been the engineer and fireman talking to a bearded gentleman wearing a civil defence helmet, a topcoat and riding boots.

" You'd go over the edge, I tell you," the old gentleman was saying.

" If you don't get this junk off the line," the engineer said, " I'll plow right through it. Off the edge ! You crazy or something ?"

" Look for yourself," the old man in the white helmet said.

The engineer was exasperated. He turned to the fireman. " You look. Humour the old man."

The bearded man—he called himself Professor Garet—went off with the fireman. Don followed them.

They came to it at last, stopping well back from it. Professor Garet swelled with pride, it seemed, as he made a theatrical gesture.

" Behold," he said. " Something even Columbus couldn't find. The edge of the world."

True, everything seemed to stop and they could see stars shining low on the horizon where stars could not properly be expected to be seen.

There was a wind and they did not venture too close. Nevertheless Don could see that it apparently was a neat,

sharp edge, not one of your old ragged, random edges such as might have been caused by an explosion. This one had the feeling of design behind it.

Don looked at the fireman, who had an unbelieving expression on his face, then at the bearded old man, who was smiling and nodding.

" You see what I mean," he said. " You would have gone right over. I believe you would have had a two-mile fall."

" Of course you could have stayed aboard the train," the man driving the old Pontiac said, " but I really think you'll be more comfortable at Cavalier."

Don Cort, sitting in the back with the redhead from the club car, asked, " Cavalier ?"

" The college. The institute, really ; it's not accredited. What did you say your name was, miss ?"

" Jen Jervis," she said. " Geneva Jervis, formally."

" Miss Jervis. I'm Civek. You know Mr. Cort, I suppose."

The girl smiled sideways. " We have a nodding acquaintance."

" There's plenty of room in the dormitories," Civek said. " People don't exactly pound on the gates and scream to be admitted to Cavalier."

" Are you connected with the college ?" Don asked.

" Me ? No. I'm the mayor of Superior. The old town's really come up in the world, hasn't it ?"

" Overnight," Geneva Jervis said. " If what Mr. Cort and the fireman say is true. I haven't seen the edge myself."

" Was there any sort of explosion ?" Don asked.

" No. There wasn't any sensation at all, as far as I noticed. I was watching the late show—or trying to. My house is down in a hollow and reception isn't very good, especially with old English movies. Well, all of a sudden the picture sharpened up and I could see just as plain. Then the phone rang and it was Professor Garet."

" The old fellow with the whiskers and the riding boots ?" Jen Jervis asked.

" Yes. Osbert Garet, Professor of Magnology at the Cavalier Institute of Applied Sciences."

" Professor of what ?"

" Magnology. As I say, the school isn't accredited. Well, Professor Garet telephoned and said ' Hector '—that's my name, Hector Civek—' everything's up in the air.' Having his

little joke. I think what he was trying to convey was that this —this levitation—confirmed his Magnology principle."

" What's that ?" Don asked.

" I haven't the faintest idea. I'm a politician, not a scientist. I think he was only calling as a courtesy, so the mayor wouldn't look foolish the next morning, not knowing his town had flown the coop."

" What's the population of Superior ?"

" Three thousand, including the students at the Institute."

" Does Superior have an airport ?" Don asked. " I've got to get back to—to Earth." It sounded odd to put it that way.

" Nope," Civek said. " No airport. No place for a plane to land, either."

" Maybe not a plane," Don said, " but a helicopter could land just about anywhere."

" Hm," said Hector Civek. " I suppose they could, at that. Well, here's Cavalier. There's Professor Garet. I've got to see him—excuse me."

The mayor was off across the campus. Don looked at Geneva Jervis, who was frowning. " Are you thinking," he asked, " that Mayor Civek was perhaps just a little less than completely honest with us ?"

" I'm thinking," she said, " that I should have stayed with Aunt Hattie another night, then taken a plane to Washington."

" Washington ?" Don said. " That's where I'm going. I mean where I *was* going before Superior became airborne. What do you do in Washington, Miss Jervis ?"

" I work for the government. Doesn't everybody ?"

" Not everybody. Me, for instance."

" No ?" she said. " Judging by that satchel you're handcuffed to I'd have thought you were a courier for the Pentagon. Or maybe State."

He laughed quickly and loudly because she was getting uncomfortably close. " Oh, no. Nothing so glamorous. I'm a messenger for the Riggs National Bank, that's all. Where do you work ?"

" I'm with Senator Bobby Thebold, S.O.B."

Don laughed again. " He sure is."

" *Mister* Cort !" she said, annoyed. " You know as well as I do that S.O.B. stands for Senate Office Building. I'm his secretary."

" I'm sorry. We'd better get out and find a place to sleep. It's getting late."

" *Places* to sleep," she said.

" Of course," Don said, puzzled by her emphasis.

He took her bag in his free hand and they were met by a grey-haired woman who introduced herself as Mrs. Garet. " We'll try to make you comfortable," she said. " What a night, eh ? The professor is simply beside himself. We haven't had so much excitement since the Cosmolineator blew up."

II

Don Cort had slept, but not well. He got up, feeling gritty, and did what little dressing was necessary. It was eight o'clock, according to the watch on the unhandcuffed wrist. The air was very clear and the long morning shadows distinct. He shivered as he stepped outdoors. It was crisp, if not freezing, and his breath came out visibly.

The mess hall, or whatever they called it, was cafeteria style, and he got in line with a tray for juice, eggs and coffee. As he was looking for a table a willowy blonde girl smiled and gestured to the empty place opposite her.

" You're Mr. Cort," she said. " Won't you join me ?"

" Thanks," he said, unloading his tray. " How did you know ?"

" The mystery man with the handcuff. You'd be hard to miss. I'm Alis—that's A-l-i-s, not A-l-i-c-e—Garet. Are you with the FBI ? Or did you escape from jail ?"

" How do you do. No, just a bank messenger. What an unusual name. Professor Garet's daughter ?"

" The same," she said. " Also the only. A pity, because if there'd been two of us I'd have had a fifty-fifty chance of going to OSU. As it is, I'm duty-bound to represent the second generation at the nut factory."

" Nut factory ? You mean Cavalier ?" Don struggled to manipulate knife and fork without knocking things off the table with his clinging brief case.

" Here, let me cut your eggs for you," Alis said. " You'd better order them scrambled tomorrow. Yes, Cavalier. Home of the crackpot theory and the latter-day alchemist."

" I'm sure it's not that bad. Thanks. As for tomorrow, I hope to be out of here by then."

" How do you get down from an elephant ? Old riddle. You don't ; you get down from ducks. How do you plan to get down from Superior ?"

" I'll find a way. I'm more interested at the moment in how I got up here."

" You were levitated, like everybody else."

" You make it sound deliberate, Miss Garet, as if somebody hoisted a whole patch of real estate for some fell purpose."

" Scarcely *fell*, Mr. Cort. As for it being deliberate, that seems to be a matter of opinion. Apparently you haven't seen the papers."

" I didn't know there were any."

" Actually there's only one. The Superior *Sentry*, a weekly. This is an extra. Ed Clark must have been up all night getting it out." She opened her purse and unfolded a four-page tabloid.

Don read the story, which seemed to him a capricious treatment of an apparently grave situation.

" Residents having business beyond the outskirts of town today are advised not to. It's a long way down.

" Where yesterday Superior was surrounded by Ohio, as usual, today Superior ends literally at Town Line.

" The law of gravity seems to have been repealed for the town but it is doubtful if the same exemption would apply to a dubious individual bent on investigating . . ."

Don skimmed the rest. " I don't see anything about it being deliberate."

" It's not on page one. Ed Clark and Mayor Civek don't get along, so you'll find the mayor's statement in a box on page three, bottom."

Don creased the paper the other way and read :

" Mayor Hector Civek, in a proclamation issued locally by hand and dropped to the rest of the world in a plastic shatter-proof bottle, said today that Superior had seceded from Earth.

His 'reasons' include these: (1) Superior has been discriminated against by county, state and federal agencies ; (2) Cavalier Institute has been held up to global derision by orthodox colleges and universities ; and (3) chicle exporters have conspired against the Superior Bubble Gum Company by unreasonably raising prices.

" The ' explanation ' consists of a 63-page treatise on Applied Magnology by Professor Osbert Garet of Cavalier

which the editor (a) does not understand, (b) lacks space to publish and which (it being atrociously handwritten), (c) he has not the temerity to ask his linotype operator to set."

Don said, " I'm beginning to like this Ed Clark."

" He's a doll," Alis said. " He's about the only one in town who stands up to Father."

" Does your father claim that *he* levitated Superior off the face of the Earth ?"

" Not to me he doesn't. I'm one of those banes of his existence, a sceptic. He gave up trying to magnolize me when I was sixteen. I had a science teacher in high school—not in Superior, incidentally—who gave me all kinds of embarrassing questions to ask Father. I asked them, being a natural-born needler, and Father has disowned me intellectually ever since."

" How old are you, Miss Garet, if I may ask ?"

She sat up straight and tucked her sweater tightly into her skirt. She had mocking eyes, a pert nose and mouth of such moist red softness that it seemed perpetually waiting to be kissed.

" You may call me Alis," she said. " And I'm nineteen."

Don grinned. " Going on ?"

" Three months past. How old are *you*, Mr. Cort ?"

" Don's the name I've had for twenty-six years. Please use it."

" Gladly. And now, Don, unless you want another cup of coffee, I'll go with you to the end of the world."

" On such short notice ?"

" What I meant—for now—was that we can stroll out to where Superior used to be attached to the rest of the Earth."

" Delighted. But don't you have any classes ?"

" Sure I do. Non-Einsteinian Relatively 1, at nine o'clock. But I'm a demon class cutter, which is why I'm still a senior at my advanced age. On to the brink !"

They walked south from the campus and came to the railroad track.

" You know," Don said, " I was half asleep last night but before the train stopped I thought it was running alongside a creek."

" South Creek," Alis said. " That's right. It's just over there."

" Is it still ? I mean hasn't it all poured off the Edge by now ?"

Alis shrugged. " All I know is you turn on the tap and there's water. Let's go look at the creek."

They found it coursing along between the banks.

" Looks just about the same," she said.

" That's funny. Come on ; let's follow it to the Edge."

The brink, as Alis called it, looked even more awesome by daylight. Everything stopped short. There were the remnants of a cornfield, with the withered stalks cut down, then there was nothing. There was South Creek surging along, then nothing. In the distance a clump of trees, with a few autumn leaves still clinging to their branches, simply ended.

" Where is the water going ?" Don asked. " I can't make it out."

" Down, I'd say. Rain for the Earthpeople."

" I should think it'd be all dried up by now. I'm going to have a look."

He walked cautiously toward the Edge. Alis followed him, a few feet behind. He stopped a yard from the brink and waited for a spell of dizziness to pass. The Earth was spread out like a topographer's map, far below. Don took another wary step then sat down.

" I still can't see where the water goes," Don said. He stretched out on his stomach and began to inch forward.

Finally he had inched to a point where, by stretching out a hand, he could almost reach the Edge. He gave another wriggle and the fingers of his right hand closed over the brink. For a moment he lay there, panting.

" How do you feel ?" Alis asked.

" Scared. When I get my courage back I'll pick up my head and look."

Alis put a hand out tentatively, then purposefully took hold of his ankle and held it tight. " Just in case a high wind comes along," she said.

" Thanks. It helps. Okay, here we go." He lifted his head. " Damn."

" What ?"

" It still isn't clear. Do you have a pocket mirror ?"

" I have a compact."

Don opened the compact and carefully transferred it to his right hand. He held it out an inch beyond the Edge and peered into it, focusing it on the end of the creek. " Now I've got it. The water *isn't* draining away !"

" It isn't ? Then where is it going ?"

" Down, of course, but it's as if it's going into a well, or a vertical tunnel, a few feet below the Edge."

" Why ? How ?"

" I can't see too well, but that's my impression. Hold on now : I'm coming back." He inched away from the Edge, then got up and brushed himself off. " I guess you know where we go next."

" The other end of the creek ?"

" Exactly."

They had about two miles to go.

As they approached what they were forced to consider the source of the creek, they found a wire-fence at the spot. " This is new," Alis said.

The fence, which had a sign on it, WARNING—ELECTRIFIED, was semi-circular, with each end at the Edge and tarpaulins strung behind it so they could not see the mouth of the creek. The water flowed from under the tarp and fence.

" Look how it comes in spurts," Alis said.

Smaller print on the sign said : *Protecting mouth of South Creek, one of two sources of water for Superior. Electrical charge in fence is sufficient to kill. Signed, Vincent Grande, Chief of Police ; Hector Civek, Mayor.*

" What's the other source, besides the tap in your bathroom ?" Don asked.

" North Lake, maybe," Alis said.

" Is the lake entirely within the town limits ?"

" I don't know."

She took his arm as they gazed past the electrified fence at the Earth below and to the west.

" It's impressive, isn't it ?" she said. " I wonder if that's Indiana way over there ?"

They were musing about the geography when a plane came out of a cloudbank and, a second later, veered sharply. They waved and thought they saw one or two people wave back. Then the plane climbed toward the east and was gone.

" Well," Don said as they turned to go back to Cavalier, "now we know that they know. Maybe we'll begin to get some answers. Or, if not answers, then transportation."

" Transportation ?" Alis squeezed the arm she was holding. " Why ? Don't you like it here ?"

" If you mean don't I like you, the answer is yes, of course I

do. But if I don't get out of this handcuff soon so I can take a bath and get into clean clothes you're not going to like me."

"You're still quite acceptable, if a bit whiskery." She stopped, still holding his arm, and he turned so they were face to face. "So kiss me," she said, "before you deteriorate."

They were in the midst of an extremely pleasant kiss when the brief case at the end of Don's handcuff began to talk to him.

III

Much of the rest of the world was inclined to regard the elevation of Superior, Ohio, as a Fortean phenomenon in the same category as flying saucers and sea monsters.

The press had a field day. The headlines were whimsical.

TOWN TAKES OFF
SUPERIOR LIVES UP TO NAME
A RISING COMMUNITY

The Pennysylvania Railroad filed a suit demanding that the State of Ohio return forthwith one train and five miles of right-of-way.

In Parliament a Labour member rose to ask the Home Secretary for assurances that all British cities were firmly fastened down.

An Ohio waterworks put in a bid for sixteen square miles of hole that Superior had left behind, explaining that it would make a fine reservoir.

A company that leased out big advertising signs in Times Square offered Superior a quarter of a million dollars for exclusive rights to advertising space on its bottom, or Earthward, side. It sent the offer by air mail, leaving delivery up to the post office.

In Washington Senator Bobby Thebold ascertained that his red-haired secretary, Jen Jervis, had been aboard the train levitated with Superior and registered a series of complaints by telephone.

Senator Bobby Thebold was an imposing six-feet-two, a youthful-looking 43. He wore his steel-grey hair cut short and his skin was tan the year round. He was a bachelor. He had been a fighter pilot in World War II and his conversation was peppered with air force slang, much of it out of date. Thebold

was good newspaper copy and one segment of the press, admiring his fighting ways, had dubbed him Bobby the Bold.

Thebold was one of the founders of the Private Pilots, a hard-flying outfit that zoomed into the wild blue yonder on weekends and holidays, engines aroar, propellers aglint, white silk scarves aflap. PP's members were wealthy industrialists, stunt flyers, sportsmen—the elite of the air.

PP was a paramilitary organization with the rank of its officers patterned after the Royal Air Force. Thus Bobby Thebold, by virtue of his war record, his charter membership and his national eminence, was Wing Commander Thebold, DFC.

Wing Commander Thebold swung into action. He barked into the intercom : " Miss Riley ! Get the airport. Have them rev up *Charger*. Tell them I'll be there for o-nine-fifty-eight take-off."

Charger was Bobby the Bold's war surplus P-38 Lightning, a sleek, twin-boomed two-engine fighter plane restored to its gleaming, paintless aluminum. Actually it was an unarmed photo-reconnaissance version of the famous warhorse of the Pacific, a fact the Wing Commander preferred to ignore. In compensation, he belted on a .45 whenever he climbed into the cockpit.

Thebold got onto Operations in PP's midwestern headquarters in Chicago. He barked, long distance :

" Jack Perley ? Group Captain Perley, that is ? Bobby ; that's right. Wing Commander Thebold now. We've got a mission, Jack. Scramble Blue Squadron. I'll give you the exact grid when I'm airborne. Can do ? Good-o ! ETA eleven forty-five. What ? Objective ? Objective Superior !"

Wing Commander Bobby Thebold took his Lindbergh-style helmet and goggles from a desk drawer and put them in a dispatch case. He gave a soft salute to the door behind which Jen Jervis customarily worked, more as his second-in-command than his secretary, and said half aloud :

" Okay, Jen, we're coming to get you."

Don Cort regretfully detached himself from Alis Garet.

" What was that ?" he said.

" That was me—Alis the love-starved. You could be a bit more gallant. Even ' How was that ?', though corny, would have been preferable."

" No—I mean I thought I heard a voice. Didn't you hear anything ?"

" To be perfectly frank—and I say it with some pique—I was totally absorbed. Obviously you weren't."

" It was very nice." The countryside, from the Edge with its fenced-in mouth of the creek to the golf course, was deserted.

" Well, thanks. Such enthusiasm is more than I can bear. I have to go now."

She gave her shoulder-length blonde hair a toss and started back. Don hesitated, looked suspiciously at the brief case dangling from his wrist, shook his head, then followed her. The voice, wherever it came from, had not spoken again.

" Don't be angry, Alis." He fell into step on her left and took her arm with his free hand. " It's just that everything is so crazy and nobody seems to be taking it seriously."

Alis squeezed the hand that held her arm, mollified. "You've got lipstick on your whiskers."

" Good. I'll never shave again."

" Ah," she laughed, " gallantry at last. I'll tell you what let's do. We'll go see Ed Clark, the editor of the *Sentry*. Maybe he'll give you some intelligent conversation."

The newspaper office was in a ramshackle one-story building off Broadway, Superior's main street.

Alis led Don to the rear where a tall skinny man with straggly grey hair in a semi-circle around a bald head was setting type.

" Good morning, Mr. Clark," she said.

" Hello, Al. How are you this fine altitudinous day ?"

" Super. I want you to meet Don Cort. Don, Mr. Clark."

The men shook hands and Clark looked curiously at Don's handcuff.

" It's my theory he's an embezzler," Alis said, " and he's made this his getaway town."

" As a matter of fact," Don said, " the Riggs National Bank will be worried if I don't get in touch with them soon. I guess you'd know, Mr. Clark—is there any communication at all out of town ?"

" I don't know of any, except for the Civek method—a bottle tossed over the Edge. The telegraph and telephone lines are cut, of course. There is a radio station in town, WCAV, operated from the campus, but it's been silent ever since the great severence."

" Isn't anybody *doing* anything ?" Don asked.

" Sure," Clark said. " I'm getting out my paper—I guess everybody's carrying on pretty much as before."

" That's what I mean. Business as usual. But how about the people who do business out of town? You have two factories, I understand, and pretty soon there's going to be a mighty big surplus of kitchen sinks and chewing gum."

" You two go on settling our fate," Alis said. " I'd better get back to school. Look me up later, Don." She waved and went out.

" Fine girl, that Alis," Clark said. " Got her old man's gumption without his nutty streak. To answer your question, the sink factory made a shipment two days ago and won't have another ready till next week, so they're carrying on. I was planning to visit the bubble gum people this afternoon. Maybe you'd like to come."

" Yes, I would. I still chew it once in a while, on the sly."

Clark grinned. " I won't tell. Would you like to tidy up, Don? There's a washroom out back, with a razor and some mysterious running water. Now *there's* a phenomenon I'd like to get to the bottom of."

Don felt better when he had shaved. It had been awkward because he hadn't been able to take off his coat or shirt, but he'd managed. He was drying his face when the voice came again. This time there was no doubt it came from the brief case chained to his handcuff.

" Are you alone now?" it asked.

Startled, Don said, " Yes."

" Good. Speak closer to the brief case so we won't be overheard. This is Captain Simmons, Sergeant."

" Yes, sir."

" Take out your ID card. Separate the two pieces of plastic. There's a flat plastic key next to the card. Open the brief case lock with it."

The voice was silent until Don, with the help of a razor blade, had done as he was directed.

" Open the brief case, take out the package, open the package and put the wrappings back in the brief case."

Again the voice stopped. Don unwrapped something that looked like a flat cigarette case with two appendages, one a disk of perforated hard rubber the size of a half dollar and the other a three-quarter-inch-wide ribbon of opaque plastic. " I've got it, sir."

" Good. What you see is a highly advanced radio transmitter and receiver. It's a pilot model you were bringing back from the contractor for tests here. But this seems as useful a way to test it as any other."

" It's range is fantastic, Captain—if you're in Washington."

" I am. Now. The key also unlocks the handcuff. Unlock it. Strip to the waist. Bend the plastic strip to fit over your shoulder. Arrange the perforated disk so it's at the base of your neck, under your shirt collar. The thing that looks like a cigarette case is the power pack."

Don followed the instructions, rubbing his wrist in relief as the handcuff came off. The radio had been well designed and its components went into place as if they had been built to his measure. The power pack was surprisingly light.

" That's done, sir," Don said. He put his shirt, tie and coat back on.

" Good," Captain Simmons said. " Practice talking without moving your lips, for occasions when you might have to transmit to us in someone's view. Now put your handcuff back on and lock it."

" Oh, damn," Don said under his breath.

" I heard that."

" Sorry, sir, but it is a nuisance."

" I know, but you have to get rid of it logically. When you get a chance go to the local bank. Show them your credentials from Riggs National and ask them to keep your brief case in their vault. Then, at you first opportunity, burn the plastic key and your ID card."

" Yes, sir."

" Keep up your masquerade as a bank messenger and try to find out, as if you were an ordinary curiosity-seeker, all you can about Cavalier Institute. You've made a good start with the Garet girl. Get to know her father."

" Yes, sir." Don realized with embarrassment that his little romantic interlude with Alis must have been eavesdropped on. " Are there any particular times I'm to report ?"

" You will be reporting constantly. That's the beauty of this radio."

" You mean I can't turn it off ? There'll always be somebody listening ?"

" Exactly. But you mustn't be inhibited. Your private life is still your own. Your unofficial actions will simply be ignored."

" Oh, great !"

" You must rely on our discretion, Sergeant. Enough for now. We mustn't excite Clark's suspicions. You'll receive further instructions as they are necessary. And remember—don't be inhibited."

" No, sir," Don said ruefully. He went back to the print-shop, feeling like a goldfish bowl.

IV

Ed Clark took Don to the Superior State Bank and introduced him to the president, who was delighted to do business with a representative of Riggs National of Washington, D. C. Don told him nothing about the contents of the brief case but the banker seemed to be under the impression they were securities or maybe even a million dollars cash.

Outside again, with the receipt in his wallet, Don stood with Clark on the corner.

" This is the heart of town, you might say," the newspaper editor said. " The bubble gum factory is over that way, on the railroad spur. Smells real nice, I think."

Don rubbed the wrist that had been manacled for so long. He was sniffing politely when there was a roar of engines and a squadron of fighter planes buzzed Broadway.

They screamed over at little more than roof level, then were gone.

" Things are beginning to happen," Don said. " The Air Force is having a look-see."

Clark shook his head. " That was not the Air Force. Those were the PP boys. They're the only ones who fly those Lightnings these days."

" PP ?"

" Private Pilots. Bobby the Bold's airborne vigilantes. Wonder what they're up to ?"

" Oh, Senator Bobby Thebold, S.O.B."

" If you want to put it that way, yes."

" It's a private joke. But I think I know what they're up to —or why. The Senator's secretary is marooned up here, like me. She was on the train, too."

" You don't say ! I got scooped on that one. Which one is she ?"

" The redhead. Geneva Jervis."

The P-38's screamed over again, this time from west to east. Don counted six planes and made out the PP markings. People had come out of stores and business buildings and were looking out of upstairs windows at the sky. They were rewarded by a third thundering flypast of the fighter planes.

" Big deal," Clark said. " This show would bring anyone outdoors, but even if they see her what do you suppose they can do about it ? There's no place in town flat enough for a Piper Cub to land, let alone a fighter plane."

" How about the golf course ?"

" Raleigh ? Worst set of links in the whole United States. A helicopter could put down there, but that's about all. What's old Bobby so worked up about, I wonder ? Unless there's something to that gossip about this Jervis girl being his mistress and he's showing off for her."

At that moment he and Don were thrown against the side of the bank building. They clung to each other and Don noticed that the sun had moved a few degrees in the sky.

" Oh-oh," Clark grunted. " Superior's taking evasive action. Thinks it's being attacked." As they regained their footing he asked, " Do you feel heavy in the legs ?"

" Yes. As if I were going up in an express elevator."

" Exactly. Somebody's getting us up beyond the reach of these pesky planes, I'd guess."

The P-38s were overhead again but now they seemed to be diving on the town. More likely, if Clark's theory were right, it was an illusion—the planes were flying level but the town was rising fast.

" They'd better climb," Don said, " or they'll crash !"

There was the sound of a crash almost immediately, from the south end of town. Don and Clark ran toward it, fighting the heaviness in their legs.

A dozen others were ahead of them, running sluggishly across South Creek Bridge. Beyond, just short of the Edge, was the wreckage of a fighter plane and behind it the torn-up ground of a crash landing. There was no fire.

The pilot struggled out of the cockpit. He dropped to the ground, felt himself to see if any bones were broken, then saw the crowd running toward him.

The pilot hesitated, then ran toward the Edge. Shouts came from the crowd. With a last glance over his shoulder the pilot leaped and went over the Edge.

The crowd, Don and Clark among them, approached more cautiously. They made out a falling dot and, a second later, saw a parachute blossom open. The other planes appeared and flew a wide protective circle around the chutist.

" Do you think that's Bobby Thebold ?" Don asked.

" Probably not. That was the last plane in the formation. Thebold would be the leader."

They went back past the crashed plane, surrounded by a growing crowd from town, and recrossed the bridge.

" Look at the water," the editor said. " Ice is forming."

" And we're still rising," Don said, "if my legs are any judge. Do you think there's a connection ?"

Clark shrugged. He turned up his coat collar and rubbed his hands. " All I know is the higher we go the colder we get. Come on back to the shop and warm up."

When Don Cort reached the campus he was shivering, in spite of the sweater and topcoat Ed Clark had lent him. He asked a student where the administration building was and at the desk he inquired for Professor Garet.

A grey-haired, dedicated-looking woman told him impatiently the Professor Garet was in his laboratory and couldn't be disturbed. She wouldn't tell him where the laboratory was.

" Have you seen Miss Jervis ?"

The woman behind the desk shook her head. " You're two of the people from the train, aren't you ? Well, you're all supposed to report in the dining room at two o'clock."

" What for ?"

" You'll find out at two o'clock."

