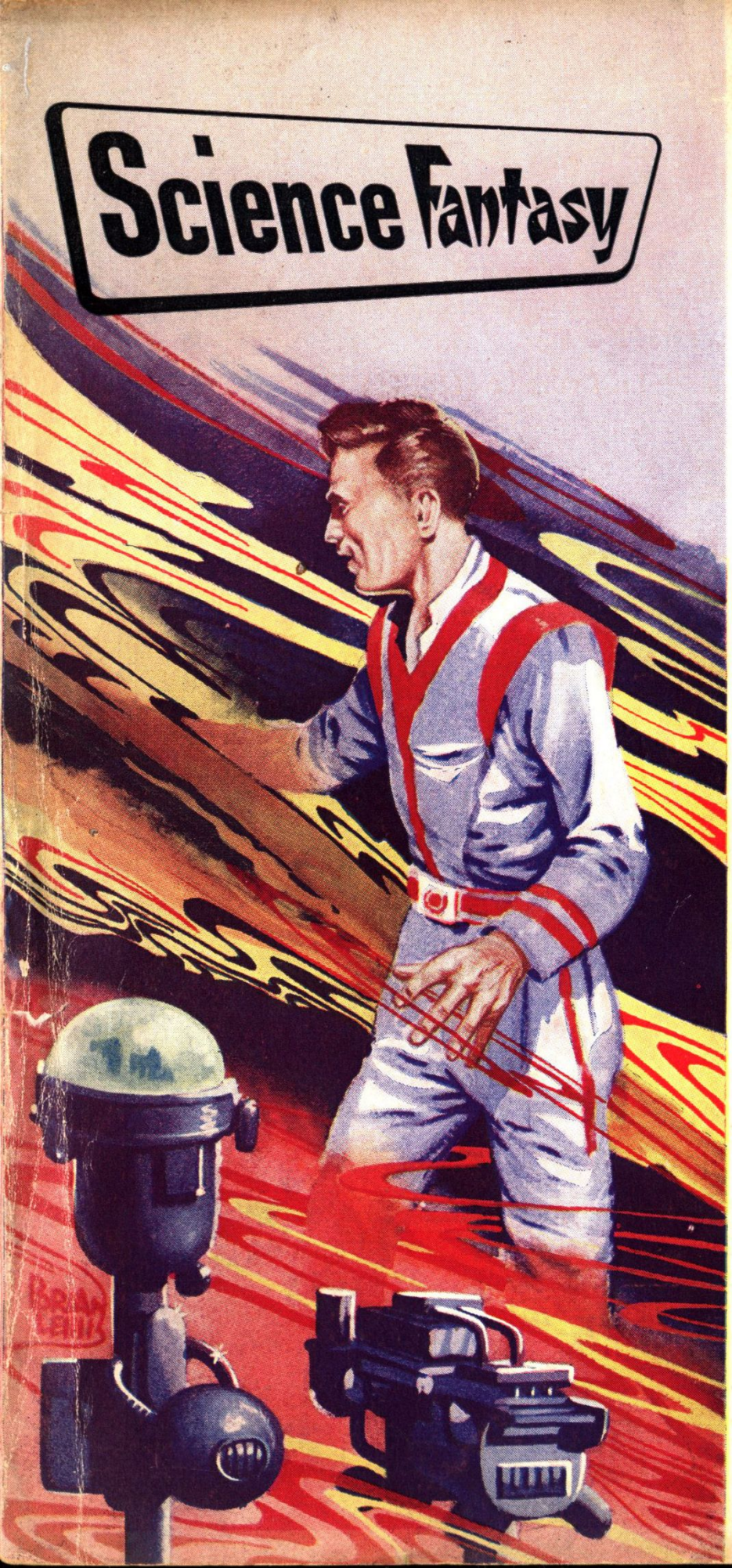
Science Fantasy



No. 46
VOLUME 16
2/6

Short Novel

NEED
Theodore Sturgeon

Short Stories

BEHIND THE CLOUD
Edward Mackin

DISPLACED PERSON
Lee Harding

Article

Studies in Science Fiction
11. KAREL CAPEK
Sam Moskowitz

★

A Nova Publication

★

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Gorwing was a person who knew when anyone needed *something* (*as opposed to* wanting). *It was a peculiar talent—best buried in a small town away from the crowds.*

NEED

BY THEODORE STURGEON

---

one

Some towns seem able to defy not only time, but change ; when this happens in the far hinterland, one is hardly amazed. Yet, amazingly, it happens all the time quite near some of our largest cities. Occasionally one of these is found by the " project " entrepreneur, and becomes the setting for winding windrows of coops and hutches, alternately " ranch " and " split "; yet not even these, and the prefabricated, alien, chain-driven supercilious superservice shopping centres in symbiosis with them, ever become a part of such towns. Whatever span of years it takes to make the " projects " obsolescent only serves to make these towns themselves more solid, more—in the chemical sense—set. Modernity does not and cannot alter the character of such a place, any more than one might alter a suit of chain mail by topping it with a Panama hat.