It was obvious he would get no more information from her. Don left the building. It was half-past one. He crossed the near-deserted campus. His legs still felt heavy and he assumed Superior was still rising.

He wondered how high they were and whether it would snow. How high did you have to be before it didn't snow any more ? He had no idea. He did recall that Mount Everest was 29,000 feet up and that it snowed up there. Or would it be *down* there, relatively speaking ?

Don remembered now that the conquerors of Everest had needed oxygen in the rarified atmosphere near the summit and he experimentally took a couple of deep breaths. No difficulty. Therefore they weren't 29,000 feet up—yet.

He picked out a building at random. Classes were in session behind the closed but windowed doors along the hall. From the third door he saw Alis Garet, sitting at the back of one of the small classrooms. Her attention had wandered from the instructor and when she saw Don she smiled and beckoned. He hesitated, then opened the door and went in as quietly as he could.

Alis cleared some books off a chair next to her and Don sat down. " Who turned you loose ?"

He realized she was referring to his de-handcuffed wrist and grinned, indicating that he'd tell her later.

" I see you've been outfitted for our new climate," she went on. A student in the row of chairs ahead turned and frowned. The instructor talked on, oblivious.

Don nodded and said, " Shh."

" Don't let them intimidate you. Did you see the planes ?"

More students were turning and glaring and Don's embarrassment grew. " Come on," he said. " Let's cut this class."

" Bravo !" she said. " Spoken like a true Cavalier."

She gathered up her books. The instructor, without interrupting his lecture, followed them with his eyes as they left the room. " Now I'll never know whether the young princes got out of the tower alive," she said.

" They didn't. The question is, will we ?"

" I certainly hope so. I'll have to speak to Father about it."

" He's locked up in his lab, they tell me. Where would that be ?"

" In the tower, as a matter of fact. The bell tower that the founding fathers built and then didn't have enough money to buy bells for. But you can't go up there—it's the holy of holies."

" Can you ?"

" No. Why ? You don't think Father is making all this happen, do you ?"

" Somebody is. Professor Garet seems as good a suspect as any."

" Oh, he likes to act mysterious, but it's all an act. Poor old Father is just a crackpot theorist."

" I wonder. Look, somebody's called a meeting for us outsiders from the train at two o'clock. It's almost that now. Maybe I'll have a chance to ask some questions. Will your father be there ?"

" I'm sure he will. He's a great meeting-caller. I'll go with you. And, since you have two free hands now, you can hold my books. Maybe later you'll get a chance to hold me."

An improvised speakers' table had been set up at one end of the room, near the door to the kitchen. A heavy-set man sat at the table talking to Mrs. Garet, the Professor's wife.

" The stoutish gentleman next to Mother is the president of Cavalier," Alis said. " Maynard Rubach. When you talk to him be sure to call him *Doctor* Rubach. He's not a Ph.D. and he's sensitive about it, but he did used to be a veterinarian."

They sat down near the big table and Mrs. Garet smiled and waved at them. Mayor Civek came in through the kitchen door, licking a finger as if he'd been sampling something on the way, and sat next to Mrs. Garet.

At that moment Don's stomach gave a hop and he felt blood rushing to his head. Others also had pained or nauseous looks.

" Ugh," Alis said. " Now what ?"

" I'd guess," Don said when his stomach had settled back in place, " that we've stopped rising."

Professor Garet came in presently, looking pleased with himself.

" Altitude 21,500 feet," he announced without preamble. Temperature 16 degrees Fahrenheit. From here on out—" he paused, repeated " out " and chuckled "—it's going to be a bit chilly. Those of you who are inadequately clothed will see my wife for extra garments. I believe you have been comfortably housed and fed. There will, of course, be no charge for these services while you are the guests of the Cavalier Institute of Applied Sciences. Thank you. I now present Mr. Hector Civek, the mayor of Superior."

Don looked at Alis, who shrugged. The conductor stood and opened a notebook which he consulted. " I have a few questions, Mr. Mayor. These people have asked me to speak for them and there's one question that outweighs all the others. That is—are you going to take us back to Earth ? If so, when ? And how ?"

Civek cleared his throat. " As for the first question—we certainly hope to take you and ourselves back to Earth. I can't answer the others."

" You hope to ?"

" Earnestly. I turn blue easily myself and I'm as anxious as you are to get back. But when that will be depends entirely on circumstances. Circumstances, uh, beyond my control."

" Who's controlling them, then? Your friend with the whiskers ?"

Professor Garet smiled amiably and patted his beard. The portly Maynard Rubach got up and Civek sat down.

" I am Dr. Maynard Rubach, president of Cavalier. I must insist that in common decency we all refrain from personal references. Mr. Civek has done his best to give you an explanation but of course he is a layman and, while he has many excellent qualities, we cannot expect him to be conversant with the principles of science. I will therefore attempt to explain.

" As you know, science has been aware for hundreds of years that the Earth is a giant magnet . . ."

Don saw Geneva Jervis. She was at the kitchen door beyond the speakers' table.

". . . the isogenic and the isoclinic . . ."

The red-haired Miss Jervis saw Don now and put her finger to her lips.

". . . an ultimote, which is simultaneously an integral part of . . ."

Now the redhead was beckoning to him urgently. He excused himself to Alis, who frowned when she saw the other girl, then went back of the speakers' table (". . . 1,257 tenescopes to the square centimeter . . .") into the kitchen. Jen Jervis was by now at the far end of it, motioning him to hurry up.

" I've found something," she said. She was wearing a shapeless fur coat, apparently borrowed.

" What ?"

" Come on ; you'll see it."

" All right, but why me ?"

" Aside from myself you seem to be the only one from the train with any gumption."

She led him out the back door and across the frozen ground past several buildings. They reached what once must have been an athletic field.

" At the far end," she said. " Come on."

" Where were you when your boy friend and his daredevil aces came over ?"

" None of your business." He shrugged. They were at a section of the grandstand at the end of the field. Jen Jervis indicated a door and Don opened it. It led to a big room under the stands.

" Look over there." She pointed to a door at a 45-degree angle to the ground, set into a triangular block of concrete.

" Where does that go ?" he asked.

" Down," she said as they walked toward it. " And there's machinery or something down there. It throbs, anyway."

" Probably the generator for the school's lighting system. Did you go down and look ?"

" No."

" All right, then." He opened the door. " Down we go."

At the bottom of a flight of steps there was a corridor lit by dim electric light bulbs along one wall. The corridor became a tunnel, sloping gradually downward. " I don't hear any throbbing," he said.

" Well, I did."

" How long ago was that ?"

" An hour, maybe."

" While we were still rising. That would make sense. We've stopped again, you know. Professor Garet gave us a bulletin on it."

He had been going ahead of her in the narrow tunnel. Now it widened and they were able to walk side by side. But then they came to a sturdy-looking door padlocked.

" That's that," Don said.

" That's that nothing," she said. " Break it down."

He laughed. " You flatter me. Come on back."

" We're going through that door." She opened her purse and took out an extensive collection of keys. Eventually she found one that opened the padlock.

" Well !" he said. " Who taught you *that* ?"

" Open the door."

The corridor beyond the door was lined—walls, ceiling and floor—with a silvery metal.

It ended in a great room whose far wall was glass or some equally transparent substance. The room was a huge observatory at the end of Superior but below its rim. They could look down from it, not without a touch of nausea, to the Earth four miles below.

V

There were clouds below that occasionally hid the Earth from sight. They gazed in silence at the magnificent view.

" This wasn't built in a day," Jen Jervis said at last.

" I should say not," Don agreed. " Millions of years."

She looked at him sharply. " I wasn't talking about the age of the Earth. I mean this room—this lookout post—whatever it is."

He grinned at her. " I agree with you there, too. I'm really a very agreeable fellow, Miss Jervis. Obviously whoever built it knew well in advance that Superior was going to take off. They also knew how much of it was going up and exactly where this would have to be built so it would be at the edge."

" Under the edge, you mean, with a downward view."

" That's right. From a distance I'd say Superior looked as if someone had cut the end off an orange. The flat part—where the cut was made—is the surface and we're looking out from a piece of the convex skin."

" You put things so simply, Mr. Cort, that even a child could understand," she said acidly.

" Thank you," he said complacently. He had remembered that whoever was listening in for military intelligence through the tiny radio under his shirt could have only a vague idea of what was going on. Any little word pictures he could supply, therefore, would help them understand. He had to risk the fact that his companion might think him a bit of an idiot.

" I don't think this is the work of those boobies at the booby hatch," she was saying.

" I beg your pardon ?"

" The Cavalier Institution of Applied Foolishness, whatever they call it. They just wouldn't be capable of an undertaking of this scope."

" Oh, I agree. That's why I let you drag me away from the meeting. Old Doc Rubach, D.V.M., was going on about the ultimote being conecka to the thighbone, way up in the middle of the air. Tell me, who do *you* think is behind it all ?"

She was walking around the big glass-sided room as if taking mental inventory. There wasn't much to catalogue—six straight chairs, heavy and modern-looking with a large wooden table, a framed piece of dark glass that might be a television set, and a grey steel box about the size and shape of a three-drawer filing cabinet. This last was near the big wall-

window and had three black buttons on its otherwise smooth top.

"I?" she said. "Behind it all?"

"Yes. What's your theory? Is this something for the Un-Earthly Activities Committee to investigate?"

"Don't be impertinent. If the Senator thinks it's his duty to look into it, he will. He undoubtedly is already. In the meantime I can do no less than gather whatever information I can, while I'm on the scene."

"Very patriotic. What do you conclude from your information-gathering so far?"

"Obviously there's some kind of conspiracy . . ." she began, then stopped as if she suspected a trap.

". . . afoot," Don said with a grin. "As I see it, all you do is have Bobby the Bold subpoena everybody up here—every last man-jack of 'em—to testify before his committee. They wouldn't dare refuse."

"I don't find you a bit amusing, Mr. Cort, though I have no doubt this sophomoric humour makes a big hit with your teenage blonde. We'd better get back. I can see it was a mistake to expect any co-operation from you."

"As you like, Madame Investigator." Don gave her a mock bow then turned for a last look down at the vast segment of Earth below.

Geneva Jervis screamed.

He whirled to see her standing, big-eyed and open-mouthed, in front of the framed dark glass he had taken for a television screen. Her face was contorted in horror and as Don's gaze flicked to the screen he had the barest glimpse of a pair of eyes fading with a dissolving image. Then the screen was blank and Don wasn't sure whether there had been a face to go with the eyes—an inhuman, unearthly face—or whether his imagination had supplied it.

The girl slumped to the floor in a faint.

Columbus, Ohio, Nov. 1 (AP)—Sen. Robert (Bobby) Thebold landed here today after leading his Private Pilots (PP) squadron of P-38s on a reconnaissance flight which resulted in the loss of one of the six World War II fighters in a crash landing on the mysteriously airborne town of Superior, Ohio. The pilot of the crashed plane parachuted safely to Earth.

Sen. Thebold told reporters grimly :

" There is no doubt in my mind that mysterious forces are at work when a town of 3,000 population can rise in a body off the face of the Earth. My reconnaissance has shown conclusively that the town is intact and its inhabitants alive. On one of my passes I saw my secretary, Miss Geneva Jervis."

Sen. Thebold said he was confident Miss Jervis would contact him the moment she had anything to report, indicating she would make an on-the-spot investigation.

Washington, Nov. 1 (Reuters)—American officials today were at a loss to explain the strange behaviour of Superior, Ohio, " the town that took off."

Authoritative sources assured Reuters that no military or scientific experiments were in progress which could account for the phenomenon of a town being lifted intact thousands of feet into the air.

Rumours circulating to the effect that a " Communist plot " was at work were greeted with extreme scepticism in official quarters.

Bulletin

Columbus, Ohio, Nov. 1 (UPI)—The airborne town of Superior began to drift east across Ohio late today.

The unconscious Geneva Jervis, lying crumpled up in the oversized fur coat, was the immediate problem. Don Cort straightened her out so she lay on her back, took off her shoes and propped her ankles on the lower rung of a chair. He was rubbing one of her wrists when her eyes fluttered open.

She smiled self-consciously. " I guess I was a sissy."

" Not at all. I saw it, too. A pair of eyes."

" And a face ! A horrible, horrible face."

" I wasn't sure about the face. Can you describe it ?"

She darted a tentative look at the screen but it was comfortingly blank. " It wasn't human. And it was staring right into me. It was awful !"

" Did it have a nose, ears, mouth ?"

" I—I can't be sure. Let's get out of here. I'm all right now. Thanks for being so good to me—Don."

" Don't mention it—Jen. Here, put your shoes on."

He was relieved when they had scrambled up the steps under the grandstand. There had been no sense of anyone or anything following them or spying on them during their long walk through the tunnel.

They were silent with their separate thoughts as they crossed the frosty ground and Jen held Don's arm, more for companionship than support. At the campus the girl excused herself, saying she still felt shaky and wanted to rest in her room. Don went back to the dining room.

The meeting was over but Alis Garet was there, having a cup of tea and reading a book.

" Well, sir," she said, giving him an intent look, " how was the rendezvous ?"

" Fair to middling." He was relieved to see that she wasn't angry. " Did anybody say anything while I was gone ?"

" Not a coherent word. You don't deserve it but I made notes for you."

" It was strictly business. Let me see the notes, you angel."

" Notes, then." She handed over a wad of paper.

" Rubach," he read : " Magnology stuff stuff stuff etc etc. Nothing.

" Q. (Conductor Jas Brown) What abt Mayor's proclamation Superior seceded frm Earth ?

" A. (Civek) repeated stuff abt discrimination agnst Spr and Cavlr and bubl gum prices.

" Q. What u xpct gain ?

" A. Stuff abt end discrimination.

" Q. Sovereignty ?

" A. How's that ?

" Q. R u trying set up Spr as separate city-state w/govt independent of U S or Earth ?"

" A. Hem and haw. Well, now.

" Q. Well, r u ?

" A. (Father, rescuing Civek :) Q of sovereignty must remain temporarily up in air. Laughter (Father's). When and if Spr returns will acpt state-fed laws as b4 but meantime circs warrant adapt to prevailing conditions.

" Rest of mtg was abt sleeping arrangmnts, meals, recreation privileges, clothing etc."

Don folded the notes and put them in his pocket. " Thanks. I see I didn't miss much. The only thing it seems to add is that Mayor Civek is a figurehead and that if the Cavalier people know anything they're not talking, except in gobbledygook."

"Check," Alis said. "Now let's go take a look at Pittsburgh."

" Pittsburgh ?" Don said. " You mean Superior's drifting across the United States ?"

" Either that or it's being pushed. Let's go see."

VI

There hadn't been much to see and it had been too cold to watch for long. The lights of Pittsburgh were beginning to go on in the dusk and the city looked pretty and far away. A Pennsylvania Air National Guard plane came up to investigate, but from a respectful distance. Then it flew off.

Don left Alis, shivering, at her door and decided he wanted a drink. He remembered having seen a sign, *Club Lyric*, down the street from the *Sentry* office.

" Sergeant Cort," said a muffled voice under his collar.

Don jumped. He'd forgotten for the moment that he was a walking radio station. " Yes ?" he said.

" Reception has been excellent," the voice said. It was no longer that of Captain Simmons. " You needn't recapitulate. We've heard all your conversations and feel we know as much as you do. You'll have to admit it isn't much."

" I'm afraid not. What do you want me to do now ? Should I go back and investigate that underground room again ? That seems to be the best lead so far."

" No. You're just a bank messenger whose biggest concern was to safeguard the contents of the brief case. Now that the contents are presumably in the bank vault your official worries are over and, though you're curious to know why Superior's acting the way it is, you're willing to let somebody else do something about it."

" But they saw me in the room. Those eyes, whatever they are. I had the feeling—well, that they weren't human."

" Nonsense !" the voice from the Pentagon said. " An ordinary closed-circuit television hookup. Don't let your imagination run away with you and above all don't play spy. If they're suspicious of anyone it will be of Geneva Jervis because of her connection with Senator Thebold. Where are you going now ?"

" Well, sir, I thought—that is, if there's no objection—I'd go have a drink. See what the townspeople are saying ?

" Good idea. Do that."

The streets were cold, dark and deserted. The few street lights were feeble and the lights in houses and other buildings seemed dimmer than normal. A biting wind had sprung up and Don was glad when he saw the neon words *Club Lyric* ahead.

The bartender greeted him cheerfully. " It ain't a fit night. What'll it be ?"

Don decided on a straight shot, to start. " What's going on ?" he asked. " Where's the old town going ?"

The bartender shrugged. " Let Civek worry about that. It's what we pay for, ain't it ?"

" I suppose so. How're you fixed for liquor ? Big supply?"

" Last a coupla weeks unless people start drinking more than usual. Beer'll run out first."

" That's right, I guess. But aren't you worried about being up in the air like this ?"

The bartender shrugged again. " Not much I can do about it, is there ? Going to have another shot ?"

" Mix it this time. A little soda. Is that the general attitude ? Business as usual ?"

" I hear some business is picking up. Lot of people buying winter clothes, for one thing, weather turning cold the way it did. Dabney Brothers—they run the coal and fuel oil company —got enough orders to keep them going night and day for at least a week."

" That's fine. But when they eventually run out, like you, then what ? Everybody freeze to death ?"

The bartender made a thoughtful face. " You got something there. Oh, hello, Ed. Kinda brisk tonight."

It was Ed Clark, the newspaperman. Clark nodded to the bartender, who began to mix him a martini. " Freeze the ears off a brass monkey," Clark said, joining Don. "Planning to settle down here ?"

" I don't seem to have much choice. Anything new at your end ?"

Clark lifted his brimming glass and took a sip. " Here's to a mild winter. New ? I guess you know we're in Pennsylvania now and not Ohio. *Over* Pennsylvania, I should say. Don't ask me why unless Hector Civek thinks Superior will get a better break, taxwise."

" You think the mayor's behind it all ?"

" He has his delusions of grandeur, like a lot of people here. But I do think Hector knows more than he's telling. Some of the merchants—mostly those whose business hasn't benefitted by the cold wave—have called a meeting for tomorrow. They want to pump him."

" He wasn't exactly a flowing spout at Cavalier this afternoon when the people from the train wanted answers."

" So that's where he was. They couldn't find him in his office at Town Hall."

" Where's it all going to end ? If we keep on drifting we'll be over the Atlantic—next stop Europe. Then Superior will be crossing national boundaries instead of just state lines, and some country may decide we're violating its air space and shoot us out of the sky."

" I see you take the long view," Clark said.

" Is there any other ?" Don asked. " You don't seem to realize that sixteen square miles of solid earth, and three thousand people, have taken off to go waltzing through the sky. That isn't just something that happens. Something or somebody's making it happen. The question is who or what, and what are you going to do about it ?"

The bartender said, " The boy's right, Ed. How do we know they won't take us up higher—up where there's no air ? Then we'd be cooked."

Clark laughed. " ' Cooked ' is hardly the word. But I agree that things are getting out of hand." He set down his glass with a clink. " I know the man we want. Old Doc Bendy. He could stir things up." The bartender nodded. " Remember the time they tried to run the pipeline through town and Doc formed a citizens committee and stopped them ?"

" Stopped them dead," the bartender recalled, then cleared his throat. " Speak of the devil." He raised his voice and greeted the man who had just walked in.

Doc Bendy was an imposing old gentleman of more than average height and magnificent girth. He was dressed for the cold weather in an old frock coat, black turning green. He wore a battered black slouch hat which long ago had given up the pretence of holding any particular shape.

" Salutations, gentlemen !" Doc Bendy boomed. " They tell me our peripatetic little town has just passed Pittsburgh. I'd have thought it more likely we'd crossed the Arctic Circle. Rum, bartender, is the only suitable potable for the occasion."

Clark introduced Don, who saw that close up Doc Bendy's face was full and firm rather than fat. The nose had begun to develop the network of visible blood vessels which indicated a fondness for the bottle.

Don noticed that the rum the bartender poured for Bendy was 151 proof and the portion was a generous one.

Bendy raised his glass. " Your health, gentlemen." He took a sip and put it down. " I might also drink to a happy voyage, destination unknown."

" Don here thinks we're in danger of drifting over Europe."

" A distinct possibility," Bendy said. " Your passports are in order, I trust ? I remember the first time I went to the Continent."

" Were you in the medical corps, sir ?" Don asked.

Doc Bendy boomed with laughter, holding his paunch. " Bless your soul, lad, I'm no doctor. I was on the board of directors of Superior's first hospital, hence the title. A mere courtesy conferred on me by a grateful citizenry."

" The citizens might be looking to you again, Doc," Clark said, " since their elected representatives are letting them down."

" But not *bringing* them down, eh ? Suppose you tell me what you know, Mr. Editor. I assume you're the best-informed man on the situation, barring the conspirators who have dragged us aloft."

" You think it's a conspiracy, then ?"

" It's not an act of God."

Clark began to fill an ancient pipe, so well caked that the pencil with which he tamped the tobacco barely fitted into the bowl. By the time the pipe was ready for a match he had exhausted the solid facts. He then told Doc Bendy what Don had told him. He was about to go further when the old man held up a hand.

" The facts only, if you please. We'll leave the fancy for your excellent editorial column. It seems to me, gentlemen, that it's time I set up a committee."

VII

Dear Diary :

There wasn't any TV tonight and I asked Grandfather Bendy what to do and he said " Marie, when I was young, boys and girls made their own fun " and so I got the Scrabble and asked Mum and Dad to play but they said no they had to go to the Warners and play bridge which I forgot. So they went and I was playing pretending I was both sides when the door opened and I said

Hello Grandfather but it wasn't him it was like a kangaroo and it had big eyes that were friendly.

After a while I went over and scratched its ears and it liked that and then it went over to the table and looked at the scrabble. I thought wouldn't it be funny if it could play but it couldn't. But it could spell ! It had hands like claws with long black fingernails and fur on them (the fingers) and it pushed the letters around so they spelled NAME and I spelled out MARIE.

Then I spelled out WHO ARE YOU and it spelled GIZL.

Then I spelled HOW OLD ARE YOU and it put all the blank spaces together.

I said WHERE DO YOU LIVE and it spelled HERE. Then I changed that to WHERE DO YOU COME FROM and it pointed to the blanks again.

The gizl went away before Mum and Dad came home and I didn't tell them about it but I'll tell Grandfather Bendy because he understands better about things like the time I had an invisible friend.

Don Cort went to bed with the surprised realization that it had been only 24 hours since Superior took off. When he woke up the floating town was over New York.

Some high-flying skywriters were at work. WELCOME SUPERIOR DRINK PEPSI-COLA, their message said.

Don dressed quickly and hurried to the brink. Alis Garet was there among a little crowd, bundled up in a parka.

" Is that the Hudson River ?" she asked him. " Where's the Empire State Building ?"

" Yes," he said. " Haven't you ever been to New York ? I can't quite make it out. It's somewhere south of that patch of green—that's Central Park."

" No ; I've never been out of Ohio. I thought New York was a big city."

" It's big enough. Don't forget we're four miles up. Have you seen any planes besides the skywriters ?"

" Just some airliners, way down," she said. " Were you expecting someone ?"

" Seeing how it's our last port of call, I thought there might be some Federal boys flying around. I shouldn't think they'd want a chunk of their real estate exported to Europe."

" Are we going to Europe ?"

" Bound to if we don't change course."

" Why ?"

" My very next words were going to be ' Don't ask me why.' I ask you. You're closer to the horse's mouth than I am."

" If you mean Father," Alis said, " I told you I don't enjoy his confidence."

" Haven't you even got an inkling of what he's up to ?"

" I'm sure he's not the Master Mind, if that's what you mean."

" Then who is ? Rubach ? Civek ? The chief of police ? Or the bubble gum king, whoever he is ?"

" Cheeky McFerson ?" She laughed. " I went to grade school with him and if he's got a mind I never noticed it."

" McFerson ? He's just a kid ?"

" His father died a couple of years ago and Cheeky's the president on paper, but the business office runs things. We call him Cheeky because he always had a wad of company gum in his cheek. But he never gave me any and I always chewed Wrigley's for spite."

"Oh." Don chewed the inside of his own cheek and watched the coastline. "We're certainly not slowing down for Customs"

A speck, trailing vapour through the cold upper air, headed toward them from the general direction of New England. As it came closer Don saw that it was a B-58 Hustler bomber.

" It's not going to shoot us down, is it ?" Alis asked.

" Hardly. I'm glad to see it. It's about time somebody took an interest in us besides Bobby Thebold and his leftover Lightnings."

The B-58 rapidly closed the last few miles between them, banked and circled Superior.

" Attention people of Superior," a voice from the plane said. The magnified words reached them distinctly through the cold air. "Inasmuch as you are now leaving the continental United States, this aircraft has been assigned to accompany you. From this point on you are under the protection of the United States Air Force."

The B-58 streaked off and took up a course in a vast circle around them.

" I'm not so sure I like having it around," Alis said. " I mean suppose they find out that Superior's controlled by—I don't know—let's say a foreign power, or an alien race. Once we're out over the Atlantic where nobody else could get hurt wouldn't they maybe consider it a small sacrifice to wipe out Superior to get rid of the—the alien ?"

Don looked at her closely. " What's this about an alien ? What do you know ?"

" I don't *know* anything. It's just a feeling I have, that this is bigger than Father and Mayor Civek and all the self-important VIPs in Superior put together." She squeezed his arm as if to draw comfort from him. " Maybe it's seeing the ocean and realizing the vastness of it, but for the first time I'm beginning to feel a little scared."

" I won't say there's nothing to be afraid of," Don said. He pulled her hand through his arm. " It isn't as though this were a precedented situation. But whatever's going on, remember there are some pretty good people on our side, too."

" I know," she said. " And you're one of them."

He wondered what she meant by that. Nothing, probably, except " Thank you for the reassurance." He decided that was it ; the mechanical eavesdropper he wore under his collar was making him too self-conscious. He tried to think of something appropriate to say to her that he wouldn't mind having overheard in the Pentagon.

Nothing occurred to him, so he drew Alis closer and gave her a quick, quiet kiss.

The crowd of people looking out over the Edge had grown. Judging by their number, few people were in school or at their jobs today. Yesterday they had seemed only mildly interested in what their town was up to but today, with the North American continent about to be left behind, they were paying more attention. Yet Don could see no signs of alarm on their faces.

" It's big, isn't it ?" Alis said. She was looking at the Atlantic, which was virtually the only thing left to see except the bright blue sky, a strip of the New England coast and the circling bomber.

An enterprising cab driver opened his door for them. " Special excursion rate to the West End," he said ; " one buck."

" You're on," Don said. " How's business ?"

" Not what you'd call booming. No trains to meet. No buses. Hi, Alis. This isn't one of your father's brainstorms come to life, is it ?"

" Hi, Chuck," she said. " I seriously doubt it, though I'm sure you'd never get him to admit it. How are your wife and the boy ?"

" Fine. That boy, he's got some imagination. He's digging a hole in the backyard. Last week he told us he was getting close to China. Today it's Australia. He said at supper last night that they must have heard about his hole and started digging from the other end. They've connected up, according to him, and he had quite a conversation with a kangaroo."

" A kangaroo ?" Don sat up straight.

" Yeah. You know how kids are. I guess he's studying Australia in geography."

" What did the kangaroo tell your son ?"

The cab driver laughed defensively. " There's nothing wrong with the boy. He's just got an active mind."

" Of course. When I was a kid I used to talk to bears. But what did he say the kangaroo talked about ?"

" Oh, just crazy stuff—I mean imaginative stuff—like the kangaroos didn't like it Down Under any more and were coming up here because it was safer."

Later that morning, at about the time Don Cort estimated that Superior had passed the twelve-mile limit—east from the coast, not up—the Superior State Bank was held up.

A man clearly recognized as Joe Negus, a small-time gambler, and one other man had driven up to the bank in Negus's flashy Buick convertible. They walked up to the head cashier and threatened him with pistols and demanded all the money in all the tills. They stuffed the bills in a sack, got into their car and drove off.

Police Chief Vincent Grande reached the scene half an hour after the criminals left it. His car had frozen up and wouldn't start. He arrived by taxi, red-faced, fingering the butt of his holstered service automatic.

Negus and his confederate, identified as a poolroom lounger named Hank Stacy, had got away with a hundred thousand dollars.

The telephone rang and someone told the bank president he'd seen Negus and Stacy go into the poolroom. In fact, the robbers' convertible was parked blatantly in front of the place.

Joe Negus and Hank Stacy were sitting on opposite sides of a billiard table when the police chief got there, dividing the money in three piles. A third man stood by, watching closely. He was Jerry Lynch, a lawyer.

" Morning, Vince," he said easily. " Come to play a little snooker ?"

" I'll shoot some bank robbers if they don't hand over that money," Grande said. He had his gun out and looked almost purposeful.

Negus and Stacy made no attempt to go for their guns. Stacy seemed nervous but Negus went on counting the money without looking up.

" Is it your money, Vince ?" Jerry Lynch asked.

" You know damn well whose money it is. Now let's have it."

" I'm afraid I couldn't do that," the lawyer said. " In the first place I wouldn't want to, thirty-three and a third per cent of it being mine, and in the second place you have no authority."

" I'm the chief of police," Grande said doggedly.

" Don't flash your badge at me, Vince," Lynch said. Negus had finished counting the money and the lawyer took one of the piles and put it in various pockets. " I said you had no authority. Bank robbery is a federal offence. Not that I admit there's been a robbery. But if you suspect a crime it's your duty to go to the proper authorities. The FBI would be indicated, if you know where they can be reached."

" Yeah," Joe Negus said. " Go take a flying jump for yourself, Chief."

" Listen, you cheap crook—"

" Hardly cheap, Vince," Lynch said. " And not even a crook, in my professional opinion. Mr. Negus pleads extra-territoriality.

Mayor Hector Civek announced a mass meeting in Town Square. Bonfires were lit and the reviewing stand was hauled out.

Civek was late. The crowd, bundled up against the cold, was stamping its feet and beginning to shout a bit when he arrived. There was a medium-sized cheer as the mayor climbed the platform.

" Fellow citizens," he began.

Don Cort stood near the edge of the crowd and watched the people around him. They mostly had a no-nonsense look about them—as if they were not going to be satisfied with mere oratory.

Civek said : " I'm not going to keep you standing in the cold and tell you what you already know—how our food supplies are dwindling, how we're using up our stocks of coal and fuel

oil with no immediate hope of replacement—you know all that."

"We sure do, Hector," somebody called out.

"Yes; so, as I say, I'm not going to talk about what the problem is. We don't need words—we need action."

He paused as if he expected a cheer, or applause, but the crowd merely stood and waited for him to go on.

"We're going to put a stop to this lawlessness we never had before. We're going to make Superior a place to be proud of. Superior has changed—risen, you might say—to a new status. We're more than a town, now. We're free and separate from the United States.

"We're a sovereign place a—a sovereignty—and we need new methods to cope with new conditions—to restore law and order to see that all our subjects—our citizen-subjects—are provided for."

The crowd had become hushed as Civek neared his point.

"To that end," Civek went on, "—to that noble end I dedicate myself and I take this momentous step and hereby proclaim the existence of the Kingdom of Superior—" he paused to take a deep breath "—and proclaim myself its first King."

He stopped. His oratory had carried him to a climax and he didn't quite know where to go from there. Maybe he expected cheers to carry him over, but none came. There was complete silence except for the crackling of the bonfires.

But after a moment there was a shuffling of feet and a whispering that grew to a murmur. Then out of the murmur came derisive shouts and catcalls.

"King Hector the First!" somebody hooted. "Long live the King!"

The words could have been gratifying but the tone of voice was all wrong.

"Where's Hector's crown?" somebody else cried. "Hey, Jack, did you forget to bring the crown?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "I forgot. But I got a rope over on my truck. We could elevate him that way."

Jack was obviously joking but a group of men in another part of the crowd pushed toward the platform. "Yeah," one of them said, "let's string him up."

A woman at the back of the crowd screamed. Two hairy figures about five feet tall appeared from the darkness. They were kangaroo-like, with long tails. No one tried to stop them

and the creatures reached the platform and pulled Hector down. They placed him between them and, their way clear now, began to hop away.

Their hops grew longer as they reached the edge of the square. Their leaps had become prodigious as they disappeared in the direction of North Lake, Civek in his heavy coat looking almost like one of them.

Don Cort couldn't tell whether the creatures were kidnapping Civek or rescuing him.

XIII

Hector Civek hadn't been found by the time Judge Helms' court convened.

Joe Negus was there, looking confident His confederate, Hank Stacy, was obviously trying to achieve the same poise but not succeeding. Jerry Lynch, their lawyer, was talking to Ed Clark.

Don Cort took a seat the editor had saved for him in the front row. Alis Garet came in and sat next to him. " I cut my sociology class," she told him. " Anybody find his Majesty yet ?"

" No," Don said. " Who gave him that crackpot idea ?"

Someone burst in from the street and shouted : " He's back ! Civek's back !"

Civek walked with dignity down the aisle, an ermine robe on his shoulders, a crown on his head and a sceptre in his right hand.

" Good morning, Judge," he said. To the clerk he said, " Frank, see to our horses, will you ?"

" Horses ?" the clerk said, blinking.

" Our royal coach is without, and the horses need attending to," Civek said patiently. " You don't think a king walks, do you ?"

Judge Helms took off his pincenez and regarded the spectacle of Hector Civek in ermine.

" What is all this, Hector ?" he asked. " You weren't serious about that king business, were you ? Nice to see you back safe, by the way."

" We would prefer to be addressed the first time as Your Majesty, Judge," Civek said. " After that you can call us ' Sir."

" Us ?" the judge asked. " Somebody with you ?"

" The royal ' we,' " Civek said. " I'll have to issue a proclamation on the proper forms of address. I mean, *we'll* have to. Takes a bit of getting used to, doesn't it ?"

" Quite a bit," the judge agreed. " But right now, if you don't mind, this court is in session and has a case before it. Suppose you make your royal self comfortable and we'll get on with it—as soon as my clerk is back from attending to the royal horses."

The clerk returned and whispered in the judge's ear. Helms looked at Civek and shook his head. " Six of them, eh ? I'll have a look later. Right now we've got a bank robbery case on the calendar."

Vincent Grande talked and Jerry Lynch talked and Judge Helms listened and looked up statutes and pursed his lips thoughtfully. Joe Negus cleaned his nails. Hank Stacy bit his.

Finally the judge said : " I hate to admit this, but I'm afraid I must agree with you, counsellor. The alleged crime contravened no local statute and in the absence of a representative of the federal government I must regretfully dismiss the charges."

Joe Negus promptly got up and began to walk out.

" Just a minute there, varlet !"

It was Hector Civek doing his king bit.

Negus, who probably had been called everything else in his life, paused and looked over his shoulder.

" Approach !" Civek thundered.

" Nuts, your kingship," Negus said. " Nobody stops me now." But before he got to the door something stopped him in mid-stride.

Civek had pointed his sceptre at Negus in that instant. Negus, stiff as a stop-action photograph, toppled to the floor.

" Now," Civek said, motioning to Judge Helms to vacate the bench, " we'll dispense some royal justice."

He sat down, arranging his robes and shifting his heavy crown. " Mr. Counsellor Lynch, we take it you represent the defendants ?"

" Yes, Your Majesty," said the lawyer, an adaptable man. " What happened to Negus, sir ? Is he dead ?"

" He could have been, if we'd given him another notch. No, he's just suspended. Let him be an example to anyone else who might incur our royal wrath. Now, counsellor, we are familiar

enough with the case to render an impartial verdict. We find the defendants guilty of bank robbery."

" But Your Majesty," Lynch said, " bank robbery is not a crime under the laws of Superior. I submit that there has been no crime—inasmuch as the incident occurred after Superior became detached from Earth, and therefore from its laws."

" There is the King's Law," Civek said. " We decree bank robbery a crime, together with all other offenses which are not specifically covered in Superior's statutes."

" Retroactively ?" Lynch asked.

" Of course. We will now pronounce sentence. First, restitution of the money, except for ten per cent to the King's Bench. Second, indefinite paralysis for Negus. Third, probation for Hank Stacy here, with a warning to him to stay out of bad company. Court's adjourned."

Civek wouldn't say where he'd got the costume or the coach-and-six or the paralyzing sceptre. He refused to say where the two kangaroo-like creatures had taken him. He allowed his ermine to be fingered, talked vaguely about better times to come now that Superior was a monarchy, then ordered his coach.

Ed Clark was setting type for an extra when Don and Alis visited his shop.

" What's the story about ?" Alis asked. " The splendid triumph of justice in court this morning ?"

" No. Everybody knows all about that already. I've got the inside story—what happens next. Just like *The New York Times*."

" Where'd you get it ?" Don asked.

Clark winked. "Let's just say it was learned authoritatively."

" Well," Alis said, " what does happen next ?"

" Listen," the editor said, and he read :

" His Unconstitutional Majesty, King Hector I, will attempt to prop up his shaky monarchy by seeking an ambassador from the United States, the *Sentry* learned today.

" Such recognition, if obtained, would be followed immediately by a demand for foreign aid.

" King Hector will point out the benefits of bolstering Superior's economy, especially during its expected foray over Europe and, barring such misfortune as being shot down en route, into the Soviet domain.

" The King will not suggest in so many words that Superior would make a good spy platform, but the implication is there. It will also be implied that unless economic aid—which in plain English means food and fuel to keep Superior from starving and freezing to death—is forthcoming from the United States, Superior may choose the path of neutrality . . ."

" I suppose ' the path of neutrality ' means Superior might consider hiring itself out to the highest bidder ?" Don asked.

" That would be one way to put it," Clark said.

" How does Civek intend to get his message to Washington?" asked Don, aware that it had already been transmitted to the Pentagon via the transceiver under his collar. " Bottle over the side ?"

" My sources tell me they've got WCAV working on short wave. That right, Alis ?"

" Don't ask me. I only live there."

" Do you still think Civek is fronting for the Cavalier crowd ?" Don asked her.

" I don't remember saying that," she said. " I think I agreed with you when you said Civek was ineffectual. Who do *you* think is behind him ? Do you think he's king of the kangaroos ?"

" Well," Don said, " they're the ones who took him away last night. And when he came back this morning he had all the trappings. He didn't get that coach-and-six from foreign aid."

Ed Clark said : " This is all very fascinating, kids, but it's not helping me to get out my extra. Don, why don't you take the little lady out to lunch ?"

Doc Bendy was hurrying out of the Riverside Inn as they reached it. He waved to them. " Save your money. His Gracious Majesty is throwing a free lunch for everybody."

" Where ?"

" At the palace, of course."

" What palace ?" Alis asked.

" The bubble gum factory. He's taken it over."

" Why the gum factory ?"

" Cheeky McFerson offered it to him. Not the factory itself but the big old house near the west wing. The mansion that's been closed up since the old man died. They say Cheeky's been given a title as part of the bargain."

" Sir Cheeky ?" Alis asked, giggling.

" Something like that. Lord Chicle, maybe, or Baron de Mouthful. Come on. It should be quite a show."

The chief of police was sitting behind a desk in the wide front hall but he now wore a military tunic with a chestful of decorations.

" Well, Vince," Bendy said. " I see you got in on the ground floor."

" General Sir Vincent Grande, Minister of Defence," Grande said with a stiff little bow.

" Enchanted," Bendy said, bowing back. " Tell me, Vince, how do you keep a straight face ?"

" I'll overlook that, Bendy, and give you a friendly tip. The country is on a sound basis now and we intend to keep it that way. Obstructionists will be dealt with."

" The country, eh ? Let's go in and see how it's being run."

A clattery hubbub came from the big room on the right. The line of people coming through the side door moved slowly past a row of huge pots from which white-coated men ladled out food. At the end of the serving line Cheeky McFerson, splendid in purple velvet, put a piece of bubble gum on each tray.

On the other side of the room, King Hector sat on a raised chair, crown on head, sceptre in hand, nodding benevolently to anyone who looked at him. On each side of the king, in lower chairs, were Professor Osbert Garet and Maynard Rubach, president of the Cavalier Institute of Applied Sciences.

" Oh, dear, there's father," Alis said in dismay. " What is that silly hat he's wearing ? It makes him look like Merlin."

" But Civek doesn't look a bit like King Arthur," Bendy said. " Let's go pay our respects. Straight faces, now."

" Ah, my dear," the king said when he saw Alis. " And gentlemen. Welcome to our court. May we introduce two of our associates ? Sir Osbert Garet, Royal Astronaut, and Lord Rubach, Minister of Education."

" Father !" Alis spoke sharply to the Royal Astronaut. " How silly can you get ?"

" Now, now, child," the king said reprovingly. " You must not risk our displeasure. For the time being our rule must be absolute—until the safety of our kingdom has been assured. Sir Osbert," he said, " we trust that at a more propitious time you will have a serious talk with your charming but impetuous daughter."

" My liege, I shall deal with her," the Royal Astronaut said, glowering at Alis. Her father's apparent sincerity left Alis speechless.

" Well spoken, Sir Osbert," the king said. He clapped his hands and a servant jumped up. " Dinner for these three. Find a table, my friends, and you will be served."

Don firmly guided Alis away. She had seemed about to explode. They found an empty table out of earshot of the king.

Bendy spread a napkin over his lap. " Let's curb our snickers and fill our stomachs " he said, " and later we can go out behind the barn and laugh our heads off."

They were eating meat loaf and potatoes.

" I wonder where his worship got all the grub," Alis said.

" I don't know," Don said, " but it certainly doesn't look as if he needs any foreign aid."

Alis put down her fork suddenly and her eyes got big. She said, " You don't suppose—"

" Suppose what ?" Bendy said, spearing a small potato.

" I just had a horrible thought." She laughed feebly. " It's ridiculous, of course, but I wondered if by any chance we were eating Joe Negus."

" Don't be silly," Don said, but he put down his fork too.

" Of course its ridiculous," Bendy said. " Hector only put Negus to sleep. Besides, Negus wouldn't stretch far enough to feed this crowd."

" Is that why you're not eating any more ? Alis asked him.

" Why, no," Bendy said. " It's merely that I've had enough. It's true that Hector could have used his sceptre on other transgressors, but— No, I refuse to admit that he's turned cannibal."

" *He* isn't eating," Don pointed out.

" I'll guarantee you he has, though. I've never known Hector to miss a meal. No. Hector may be a fool and a dupe, and power-hungry to boot, but he's not a cruel man, or a deranged one."

" No ?" Alis said. "I dare you to ask him what's in the meat loaf."

" All right." Bendy got up. " I'll ask to see the kitchen—to compliment the chef."

She and Don watched Doc Bendy talk to Civek. The king laughed and stood up and he and Bendy crossed the room. They went through a door behind the line of servers.

IX

" Hector was very co-operative," Doc Bendy said. " I guess he figured he couldn't keep it a secret for long anyhow, so he decided to be frank. After all, half the town had seen them take him away."

" You mean Civek admits he's only a figurehead?" Don asked.

" Oh, he wouldn't admit that. His story is that it's a working arrangement—a treaty of sorts. He's absolute monarch as far as the human inhabitants are concerned, but the kangaroos control Superior as a piece of geography."

" I knew father couldn't have done it," Alis murmured.

They went down a flight of stairs off the main hall to a basement room. It was luxuriously furnished, as every room in the mansion must have been. There was a rug over inlaid linoleum and a fireplace blazing. A huge round mahogany table stood in the centre of the room.

Hector Civek sat in one of the half dozen leather armchairs drawn up to the table. In another sat a furry, genial-looking blue-grey kangaroo.

Only it wasn't really a kangaroo, Don realized. It was more human than animal in several ways. It's bearing, for instance, had dignity and its round eyes had intelligence. A thick tail at least three feet long stuck through a space under the backrest of the armchair.

Civek nodded and smiled, apparently willing to forget his flare-up at Alis. " I'll introduce you," Civek said. " I mean *we'll* introduce you—Oh, the hell with the royal we, as long I'm among friends. This is Gizl, and what I'm trying to say is that he doesn't speak English. But he understands the language and he can read and write it. That's why all this."

He indicated the letter and number squares on the table. They were from sets of games—Scrabble, Anagrams, I-Qubes, Lotto and poker dice.

" My granddaughter met Gizl, you'll recall," Doc Bendy said.

Don sat down at the table and began to form squares into words. He spelled GREETINGS, then ALIS GARET, then DON CORT, and pointed from the squares to Alis and himself. " I assume you've already introduced yourself?" he asked Bendy.

Bendy nodded and the kangaroo-like creature inclined his furry head in acknowledgement to Alis and Don. Then he—Don had already stopped thinking of the creature as an " it " —formed two words with his tapering, black-nailed fingers.

PLEASANT, he communicated. GIZL. And he tapped his chest three times.

Don left the three names intact, distributing the rest, then put three squares together to spell MAN. He pointed to it and then to Civek, Bendy, Alis and himself, excluding the creature.

The creature nodded and pointed again to GIZL, then to himself. " He doesn't understand," Don said.

" It's quite possible his people don't have individual names," Bendy said. " Let's call him Gizl for now and go on."

" Okay." Don thought for a moment, then formed a question.

Q. ARE YOU FROM EARTH
A. NO.

At the risk of irritating the others, Don repeated the questions and answers aloud for the benefit of his eavesdropper in the Pentagon.

Q. ARE YOU FROM SOLAR SYSTEM
A. NOT YOURS
Q. WHEN DID YOU REACH EARTH
A. 1948 YOUR CALENDAR
Q. WHY
A. FRIENDSHIP
Q. WHY HAS NO ONE SEEN YOU SOONER
A. FEAR
Q. YOU MEAN YOU FRIGHTENED OUR PEOPLE
A. NO I MEAN FEAR OF YOUR PEOPLE
Q. WHY
A. GIZL RESEMBLE EARTH ANIMALS
Q. WAS SUPERIOR THE FIRST PLACE YOU LANDED
A. NO
Q. WHERE WAS IT
A. AUSTRALIA

" The home of the kangaroo," Doc Bendy said. " No wonder they had a bad time. I can imagine some stockman in the outback taking umbrage at a kangaroo asserting its equality. Let me talk to him a while, Don."

Q. HOW MANY ARE THERE OF YOU
A. NO SPECIFIC COMMENT
Q. ARE YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR RAISING SUPERIOR

A. ENTIRELY
Q. HOW
A. IMPOSSIBLE TO EXPLAIN WITH THESE
Q. WHERE IS SUPERIOR GOING
A. NO SPECIFIC COMMENT
Q. 3000 LIVES ARE IN YOUR HANDS
A. GIZLS HAVE NO MALEVOLENT DESIGNS
Q. THANKS. YOU SAID FRIENDSHIP BROUGHT YOU. WHAT ELSE
A. TRADE. CULTURAL EXCHANGE.
Q. WHAT HAVE YOU TO TRADE
A. WILL DISCUSS THIS LATER WITH DULY CONSTITUTED AUTHORITY
Q. WHO KING HECTOR
A. TERMINATING INTERVIEW WITH GOODWILL ASSURANCES

" Wait," Alis said. " I haven't had a chance to talk to him." She formed letters into words. " I don't think he's being very frank with us but I have a few random questions."

Q. HOW MANY SEXES HAVE GIZLS
A. THREE
Q. MALE FEMALE AND
A. NEUTER
Q. ARE THERE BABIES AMONG YOU
A. BABIES ARE NEUTER AND DEVELOP ACCORDING TO NEED
Q. CONFIDENTIALLY WHAT DO YOU THINK OF FATHER'S SCIENCE
A. UNFATHOMABLE OUR MEAGER KNOWLEDGE
Q. FLATTERER
A. ENDING CONVERSATION WITH PLEASANT REGARD

Gizl slid back his chair and got up. King Hector stood and bowed as Gizl, who had nodded politely to each in turn, walked, manlike, to a corner of the room which then sank out of sight.

" He's quite a guy, that Gizl," Hector said, taking off his crown.

" Are you the duly constituted authority ?" Bendy asked him.

" Who else ? Somebody's got to be in charge till we get Superior back to Earth."

" Sure," Bendy said, " but you don't have to rig yourself up in ermine. I also have a sneaking suspicion that you aren't exactly anxious to get Superior down in a hurry."

" I'll overlook that remark for old time's sake. But I defend the kingship. A show of force was necessary to prevent crime from running rampant."

" Maybe," Bendy said. " Anyhow I appreciate your frankness in introducing us to Gizl and what he modestly describes as his meager knowledge. Since you've already admitted that he's the one who provided the big feed, will you ease Alis's mind now and assure her that what she was eating wasn't Negusburger ?"

" Negusburger ?" The king laughed. " Is that what you thought, Alis ?"

" Not really," she said. " But I couldn't help wondering where all the food came from."

" Over here." The king led them to the corner where Gizl had sunk from sight. The top of the elevator, now level with the floor, blended exactly with the linoleum tile. In a moment it rose again.

" Gizl and his people have their headquarters down there somewhere. All I have to do is write an order and send it down. Up comes food or whatever I need. Would you like to try it ?"

" Love to," Bendy said. " What shall I ask for ?"

" Anything at all."

" Well." Bendy looked impressed. " This will take a moment of thought. How about a gallon—no ; as long as I'm asking I might as well ask for a keg—of rum, 151 proof."

Up it came, complete with spigot and tankard.

" Fabulous !" Bendy said. He rolled it out of the elevator and the elevator went down again as soon as it was empty.

" Let me try !" Alis said. " If Doc can get a keg, I ought to be able to have—oh, say a pint of Chanel Number 5. Would that be too extravagant ?"

" A simple variation in formula, I should think," the king said. He wrote out her request.

What came up for Alis didn't look in the least like an expensive Paris perfume. In fact, it looked like a lard pail with a quantity of liquid sloshing lazily in it. But its aroma belied its completely unappetizing looks.

" Oh, heaven !" Alis said. " Smell it !" She lifted it by its handle stuck a finger in it and rubbed behind each ear.

" It's a bit overpowering by the pint," Bendy said. He'd drained off a tankard of rum and looked quite at peace with the world.

" I'll admit they're not very good in the packaging department but that's just a quibble. Could I have—how many ounces in a pint ?—sixteen one-ounce stoppered bottles ? And a little funnel ?"

" Easiest thing in the world," the king said. " Don ? Anything you'd like at the same time ? Save it a trip."

" I've got an idea, Your Majesty, but I don't know whether you'd approve. Even though I work in a bank, I've never seen a ten thousand dollar bill. Do you think they could whip one up ?"

" I really don't know," Hector said. " It could upset the economy if we let the money get out of hand. But we can always send it right back. Let's see what happens."

The elevator came up with the bottles, the funnel and a green and gold bill.

It was, on the face of it, a ten thousand dollar bill. But the portrait was that of Hector Civek, crowned and ermined. And the legend on it was :

Payable to Bearer on Demand, Ten Thousand Dollars. This Note is Legal Tender for all Debts, Public and Private, and is Redeemable in Lawful Money at the Treasury of the Kingdom of Superior. (Signed) Gizl, Secretary of the Treasury.

X

Don didn't know what he might learn by skulking around the freezing grounds of Hector's palace in the faint moonlight.

His peering into basement windows had revealed nothing and he was about to head back to the campus for a night's sleep when someone called his name.

He looked up. Red-headed Geneva Jervis was leaning out of one of the second-story windows.

" Well, hello," he said. " What are you doing up there ?"

" I've sworn fealty," she said. " Come on up."

" What ?" he said. " How ?"

She disappeared from his sight, then reappeared. " Here." She dropped a rope ladder.

Don climbed it, feeling like Romeo. " Where'd you get this ?"

" They've got them in all the rooms. Fire escape. Old McFerson was a precautious man, evidently." She pulled the rope back in.

Jen Jervis had a spacious bedroom. She wore a dressing gown.

"What do you mean you swore fealty?" Don asked. "To Hector?"

"Sure. What better way to find out what he's up to? Besides, I was getting fed up with that dormitory at Cavalier. Want a drink?"

Don saw that she had a half-full glass on the dresser next to a bottle of bourbon.

"Why not?" he said. "Let's drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may freeze to death."

She poured him a stiff one. "Here's to happy endings."

He sipped his drink and she swallowed half of hers.

"I didn't picture you as the drinking type, Jen."

"Revise the picture. Come sit down." She backed to the big double bed and relaxed into it, lying on one elbow.

Don sat next to her, but upright. "Tell me about this fealty deal. What did you have to do?"

"Oh, renounce my American citizenship and swear to protect Superior against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

"Have you got a title yet? Are you Dame Jervis?"

"Not yet." She smiled. "I think I'm on probation. They know I'm close to Bobby and they'd like to have him on their side for all their avowed independence. They're not so terribly convinced that Superior's going to stay up forever. They're hedging their bets, it looks to me."

"It looks to me that maybe Bobby Thebold might not understand. He's the kind of man who demands absolute fealty, from what I've seen of him."

Jen took another swallow. "He's not here. He's had plenty of time to come, if he was going to, and he hasn't. To hell with him, let me get you another drink."

"No, thanks."

"Relax," she said. "I'm not going to bite you." She lay back and her dressing gown opened in a V as far as the belt.

Don looked away self-consciously.

Jen laughed. "What's the matter, boy? No red blood?" She rolled herself off the end of the bed and went to the dresser.

"Don't you think you've had enough?"

She shook her red hair violently. "Drinking is as drinking does. Trouble is, nobody's doing anything."

"Exactly. Everybody's acting as if Superior's one big pleasure dome. Civek's on the throne and all's well with his

little world. Even you've joined the parade. Why? I don't buy that double agent explanation."

She was looking in the bureau mirror at his reflection. "You don't like me, do you, Donny-boy?"

"I never said that."

"You don't have to say it. But I don't blame you. I don't like myself sometimes. I'm a cold dedicated fish. Or I was. I've decided to change my ways."

"I can see that."

"Can you?" She turned around and leaned against the bureau, holding her glass. "How do you see me now?"

"As an attractive woman with a glass in her hand. I wonder which is doing the talking."

"Rhetorical questions at this time of night, Donny? I think it's me talking, not the whiskey. We'll know better in the sober light of morning, won't we?"

"If that's an invitation," Don began, "I'm afraid—"

Her eyes blazed at him. "I think you're the rudest man I ever met. *And* the most boorish." She tossed off the rest of her drink, then began to cry.

"Now, Jen—" He went to her and patted her shoulder awkwardly.

"Oh, Don." She put her head against his chest and wept. His arms automatically went around her, comfortingly.

Then he realized that Jen's muffled sobs were going direct to the Pentagon through his transceiver. That piece of electronics equipment taped to his skin, he told himself, was the least of the reasons why he could not have accepted Jen's invitation—if it had been an invitation.

He lifted her chin from his chest to spare the man in the Pentagon any further sobs, which must have been reaching him in crescendo. Jen's face was tearstained. She looked into his eyes for a second, then fastened her mouth firmly on his.

There was nothing a gentleman could do, Don thought, except return the kiss. Rude, was he?

Jen broke away first. "What's that?" she said.

The sky was bright as day over in the direction of the golf course.

"It's a star shell," he said. "A flare."

They went to the window and leaned out, looking past a corner of the bubble gum factory.

"What's it for?" Jen asked.

Don pointed. " There. That's what for."
" A blimp !" she said. " It's landing !"
" Is it an Air Force job ? I can't make out the markings."
" I think I can," Jen said. " They're—PP."
" Private Pilots ! Senator Bobby the Bold !"
Jen Jervis clutched his arm. " S.O.B. !" she whispered fiercely.

Don Cort was down the rope fire escape and away from the mansion before it woke up to the invasion. There was a lot of whistle blowing and shouting and a lone shot which didn't seem to be aimed at him.

Don waited to see how the Hectorites would react to the landing of the blimp. A few men gathered at the front gate and looked nervously into the sky and toward the golf course. Others joined them, armed with shotguns, pistols and a rifle or two.

It was clear that Hector had no intention of starting a battle. His men apparently were under orders only to guard the mansion and the bubble gum factory. No one even went to see what the blimp was up to.

Don found as he neared the golf course that the people from the blimp apparently had no immediate plan to attack, either. He found a sand trap to lie down in. From it he could watch without being seen. The star shell had died out but he could see the blimp silhouetted against the sky. Men in battle dress were establishing a perimeter around the clubhouse. Each carried a weapon of some kind. It was all very dim.

Don remembered his communicator. " Cort here," he said softly. " Do you read me ?"

" Affirmative," a voice said. Don didn't recognize it. He described the landing and asked : " Is this an authorized landing or is it Senator Thebold's private party ?"

" Negative," said the voice from the Pentagon, irritatingly GI.

" Negative *what* ?" Don said. " You mean Thebold *is* leading it ?"

" Affirmative," said the voice.

" What's he up to ?" Don asked.

" Negative," the voice said.

Don blew up. " If you mean you don't know, why the hell don't you say so ? Who is this, anyhow ?"

" This happens to be Major Johns, the O.O.D., Sergeant, and if you know what's good for you . . ."

Don stopped listening because a man in battle dress, attracted by his voice, was standing on the green, looking down into the bunker where Don lay, pointing a carbine at him.

" I'll have to hang up now, Major," Don said quietly. " Something negative has just happened to me. I've been captured."

The man with the carbine shouted down to Don : " Okay, come out with the hands over the head."

Don did so. He hoped he was doing it affirmatively enough. He had no wish to be shot by one of the Senator's men, regardless of whether that man was authorized or unauthorized.

Senator Thebold sat at a desk in the manager's office of the Raleigh Country Club. He wore a leather trench coat and a fur hat. He motioned to Don to sit down. Two guards stood at the door.

" Name ?" Thebold snapped.

Don decided to use his own name but pretend to be a local yokel.

" Donald Cort."

" Who were you talking to in the sand trap ?"

" Nobody. I sometimes talk to myself."

" Oh, you do ? Do you ever talk to yourself about a man named Osbert Garet or Hector Civek ?"

" Hector's the king now," Don said. " Things got pretty bad before that but we got enough to eat now."

" Where did the food come from ?"

Don shrugged.

Thebold drummed his fingers on the desk. " You're not exactly a fount of information, are you ? What do you do for a living ?"

" I used to work in the gum factory but I got laid off."

" Do you know Geneva Jervis ?"

" Who's he ?" Don said innocently.

Thebold stood up in irritation. " Take this man to O. and I.," he said to one of the guards. " We've got to make a start someplace. Are there any others ?"

" Four or five," the guard said.

" Send me the brightest looking one. Give this one and the rest a meal and a lecture and turn them loose. It doesn't look

as if Civek is going to give us any trouble right away, and there isn't too much we can do before daylight."

The guard led Don out of the room and pinned a button on his lapel. It said : *Bobby the Bold in Peace and War.*

" What's O. and I. ?" Don asked him.

" Orientation and Integration. Nobody's going to hurt you. We're here to end partition, that's all."

" End partition ?"

" Like in Ireland. Keep Superior in the U.S.A. They'll tell you all about it at O. and I."

Don was fed, lectured and released, as promised.

Early the next morning, after a cup of coffee with Alis Garet at Cavalier's cafeteria, he started back for the golf course. Alis went with him.

The glimpses of the Thebold Plan which Don had had from O. and I. were being put into practice. Reilly Street, which provided a boundary line between Raleigh Country Club and the gum factory property, had been transformed into a midway.

The Thebold forces had strung bunting and set up booths along the south side of the street. Hector's men, apparently relieved to find that the battle was to be psychological rather than physical, rushed to prepare rival attractions.

A growing crowd thronged the centre of Reilly Street. Some wore Thebold buttons. Some wore other buttons, twice as big, with a smiling picture of Hector I on them. Some wore both.

The sun was bright but the air was bitingly cold. As a result one of the most popular booths was on Hector's side of the street where Cheeky McFerson was giving away an apparently inexhaustible supply of handwarmers.

Two of Hector's men set up ladders and strung a banner across two store-fronts. It said in foot-high letters : KINGDOM OF SUPERIOR, LAND OF PLENTY.

A group of Thebold trouble-shooters watched, then rushed away and transformed an advertising sign to read, in letters two feet high : SUPERIOR, U.S.A., HOME OF THE FREE.

Hawkers on opposite sides of the midway vied to give away hot dogs, boiled ears of corn, steaming coffee, hot chocolate, candy bars and popcorn.

" There's a smart one." Alis pointed to a sign in Thebold territory. THE GRIPE ROOM, it said over a vacant store. The Senator's men had set up desks and chairs inside and long lines had already formed.

Apparently a powerful complaint had been among the first be registered. Within minutes the sign painters were at work again. Their new banner, hoisted to dry in the sun, proclaimed: BLIMP MAIL.

Underneath, in smaller letters, it said: *How long since you've heard from your Loved Ones on Earth? The Thebold Blimp will carry your letters and small packages. Direct daily connections with U.S. Mail.*

"You have to admire them," Alis said. "They're really organized."

"One's as bad as the other," Don said. Impartially, he was eating a Hector hot dog and drinking Thebold coffee. "Have you noticed the guns in the upstairs windows?"

"No. You mean on the Senator's side?"

"Both sides. Don't stare."

"I see them now. Do you see any Gizl-sticks? The thing Hector used on Negus?"

"No. Just conventional old rifles and shotguns. Let's hope nobody starts anything."

"Look," Alis said, grabbing Don by the arm, "isn't that Ed Clark going into the Gripe Room?"

"It sure is. Gathering material for another powerful editorial?"

Within minutes Clark's visit had provoked another bustle of activity. Two of Thebold's men dashed out of the renovated store and off toward the country club. They came back with the Senator himself, making his first public appearance.

Thebold strode down the centre of the midway, wearing his soft aviator's helmet with the goggles pushed up on his forehead and his silk scarf fluttering behind him. A group of small boys followed him, imitating his self-confident walk and scrambling occasionally for the Thebold buttons he threw to them. The Senator went directly into the Gripe Room.

"Looks as if Ed has wangled an interview with the great man himself," Alis said.

"You didn't say anything to Clark about our talk with the Gizl, did you?"

"I did mention it to him," Alis said. "Was that bad?"

"Half an hour ago I would have said no. Now I'm not so sure."

XI

A speaker's platform had been erected on the Senator's side of Reilly Street, and now stirring band music was blaring out of a loudspeaker. Thebold came out of the Gripe Room and mounted the platform.

Thebold raised his arms as if he were stilling a tumult. The music died away and Thebold spoke.

" My good friends and fellow Americans," the Senator began.

Then a Hectorite sound apparatus started to blare directly across the street. The sound of hammering added to the disruption as workmen began to set up a rival speaker's platform. Then the music on the north side of Reilly Street became a triumphal march and Hector I made his entrance.

Thebold spoke on doggedly. Don heard an occasional phrase through the din. ". . . reunion with the U.S.A. . . . end this un-American, this literal partition . . ."

But many in the crowd had turned to watch Hector, who was magnificent and warm-looking in his ermine robe.

" Loyal subjects of Superior, I exhort you not to listen to this outsider who has come to meddle in our affairs," Hector said. " What can he offer that your king has not provided ? You have security, inexhaustible food supplies and, above all, independence . . ."

Thebold increased his volume and boomed :

" Ah, but *do* you have independence, my friends ? Ask your puppet king who provides this food—and for what price ? And how secure *do* you feel as you whip through the atmosphere like an unguided missile? Who knows at what second the unearthly controls may dump us all into the freezing waters . . ."

Hector pushed his crown back on his head as if it were a derby hat. " Who asked the Senator here ? Let me remind you that he does not even represent our former—and I emphasize *former*—State of Ohio. We all know him as a political adventurer, but never before has he attempted to meddle in the affairs of another country . . ."

". . . and you know what lies beyond Western Europe," Thebold said. " Eastern Europe and Russia. Atheistic, communistic Red Russia. Is that where you'd like to come down ? For that's where you're heading under Hector Civek's so-called leadership. King Hector, he calls himself. Let me remind you, friends, that if there is anything the Red Soviet

Russians hate more than a democracy, it's a monarchy—Remember what they did to the Czars."

Then Senator Bobby Thebold played his ace :

" But there's an even worse possibility. And that's for the creatures behind Hector Civek to decide to go back home—and take off into outer space. Has Hector told you about the creatures ? Has he told you they're aliens from another planet ? He has not. Some of you have seen them—these kangaroo-like creatures who, for their own nefarious purposes, made Hector what he is today.

" But, my friends, these are not the cute and harmless kangaroos that abound in the land of our ally, Australia. No : these are intelligent alien beings who have brazenly stolen a piece of American territory and are now in the process of making off with it."

A murmur came from the crowd and they looked over their shoulders at Hector, whose oratory had run down and who seemed unsure how to answer.

" Yes, my friends," Thebold went on, "you may well wonder what your fate will be in the hands of that power-mad ex-mayor of yours. A few thousand feet more of altitude and Superior will run out of air. Then you'll really be free of the good old U.S.A. because you'll be dead—"

At that point somebody took a shot at Senator Bobby Thebold. It missed him, breaking a window behind him.

Immediately a Thebold man behind that window smashed the rest of the glass and fired back across Reilly Street, over the heads of the crowd.

People screamed and ran. Don grabbed Alis and pulled her away from the immediate zone of fire.

" Hostilities seem to have commenced," Alis said. She gave a nervous laugh. " I guess it's my fault for blabbing everything to Ed Clark."

" It was bound to happen, sooner or later," Don said. " I hope nobody gets hurt."

Evidently neither Thebold nor Hector personally had any such intention. Both had clambered down from the platforms and disappeared. Most of the crowd had fled, too, but a few, had merely taken cover and were waiting to see what would happen next.

There was a concentration of shooting from the Senator's side and a dozen or more of Thebold's men made a quick rush

across the street and into the buildings on the north side. In a few minutes they returned, under another protective burst, with prisoners.

" Slick," Don said. " Hector's being out-manoeuvred."

" I wonder why the Gizls aren't helping him."

The Thebold loudspeaker came to life. " Attention !" it boomed in the Senator's voice. " Anyone who puts down his arms will be given safe conduct to the free side of Reilly Street. Don't throw away your life for a dictator. Come over to the side of Americanism and common sense." There was a pause, and the voice added : " No reprisals."

The firing stopped.

The Thebold loudspeaker began to play *On the Sunny Side of the Street.*

But nobody crossed over. Nor was there any further firing from Hector's side.

Lay Down Your Arms, the loudspeaker blared in another topical tune from Tin Pan Alley.

When it became clear that Hector's forces had withdrawn completely from the Reilly Street salient, Thebold's men crossed in strength.

They worked their way block by block to the grounds of the bubble gum factory and proceeded to lay siege to it.

With Hector Civek immobilized, Senator Bobby Thebold went looking for Geneva Jervis, accompanied by two armed guards.

Alis, unable to reach the besieged palace to see if her father was safe had asked Don to go back with her to Cavalier after the Battle of Reilly Street. Her mother told Alis that the Professor was not only safe on the campus but had resigned his post as Royal Astronaut at Hector's court.

" Father broke with Hector ?" Alis asked. " Good for him ! But why ?"

" He and Dr. Rubach just up and walked out," Mrs. Garet said. " That's all I know. But if my intuition means anything, the Professor is up to one of his tricks again. He's been locked up in his lab all day."

A rally was in progress in front of the administration building when Senator Thebold arrived. Don and Alis joined the group of listeners for camouflage and pretended to pay attention to what the speaker, an intense young man on the back of a truck, was saying.

" The time has come," he said, " for men and women of, uh, perspicacity to shun the extremes and tread the middle path. To avoid excesses as represented on the one hand by the, uh, paternalistic dictatorship of the Hectorites and on the other by the, uh, pseudo-democracy of Senator Thebold which resorts to force when thwarted. I proclaim, therefore, the course of reason, the way of science and truth as exemplified by the, uh, the Garet-Rubach, uh—"

Senator Thebold had been listening at the edge of the little crowd. He spoke up.

" The Garet-Rubach Axis ?" he suggested.

The speaker gave him a cold stare. " And who are you ?"

" Senator Robert Thebold, representing pseudo-democracy, as you call it. Speak on, my young friend. Like Voltaire, I will defend to the death—but you know what Voltaire said."

" Yes, sir," the speaker said, abashed. " No offence intended, Senator."

" Of course you intended offence," Thebold said. " Stick to your guns, man. Free academic discussion must never be curtailed. But at the moment I'm more interested in meeting your Professor Garet. Where is he ?"

" In—in the bell tower, sir. Right over there." He pointed. " But you can't go in."

" We'll see about that," the Senator said. " Carry on with your free and open discussion."

He headed for the bell tower, followed by his guards.

Alis tugged at Don's sleeve. " Come on. Let's see the fun."

"Alis," the speaker called to her, "was that really Thebold?"

" Sure was. But what's this Garet-Rubach Axis ?"

" Not Axis. That was Thebold's propaganda word. It's a movement of— Oh, never mind. You don't appreciate your own father."

" You can say that again. Come on, Don."

As Alis closed the door to the bell tower behind them, they heard Professor Garet's voice from above.

" Attention interlopers," it said. " You have come unasked and now you find yourself paralyzed, unable to move a muscle except to breathe."

" Stay down here," Alis whispered. " There's a sort of vestibule one flight up. That's where Thebold must have got it. Father spends all his spare time fortifying his holy of holies. Nobody gets past the vestibule." She frowned. " But I didn't know he had a paralysis thing, too."

" He probably swiped it from Hector before he broke with him," Don said.

Professor Garet's voice came again. " I shall now pass among you and relieve you of your weapons. Why, if it isn't Senator Thebold and his strong-arm crew ! Very soon now you'll have the pleasure of seeing a scientific weapon in action."

Don, standing with Alis on the steps of the administration building, didn't know whether to be impressed or amused by the giant machine Professor Garet had assembled. It was mounted on the flat bed of an old Reo truck and various parts of it went skyward in a dozen directions.

The machine's crowning glory was a big bowl-shaped sort of thing that didn't quite succeed in looking like a radar scanner.

" What's it supposed to do ?" Don asked.

" From what I gather," Alis said, " it's Hector's paralysis thing, adapted for distance. Only of course nobody admits father stole it. It's supposed to have anti-gravity powers, too, like whatever it was that took Superior up in the first place. Naturally I don't believe a word of it."

" But where's he going with it ?"

" He's ready to take on all comers, I gather. Please don't try to make sense out of it. It's only father."

The young man who had addressed the student rally took over the driver's seat and Professor Garet hoisted himself into a bucket seat at the rear of the truck near a panel which presumably operated the machine. Maynard Rubach sat next to the driver. The small army of dedicated students who had been assembling fell in behind the truck. They were unarmed, except with faith.

Senator Thebold and his two former bodyguards, de-paralyzed, sat trussed up in the back of a weapons carrier, looking disgusted with everything.

" Are we ready ?" Professor Garet called.

A cheer went up.

" Then on to the enemy—in the name of science !"

Don shook his head. " But even if this crazy machine could knock out Hector's and Thebold's men and the Garet-Rubach Axis reigns supreme, then what ? Does he claim he can get Superior back to Earth ?"

Alis said only, " Please, Don . . ."

The Garet machine, the weapons carrier and the foot soldiers moved off toward the turn-off for the country club.

They met an advance party of the Thebold forces. There were about twenty of them, armed with carbines and submachine guns. As soon as they spotted the weird armada from Cavalier they dropped to the ground, weapons aimed.

Senator Thebold rose in his seat. " Hold your fire !" he shouted to his men. " We don't shoot women, children or crackpots." He said to Professor Garet : " All right, mastermind, untie me."

XII

A submarine surfaced on the Atlantic, far below Superior. It was obvious to the commander of the submarine, which bore the markings of the Soviet Union, that the runaway town of Superior, being populated entirely by capitalist madmen, was a menace to humanity. The submarine commander made a last-minute check with the radio room then gave the order to launch the guided missiles which would rid the world of this menace.

Superior immediately took evasive action.

First, in its terrific burst of acceleration, everybody was knocked flat.

Next, Superior sped upward for a few hundred feet and everybody was crushed to the ground.

At the same time the first missile, which was now where Superior would have been had it maintained its original course, exploded.

The submarine fired again and a second missile streaked up.

Superior dodged again. But this time its direction was down. Everyone who was outdoors found himself momentarily suspended in space.

Don and Alis, among the hundreds who had had the ground snatched out from under them, clung to each other and began to fall. All round them were the various adversaries who had been about to clash.

The downward swoop of Superior had taken it out of the immediate path of the second missile but whoever had changed the townoid's course had apparently failed to take the inhabitants' inertia into immediate consideration. The missile was headed into their midst.

Then two things happened. The missile exploded well away from the falling people. And scores of kangaroo-like Gizls

appeared from everywhere and began to snatch people to safety.

Great jumps carried the Gizls into the air, and they collected three or four human beings at each leap. The leaps appeared to defy gravity, carrying the creatures hundreds of feet up.

Geneva Jervis, who had been hurled up from the roof of Hector's palace, where she had gone in hopes of catching a glimpse of Senator Thebold, was re-united with the Senator when they were rescued by the same Gizl, whose leap had carried him in a great arc virtually from one edge of Superior to the other.

Don Cort pressed close to Alis and grasped securely against the hairy chest of their particular rescuer, was experiencing a combination of sensations. One, of course, was relief at being snatched from certain death.

Another was the delicious closeness of Alis, who he realized he hadn't been paying enough attention to in a personal way.

Another was surprise at the number of Gizls who had appeared in the moment of crisis, just when they were needed.

Finally he saw beyond doubt that it was the Gizls who were running the entire show—that Hector I, Bobby the Bold and the pseudo-scientific Garet-Rubach Axis were merely strutters on the stage.

It was the Gizls who were manoeuvering Superior as if it were a giant vehicle. It was the Gizls who were exploding the enemy missiles. And it was the alien Gizls who, unlike the would-be belligerents among the Earthpeople, were scrupulously saving human lives.

" Thanks," Don said to his rescuing Gizl as it set him and Alis down gently on the hard ground of the golf course.

" Don't mention it," the Gizl said, the leaped off to save others.

" He talked !" Alis said.

" He certainly did."

" Then that must have been a masquerade, that other time—all that mumbo-jumbo with the Anagrams."

" It must have been, unless they learn awfully fast."

He and Alis clutched each other again as Superior tilted. It remained steady otherwise and they were able to see the ocean, whose surface was marked with splashes as a variety of loose objects fell into it. Don had a glimpse of Professor Garet's

machine plummeting down in the midst of most of Superior's vehicular population.

" There's a plane !" Alis cried. " It's after something on the surface."

" It's the Hustler," Don said. " It's after the submarine."

" Sergeant Cort," a voice said, and because Alis was lying with her head on Don's chest she heard it first.

" Is that somebody talking to you, Don ? Are you a sergeant ?"

" I'm afraid so," he said. " I'll explain later. Sergeant Cort here," he said to the Pentagon.

" Things are getting out of hand, Sergeant," the voice of Captain Simmons said.

" Captain, that's the understatement of the week."

" Whatever it is, we can't allow the people of Superior to be endangered any longer."

" No, sir. Is there another submarine ?"

" Not as far as we know. I'm talking about the state of anarchy in Superior itself, with each of three factions vying for power. Four, counting the kangaroos."

" They're not kangaroos, sir, they're Gizls."

"Whatever they are. You and I know they're creatures from some other world and I've managed to persuade the Chief of Staff that this is the case. He's in seeing the Defence Secretary right now. But the State Department isn't buying it."

" You mean they don't believe in the Gizls ?"

" They don't believe they're interplanetary. Their whole orientation at State is toward international trouble. Anything interplanetary sends them into a complete flap." Captain Simmons' voice interrupted itself. " Never mind that now. Here comes the Defence Secretary."

" Foghorn Frank ? Don asked.

" Shh."

Frank Fogarty had earned his nickname in his younger years when he commanded a tugboat in New York harbour.

" Is this the gadget ?" Don heard Fogarty say.

" Yes, sir."

" Okay. Sergeant Cort ?" Fogarty boomed. " Can you hear me ?" It was no wonder they called him Foghorn.

" Yes, sir," Don said, wincing.

" Good. Then stand up. No, better not if Superior is still gyrating. Just raise your right hand and I'll give you a field promotion to major.

" Now then, Major Cort, we're going to present the State Department with what they would call a *fait accompli.* You are now Military Governor of Superior, son, with all the power of the U.S. Defence Establishment behind you. A C-97 troop carrier plane is loading. I'll give you the ETA as soon as I know it. A hundred paratroopers. Arrange to meet them at the golf course, near the blimp. And if Senator Thebold tries to interfere—well, handle him tactfully. As for Hector Civek and Osbert Garet, be firm. I don't think they'll give you any trouble."

" But, sir," Don said. " Aren't you underestimating the Gizls ? If they see paratroops landing they're liable to get unfriendly fast. May I make a suggestion ?"

" Shoot, son."

" Well, sir, I think I'd better go try to have a talk with them and see if we can't work something out without a show of force. If you could hold off the troops till I ask for them . . ."

Foghorn Frank said : " Want to make a deal, eh ? If you can do it, fine, but since State isn't willing to admit that there's such a thing as an intelligent kangaroo, alien or otherwise, any little deals you can make with them will have to be unofficial for the time being. All right—I'll hold off on the paratroopers. The important thing is to safeguard the civilian population and uphold the integrity of the United States. You have practically unlimited authority."

" Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I'll do my best."

" Good luck. I'll be listening."

" As I see it," Alis said after Don had explained his connection with the Pentagon, "Senator Thebold licked Hector Civek. Father, who defected from Hector, captured the Senator and vice versa. But now the Gizls have taken over from everybody and you have to fight them—all by your lonesome."

" Not fight them," Don said. " Negotiate with them."

" But the Gizls are on Hector's side. It seems to come full circle. Where do you start ?"

Superior had returned to even keel and Don helped her up. " Let's start by taking a walk over to the bubble gum factory. We'll try to see the Gizl-in-Chief."

They saw no one in the mansion and started for the basement room in which they'd had their talk with the Gizl, passing through rooms where the furniture had been knocked about as if by an angry giant. They were stopped en route by Vincent

Grande, ex-police chief now Minister of Defence. " All right, kids," he said, " stick 'em up. Your Majesty," he called, "look what I got."

Hector Civek, crownless but still wearing his ermine, came up the stairs. " Put your gun away, Vince. Hello, Alis ; hello, Don. Glad you survived. I thought we were all headed for kingdom come."

Vincent protested : " This is that traitor Garet's daughter. We can hold her hostage to keep her father in line."

" Nuts," the king said. " I'm getting tired of all this foolishness. I'm sure Osbert Garet is just as shaken up as we are. And that crazy Senator, too. All I want now is for Superior to go back where it came from, as soon as possible. And that's up to Gizl, I'm afraid."

" Have you seen him since the excitement ?" Don asked.

" No. He went down that elevator of his when the submarine surfaced. I guess his control room, or whatever it is that makes Superior go, is down there. Let's take a look. Vince, will you put that gun away ? Go help them clean up the mess in the kitchen."

Vincent Grande grumbled and went away.

In the basement room, Hector went to the corner and said, " Hey ! Anybody down there ?"

A deep voice said, "Ascending," and the blue-grey kangaroo-like creature appeared. He stepped off the elevator section. " Greetings, friends."

" Well," Hector said, " I didn't know you could talk."

" Forgive my lack of frankness," Gizl said. " Alis," he said, bowing slightly. " Your Majesty."

" Frankly," Hector said, " I'm thinking of abdicating. I don't think I like being a figurehead. Not when everybody knows about it, anyhow."

" Major Cort," Gizl said.

Don looked startled. " What ? How did you know ?"

" We have excellent communications. We thank your military for it's assistance with the submarine."

" A pleasure. And we thank you and your people for saving us when we went flying."

" Mutuality of effort," Gizl said. " I'll admit a dilemma ensued when the submarine attacked. But our obligation to safeguard human lives outweighed the other alternative—escape to the safety of space. Now suppose we have our

conference. You, Major, represent Earth. I, Rezar, represent the survivors of Gorel-zed. Agreed ?"

" Rezar ?" Don said. " I thought your name was Gizl. And what's Gorel-zed ?"

" Little Marie Bendy called me Gizl," Rezar said. " She couldn't pronounce Gorel-zed. I'm afraid I haven't been entirely candid with you about a number of things. But I think I know you better now. I heard your conversation with Foghorn Frank."

Don smiled. " Do you mean you've been listening in ever since I strapped on the transceiver ?"

" Oh, yes." Rezar said. " So recapitulation is unnecessary. But we Gizls, so-called, are still a mystery to you, of course. I suppose you'd like some background."

" I certainly would," Don said. " Are you listening, Mr. Secretary ?"

" I sure am," Fogarty said. " What's more, son, you're being piped directly into the White House—and a few other places."

" Good," Rezar said. " Now marvel at our saga."

XIII

On the desert planet of Gorel-zed, the last world to survive the slow nova of its sun, the Gizls, once the pests but now through brain surgery the possessors in their hardy bodies of the accumulated knowledge of the frail human beings, were preparing to flee. Their self-supporting ships were ready, capable of crossing space to the ends of the universe.

But their universe was barren. No planet could receive them. All were doomed as was theirs, Gorel-zed. They set out for a new galaxy, knowing they would not reach it but that their descendants might. They became nomads of space, self-sufficient.

For generations they wandered, their population diminishing.

Several times in their odyssey they had come to a planet which could have housed them. But each time an injunction which had been built into them at the time of the brain surgery prevented them from staying. The doomed human beings on Gorel-zed had built into the very fibre of the Gizls—who were, after all, only animals—the injunction that no human being could be harmed for their comfort.

This meant the world of Ladnora, whose gentle saffron inhabitants were incapable of offering resistance, could not be conquered. The Ladnorans, in their generosity, had offered the refugees from Gorel-zed a hemisphere of their own. But the Gizls accepted a small continent only and made it space-borne and took it with them.

The Crevisians ruled a belt of fertile land around the equator of their world—the rest was icy waste. The Gizls took a slice of each polar region and, joining them, made them spaceborne.

In time they reached the system of Sol.

Mars attracted them first because of its sands. Mars was like Gorel-zed in many ways. But that very resemblance meant it was not for them. Mars was a dead world, as their own Gorel-zed had become.

But next nearest Sol to Mars was a green planet. The Gizls moored the acquisitions in the asteroid belt and visited Earth.

Here, at their planetfall, Australia, was the perfect land. Even its inhabitants—the great kangaroos, the smaller wallabies—breathed Home to the Gizls. But there were also the human beings who had made the land their own. And though memory of their origin had weakened in the Gizls, the injunction had not.

Out of the cramped ships they came, to bound in freedom and fresh breathable air across the wasteland. But hardy naked black human beings lived in the desert, and they attacked the Gizls with their primitive weapons. And when the Gizls fled, not wishing to harm them, they came to white men, who attacked them with explosive weapons.

And so they took to their ships and were spaceborne again. But the attraction of Earth was strong and they sought another continent, called North America.

" What attracted you to Superior, of all places ?" Alis asked.

Rezar seemed to smile. " Two things. Cavalier and bubble gum."

" What ?" Alis said. " You're kidding !"

" It's true. Bubble gum because after generations of subsistence on capsule food our teeth had weakened—and bubble gum strengthened them. And Cavalier Institute because here were men who spoke in terms which paralleled the secret of our spacedrive."

Alis laughed. " This would make father expire of joy," she said. " But now you know he's just a phony."

" Alas," Rezar said. " But he was so close. Magnology. Cosmolineation. It's Jargon merely, as we learned in time. Osbert Garet is mad. Harmless, but mad."

Don asked Rezar : " But if this built-in morality of yours is so strong, why didn't it prevent you from taking off with Superior ?"

Rezar replied : " There are factions among us now. One faction—" he tapped his chest "—is completely bound by the injunction. But in the other, self-preservation places a limit on the injunction."

The other faction, which grew in strength with every failure to find a world of their own, felt that a planet such as Earth, with a history of men warring against men, required the Gizls to be no more moral than the human inhabitants themselves.

" The Good Gizls versus the Bad Gizls ?" Alis asked.

Rezar seemed to smile. The Bad Gizls, led by one called Kaliz, had got the upper hand for a time and elevated Superior, intending to join it to the bits and pieces of other planets they had previously collected and stored in the asteroid belt. But Rezar's influence had persuaded them not to head directly into space—at least not until they had solved the problem of how to put Superior's inhabitants " ashore " first.

Don, unaccustomed to his new role of interplanetary arbitrator, said tentatively :

" I can't authorize you to take Superior, even if you do put us all ashore, but there must be a comparable piece of Earth we could let you have."

" But Superior is not all," Rezar said. " To use one of your nautical expressions, Superior merely represents a shakedown cruise. Our ability to detach such a populated centre has shown the feasibility of raising other typical communities—such as New York, Magnitogorsk and Heidelberg—each a different example of Earth culture."

" You mean you've burrowed under each one of those ' communities ' ? " Don asked.

Rezar shrugged. " Kaliz's faction," he said, as if to dissociate himself from the project of removing some of Earth's choicest property. " They aim at a history-museum of habitable worlds."

" Interplanetary souvenirs," Alis said. " With quick-frozen inhabitants ? Don, what are you going to do ?"

Don didn't even know what to say. His eyes met Hector's.

" Don't look at me," Hector said. " I definitely abdicate."

" Look," Don said to Rezar, " how far advanced are these plans ? I mean, is there a deadline for this mass levitation ?"

" Twenty-four hours, your time," Rezar said.

" Can't you stop them ? Aren't you the boss ?"

The alien turned Don's question back on him. " Are *you* the boss ?"

Don had started to shake his head when Foghorn Frank's voice boomed out.

" Yes, by thunder, he *is* the boss ! Don, raise your right hand. I'm going to make you a brigadier general. No, blast it, a full general. Repeat after me . . ."

General Don Cort squared his shoulders. He was almost getting used to these spot promotions.

" Now negotiate," Fogarty said. " You hear me, Mr. Gizl-Rezar ? The United States of America stands behind General Cort. Who stands behind you ?"

" A democratic government," Rezar said. " Like yours."

" You represent them ?" Fogarty asked.

" With my council, yes."

" Then we can make a deal. Talk to him, Don. I'll shut up now."

Don said to Rezar : " Was it your decision to burrow under New York and Magnitogorsk and Heidelberg ?"

" I agreed to it, finally."

" But you agreed to it in the belief that the Earth-people were a warring people and that your old prohibitions did not apply. But Earth is at peace."

" Is it ?" Rezar asked sadly. " Your plane warred on the submarine."

" In self-defence," Don said. " Don't forget that we defended you, too. And we'd do it again—but not unless provoked."

Rezar looked thoughtful. Finally he said : " I believe you. But I must talk to my people first, as you have talked to yours. Let us meet later—" he seemed to be making a mental calculation "—in three hours. Where ? Here ?"

" How about Cavalier ?" Alis suggested. " It would be the first important thing that ever happened there."

For the first time since Superior took off, all of the town's elected or self-designated representatives met amicably. They gathered in the common room at Cavalier Institute as they waited for Rezar and his council to arrive for the talks which could decide not only the fate of Superior but of New York and two foreign cities as well.

Apparently the Pentagon expected Don to pretend he had authority to speak for Russia and Germany as well as the United States. But could he speak even for the United States, constitutionally? He was sure that Bobby Thebold, comprising one ninety-eighth of that great deliberative body, the Senate, would let him know if he went too far, crisis or no crisis.

The Senator, re-united with Geneva Jervis, sat holding her hand on a sofa in front of the fireplace. Thebold looked untypically placid. Jen Jervis, completely sober, had greeted Don with a cool nod.

Thebold had been chagrined at learning that Don Cort was not the yokel he had taken him for. But he recovered quickly, saying that if there was any one thing he had learned in his Senate career it was the art of compromise.

"Isn't that so, sweetest of all the pies?" he said to Jen Jervis.

Jen looked uncomfortable. "Please, Bobby," she said. "Not in public."

Professor Garet, whose wife and daughter were serving tea, stood with Ed Clark near the big bay window. Maynard Rubach sat in a leather armchair next to Hector Civek, who had discarded his ermine and wore an old heavy tweed suit. Doc Bendy sat off in a corner by himself.

Don Cort, despite his four phantom stars, was telling himself he must not let these middle-aged men make him feel like a boy. Each of them had had a chance to do something positive and each had failed.

"Gentlemen," Don said, "my latest information from Washington confirms that the Gizls have actually tunnelled under the cities they say their militant faction want to take up to the asteroid belt, just as they dug in under Superior before it took off. So they're not bluffing."

"How'd we find out about Magnitogorsk?" Ed Clark asked. "Iron curtain getting rusty?"

Don told him that the Russians, impressed by the urgency of an unprecedented telephone call from the White House to the Kremlin, had finally admitted that their great industrial city was sitting on top of a honeycomb. The telephone conversa-

tion had also touched delicately on the subject of the submarine that had been sunk in mid-Atlantic and there had been tacit agreement that the sub commander had exceeded his authority in firing the missiles and that the sinking would not be referred to again.

Maynard Rubach turned away from the window. " Here they come. Three of them."

The Gizls, looking remarkably alike, sat close together. Don tentatively addressed the one in the middle.

" Gentlemen," he said, " first it is my privilege to award to you in the name of the President the Medal of Merit in appreciation of your quick action in saving uncounted lives during the submarine incident. The actual medal will be presented to you when we re-establish physical contact with Earth."

Rezar, who, it turned out, was the one in the middle, accepted with a grave bow. " Our regret is that we were unable to prevent the loss of many valuable objects as well," he said.

" Mr. Rezar," Don said, " I haven't been trained in diplomacy so I'll speak plainly. We don't intend to give up New York. Contrary to general belief, there are about eight million people who do want to live there. And I'm sure the inhabitants of Heidelberg and Magnitogorsk feel the same way about their cities."

" Then you yield Superior," Rezar said.

" I didn't say that."

" Yield Superior and we will guarantee safe passage to Earth for all its inhabitants. We only want its physical facilities."

" We'll yield the bubble gum factory to help your dental problem—for suitable reparations."

" Payment will be made for anything we take. Give us Superior intact, including the factory and Cavalier Institute, and we will transport to any place you name an area of equal size from the planet Mars."

" Mars ?" Don said. " That'd be a very valuable piece of real estate for the researchers."

"Take it," Don heard Frank Fogarty say from the Pentagon.

Professor Garet spoke up. " If Cavalier goes, I go with it. I won't leave it."

" And I won't leave you, Osbert," his wife said. " Will there be air up there among the asteroids ?"

" We are air-breathers like you," Rezar said. " When we have assembled our planet there will be plenty. You will be welcome, Professor and Mrs. Garet."

" Hector ?" Don said. " You're still mayor of Superior. What do you think ?"

" They can have it," Hector said. " I'll take a nice steady civil service job with the federal government, if you can arrange to get one for me."

" Hector," Ed Clark said, " I think that sums up why you've never been a howling success in politics. All you care about is yourself."

Hector shrugged. " Well, you needn't be so holy-sounding, Eddie-boy," he said. " Why isn't the *Sentry* out this week ? Because you've been so busy filing to the Trimble-Grayson papers on Thebold's private radio and you haven't had time for anything else. How much are they paying you ?"

Ed Clark, deflated, muttered, " News is news."

" Is that what you were doing in Senator Thebold's Gripe Room on the midway ?" Don asked Clark. " Making this deal ?"

" Now, General," Thebold said. " Would you deprive the people of their right to know ? Throughout my Senate career I have carried the torch against government censorship, which is the path to a totalitarian state."

" I'm sure part of the deal was that Clark's copy didn't make you anything less than a hero," Don said.

" Don't be too righteous, young man," Thebold said. "Are you not at this moment bargaining away a piece of the sovereign United States ? I don't happen to represent Ohio but if I did I would rise in the upper chamber to demand your court-martial."

" At ease, Senator !" Don ordered. " You're not in the upper chamber now. You're on an artificial satellite which at any moment is apt to take off into outer space."

Doc Bendy spoke for the first time : " Oops-a-daisy ! You tell 'im, Donny-boy. Soo-perior—the town everybody looks up to."

" Y' don't have to say it, Donny. I been drinkin'. Ever since Superior looped the looperior and flung me feet over forehead into the bee-yond. But you carry on, boy. Y' doin' a great job."

" Thanks," Don said in irony. " I guess that completes the roster of those qualified to speak for Superior. Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Rubach. Did you have something to say ?"

But all the portly president of Cavalier had to say was that if Cavalier was taken as part of a package deal, its trustees would have to receive adequate compensation. Professor Garet tugged at his sleeve and said, " Sit down, Maynard. They've already said they'll pay."

Fogarty's voice rumbled at Don : " Let's try to speed things up, General. Close the deal on Superior, at least, before the press gets there."

" The press ?"

" The rest of the papers couldn't let the Trimble-Grayson chain keep their exclusive. The boys've hired a verti-plane. You've seen it. Lands anywhere."

" Okay, I'll try to hurry it up." To the Gizls Don said : " All right. You take Superior, minus its people, and bring us a piece of Mars."

" Agreed," Rezar said. It was as easy as that. Nobody objected. Too many of Superior's self-proclaimed saviours had been caught with their motives showing.

" You've got to give up New York, though," Don said. He felt as if he were playing a game of interplanetary Monopoly. " We'll give you a chunk of the great central desert instead, if Australia's willing."

" Agreed," said Rezar.

Don sighed quietly to himself. It should be smooth sailing now that the hurdle of New York was past.

But Kaliz, the one Alis had called the Bad Gizl, shook his head violently and spoke for the first time. " No," he said firmly. "We must have New York. It is by far the greatest of our conquests and I will not yield it."

Rezar said sharply, " We have foresworn conquest."

" I tire of your moralizing," Kaliz said. " We are dealing with beings whose greatest respect is for power. If we temporize now we will lose their respect. They will think our new world weak and itself open to conquest. I say take New York *and* its people and hold them hostage."

" No !" Don said. " You can't have New York."

Kaliz seemed to smile. " We already have it. It's merely a question of transporting it." He put a long-fingered hand to his furry chest where, almost hidden in the blue-grey fur, was a flat perforated disk. He said into it : " Show them that New York is ours !"

" Wait !" Rezar said.

"Merely a demonstration," Kaliz told him, "for the moment, at least."

Frank Fogarty's voice, alarmed, said urgently : " Tell him we believe him. New York's reporting an earthquake or something very like it. For God's sake tell him to put it back while we re-orient our thinking."

Kaliz nodded in satisfaction. " The city is as it was. Our people under New York raised it a mere fraction of an inch. It could as easily have been a mile."

Rezar was agitated. " We came in peace," he said to his fellow Gizl. " Let us not leave in war. There's power on both sides, capable of untold destruction. Neither must use it. Let us vote. I say we must not take New York."

" And I say we must," Kaliz told him, " in self-interest."

They turned to the third of their people, who had been looking from one to the other.

Ezial said : " I abstain."

Deadlock.

Frank Fogarty's voice said :

" SAC has been airborne in total strength for half an hour, General. It was a purely precautionary alert at the time."

Don started to interrupt.

" I know they hear me," the Secretary of Defence said. " I intend that they should. We don't want to fight but we will if we must. Son—" the rough voice faltered for a moment "—if necessary we'll destroy Superior to save New York. As a soldier I hope you understand. It's the lives of three thousand people against the lives of eight million."

Only Don and the Gizls had heard. Don looked across the room and into Alis's eyes. She gave him a tentative smile.

" Yes, sir," Don said finally.

Rezar spoke. " This is folly." He touched the disk in the fur of his own chest.

" No !" Kaliz cried.

" It is time," Rezar said. " We are beginning to fail in our mission." He spoke reverently into the disk : " My lord, awake."

Kaliz said quickly : " Raise New York ! Take it up !"

" They will not obey you now," Rezar said. " I have invoked the counsel of the Master."

XIV

The man was frail and incredibly old. He had sparse white hair and a deeply lined face but his eyes were alert and wise.

The doorbell had rung and the old man had walked slowly into the room, followed respectfully by two Gizls.

" My lord," said Rezar. He got to his feet and bowed, as did the other Gizls. " I had hoped to let you sleep until your new world had been prepared for you. But the risk was great that if I delayed your world would never be. Forgive me."

" You did well," the old man said.

Don stood up, too. " How do you do, sir."

" How do you do, General Cort."

" You know my name ?"

" I know many things. Too many for such a frail old body. But someone had to preserve the heritage of our people and I was chosen."

" Won't you sit down, sir ?"

" I'll stand, thanks. I've rested long enough. Shall I answer some of your obvious questions ? I'd better say a few things quickly, before Foghorn Frank hits the panic button."

Don smiled. "Can he hear you or shall I repeat everything?"

" Oh, he hears me. I must say it's a pleasure to be among people again." He nodded pleasantly around the room. " First I must assure you that no one will be harmed by us and that we want nothing for our new world that you are not willing to give."

" That's good to hear," Don said. " I gather you've been in some kind of suspended animation since you left your old world. So I wonder how you're able to speak English."

" Everything was suspended but the subconscious. That kept absorbing everything the Gizls fed into it. And they've been absorbing your culture for ten years, so I'm pretty fluent. And I apologize for all the inconvenience my associates have caused you in their zeal to re-establish the human race of Gorelzed. In the case of Kaliz, of course, it was excessive zeal which will necessitate his rehabilitation."

" Your pardon, Master," Kaliz said humbly.

" Granted. But you'll be rehabilitated anyway."

Don asked : " Did I understand you to say you plan to re-establish your race ? Do you mean there are more of you, aside from the kangaroo-people ?"

" Oh, yes. The youngest of all from Gorel-zed. They were put to sleep like me, to be ready to carry on when their new world is built. I won't wake them till then.

" But let's get on with the horse trading. Of course we won't take New York, or the two other cities." (There was a collection of sighs of relief from Washington). " But we would like some of your uninhabited jungle land to help us out in the oxygen department. We'd also like some of your air, if you can spare it. We've got a planet to supply now, not just ships."

" How would you get air across space ?" Don asked.

" At the moment," the Master said, " I'm afraid we're not prepared to barter our scientific knowledge."

" I didn't mean to pry. It just didn't seem to be something you could do. Do you think we could supply them with some air, Mr. Secretary ?"

" I'll have to ask the science boys about that one," Frank Fogarty said. " Meanwhile it's okay with Australia on the desert. But your Gizl friends have to agree to relocate the aborigines from that tract, and they must take every last rabbit or it's no deal."

" Agreed," the Master said with a smile. " But please ask their stockmen to hold their fire. My friends only *look* like kangaroos."

As Superior headed back across the Atlantic, the Earth-people were given a farewell tour.

The observation room which Don and Jen Jervis had found was connected by a hidden elevator to a vast main chamber. A control console formed the entire wall of one end of it.

Don and Alis stood for a moment watching Professor Garet, who was tugging at his beard as he became aware of the magnitude of the operation which drove Superior through the skies and was soon to take it across space to the asteroid belt.

" Poor father," Alis whispered to Don. " Magnology in action, after all these years—and he didn't have a thing to do with discovering it."

" Is that why he wants to go with the Master ?"

" I imagine so. If he stayed on Earth he'd have nothing. He's too old to start again. In a way, I suppose, his going is justification for his years of work. He'll at least be close to the things he might have developed in the right circumstances."

" He certainly won't be lonely," Don said. " Have you noticed the rush to emigrate ? Cheeky McFerson's decided to

stick with his bubble gum factory. He says the Gizls are a ready-made market. He saw one of them cram five Super-Bubs into his mouth at one time."

Alis giggled. " And half the student body of Cavalier wants to go. You'd think they'd be disillusioned with father. But they're not— I guess they had to be crazy to enrol in the first place."

" Senator Thebold's started campaigning to be named U.S. ambassador to Superior. I heard him talking to the man from *The New York Times*. I suspect they'll give it to him—they'll need his influence to get Senate approval of the treaty with the Gizls."

" I had a little talk with Jen Jervis," Alis said. " She's radiant, have you noticed ? The Senator finally asked her to marry him. That's all that was the matter with her."

Don sought a way to get the conversation away from Jen Jervis. " Where's Doc Bendy ? He certainly turned out to be a disappointment."

" Poor Doc !" Alis said. " He's always the first to form a committee. But then his enthusiasm wears off and he goes back to the bottle. Only now he's got a keg."

Don snapped his fingers. " The keg. I almost forgot about that matter duplicator. If it can give you perfume and Doc rum—Come on ; let's re-open negotiations with the Master."

They found the old man surrounded by a group of reporters, being charmingly evasive. Professor Garet listened as eagerly as a student.

The Master was showing them the vault-like chamber in which he had spent the generations since the spaceships left Gorel-zed. He let them examine the drawer that had been his bed and indicated the others where the younger ones still slept, awaiting the birth of their new planet. Don counted fewer than three dozen drawers.

" Is that all ?" he asked.

" Infants and children take up less room," the Master said. " There are two or three in each drawer, and still others in the ships that never came to Earth. Even so, we number fewer than a thousand."

" But you have the matter duplicator," Don said. " Won't it work on people ?"

" Transsubstaniation has never worked on living cells. Don't think we haven't tried. We shall have to encourage early marriages and hope for a high birth rate."

Don asked, " What will you trade for the transsubstantiator and the paralysis sceptre you gave Hector ?"

The old man smiled. " Not even New York," he said. " Our moral code couldn't permit us to trade either. Earth has enough problems already."

" Offer him the formula for fusion," Frank Fogarty's voice said from the Pentagon.

The old man shuddered. " I heard that," he said. " No, thank you, Mr. Secretary !"

" This is the *clean* bomb," Fogarty said. " It ought to come in very handy in construction work on your new planet."

" We will try to manage in our own way," the Master said.

" What will you call your new planet ?" the AP man asked.

" We haven't decided. I welcome suggestions."

The UPI man was inspired. " How about Neworld ?" he asked. " That describes it perfectly, doesn't it ? New world—Neworld ?"

" Thank you," the Master said. " We'll certainly consider it."

Superior, Nov. 6 (AP)— The floating city of Superior, Earthbound again after nearly six days of aerial meandering, prepared today to discharge its former residents. Its new inhabitants, the kangaroo-like Gizls who came from beyond the stars to swing an unprecedented barter deal involving the United States, Russia and Germany, said they would leave almost immediately to join Superior with the new planet they have been building in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter . . .

Moscow, Nov. 6 (Reuters)—The industrial city of Magnitogorsk was assured of remaining Soviet territory today with the departure of 1,000 kangaroo-like aliens. These visitors from Gorel-zed, the doomed world whose survivors will increase the number of planets in the Solar System to ten with the creation between Mars and Jupiter of . . .

Hartford, Conn., (NANA)—Altitude-induced eccentricity has been suggested as a possible explanation for the weird behaviour of Superior's inhabitants during its sojourn in the sky. Dr. Harris Byroad, chief surgeon of a leading insurance company, says an ascent from sea level to altitudes of 20,000 feet throws a strain on the nervous system, resulting from a lack

of sufficient oxygen to nourish the brain tissues. This causes certain normally stable people to go through periods of flighty judgment and eccentric behaviourism . . .

Bulletin

Aboard the Spaceship Superior, Nov. 6 (UPI)—This former Ohio town, adapted for space travel, took off today after transferring 2,878 of its citizens to a convoy of buses bound for a relocation centre. The other 122 of its previous population of 3,000 chose to remain aboard to pioneer the birth of the tenth planet of the Solar System—Neworld.

Neworld named by the United Press International correspondent accompanying the survivors of the burned-out planet of Gorel-zed, will become the second known inhabited planet in the Solar System . . .

" Just a minute, Alis," Don said.

" No, sir, Sergeant-General Donald Cort, sir. Not a minute longer you tell him now."

" All right. Sir," Don Cort (Gen., temp.) said to Frank Fogarty, Secretary of Defense, " has the mission been accomplished ?"

Don and Alis were in the back seat of an army staff car that was leading the bus convoy.

" Looks that way, son. Our best telescopes can't see them any more. I'd say Neworld was well on its way to a-borning."

Alis Garet, her arms around Don and her head on his shoulder, spoke directly into the transceiver. " Mr. Fogarty, are you aware that I haven't had a single minute alone with this human radio station since I've known him ? This is the most inhibited man in the entire U. S. Army."

" Miss Garet," the Defence Secretary said, " I understand perfectly. When I was courting Mrs. Fogarty I was a pilot on the Meseck Line— Well, never mind that. Mission accomplished, General Cort, my boy."

" Then, sir," Don said, " Sergeant Cort respectfully requests permission to disconnect this blasted invasion of privacy so he can ask Miss Alis Garet if she thinks two of us can live on a noncom's pay."

The driver of the staff car, a sergeant himself, said over his shoulder : " Can't be done, General."

Fogarty said : " Don't be too anxious to revert to the ranks, my boy. I'm sure we can compromise somewhere between

three stripes and four stars. Suppose you take a ten-day delay en route to Washington while we see what we can do. I'll meet you in the White House on November 16. The President tells me he wants to pin a medal on you."

" Yes, sir," Don said. Alis was very close and he was only half listening. " Any further orders, sir ?"

" Just one, Don. Kiss her for me, too. Over to you."

" Yes, sir !" Don said. " Over and out."

—Richard Wilson

EDITORIAL EPILOGUE

Author Richard Wilson has sent us the following interesting information just in time for inclusion at the end of his story.

" *Super City*," he writes, " was written between November 1955 and July 1957 and was first published in USA in January, 1958. *On September, 15th*, 1958 a Jersey Central passenger train plunged off the end of an open drawbridge into Newark Bay, killing about 50 people. The New York *Journal-American* in its edition of September 17th printed this story on its front page : ' Army Intelligence officers have stepped into the Jersey Central train disaster in a search for a super-secret guided missile mechanism, believed lost by a courier in the crash, it was learned today.' (Don Cort was a courier for Army Intelligence and we first met him on a train).

' The loss of the equipment came to light when officers of the Army's Central Intelligence Corps recovered a brief-case from the courier's body—but reportedly failed to find the integral mechanism, said to have been used in the country's earth satellite program.' (Cort carried a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist). ' Indications were that the missing device—reported to be a tiny transistor-type radio capable of beaming signals from a baby moon in outer space—is probably imbedded in the silt at the bottom of Newark Bay.' (Cort's briefcase contained a tiny, powerful radio which did beam signals from Superior, the town that took off and became a baby moon, though admittedly in inner space).

" The *Journal-American* reported elsewhere that Army Intelligence had impounded the brief-case."

" Weird, eh ?"

* * *

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

BY CLIFFORD C. REED

The following story is of the abstract type Mr. Reed is beginning to develop so well. It isn't so much his fantasy atmosphere which stimulates the interest as much as the effects such an atmosphere have upon the human characters involved.

All right, so I'm off the paper. I'm not the editor's blue-eyed boy, and any ideas I'd ever had that I'd be the editor one day, and who knows what after that, can be scrubbed. All right, then. *All* right ! But I'm not crazy, and I won't pretend I am.

If the rest of the world likes to swallow moonbeams, and swear there are fairies at the bottom of their gardens, do I have to do the same ? I *won't* ! Just because a crook comes up with a cock and bull story and certain influential people to cover themselves endorse it, that doesn't make it true. Because it isn't. It's a lie.

It's worse than a lie. It's crazy. It's the sort of thing you tell kids. Little kids. It's straight out of Hans Anderson, and it's an insult to anyone's intelligence, and I'm not going to rest until I've proved that.

And when I do, boy, are there a lot of nice, respectable, too-clever-by-half, dirty, twisting, double-crossing rats, not naming any names yet, but you'll see, are there a lot who're going to be almighty sorry for themselves ?

Especially Leslie.

And Walker Betts.

And Mr. News Editor McPherson.

But—especially, very especially, Leslie.

She's sitting on top of the world now, to-day, and I'm at the bottom of the discard pile. Through her. Because I believe in facts, even if they are smelly while she'll believe in anything, even if it doesn't make sense, provided it means mink coats and the South of France.

You'd think, after all I'd done for her, that she'd have had the decency to play straight with me. But she always was a selfish piece. Someday, though, she's going to realise what a fool she's been. When I catch up with that joy-dream pedlar, and she and Walker Betts and whoever it is behind United Atomics have to come up with the real story. Instead of that corny fantasy they pulled about a magic scent. And when that time comes it's going to be funny. Because if there's one thing that's certain it's that Leslie'll blame me for it. On account of it being me who first told her about the pedlar and his very carefully unlabelled jars.

It was the jars that caught my eye in the first place. That and the pedlar's silence. It hit you—his silence. His absolute, utter, complete non-speaking. First off, I wondered if he might be dumb, so I stopped. Because that sort of thing is always good for an item in the oddities column : " Speechless Street Salesman Defeats Dumbness." But he wasn't dumb. The policeman passing on his beat spoke to him just as I was composing the way it would read, and he answered. Then, when the officer went on, back the pedlar went into his act. Not speaking, not inviting enquiries—just standing beside his barrow with its rows of stone jars, none labelled and no placard that would tempt anyone to slow down to see what it was he was selling.

It had me interested.

If his aim was to sell those jars I reckoned he was going about it in a queer way. Because he didn't seem to care whether he provoked customer curiosity or not. He just stood there, next to his barrow, not looking at anyone, not seeming to look at anything. Just standing.

It didn't add up.

I eased back a little so I could take in more territory ; watch the reactions of the passers-by, as well as keep an eye

on the pedlar. One thing—it certainly confirmed what everybody accuses everyone else of doing, going about with their eyes shut. Not one person in fifty even noticed him while I stood there. I counted only three people who did notice him, actually observed him, and who showed they'd seen him by turning their heads. And those three didn't stop. He didn't whet their curiosity enough to make them halt, to make them ask what was in those jars.

The trouble, I reasoned, was that he was being *too* subtle. He wasn't leaving any loophole, any cranny that *invited* you to step up and peek. Me, being a newspaper man, who's on the lookout for anything out of the ordinary, I couldn't help but have noticed him. But, so far as the ordinary citizen was concerned, this guy wasn't going to get an upslanting sales graph with this method.

I decided it was about time I pursued the matter further. On account of *my* sales graph. I moved forward.

His head turned as I got close. "You hung back longer than was necessary," he said in a flat voice. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it."

It didn't make sense. Write off the fact that he'd spotted me watching him. That's good business—taking in more than people credit you with seeing. I didn't complain about that. But, why did he suggest that I should have galloped forward like a dog welcoming its long lost master? Who did he think I was?

I snapped my fingers. I'd almost fallen for it. He was using his gimmick—the subtle approach. Only, this time, I was the one who was on the receiving end. Or so he thought. I smiled inwardly. With most people it *would* have worked. I'd grant him that. But not with someone who recognised the treatment.

"A good thing doesn't improve by being rushed," I told him. "I like to get the background."

He nodded. He didn't seem interested either way. And that also was wrong. He seemed to be waiting. Rather like a teacher being patient with a slow pupil who isn't sure what answer he ought to offer. I couldn't help it. I started getting irritated. In spite of knowing that it was all an act.

"If you're genuine," I told him, "you'll have a licence."

"I have one," he answered. And continued to wait.

I was tempted to leave him. To cut off my nose. Except that I'd a hunch that there was a story here. And that he wouldn't call me back if I did walk away. I took his word for it that he had got a licence. But, what did he want one for if he wasn't trying to make sales. That was where he had me. I'd got to know the answer to that.

" What's in the jars ?" I asked, conceding him the psychological advantage. I did my best to sound friendly, but I wasn't very successful. Not that it seemed to worry him.

" Scent."

" Perfume ?" He shrugged. " What perfume ?" I asked.

" If you don't know," he came back, " then you don't want it. If you don't want it, it's not for sale."

I guess my mouth fell open at that one. Trouble was, he didn't seem interested any longer. Before I asked what perfume it was he'd been sort of objective and detached, but, underneath that, expectant. Now, he'd obviously written me off as a prospect. It wasn't just some more of his subtlety. It was final.

So far as he was concerned maybe. But not so far as I was concerned. Not after that. Nobody treats me that way.

" Whatever school of salesmanship taught you this approach," I told him, " you ought to sue them. There's such a thing as *increasing* customer resistance. Don't you *want* to sell your junk ?"

His eyes wandered back to me. " Are you blaming me," he enquired, " because you've got a hick mind ?" He shook his head. " Don't blame me for what you do to yourself," he said.

That was the last straw. I spun round on my heel, and left. But, after I'd gone half a block, I cooled down. Enough to start using my head. What, I asked myself, *could* be his reason for acting that way ? Going out of his way not to sell ! What possible sense was there in it ?

Reading over what I have written, of course the answer's obvious. There could be only one thing that a guy would be peddling that he wouldn't advertise and wouldn't sell to just anyone, and that was dope. What I'd taken for subtlety was just as deliberate, but for a different purpose. It was meant to discourage casual would-be buyers. His cryptic answers made sense now. They wouldn't have been cryptic at all if

I'd known what was in the jars ; if I'd had the password. Instead, there'd have been a sale.

I started back the way I had come. I'd got a story all right. But, I'd also got caution. People who stick their necks out in the dope racket sometimes wish they hadn't. After it's too late. That wasn't going to be my way. On the other hand, I wasn't going to spoil the story by screaming for the police. Not yet. The time for that was when I'd got enough for an exclusive, stone-cold certainty.

I came up against the snag right away. How was I going to cover the pedlar without him knowing I'd seen through his game and was on his tail ?

It was because I couldn't see a way round this problem that I made my mistake. By bringing Leslie into it.

There was a phone box close by. I beat an old granny to it, and dialled Leslie's number.

" Ectoplasm," she answered. " I'm here in the spirit only."

I told her I hadn't got time for humour. I needed help, and I needed it fast. If she loved me like she was always claiming— ?

" Tell me what it is." She spoke up as though this was her big moment.

I didn't waste time putting her hope into a more reasonable perspective. Not while I needed her help. I told her where to come, and how she would recognise this joy-dream merchant and how to act when she got to the scene. She promised she'd hurry.

From where I lay back I saw her arrive. I've got to admit that she used her head. She had the cab pull up outside a department store. It was almost closing time, and she darted in the nearest door as though she'd heard that the biggest bargain in hats was being left unguarded for the next ten seconds. A few moments later I spotted her in another entrance, further along, standing casually, as though waiting for someone, and I knew it was okay for me to relax.

The pedlar started to move off at that moment, and I watched Leslie strolling along after him. Which was another good thing. It cut down the risk of her becoming conspicuous, hanging about, which would have spoiled my plan. I went off feeling better. Leslie'd know where to contact me, and I could grab something to eat while I waited for her to report.

She got there about an hour later. I'd finished eating when she slid into the seat opposite.

" Well ?" I asked.

She nodded. " What are you ordering ?" she asked.

I told her I'd eaten, but I could wait to hear what she'd found out until she'd got herself a cup of coffee. I thought for a moment she was going to go temperamental on me. She used to act that way when I first met her. When she was full of illusions that she was cut out to be the outstanding female sculptor of the century. But, after a while, after I'd taken her around a bit, and shown her one or two things, she stopped talking that way. She took up typing. She didn't scrap her equipment like I advised her to do, but I reckoned that wasn't really important. That was just sentiment, and wishful day-dreaming. Trouble was, she'd started getting other ideas, and I was beginning to think we were about due to part. She was fine now, but in twenty years time, when she'd be talking of the wonderful future that had been hers by right, and the way I'd discouraged her genius—! Oh, no ! That wasn't for me.

Anyway, she controlled herself, and after she'd gone and got her coffee, she told me what had happened. Not that it helped much. She hadn't a trained observation, and she'd probably missed plenty.

She'd followed the man as far as a yard. She hadn't been able to think of an excuse for following him right into the place, and she hadn't got the nerve just to walk in. So all she had to offer was the address. She'd hung around for a while, but he hadn't reappeared, so she'd called it a day and come back.

That's what you get for relying on a woman. Though to listen to her, you'd think she'd done wonders—she'd got his address !

I didn't point out what was obvious. That a yard can have two entrances. That the fellow had probably spotted her, and had worked this deliberately. What would have been the good ? I'd only have had another argument on my hands.

As it was, she had ideas.

" How do you *know* he's flogging dope ?" she asked.

I shrugged. " What do you suggest ?" I came back. " That his doctor's told him to take exercise in the open air ? That he's got anti-business principles, and that's why he won't sell his pots ?"

" He sold *one*," she said.

I did a little mental arithmetic before I let myself speak. " Did you get the buyer's name and address ?" I snapped.

" I didn't need to," she retorted. " *You* know who he is. You pointed him out to me once. You said he was someone who must hold the record for trying to patent more impractical ideas than anyone outside a mental hospital."

I stared at her. I knew whom she meant all right. Walker Betts. I whistled softly through my teeth. If there was anyone I'd never have credited with needing dope Betts would have been the one. He didn't *need* dope I'd have said. Opium, or hashish, or cocaine, none of 'em could have given him wilder ideas than his own brain could supply. Well, it just goes to show how wrong one can be.

It certainly was a lead, though. I'd have to give Leslie that. Under pressure Betts would talk. Once the police got to work on him, he'd talk. He'd spill everything he knew.

" Well, there you are," I said cheerfully. " Walker Betts. One guy I'd never have taken for a dope fiend."

" Somehow," she commented dreamily, " I don't think your pedlar is either."

I looked at her with surprise. I hadn't expected her to be so intelligent. " He won't be," I agreed. " The ones who sell it don't take it. They know better."

" I mean, I don't think it's dope he's selling," she corrected.

I sighed. My opinion of her brain-power dropped back to normal. Still, there was no advantage to be got by arguing. She was still going to be useful.

" You don't want to worry about that," I answered. " If he isn't, there's no harm done. If he is—you'll have helped to put him where he belongs." I frowned. " Trouble is," I said, " how are we to know he won't pull out ? In case he knows he's being watched."

She stood up, drawing on her gloves. " Tell me to-morrow," she said selfishly. " If *you* watch that yard to-night, you'll be on hand in case he tries to run. If he doesn't, I'll take over again in the morning. I'll ring you to find out."

She was away before I could remind her that the last thing I wanted was to let the pedlar know *I* was interested in him. But with her making it difficult by refusing to work longer than union hours there wasn't much I could do except stick my neck out. However, I wasn't going to stick it out far

enough to give anyone a target. I could do the night shift by proxy. It meant spending a bit but I looked on that as an investment. When the story was ripe I'd get back what I'd had to lay out. I arranged with Judson's Agency for them to play night watchman, and I went home to bed.

The phone woke me. It was Leslie. " Want me to-day ?" she asked.

I told her I did. I also asked whether she thought the guy started on his rounds before dawn.

" It's gone seven," she replied.

I thanked her for this information. If it hadn't been for her I'd have gone to my grave not knowing there was such an hour in the morning. Now, after learning the hard way that there was, I didn't feel I'd been missing anything. " He won't be on the streets before nine," I finished. Also, there was the little matter of knowing what street he'd be using.

" He'll stay on Main Street," she cut in. " Obviously."

" When I hear," I said, " I'll ring you." I put down the receiver so as not to get wakened up further by her arguing, and I crawled back to sleep.

Once again it was the phone that woke me. Only, this time, I wasn't sorry. I'd dreamed that I was being chased by the pedlar, and Leslie, and Walker Betts, and each of them was flourishing a jar which they wanted me to buy. They hunted me right into the offices of the paper, and when he saw me come rushing in the news editor grabbed a jar from beside *his* desk, and joined in the pursuit. They got me into a corner, and if the phone hadn't wakened me I don't know what would have happened.

It was Judson's Agency ringing. The pedlar was on the move. I'd been right that he wouldn't start before nine, and Leslie's guess that he'd go back to Main Street had come up.

I called her, and put her in the picture, and told her to hurry. I said I'd be at the usual spot around one if she had anything special to report.

I still had twenty-four hours in hand. McPherson, the news editor has always had it in for me. You've only got to look at the assignments *I* always got. But even he couldn't say anything when I phoned him, the moment I'd realised what the pedlar was doing, and told him that I had a lead on a dope set-up. He'd salved what he calls his self respect by putting a time limit on my freedom of action, but that hadn't

worried me. If I could spot a system that was under the noses of the police, and which they'd missed, I shouldn't have any difficulty in coming up with the story inside McPherson's beggarly limit.

Provided Leslie didn't spoil things. Provided she didn't step outside the instructions I'd given her. Provided she kept her eyes open, her mouth shut, and her legs moving, and didn't try using her intelligence. In short, provided she didn't let me down.

She did.

If ever a thing was deliberate, this was. I'd warned her to keep back, to watch the guy from some place the other side of the street, and not to do anything that would make him notice her.

But, when she walks in to where I'm eating, the first thing I spot is the jar she's carrying.

I put down the cutlery I was using. Very slowly. Very deliberately. " How ?" I asked.

She smiled back at me happily, in a dreamy, half-baked fashion. " I bought it," she had the gall to tell me. " It took everything I've got. I had to draw out all my savings, right down to the last penny—it's almost as though he *knew* how much I could raise—but it was worth it." The doped, ecstatic look stayed on her face. " You'll see it was worth it," she said.

" Will I ?" I asked.

She nodded. " Of course you will," she said brightly. " When you buy yours. No matter what it costs." She picked up the menu. " You'll have to pay for my lunch," she had the nerve to say. " I haven't got anything left."

" First," I told her, " I want to know what happened. Why did you do this ? After I'd said it was important for him not to know you were watching him— "

" But I *had* to buy it," she said. She stared. " You *still* think— !" She laughed. " But that's not what he's selling."

The waiter was at her elbow. She smiled up at him. " I'll have the nicest thing on the menu," she told him. " Whatever the chef recommends."

I stood up. I looked at the waiter. " She'll pay for it by washing up afterwards," I warned him. I looked down at her. " You *bought* it, eh ?" I shook my head. " You did not ! What you did was to sell out on me. You tipped him

off. And this story is just to make me think he's an angel of light."

She opened her mouth to deny this, but I wasn't listening. I stared down at her face that was pretending to be shocked. " You cheap little bitch !" I exploded.

I had to step aside at that moment for the waiter, elbowing me away from the table. " If I may suggest a glass of sherry, madam," he said to her. Just as though I wasn't there. " Madame will appreciate the speciality of the house more after."

I had to stop myself from swinging on him. To be snubbed by a lousy dish-slinger. I controlled myself, however. That class of person likes nothing better than a scene, but I wasn't going to give him and the goggle-eyed eaters who were craning round from the tables nearby that satisfaction. I left.

I'd got to act fast. The guy knew now that I was after him. That meant he was going to get rid of all the dope he had as fast as he could. The question was, could I jump him before he was clean ?

There was only one way I could do that. I'd have to give McPherson the story as it stood. A news editor carries more weight than a plain reporter. The police would listen to him where they'd give me the brush off, then make the arrest, and claim the credit for themselves.

I found a booth, and dialled him.

" Well ?" his voice crackled.

I told him. I stressed the need for quick action. He didn't say anything until I'd finished. He didn't say anything then.

" Well ?" I urged.

" It's a pity you don't read the papers," he said. " The edition hit the streets half an hour ago."

I squawked. " You mean someone's beaten me to it ?"

" That's right," McPherson answered wearily. " A fellow named Betts. Walker Betts."

" He's confessed ?"

" He's hit the jackpot. Last night—one of those inventions you said was crazy—United Atomics settled with him for a million." I leaned on the wall. I felt dizzy. McPherson's voice grated on. " Betts mentioned the pedlar. According to him he owes his success to the fellow. For selling him one of those jars. Bett's story is that he was walking along the street, figuring it was time he cut his losses, *and* his throat,

when he spotted this pedlar and his barrow. And Betts said he knew, then and there, he'd got to have one of those jars. He didn't explain how he knew. He said he couldn't explain it. It just was. He says he gave the pedlar everything he had —cleaned himself out—and took the jar home. He opened it in his room, as soon as he was indoors, and he'd only just got the stopper out, and had one sniff, and the phone rang."

His voice had gradually got softer. When he stopped talking it sounded like he'd been speaking of something awe-inspiring.

" So ?" I prodded. " The phone rang. What's the miracle? The phone rings for everybody."

" You fool !" he exploded. " You blind, obstinate fool ! Can't you see ?"

" I see it's crazy," I yelled back.

He was quiet for a moment. Then—

" It was *it*," McPherson said. " It was his world changing. Don't ask me what, or how, or why. I don't know. Nobody does. Maybe it's power—the essence of power ? Maybe it's something that's latent in the jars ? And that's something else we don't know—where they come from. But, when someone gets one, somehow—I'm only guessing—but they have the jar in their hands. They're making contact. Their hands, their fingers, move the stopper, charging the contents. They lift it, and inhale. And it comes through as power. Transferred to them.

" There isn't anyone who can guess how. Or why. But—they do that, and there it is. They're invested with it, and, because of that, they change the world around them. Their own world. Make it work for them instead of against them. I don't know. I'm guessing. But, according to Betts, that's how it was. In that instant."

" And, in that instant," I jeered, " United Atomics phoned. Just that very moment that he's got the jar under his nose. No warning for them. No Board Meeting. No vote that they should want to buy it. No deciding." I was so mad I was near crying. " There must have been a lot of surprise around United Atomics when they learned they'd done all that in the wink of an eye."

I knew I wasn't doing any good. But I kept on. " A fairy tale like that !" I said.

" A genius who sells an idea for a million is entitled to fairy tales," McPherson came back. His voice got colder.

" When he came across with his story we started looking for this pedlar. We didn't find him. We would have found him if you hadn't been sitting on your backside somewhere telling yourself you were a detective." His voice got nasty. " For your benefit, the police hadn't overlooked the dope angle. They vetted him when he first applied for a licence. They gave him a clean bill. It didn't worry them if he didn't push his goods. An' if you had done your job properly in the first place, and brought in the story that was under your nose, instead of dreaming up an excuse for avoiding work, I wouldn't have the necessity for firing you like I'm doing now."

If it takes me the rest of my life I'm going to catch up with that pedlar. That story of Betts is good enough for the average newspaper reader, but one day I'm going to get the real truth. And when I do I'm going to rub McPherson's nose in it.

United Atomics have put me on the black list so far as their staff and their establishments are concerned. I'm still going to dig up the real reason why they paid Betts all that dough.

And that cheap slut Leslie who sold out on me, and who's been "*discovered*," and who's billed as the white hope of women sculptors. The people who've got something to hide are paying her thirty pieces of silver to-day, but there's always tomorrow.

And when that comes, as it surely will do, and I write their true success stories, there won't be any fairy tale quality about them. There won't be any scent in them. They'll stink.

You wait. Just you wait. That's all.

—Clifford C. Reed

Canadian journalist Gene Lees first appeared in Science Fantasy *No. 7 (March 1954) with a fine story entitled "Stranger From Space"; subsequently appeared unexpectedly at the annual S-F Convention held that year in Manchester; then disappeared from our ken. Now working for an American newspaper, he has been on a European tour for his employer and is currently working from Paris.*

UTOPIAS—A FEW YEARS LATER

BY EUGENE LEES

The primary purpose of modern Utopian fiction is to warn —to predict to a slumbering public what will or could happen if certain tendencies evident in the society are permitted to develop to the horrid logical ultimate.

For a work of this art to be completely successful, the public must take heed and react against the dangerous drift so that the predicted end is obviated. Thus the author, by the very facts of his participation in the society and his interference with its movements, strives to defeat his own predictions. He is trying to alter history in advance, and the melancholy prophets of science-fiction are in the peculiar position of being the first breed of seers in history who passionately hope that their predictions will *not* come true.

Obviously, then, to evaluate how successful a given gloomy Utopia has been, you cannot just ask how right were its predictions. You must also ask how *wrong* they are turning out to be—that is, how much influence of prevention the work has had. It is a peculiar double standard. But it is not an unworkable one.

By this double standard, it seems to me, the four most important Utopias of the recent decades are Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit* 451, Orwell's '1984,' Huxley's *Brave New World*, and E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*.

Since Bradbury came up through science-fiction, rather than "bending" down to it as Orwell and Huxley did, he is not usually looked on in high-nosed literary circles as one of the important Utopian writers. But he is.

Fahrenheit 451, reflecting as expected its gifted author's almost obsessive distrust of technology, was more accurate a few years ago than it is today. When the demagogue Joe McCarthy was at the summit of his career, infecting the American society with fear and making difficult if not impossible any freedom of thought, *Fahrenheit* was the most accurate prediction of the lot. Books had perhaps not begun to be burned, but many were on proscribed lists in American libraries and objective thought about the international situation was virtually at a standstill. Yet, only a short time later, McCarthy was a forgotten man, a broken and even pathetic figure handing out his little press releases to journalists who no longer cared, who threw them in the nearest wastebasket. Not long after that, Joe McCarthy was dead—of a broken heart, some said, though others went less deep and said it was alcohol that did it. The American society began to recover its intellectual health.

It was not Ray Bradbury who brought down Joe McCarthy, to be sure. McCarthy was destroyed by a number of things : the deliberate indifference of decent journalists, a snubbing by President Eisenhower, exposure as a bully on the television programme of Edward R. Murrow, and perhaps most of all by the sheer disgust of the American public. But that is precisely where Bradbury enters the situation. There is no doubting that, in some impossible-to-specify degree, Bradbury has created in minds all over the world, not just in America, disgust with the kind of man who would fetter our minds and, if given the chance, burn our books. That is why Bradbury must be considered one of the important Utopian writers.

Orwell's work, unquestionably, has had the greatest intellectual impact on our society. Today, phrases such as " Big Brother is watching," have passed into our everyday vocabulary and turn up in dillution in the casual pleasantries of cocktail parties. Orwell induced more sheer fear than any writer of our time, prophetic or otherwise. His was, by far, the most appalling of our four Utopias.

The double-think that Orwell predicted has arrived and the mark of its efficiency lies in the fact that its practitioners are not aware that they are doing it. It is evidently gaining ground behind the Iron Curtain and it is by no means absent on this side of it. The Kremlin consistently and persistently refers to our self-defences as our " aggressions." The tragic revolt in Hungary was drowned in a bloody sea of double-think—but such Russian aggressions are known as "liberations." How close can you get to " War is Peace " ? The term " preventive war " used on our side of the Curtain is blatant double-think.

The Russians alter history as they did in Orwell's world of 1984. Witness the posthumous degradation of Stalin, followed by his restoration to respect. And we are getting into the revised military alliances of 1984 too. The Germans, so recently our hated enemies, are now our allies, and, we are told, lovely people. (Some of them, as a matter of fact, are). And we are also hearing speculation that sooner or later Russia will have to ally itself with the West to resist the threat of the Chinese—which brings us very close indeed to the political divisions and re-alligned alliances of the world predicted by Orwell.

But for one of the most harrowing bits of Orwell fulfilled, study the French army's concept of " revolutionary warfare." Developed after the defeat in Indo-China, this concept, now being taught to French military men, is an adaptation of the Communists' own methods. Called the parry-and-thrust, terms borrowed from fencing, it involves (1) knowing about planned revolutionary movements in advance and heading them off if possible, and (2) crushing them quickly and effectively once they start and then re-educating and re-orienting the people to accept the established order—though perhaps not quite as harshly as Winston Smith was made to accept it at the end of ' 1984.'

As you read the French army recommendations on having agents at all levels of society, agents who will report to the

authorities on tendencies of thinking and possible revolutionary drifts, a cold shudder is likely to run through you and you will say to yourself : " My God, Orwell's Thought Police !" To that the dedicated French officer would tell you reasonably that techniques in themselves are neither good nor bad, that virtue lies in the purpose for which they are applied —a reasoning that in itself involves some measure of doublethink. Then, if you still object, he will ask you if you would rather let the Communists continue to take us over piece-meal and impose their own thought police.

If you can give him a clear answer to that, you're a better man than I am. For we are now on the horns of a true dilemma—and the drift toward Orwellian horror goes on. A way out may be found, but at the moment I cannot see what it will be. We may hope, perhaps, that the Russians will suffer an attack of sweet reasonableness. It is a meagre hope indeed.

If Orwell's political projections were accurate, his economics, it seems to me, were shaky. Anti-Marxian that he was, Orwell seems to have fallen into certain Marxian errors himself in assuming that his world of 1984 would be grounded by poverty. With 1984 now only 16 years in the future, that poverty does not seem probable. America continues to enjoy great prosperity. England, too, to this foreigner's eyes, looks prosperous on the whole, and comfortable. Your cars, like ours, grow longer every year, the traffic problems get worse, and television antennas make unattractive forests on the rooftops, even by the Grand Canal of Venice.

Every country I have seen in Europe this past summer—Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, Denmark, Sweden—looks prosperous and likely to become more so. Winston Smith may have drank Victory Gin, but I'm still drinking Haig and Haig. I trust this will continue. With automation and the consumer's hunger for goods, there appears to be no reason why our material lot should not become softer, rather than harder, even in Russia.

It is on this point that Huxley's *Brave New World* indicated more insight. Technologically, Huxley hit many things right on the nose, though his misses are perhaps more surprising than his hits. A measure of technological accuracy was to be expected of Huxley, coming as he does from a distinguished family of scientists. Some of the Huxley predictions have

already come true. The soma pills are almost here. The main medical purpose of tranquillizers is supposed to be to relieve abnormal tensions. But in practise they are being used to eliminate *normal* tensions and sobering thoughts.

And what more is there to say about the mind-destroying powers of television ? Too many writers have pondered the subject for it to require elaboration here. We might, however, take a quick glance at the moronic music of Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and—England's indigenous affliction—Tommy Steele. It will be remembered that moronic popular music (there is such a thing as *good* popular music) is a significant part of the fabric of Huxley's predicted society.

In Huxley's world, nobody worried, and sex came casually. The kind of music heard was related to both facts.

But it seems to me that it is in regard to sex that Huxley went astray, both technologically and philosophically.

You will recall that the girls in the *Brave New World* carried their contraceptives in " Malthusian " belts and went through a numbered drill before each copulation, implying that the contraception was mechanical. As you may know, two American medical men have developed a contraceptive pill which may soon move out of the experimental stage—and which may, far from being a curse, free the world from the grave present danger of overpopulation. How Huxley, with a biologist brother and grandfather, failed to anticipate such a development, is beyond me. (Huxley himself pointed out in a 1946 preface for the book that he also failed to foresee nuclear fission, or at least to mention it).

Philosophically, Huxley's horror at the sexual relations in his world of the future are very questionable. " Everybody belongs to everybody," his characters are taught from birth—or rather, from " decanting." This, as Huxley saw it, contributed to the destruction of individualism. But it might well be argued that individualism suffers equivalent or worse hardships under our present system of sexual mores. For, as matters stand, each of us—male or female—is expected to lock himself up permanently with another person, and share forever that person's viewpoint, ambitions and desires. This is known as " adjusting " to each other and a half century ago, women alone were subjected to this outrage. Today, " adjustment " is a two-way street and women take it as their right to tell their loved ones how they will sit, dress, stand and when

they will arrive home from the office. Nor may a husband fall asleep during concerts or an opera—even if the opera is Wagner and the husband's snore indicates good critical judgment, if not good social form. This reciprocity of personality interference cannot be considered an improvement : it's just that matters have become as distressing for men as they have long been for women. If the facts of sexual life in the *Brave New World* are not pretty, neither are those we see now.

But Huxley's horrification at the way sex is used as a narcotic is more than justified. Even now, we are getting more and more into the soporific practise of vicarious sex, as witness the little magazines featuring pictures of nude young ladies that are as common on London news-stands as they are in New York or Chicago. What are most of the buxom film starlets if not perfect candidates for stardom in the "feelies ?" And please take note of how near we are to having those self-same feelies. As much as five years ago, in the midst of the Three-D boom, one picture featured the advertising slogan : " A girl in your arms, a lion in your lap." Since then, the matter has gone farther. The technique of " pre-con " or pre-consciousness is already in application. If you're not familiar with it, it is, briefly, a method of flashing words and symbols on the screen with the picture—but so briefly that you do not consciously see them. Instead, they induce direct emotional responses, such as fear or even a desire to eat popcorn. What is perhaps most disturbing is that the producers of the first film using pre-con are quite unabashedly referring to such pictures by Huxley's own term, the " feelies." No one seems horrified—which is the great irony of it.

Even the scent-organ of the *Brave New World* has been developed, though why such an instrument should dismay Huxley is difficult to determine. Still, he must be given his marks for foreseeing it.

I have left to last E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* because it is the least known, least influential, the most frightening and, in some ways, the most ruthlessly logical of the four Utopias here under consideration.

Briefly, the story anticipates a world in which humanity, or a pathetic descendant thereof, is kept in hand by a giant, interlocked, self-perpetuating machine. Coddled and pro-

tected from all realities, the inhabitants have no idea how the machine operates and could not possibly repair it if something went wrong. (How many men can today repair their own automobiles ?)

The inhabitants of Forster's machine can never leave it, even should they wish to—or even had they the physical strength to do so. Feeble and almost mindless slugs, they encounter nothing directly (we have our phonographs and television already) and do not even see friends, such as they are, face to face. They see them only on television screens and ask : " Have you had an idea lately ?" One is reminded of the interminable telephone conversations of housewives and adolescents.

Such is Forster's machine. How possible is it ?

Aside from those parallel's already cited, I am reminded vividly of an apartment building (a block of flats, as you say), in which I used to live. The apartment was superbly appointed. It had wall-to-wall carpets, a garbage disposal machine, air-conditioning, a fan to suck off the stale smells of cooking, the television set and of course my high-fidelity phonograph, with thousands of pieces of canned music standing beside it.

Sometimes I would leave the air-conditioned, dust-free modern building in which I work and hurry home because I could not stand the intense—but natural—heat of the summer day. I would be anticipating a worry-free evening in front of the TV set, interrupted by nothing more serious than a phone call from a friend. I would arrive at the building and cross the lobby, which contained among other things a cigarette machine, a soft drink dispenser and a vending machine for chocolate bars, cookies and the like. I would be conveyed up to my floor in a smooth silent elevator, perhaps planning to phone the grocery store to have the evening's needs sent up. Then I would walk down the hall, past the doors of dozens of small pleasant apartments exactly like mine. And sometimes I would reflect that, while not a poor physical specimen, I was still incapable, from sheer lack of exercise, of doing more than ten pushups—and that all my neighbours in their little protective cubicles were probably the same.

At last I would turn into my own corridor. And every day, as my hand touched the doorknob, the same thought went through my head : " The Machine Stops."

What Forster saw more clearly than Bradbury, Huxley or Orwell is that you do not have to prohibit ideas. For given sufficient comfort and minor pleasures, the people become indifferent to them.

A French student's magazine I read recently stated as one of the characteristics of today's youth in that country "an indifference to abstracts, an interest only in the concrete." The young writer of the article made the claim proudly, believing this to be one of the most admirable characteristics of his generation—failing completely to see that it is in fact one of the most dangerous. " We," he seemed to be saying, " have our feet on the solid ground of fact."

But there is nothing more slippery than an objective "fact" and in the last analysis, as contemporary physics reveals, the abstracts are the true realities. Too many young people today fail to grasp that, and that is why there is nothing less realistic than the realism, so-called, of today's youth.

Meantime, ideals falter, the Cold War makes us confused, everyone's values become fuzzy and the double-think boys compound our problems with their pernicious perversions of the semantical arts. It is perhaps significant that the four Utopias we are discussing did not predict that we would be obliterated in atomic holocaust, they did not see us as destroyed—only hopelessly crippled.

The concern of all four writers was more than justified, as our unfolding history shows. Some facet of each prediction has already come to pass, so that from the standpoint of how *right* they were all four books must be considered successes, marvels of social prediction. From the standpoint of how *wrong* they are turning out to be, that is how much they have served to prevent their own predictions, none has had the success we might have hoped.

I venture to say the authors would be in melancholy agreement with that evaluation.

—**Eugene Lees**

EDITORIAL NOTE—Since the above article was written a new Aldous Huxley book has been published, *Brave New World Revisited*, in which the author claims that he was largely correct in his original predictions. It will be interesting to compare author Lees' comments with the Huxley findings.

Apparently the trouble with Roberts was that his imagination was over-developed—on the other hand he was quite convinced that They were after him and there wasn't much he could do about it. There were too many of Them.

CALL OF THE WILD

BY JOHN KIPPAX

As Roberts left the house he closed the door carefully, and nerved himself for the walk down the drive. It wasn't so bad when Mrs. Prosser was left behind in the house, but now she was away sick. Try as he might, he could not disguise the fact that the situation was getting worse. He *needed* Mrs. Prosser —or someone—to watch him go to the gate. Then it was easier.

Without her, it seemed such a *long* distance to go to the front street. Come to terms, part of him said, come to terms and get used to it. Oh, he might do that in time, if he did not go mad first ; they had their spies and their observation posts

every inch of the way, and they missed nothing. They had places in the house, too. No matter how much Mrs. Prosser swept and dusted, there were always observer points in the house.

Strangely enough, he didn't feel too badly about it all, in the house. He had got used to being spied on from there, and he might even be a little lonely without it, now. He had a pretty good idea of their favourite places. He knew, for example, that they watched from the high corner above the hallstand. It did not matter how much Mrs. Prosser swept round there, there was always a replacement within twenty-four hours. Why they regarded this spot as so important he was not sure, unless it was a kind of repeater station, a link between the upstairs and the downstairs forces. That was probably it.

Roberts was glad that he had a set of workable ideas about them. One had to adjust ; life had to go on, didn't it ? He stood in his porchway now, irresolute. He was a greying man of about forty-five, thin, with a slight stoop. His face was long and pale, with deep-set grey eyes looking out from beneath bushy brows. He wore a light coat and a bowler hat, and he carried a stick and a brief case. He had to face them, he must face them. He had done it many times now, but it never seemed to get any easier. On rainy or dull mornings it was quite bearable ; that was because they didn't come out in such great numbers to watch him go.

He muttered, " You're not the bosses yet, not yet !"

Sometimes, as he sat in the train pretending to read his paper, he thought of the way they must carry on in his house, now that it was deserted for five days a week during the daytime. What fun they must have ! Fun ? No, that must be wrong ; one could not think of them in human terms ; but one had to personalise, to some extent, in order to try to make sense of their motives ?

Their motives.

It was a thought to make a sane and reasonable man shudder, and Roberts was a sane and reasonable man. How else could he be an office manager, with a staff of fifty, at Britling and Garrard's ? He had approached his present difficulty with as much rationality as possible. He had undesirable residents. They could be killed, but not eliminated, for they always bred more, just as ruthless, efficient, and evasive. These were the things he thought about on the railway journey to town. And these things bothered him in a tangible

form, beyond the confines of his house and garden. They had started to send representatives after him. Once he had been sure that there was one in a dark corner above the luggage rack ; on another occasion, Miss Torrence, his secretary, had been quite alarmed one day to find him standing on his padded chair which he had moved into a corner.

" Oh, Mr. Roberts !"

She sounded concerned for him. She was a nice woman, dark, about thirty, with fancy spectacles and a pleasant shape. She was also very efficient.

" It's all right, Miss Torrence—"

" But what—"

" Nothing to get alarmed at." He hoped she did not notice that he was trembling. He got down and brought his chair back to his desk. There was no point in telling her ; more than that, there was real danger, for once he did start he would assuredly tell her everything, and he felt wary of unburdening himself to the wrong person. That would never do.

Still, he stood on his porch. What, he wondered, *could* be their motives ? It was damnably difficult. One could only think of them in terms of one's own experience. And one did not experience things in the same way that insects experienced them.

The morning sun, rather watery and indistinct, had now gone behind a cloud. Good. This might be the time to go. Now Roberts, keep your head up, don't wilt when you hear them whisper, and don't *acknowledge* them. They will think themselves as good as you, if you do that. Step onto the drive, and away you go . . .

(What is that, above the sounds of my footsteps along the gravel ? Oh, the bees. Two of them, big black and yellow ones. That might be part of the answer, you know, why their communications system is so good. Bees are great technicians, aren't they ? Almost as good as ants. Listen carefully as you pass, and hear the subtle variation in their buzzing. And there, threaded across the tallest antirrhinums, is a cross spider on its web. The way they do it, all out in the open ! They use the front of their supposedly natural habits to perfection !)

When he went by the laurels he could feel that he was the focus of scores of compound eyes, all impinging on his consciousness like so many microscopic needles. Greatly daring, he stopped to listen. On certain mornings, when they

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were particularly careless or he was particularly sensitive, he had heard them conversing. He listened ; no, there was nothing he could pick out this morning. Sometimes it was very clear . . .

' *Repeater station to downstairs and garden forces ; Roberts is going.*'

' *Message received. Harass at full strength.*'

' *Downstairs forces here. Two pots in larder open. And forage squad, hurry, hurry.*'

Or

' *Bee seven-three-one, calling bee seven-three-one. Hive ten, report hive ten. Special duty . . .*'

And

' *Web sixteen, web sixteen, pay attention* ! *You should have fed earlier. Attention now, please . . .*'

Roberts shuddered, breathed deeply, and continued on his way to the gate. He would resist. As long as he did that, they could not get the measure of him ; they could not possibly win this fantastic assault on a human being, could they ? Was it possible that they thought he could crack under their campaign, that that, and his loneliness, could get him down ? Did they imagine that one day he would come to them and say, ' All right, I'm on your side now ; what do you want ?' He trembled as he thought how they might eventually get him, and what they might do. And once he gave in, they would certainly use his house as a base for further operations, from which they might invade the whole avenue, the district, the town !

He reached the gate ; by the post grew three sunflowers. They were about four feet high. Roberts knew that he had not planted them ; they had just grown. He wondered if the insects had allies in the plant world too.

On the sunflowers, in the centre of each, sat a ladybird. He *knew* what they were there for. They were to see him go and then signal the 'all clear' back to the house. But he swung open the gate and went through. He strode down the avenue. Let them see him ! Outside he was—fairly free.

' *Ladybird group reporting—Roberts out, Roberts out.*'

As he went to the station, he began to wonder again why they had selected him. Did they think that they could convert him into a suitable ally ? It seemed impossible, and yet—didn't he find it quite easy to understand their language ? But to come over to them ! He was human, they were insects, and

arachnids. They were not reasonable, he was ; how could a sane human being be otherwise ?

Now he had turned into the main road, and there were others hurrying to catch the train ; he saw Dimmock, stiff and spindly, holding his briefcase in a gorilla clutch, Miss Mawson with her high heels clicking along the pavement, and many others. He knew them all to speak to ; what if he were to tell them of his suffering ? Oh, the drawing to of skirts, the raised eybrows, the glances and nudges that would follow such a revelation ! He did not dare. But he felt that there ought to be, somewhere, another human being who would understand, who might at this very moment be suffering the same sort of thing. Might (here he trembled) have come to terms with them.

The people who caught the eight-twenty train into town converged into the station yard, blues and browns and greys of the men, with some bright touches of colour for the women. Suddenly Roberts stopped, and stood on one side, letting the hurrying commuters pass by. His mind was turned inward, alert, fearful. He knew that they had a representative somewhere very near to him.

He listened.

" *Roberts* !" The voice was tiny, full of sibilant menace. " *We shall not wait much longer.*"

" You w-won't wait ?" He could not stop his voice from shaking. And he wondered, where is the thing ? Let me find it, brush it off with my hand, stamp it into the ground !

" *You know we need you, Roberts ; why do you resist us* ?"

It was on his collar ; he was sure ! He stood quite still, and raised his arm slowly.

" *Don't try it, Roberts. We are at the stage where it wouldn't be wise, you know. Do you think I came unguarded* ? *Some of us are armed* ! *We came this far with you, to show you how well organised we are. Apart from that, you want to come home tonight, don't you* ? *And we are waiting for you.*"

Roberts lowered his arm. He thought he heard the train.

" *Think about it, Roberts ; we need you. Give us a sign, soon.*"

He gulped, muttered, " Never, never !"

" *All right. We can wait. Sooner or later it will come. Now, stand close to this fence. We will get onto it. Don't move for about half a minute.*"

He wanted to tear off his coat and see the insects, but he did not dare. He did not know their power, but he was terrified of the little he did know.

" Who are you ?" he whispered. Only vaguely did he notice the people hurrying in to the station. One or two gave him curious glances. In the distance, a whistle shrieked.

" *Special agent, spider division,*" said the tiny voice, " *now be still.*"

As Roberts waited, the train came in. Now he wouldn't get a corner seat. Damn ! The half minute over, he went into the station, showed his season ticket, gained the platform with

hurrying steps and found a carriage. He sat tense and trembling until the train gathered speed ; then he relaxed a little, and began to study his companions. There were seven ordinary people. How could they know what he suffered ? He ought to warn them ! He ought—but he could not. He could not bare himself. And anyway, they had had their warning ; the whole world had been warned. The facts were in any encyclopaedia ; the insect population of the world was uncountable ; it was untold billions of trillions. All it needed was organisation, perhaps including co-operation with a few selected humans. But why had they selected Roberts ?

The train was going at a fair speed, and he began to feel easier. But he looked up, and at once he was not easy. Above the luggage rack, not far from one of the lights, there was a small dark scrap of—*something*. He shivered ; they were still watching him. *He knew* !

He gulped and gasped, and was then aware that curious and slightly offended eyes were upon him. He blundered out into the corridor, and lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. Helplessly, he watched trees and fences flash by.

He stayed in the corridor until the train arrived at the terminus. In a dream, a daze, a horrid half-world peopled by creatures that had at least six legs, he went to the office, going by bus rather than the underground. He needed as much cleanness and light as he could get. Work, that was the thing, lose yourself in work. That was possible with Miss Torrence as a secretary. She was so very good. Even if he, during these past months of growing oppression, had made a mistake, Miss Torrence never did. She was alert, efficient, and, come to think of it, quite charming. He suddenly realised that he knew nothing about her really. Did she go to concerts, did she play golf . . .?

He bent over his desk, doing his correspondence. After that, there were telephone conversations with the various heads of departments, then the managing director wanted to see him, then he worked on the re-organisation programme. He was determined to shut his mind, to make the morning go quickly.

He had lunch out, as usual, then back to work again. He did not look at the dark corners of the room ; he felt that it helped not to ; they might easily have a representative here . . .

As he worked, he heard Miss Torrence come in. She was quite remarkable, in her capacity to appear just when she was wanted. Now, for what did he want her at this moment ? He

looked up to see that she had a large yellow duster in her hand, and she was in the act of carrying a light chair to a corner. He felt he knew why. Of course he knew.

"What is it, Miss Torrence ?" he asked, in a voice that was a little too quick, and high.

Miss Torrence got onto the chair, her eyes seeking into the dark corner ; she spoke without looking at him.

" A big one," she said. She stretched upwards, and indeed her legs were fine and shapely. " A huge spider, a beauty."

He leaped to his feet, his mouth yammering at words that would not come. "K-k-k-" then he swallowed and managed to get it out. " Kill it then !"

She protested. " Oh, no. That's unlucky. My grandmother would never kill one. I'll catch it in this duster, and put it carefully outside. That's the best thing to do with spiders."

Trembling, he watched her reach into the corner, and take the black leggy thing. Holding the duster with great care, she got down, and approached to pass him on her way to the window. He trembled more. " No !" he cried hoarsely. " Kill it, kill it !"

She stopped, and looked at him with an expression of great seriousness. There was tenderness and concern in her look ; he seemed to notice again, that she was a fine, tender woman, with a generous mouth. " Is *that* the matter ?" she asked, oddly, " I might have guessed, before now. Just a minute." And very calmly she opened the window and shook out the spider, gently. When she had closed it and turned round she saw Roberts was sitting at his desk, with his head in his hands. He was sobbing.

Miss Torrence was, as ever, very competent. She went out quietly, and came back with a cup of tea and three aspirins. She waited until Roberts' attack had died down, and then she administered her simple therapy. When he showed signs of recovery, she began to draw him out, with every show of interest and tender solicitude. He drank the rest of the tea gratefully, and soon found himself telling this paragon of womanly virtues all about it. He told her about the bees and the ladybirds and the spiders and the upstairs and downstairs forces. He explained how he sometimes overheard them, and that he was certain that they were up to no good. He missed nothing ; he told her about this recruiting of humans by the insects. Everything came out, and she never laughed once.

The relief of having told someone at last, was enormous. He nearly cried all over again.

" Of course I understand how you feel," she said. " But you know, you don't really have all that to fear. Suppose you try accepting more, and fighting less ?"

He felt calmer now ; what a wonderful influence she had ! She seemed to have drawn away all his fear. He said, hesitantly, " I suppose I could try."

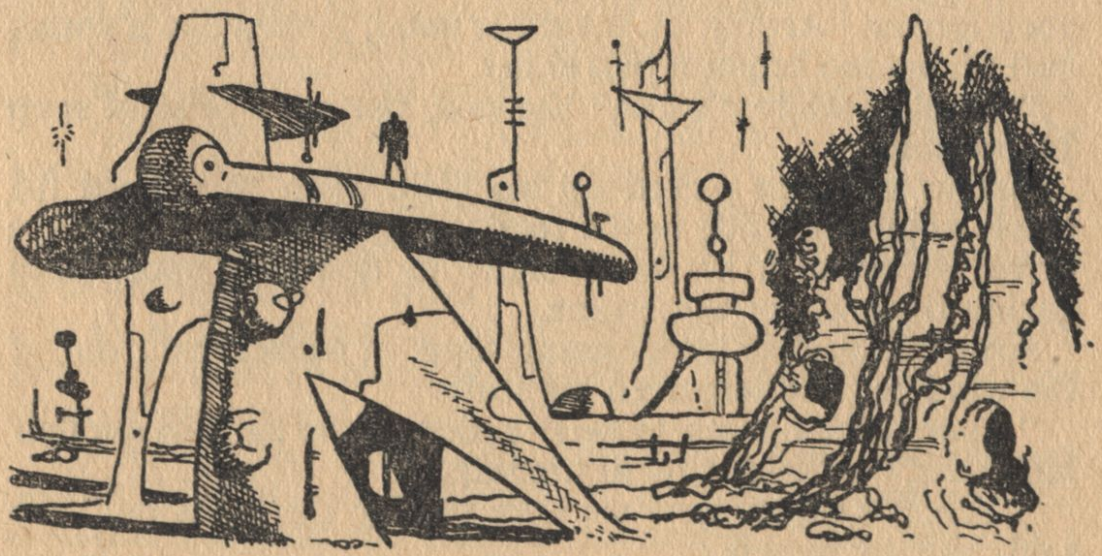
She came closer to him. She had a faint, very beautiful perfume ; he had never noticed it before, and her eyes were deep and beautifully bright, behind those fancy rimmed spectacles which suited her so admirably. " Yes, you could try. And you would succeed. Then you would pass from the first stage, to the second."

He was puzzled : " The second ?"

" That's right. I understand you because I know your suffering. I have been through it. It is in the second stage where you really begin to live, when you know that they have accepted you. Then you can do *this* !"

As Roberts watched her drop on all fours and run lightly up the wall, he understood.

—**John Kippax**



Blessed—or cursed—with more than normal insight into human foibles, Brian Aldiss this month weaves the pattern of his story round the intangible issues which affect normal human activities. No matter how strong your will-power, something *will alter the course of your plans and decisions.*

INTANGIBLES, INC.

BY BRIAN W. ALDISS

———

Mabel dumped the china salt and pepper pots down at Arthur's end of the table and hurried through to the kitchen to get the supper. His eyes followed her admiringly. She was a fine figure of a young girl ; not too easy to handle, but a good looker. Arthur, on the other hand, looked like a young bull ; none too bright a bull either.

" Drink it while it's hot," she said, putting a bowl of soup before him.

Arthur had just picked up his ladle when he noticed the truck stopped outside in the road. Its hood was up and the driver stood with his head under it, doing no more than gazing dreamily at the engine.

Arthur looked at his steaming soup, at Mabel, back out of the window. He scratched his scalp.

" Poor feller's going to be stranded in the dark in another half-hour," he said, half to himself.

" Yep, it's nearly time we were putting the lights on," she said, half to herself.

" I could maybe earn a couple of dollars going to see what was wrong," he said, changing tack.

" ' This is food like money won't buy or time won't improve on,' my mother used to say," Mabel murmured, stirring her bowl without catching his eye.

They had been married only four months, but it had not taken Arthur that long to notice the obliquity of their intentions. Even when they were to all intents and purposes conversing together, their two thought-streams seemed never quite to converge, let alone touch. But he was a determined young man, not to be put off by irrelevancies. He stood up.

" I'll just go see what the trouble seems to be out there," he said. And as a useless sop to her culinary pride, he called as he went through the door, " Keep that soup warm—I'll be right back !"

Their little bungalow, which stood in its own untidy plot of ground, was a few hundred yards beyond the outskirts of the village of Hapsville. Nothing grew much along the road bar billboards, and the stationary truck added to the desolation. It looked threadbare, patched and mended, as if it had been travelling the roads long before trains or stage coaches.

The overalled figure by the hood waited till Arthur was almost up to it before snapping the hood down and turning round. He was a small man with glasses and a long, long face which must have measured all of eighteen inches from crown of skull to point of jaw. In among a mass of crinkles, a likeable expression of melancholy played.

" Got trouble, stranger ?" Arthur asked.

" Who hasn't ?" His voice, too, sounded a mass of crinkles.

" Anything I can do ?" Arthur enquired. " I work at the garage just down the road in Hapsville."

" Well," the crinkled man said, " I come a long way. I daresay if you pressed me I could put a bowl of steaming soup between me and the night."

" Your timing sure is good," Arthur said. " You better come on in and see what Mabel can do. Then I'll have a look in at your engine."

He led the way back to the bungalow. The crinkled man scuffled his feet in the mat, rubbed his spectacles on his dirty overalls and went in. Mabel had worked fast. She'd had time, when she saw through the window that they were

coming, to toss their two bowls of soup back into the pan, add water, put the pan back to heat on the stove and set a clean apron over her dirty one.

" We got a guest here for supper, Mabel," Arthur said. " I'll light up the lamp."

" How d'you do ?" Mabel said, putting out her hand to the crinkled man. " Welcome to our hospitality."

She said it just right : made it really sound welcoming, yet by slipping in that big word ' hospitality ' let him know she was putting herself out for him. Mabel was educated. So was Arthur, of course. They both read all the papers and magazines. But while Arthur just poured over the scientific or engineering or mechanical bits (those three words all meant the same thing to Mabel), she studied up on psychological or educational or etiquette articles. If they could have drawn pictures of their idea of the world, Arthur's would have been of a lot of interlocking cogs, Mabel's of a lot of interlocking school marms.

They sat down at the table as soon as the diluted soup boiled, and sipped out of their bowls.

" You often through this way ?" Arthur asked his visitor.

" Every so often. I haven't got what you might call a regular route."

" Just what model is your truck ?"

" You're a mechanic down at the garage, eh ?"

Thus deflected, Arthur said, " Why, no, I didn't call myself that—did I ? I'm just a hand down there, but I'm learning, I'm learning fast."

He was about to put the question about the truck again, but Mabel decided it was time she spoke.

" What product do you travel in, sir ?" she asked.

The long face wrinkled like tissue paper.

" You can't rightly say I got a product," he said, leaning forward eagerly with his elbows on the bare table. " Perhaps you didn't see the sign on my vehicle : ' Intangibles, Inc.' It's a bit worn now."

" So you travel in tangibles, eh ?" Arthur said. " They grow down New Orleans way, don't they? Must be interesting things to market."

" Dearie me !" exclaimed Mabel crossly, almost blushing. " Didn't you hear the gentleman properly, Arthur ? He said he peddles intangibles. They're not things at all : surely you

knew that? They're more like—well, like something that isn't there at all."

She came uncertainly to a halt, looking confused. The little man was there instantly to rescue both of them.

"The sort of intangibles I deal in are there all right," he said. "In fact, you might almost say they're the things that govern people's lives. But because you can't see them, people are apt to discount them. They think they can get through life without them, but they can't."

"Try a sample of this cheese," Mabel said, piling up their empty bowls. "You were saying, sir . . ."

The crinkled man accepted a square of cheese and a slab of home-baked bread and said, "Well, now I'm here, perhaps I could offer you good folks an intangible."

"We're mighty poor," Arthur said quickly. "We only just got married and we think there may be a baby on its way for next spring. We can't afford luxuries."

"I'm happy to hear about the babe," the crinkled man said. "But you understand I don't want money for my goods. I reckon you already gave me an intangible: hospitality; now I ought to give you one."

"Well, if it's like that . . ." Arthur said. But he was thinking that this old fellow was getting a bit whimsical and had better be booted out as soon as possible. People were like that: they were either friendly or unfriendly, and unfortunately there were as many ways of being objectionable while being friendly as there were being unfriendly.

Chewing hard on a piece of crust, the crinkled man turned to Mabel and said, "Now let us take your own case, and find out which intangibles you require. What is your object in life?"

"She ain't got an object in life," Arthur said flatly. "She's married to me now."

At once Mabel was ready with a sharp retort, but somehow her guest was there first with a much milder one. Shaking his head solemnly at Arthur, he said, "No I don't quite think you've got the hang of what I mean. Even married people have all sorts of intangibles, ambition and whatnot—and most of them are kept a dead secret." He turned to look again at Mabel, and his glance was suddenly very penetrating as he continued "Some wives, for instance, take it into their pretty heads very early in marriage always to run counter to

their husbands' wishes. It gets to be their main intangible and you can't shake 'em out of it."

Mabel said nothing to this, but Arthur stood up angrily. The words had made him more uneasy than he would confess even to himself.

" Don't you go saying things like that about Mabel !" he said in a bull-like voice. " It's none of your business and it ain't true ! Maybe you'd better finish up that bread and go and see anybody don't pinch your truck !"

Mabel was also up.

" Arthur Jones !" she said. " That's not polite to a guest. He wasn't meaning me personally, so just you sit down and listen to a bit of conversation. It isn't as if we get so much of that."

Squashed, Arthur sat down. The crinkled man's long crinkled face regarded him closely, immense compassion in the eyes.

" Didn't mean to be rude," Arthur muttered. He fiddled awkwardly with the salt pot.

" That's all right. Intangibles can be difficult things to deal with—politeness, for one. The only way is to use will power with them." He sighed. " Will power certainly is needed. Have you got will power, young man ?"

" Plenty," Arthur said. The crinkled man seemed unable to understand how irritated he was, which of course made the irritation all the greater. He twiddled the salt pot at a furious speed.

" And what's your object in life ?" persisted the crinkled man.

" Oh, why should you worry ?"

" Everyone's happier with an object in life," the crinkled man said.

This sounded to Mabel very like the maxims she read in her magazines, the founts of all wisdom. Pleasure shared is pleasure doubled ; a life shared is life immortal. Working for others is the best way of working for yourself. Cast your bread upon the waters : even sharks got to live. Mabel was not too happy about this little man in overalls, but obviously he could teach her husband a thing or two.

" Of course you've got an object in life, honey," she said.

Honey raised his bovine eyes and looked at her, then lowered them again. A crumpled hand slid across the table

and removed that fidgetting salt pot. Arthur had a distinct feeling he was being got at from all sides.

" Sure, I got objects . . . Make a bit of money . . . Raise some children . . ." he muttered, adding, " And knock a bit of shape into the yard."

" Very commendable, very honourable," the crinkled man said in a warm tone. " Those are certainly *fine* objectives for a young man. To cultivate the garden is especially proper. But those, after all, are the sort of objectives everyone has. A man needs some special, private ambition, just to distinguish himself from the herd."

" I'm never likely to mistake myself for anyone else, mister," Arthur said unhappily. He could tell just by Mabel's silence she approved of this interrogation. Seizing the pepper pot, he began to twirl that.

" Haven't you got any special, private ambitions of your own ?"

Arthur didn't know what to say without sounding stupid, so he sat there looking stupid. The crinkled man politely removed the twirling pepper pot from his hand, and Mabel said with subdued ferocity, " Well, go on then, don't be ashamed to admit it if you've got no aim in life."

Arthur lumbered up from the table.

" I'm sorry," he said. " I can't say any more than what I have. I don't reckon there's anything in your cargo for me."

" On the contrary," said the crinkled man, his voice losing none of its kindness. " I have just what you need. For every size of mentality I have a suitable size of intangible."

" Well I don't want it," Arthur said stubbornly. " I'm happy enough as I am. Don't you get bringing those things in here !"

" Arthur, I don't believe you've taken in a word this gentleman's been—" Mabel began.

" You keep out of this !" Arthur told her. " All I know is he's trying to put something over on me and you're helping him."

They confronted each other, the crinkled man sitting quietly nursing the two pots. Mabel's expression changed from one of rebellion to anguish ; she put a hand to her womb.

" The baby's hurting me," she said.

In an instant, Arthur was round the table, his arms about her, consoling her, penitent. But when she peeped once at

the crinkled man, he was watching her hard, and his eyes held that penetrating quality again. Arthur also caught that glance and, misinterpreting it, said guiltily, " Do you reckon I ought to get a doctor ?"

" It would be a waste of money," the crinkled man said.

This obviously relieved Arthur, but he felt bound to say, " They do say Doc Smallpiece is a good doctor."

" Maybe," said the crinkled man. " But doctors are no use against intangibles, which is what you're dealing with here . . . Ah, a human soul is a wonderfully dark and intricate place ! Funny thing is, it could do so much, but it's in such a conflict it can do so little."

But Arthur was feeling strong again now he was touching Mabel.

" Go on, you pessimistic character," he scoffed. " Mabel and me're going to do a lot of things in our life."

The crinkled man shook his head and looked ineffably sad. For a moment they thought he would cry.

" That's the whole trouble," he said. " You're not. You're going to do nothing thousands of people aren't doing exactly the same at exactly the same time. Too many intangibles are against you. You can't pull in one direction alone for five minutes, never mind pulling together."

Arthur banged his fist on the table.

" That's not true, and you can get to hell out of here. I can do anything I want. I got will power !"

" Very well."

Now the crinkled man stood up, pushing his chair aside. He picked up the pepper pot and the salt pot and plonked them side by side, not quite touching on the edge of the table.

" Here's a test for you," he said. His voice, though still unraised, was curiously impressive. " I put these two pots here. How long could you keep these two pots here, without moving them, without touching them at all, in exactly that same place ?"

For just a moment, Arthur hesitated.

" As long as I liked," he said stubbornly.

" No, you couldn't," the visitor contradicted.

" Course I could ! This is my place, I do what I like in it. It's a fool thing to want to do, but I could keep them pots there a year if need be."

" Ah, I see ! You'd use your will power to keep them there, eh ?" The tone was gently derisive.

" Why not ?" Arthur asked.

The long face swung to and fro, the shoulders shrugged.

" You can't test will power like that," he said. " Will power is something that should last a life time. You're not enough of an individualist to have that kind of will power."

" Want to bet on that ?" Arthur asked.

" Certainly."

" Right. Then I'll bet you I can keep those pots untouched on that table for a lifetime—my lifetime."

The crinkled man laughed. He took a pipe out of his pocket and commenced to light it.

" I won't take you on, son," he said, " because I know you'd never do it and then you'd be disappointed with yourself. You see, a little thing like that is not so simple ; you'd run up against all those intangibles in the soul I was talking about."

" To hell with them !" Arthur exploded. His blood was now thoroughly up. " I'm telling you I could do it."

" And I'm telling you you couldn't. For why ? Because in maybe two, maybe five, say maybe ten years you'd suddenly say to yourself, ' It's not worth the bother—I give up '; or you'd say, ' Why should I be bound by what I said when I was young and foolish ? '; or a friend would come in, and accidentally knock the pots off the table ; or your kids would grow up and take the pots ; or your house would burn down ; or something else. I tell you it's impossible to do even a simple thing with all the intangibles against you. They and the pots would beat you."

"He's quite right," Mabel agreed. " It's a silly thing to do and you couldn't do it."

And that was what settled it.

Arthur rammed his fists deep down into his pockets and stood over the two pots.

" I bet you these pots will stay here, untouched, all my life," he said. " Take it or leave it."

" You can't—" Mabel began, but the crinkled man silenced her with a gesture and turned to Arthur.

" Good," he said. " I shall pop in occasionally—if I may —to see how things are going. And in exchange I give—I have already given—you one of my best intangibles : an objective in life."

He paused for Arthur to speak, but the young man only continued to stare at the pots as if hypnotised.

It was Mabel who asked, " And what is his objective ?"

As he turned towards the door, the crinkled man gave a light laugh, not exactly pleasant, not exactly cruel.

" Why, guarding those pots," he said. " Goodnight, children."

Several days elapsed before they realised that he went out and drove straight away without any further trouble from the engine of his ancient truck.

At first Mabel and Arthur argued violently over the pots. The arguments were one-sided, since Mabel had only to put her hand on her stomach to win them. She tried to show him how stupid the bet was ; sometimes he would admit this, sometimes not. She tried to show him how unimportant it all was ; but that he would never admit. The crinkled man had bored right through Arthur's obtuseness and anger and touched a vital spot.

Before she realised this, Mabel did her best to get Arthur to remove the pots from the table. Afterwards, she fell silent. She tried to wait in patience, to continue life as if nothing had happened.

It was Arthur's turn to argue against the pots. They changed sides as easily as if they had been engaged in a strange dance. Which they were.

" Why should we put up with the nuisance of them ?" he asked her. " He was only a garrulous old man making a fool of us."

" You know you wouldn't feel right if you did move the pots—yet anyhow. It's a matter of psychology."

" I told you it was a trick," growled Arthur, who had a poor opinion of the things his wife read about.

" Besides, the pots don't get in your way," Mabel said, changing her line of defence. " I'm about the place more than you and they don't really worry me."

" I think about them all the while when I'm down at the pumps," he said.

" You'd think more about them if you moved them. Leave them just a few more days."

He stood glowering at the two little china pots. Slowly he raised a hand to skitter them off the table and across the room. Then he turned away instead, and mooched into the garden.

The next stage was that neither of them spoke about the pots. By mutual consent they avoided the subject and Mabel dusted round the pots. Yet the subject was not dropped. It was like an icy draught between them. An intangible.

Two years passed before the antediluvian vehicle drove through Hapsville again. It was Arthur's twenty-fourth birthday, and once more it was evening as the overalled figure with the long skull walked up to the door.

" If he gets funny about those pots, I swear I'll throw them right in his face," Arthur said. It was the first time either of them had mentioned the pots for months.

" You'd better come in," Mabel said to the crinkled man.

He smiled disarmingly, charmingly, and thanked her, but hovered where he was, on the step. As he caught sight of Arthur, his spectacles shone, every wrinkle animated itself over the surface of his face. He read so easily in Arthur's expression just what he wanted to know that he did not even have to look over their shoulders at the table for confirmation.

" I won't stop," he said. " Just passing through and thought I'd drop this in."

He fished a small wooden doll out of a pocket and dangled it before them.

" A present for your little daughter," he said, thrusting it towards Mabel.

Mabel had the toy in her hand before she asked in sudden astonishment, " How did you guess it was a girl ?"

" I saw a frock drying on the line as I came up the path," he said. " Goodnight !"

They stood there watching the little truck drive off and vanish up the road. Both fought to conceal their disappointment over the brevity of the meeting.

" At least he didn't come in and rile you with his clever talk," Mabel said.

" I wanted him to come in," Arthur said petulantly. " I wanted him to see we'd got the pots just where he left them."

" You were too rude to him last time."

" Why didn't you make him come in !" he asked unfairly.

" Last time you didn't want him in, this time you do ! Really, Arthur, you're a hard man to please. I reckon you're most happy when you're unhappy."

He swore at her. They began to argue more violently, until Mabel clapped a hand to her stomach and assumed a pained look.

This time it was a boy. They called him Mike and he grew into a little fiend. Nothing was safe from him. Arthur had to nail four walls of wood round the pots to keep them unmolested ; as he told Mabel, it wasn't as if it was a valuable table.

" For crying aloud, a grown man like you !" she exclaimed impatiently. " Throw away those pots at once. They're getting a regular superstition with you."

He stared darkly and belligerently at her until she turned away.

Mike was almost ten years old and away bird-snaring in the woods before the crinkled man called again. He arrived just as Arthur was setting out for the garage, and smiled engagingly as Mabel ushered him into the front room. Even his worn old overalls looked unchanged.

" There are your two pots, mister," Arthur said proudly. " Never been touched since you put 'em there."

Sure enough, there the pots stood, upright as sentries.

" Very good, very good !" the crinkled man said, looking really delighted. He pulled out a notebook and made an entry. " Just like to keep a note on all my customers," he told them apologetically.

" You mean to say you've folks everywhere guarding salt pots ?" Mabel asked, fidgetting because she could hear the two-year-old crying out at the back.

" Oh, they don't only guard salt pots," the crinkled man said. " Some of them spend their lives collecting match box tops, or sticking little stamps in albums, or writing words in books, or hoarding coins. Sometimes I help them, sometimes they manage on their own. I can see you two are doing fine."

" It's been a great nuisance keeping the pots just so," Mabel said. " A man can't tell how much nuisance."

The crinkled man turned onto her that penetrating look she remembered so well, but said nothing. Instead, he switched to Arthur and enquired how work at the garage was going.

" I'm head mechanic now," Arthur said, not without pride. " And Hapsville's growing into a big place now—yes, sir ! We've got all the work we can handle."

" You're doing fine," the crinkled man assured him again. " But I'll be back to see you soon."

Soon was fourteen years.

The battered old vehicle with its scarcely distinguishable sign drew up and the crinkled man climbed out. He looked about with interest.

Hapsville had gradually crawled out to Arthur's place and embraced it with neat little wooden doll's houses. Arthur's place itself had changed. A big new room was tacked onto one wing; the whole outside had been repainted; a lawn with rose bushes fringing it lapped up to the front fence.

"They're doing O.K.," the crinkled man said, and went and knocked on the door.

A young lady of sixteen greeted him, and guessed at once who he was.

"My name's Jennifer, and I'm sixteen and I've been looking forward to seeing you for ages. And you'd better come on in because Mom's out in the yard doing washing and you can come and see the pots because they're just in the same place and never once been moved. Father says it's a million years' bad luck if we touch them, 'cause they're intangible."

And chattering away she led him into the old room. It too had changed. A bed stood in it now and several faded photographs hung on the wall. An old man with a face as pink as sunset sat in a rocking chair and nodded contentedly when Jennifer and the crinkled man entered. "That's Father's Pop," the girl explained.

One thing was familiar in the room. A bare table stood in its usual place, and on it, near the edge and not quite touching each other, were two little china pots. Jennifer left the crinkled man admiring them while she ran to fetch her mother.

"Where are the other children?" the crinkled man asked Father's Pop by way of conversation.

"Jennifer's all that's left," Father's Pop said. "Prue, the eldest, she got married like they all do. That would be before I first came here. Six years, most like. She married a miller called Muller. Funny thing that, huh?—A miller called Muller. And they got a little girl called Millie. Now Mike, Arthur's boy, he was a young dog. He was good for nothing but reproducin'. And when there was too many young ladies that should have known better around here expecting—why, then young Mike pinches hold of an auto from his father's garage and drives off and joins the Navy, and they never seen him since."

The crinkled man made a smacking noise with his lips, which suggested that although he disapproved of such carryings on he had heard similar tales before.

" And how's Arthur doing ?" he asked.

" Business is good. Maybe you didn't know he bought a new garage down town last fall ?"

" I haven't been around these parts for nearly fifteen years."

" Hapsville's going up in the world," Father's Pop murmured. " Of course, that means it ain't such a comfortable place to live in . . . Yes, Arthur bought up the old garage when his boss retired. Clever boy, Arthur—a bit stupid, but clever."

When Mabel appeared, she was drying her hands on a towel. Like nearly everything else, she had changed. Her last birthday had been her forty-eighth, and the years had thickened her. The spectacles perched on her nose were a tribute to the persistance with which she had tracked down home psychology among the advert columns. Experience like a grindstone had sharpened her expression.

Nevertheless, she allowed the crinkled man a smile and greeted him cordially.

" Arthur's at work," she said. " I'll draw you a mug of cider."

" Thank you," he said, " but I must be getting along. Only just called in to see how you all were doing."

" Oh, the pots are still there," Mabel said, with a sudden approach to asperity, sweeping her hand towards the pepper and salt. Catching sight as she did so of Jennifer lolling in the doorway, she called, " Jenny, you get on stacking those apples like I showed you. I want to talk with this gentleman."

She took a deep breath and turned back to the crinkled man. " Now," she said. " You keep longer and longer intervals between your calls here. I thought you were never going to show up again. We've had a very good offer for this plot of ground, enough money to set us up for life in a better house in a nicer part of town."

" I'm so glad to hear of it." The long face crinkled engagingly.

" Oh, you're glad, are you ?" Mabel said. " Then let me tell you this : Arthur keeps turning that very good offer down just because of these two pots here. He says if he sells up the pots will be moved, and he don't like the idea of them being moved. Now what do you say to that, Mister Intangible ?"

The crinkled man spread wide his hands and shook his head from side to side. His wrinkles interwove busily.

" Only one thing to say to that," he told her. " Now this little bet we made has suddenly become a major inconvenience, it must be squashed. How'll it be if I remove the pots right now before Arthur comes home ; then you can explain to him for me, eh ?"

He moved over to the table, extending a hand to the pots.

" Wait !" Mabel cried. " Just let me think a moment before you touch them."

" Arthur'd never forgive you if you moved them pots," Father's Pop said from the background.

" It's too much responsibility for me to decide," Mabel said, furious with herself for her indecision. " When you think how we guarded them while the kids were small. Why, they've stood there quarter of a century . . ."

Something caught in her voice.

" Don't you fret," the crinkled man consoled her. " You wait till Arthur's back, and then tell him I said to forget all about our little bet. Like I explained to you right back in the first place, it's impossible to do even a simple thing with all the intangibles against you."

Absent-mindedly, Mabel began to dry her hands on the towel all over again.

" Can't you wait and explain it to him yourself?" she asked. " He'll be back in half an hour for a bite of food."

" Sorry. My business is booming too—got to go and see a couple of young fellows breeding a line of dogs that can't bark. I'll be back along presently."

And the crinkled man came back as he promised, nineteen years later. There was snow in the air and mush on the ground, and Arthur's place was hard to find. A big cinema then showing a film called " Lovelight " bounded it on one side while a new by-pass shuttled automobiles along the other.

" Looks like he never sold out," the crinkled man commented to himself.

He went up to the front door, hesitating there and looking round again. The garden, so trim last time, was a wilderness now ; the roses had given way to cabbage stumps, old tickets and ice cream cartons fringed the cinema wall. The house itself looked a little rickety.

" They'd never hear me knock for all this traffic," the crinkled man said. " I better take a peek inside."

In the room where the china pots still stood, a fire burned, warming an old man in a rocking chair. He and the intruder peered at each other through the dim air.

"Father's Pop!" the crinkled man exclaimed. For a moment he had thought . . .

"What you say?" the old fellow asked. "Can't hear a thing these days. Come here . . . Oh, it's you! Mister Intangibles calling in again. Been a long while since you were round."

"All of nineteen years."

"What you say? Didn't think to see me still here, eh?" Father's Pop asked. "Ninety-seven I was last November. Fit as a fiddle, too, barring this deafness."

Someone else had entered the room by the rear door. It was a woman of about forty-five, plain, dressed in unbecoming mustard green.

"Didn't know we'd company," she said. Then she recognised the crumpled man.

"Let's see," he said. "You'd be—why, you must be Prue, the one who married the miller!"

"I'll thank you not to mention him," Prue said sharply. "We saw the last of him two years ago, and good riddance to him."

"Is that so? Divorce, eh? Well, it's fashionable, my dear . . . And your little girl?"

"Millie's married, and so's my son Rex, and both living in better cities than Hapsville," she told him.

"That so? I hadn't heard of Rex."

"If you want to see my father, he's through here," Prue said abruptly, evidently anxious to end the conversation.

She led him into a bedroom. Here curtains were drawn against the bleakness outside and a bright bedside lamp gave an illusion of cosiness. Arthur, a *Popular Mechanics* on his knees, sat huddled up in bed.

It was thirty-three years since they had seen each other. Arthur was hardly recognisable, until you discovered the old contours of the bull under his heavy jowls. During middle age he had piled up bulk which he was now losing. His eyebrows were ragged; they all but concealed his eyes, which now lit in recognition.

Despite the gulf of years which separated their meeting, Arthur began to speak as if it were only yesterday they were together.

" They're still in there on the table. Have you seen them ?" he asked eagerly.

" I saw them. You've certainly got will power."

" They never been touched all these years ! How . . . how long's that been, mister ?"

" Forty-five years, all but."

" Forty-five years !" Arthur echoed. " It don't seem that long . . . Shows what an object in life'll do, I suppose. Forty-five years . . . You ain't changed much, mister."

" Keeps a feller young, my job," the crinkled man said.

" We got Prue back here now to help out," Arthur said, following his own line of thought. " She's a good girl. She'd get you a bite to eat, if you asked her. Mabel's out."

The crinkled man polished up his spectacles on his overalls.

" You haven't told me what you're in bed with," he said gently.

" Oh. I sprained my back down at the garage. Trying to lift a chassis instead of bothering to get a jack. We had a lot of work on hand. I was aiming to save time."

" How many garages you got now ?"

" Just one. We—I got a lot of competition from big companies, had to sell up the down-town garage. It's a hard trade. Maybe I should have gone in for something else, but it's too late to think of changing now . . . Doctor says I can get about again in the spring."

" How long have you been in bed ?" the crinkled man asked.

" Weeks, on and off. First it's better, then it's worse. You know how these things are. Mabel goes down every day to look after the cash for me. Look, about them pots—"

" Last time I came, I told your lady wife to call the whole thing off."

Arthur plucked peevishly at the bedclothes, his hands shining redly against the grey coverlet. In a moment of pugnacity he looked more his old self.

" You know it can't be called off," he said pettishly. " Why d'you talk so silly ? It's just something I'm stuck with. It's more than my life's worth to think of moving those two pots now. Mabel says it's a jinx and that's just about what it is. Move them and anything might happen."

The long head wagged sadly from side to side.

" You got it wrong," the crinkled man said. " It was just a bet we made one night."

" Yes—and now you're trying to make me lose it !" Arthur said excitedly. " I never did trust you and your Intangibles too much. Don't think I've forgotten what you said. You said something would make me change my mind, you thought I'd go in there and knock 'em over one day. Well—I never have. We've even stuck on in this one place because of those pots, and that's been to our disadvantage."

" Guess there's nothing I can say then."

" Wait ! Don't go !" Arthur stretched out a hand, for the crinkled man had moved towards the door. " There's something I want to ask you."

" Go ahead."

" Those pots—although we never touch 'em, if you look at them you'll see something. You'll see they got no dust on them ! Shall I tell you why ? It's the traffic vibration from the new bypass. It jars all the dust off the pots."

" Useful," the crinkled man said cautiously.

" But that's not what worries me," Arthur continued. " That traffic keeps on getting worse all the time. I'm scared that it will get so bad it shakes the pots right off the table. They're near the edge, aren't they ? They could easily be shaken off. Supposing they *are* shaken off—does that count?"

He peered up at the crinkled man's face, but lamplight reflecting off his spectacles hid the eyes. There was a long silence which the crinkled man seemed to break with reluctance

" You know the answer to that one all the time, Arthur," he said. It was the only time he ever used the other's name.

" Yep," Arthur said slowly. " Reckon I do. If they were rattled off the table, it would mean the intangibles had got me."

Gloomily, he sank back onto the pillows. The *Practical Mechanics* slid unregarded onto the floor. After a moment's hesitation, the crinkled man turned and went to the door ; there, he hesitated again.

" Hope you'll be up and about again in the spring," he said softly.

That made Arthur sit up abruptly, groaning as he did so.

" Come and see me again !" he said. " You promise you'll be round again ?"

" I'll be round," the crinkled man said.

Sure enough his antique truck came creaking back into the lanes of Hapsville traffic another twenty-one years later. He turned off the bypass and pulled up.

" Neighbourhoods certainly do change fast," he said.

The cinema looked as if it had been shut down for a long time. Now it was evidently used as a furniture warehouse, for a big pantechnicon was loading up divans outside it. Behind Arthur's place, a block of ugly flats stood ; children shrieked and yelled down its side alley. On the other side of the busy highway was a row of small stores selling candies and cotton shirts and the like.

Arthur's place was hardly visible. The garden in front of it had obviously been sold off. A shiny drug store stood there, paper-backs spilling out of it onto the sidewalk.

". . . certainly do change fast," the crinkled man murmured.

He made his way down a narrow side alley, and there, squeezed behind the rear of the drug store, was Arthur's place. Nature, pushed firmly out elsewhere, had reappeared here. Ivy straggled up the posts of the porch and weeds grew tall enough to look in all the windows.

" What do you want ?"

The crinkled man would have jumped if he had been in the habit of jumping. His challenger was someone standing in the half-open doorway, smoking a pipe. It was a man in late middle-age, a bull-like man with heavy, unshaven jowls.

" Arthur !" the crinkled man exclaimed. And then the other stepped out into a better light to get a closer look.

" No, it can't be Arthur," the crinkled man said. " You're Mike, huh ?"

" I'm Mike. So what ?" the other asked, not relaxing his first surly tone.

" Yes, that's right. You'd be—sixty-four ?"

" What if I am ? Who are you—police ? No—wait a bit ! I know who you are. How come you arrived here today of all days ?"

" Why, I just got round to calling."

" I see." Mike paused and spat into the weeds. He was the image of his father, and evidently did not think any faster.

" You're the old pepper and salt guy ?" he enquired.

" You might call me that, yes."

" You better go on in and see Ma."

The house was cold and damp and dusty. Mabel hobbled slowly round the bedroom, putting things into a large, black bag. When the crinkled man entered the room, she came close to him and stared at him, nodding to herself.

She was eighty-eight. Under her threadbare coat, she had shrunken to a little old lady. Her spectacles glinted on a nose still sharp but incredibly frail. But when she spoke her voice was as incisive as ever.

"I *thought* you'd be here," she said. "I told them you'd come. You would want to see how it ended, wouldn't you? Well—so you shall. We're selling up. We're going. Prue got married again—another miller, too. And Mike's taking me out to his place—got a little shack in the fruit country."

"And . . . Arthur?" the crinkled man prompted.

She shot him another hard look.

"As if you didn't know!" she exclaimed, her voice too flinty for tears. "They buried him this morning. I didn't go. I'm too old for any funerals but my own."

"I wish I'd come before . . ." he said.

"You always come when you think you'll come," Mabel said. "Arthur kept talking about you, right to the last . . . He never got out his bed again since that time he bust up his back down at the garage. Twenty-one years he lay in that bed there . . ."

She led the way into the front room where they had once drunk diluted soup together. It was very dark there now, a sort of green darkness with the dirty panes and the weeds at the windows. The room was completely empty except for a table with two little china pots standing on it.

The crinkled man made a note in his book and attempted to sound cheerful.

"Arthur won his bet all right! I sure do compliment him," he said. He walked across the room and stood looking down at the two pots.

"To think they've stood there undisturbed for sixty-six years . . ." he said.

"That's just what Arthur thought!" Mabel said. "He never stopped worrying over them. I never told him, but I used to pick them up and dust them every day. He'd have killed me if he found out, I know, but I just couldn't bear to see him believing in something I thought so silly. As you once said, women have got their own intangibles, just like men."

—Brian Aldiss

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