In such towns are businesses—shops and services—which live as the unassailable town lives, that is to say, in their own way and forever. Purveyors of the same shoes, sheets and sundries as the multicelled merchandizing mammoths sell go

by the board, quite deserving of all that their critics say of them, that they can't keep up with the times, that they're dead and now must lie down. Defiance of time, of change, of anything is, after all, only defiance, and does not in itself guarantee a victory. But certain businesses, by their very nature, may be in a town, may *be* a town and achieve this defiant immortality. Anyone who has reflected with enough detachment on recent history is in a position to realize that, in revolutionary days, there must have been a certain market for genuine antiques made in America of American materials more than a century earlier.

No technology advancing or static can eliminate the window-washer, the launderer, the handyman-smith and their establishments. Fashions in invention might change the vestments of their activity, but never their blood and marrow. The boat-wright becomes a specialist in wooden station-wagon bodies, and then in mobile-home interiors. The blacksmith trades his leather bellows for a drill-press and a rack of epoxy resins, but he is what he was, and his shop is his permanence and his town's.

The general store has passed into the hands of the chains. It, and they, pursue the grail of *everything*, and since to be able to sell everything is on the face of it impossible, they are as impermanent as a military dictatorship that must expand or die, and that dies expanding. But there is another kind of store that sells, not everything, but *anything*. Its hallmark is that it has no grail at all, and therefore no pursuit. It emphatically does not expand. Its stock is that which has been useful or desirable to some people at some time ; its only credo, that anything which has been useful or desirable to some people at some time will again be useful to someone—*anything*.

Here you might find dried flowers under a glass dome, a hand-cranked coffee mill, a toy piano, a two-volume, leather-bound copy of *Dibdin's Journey*, a pair of two-wheel roller skates or a one tube radio set—the tube is a UX-11 and is missing—which tunes with a vario-coupler. You might—you probably would—also find in such a place, a proprietor who could fix almost anything and has the tools to do it with, and who understands that conversation is important and the most important part of it is listening.

Such a town was North Nyack, New York, barely twenty miles from Manhattan, yet—but for superficial scratches—

untouched and unchangeable. It contained such a business, the Anything Shoppe—a title that constituted one of the scratches, being a concession to the transient trade, but one that did not bleed—and such a proprietor. His name was Noat, George Noat. G-Note, naturally, to his friends, who were all the people who knew him. He was the ugliest man in town, but that, like the silliness of his concern's name, was only skin-deep.

Why such a trade should be his, or why he was its, might make for some interesting discussion of cause and effect. The fact—which would contribute nothing to the discussion—remained that there was an *anythingness* about G-Note ; not only would he buy anything, sell anything or fix anything, he would also listen to anyone, help anyone and, from the depths of a truly extraordinary well of the quality called empathy—the ability to feel with another's fingertips, look out through another pair of eyes—he could understand.

To George Noat, Prop., then, at twenty minutes to three one stormy morning, came Gorwing.

" G-Note !" Gorwing roared, pounding on the front door of the Anything Shoppe with force enough to set adance the two sets of pony harness and the cabbage grater that hung against it. " G-Note, Goddammit !"

A dim light appeared in the back of the shop, and G-Note's grotesque face and one T-shirted shoulder, over which a big square hand was pulling a gallus-strap, appeared at the edge of the baize curtain that separated G-Note's working from G-Note's living—the most partial of barriers, which suited him. He called, " It's open !" semaphored and withdrew.

Gorwing, small, quick, black hair, snapping black voice and eyes, sharp white teeth, slammed into the shop. The vibration set a clothing-dummy, atop which was perched a rubber imp carnival mask, teetering, and it turned as it teetered, bearing round on Gorwing indignantly. He and it stared one another in the eye for an angry moment, and then he cursed and snatched off the head and threw it behind the counter. "G-Note !" he barked.

G-Note shuffled into the shop, shrugging into a shawl-like grey cardigan and, with his heavy lids, wringing sleep out of his eyes. "I got that toilet you wanted yesterday," he mumbled. " Real tall, with pink rosebuds on. I bet there wouldn't be another like it from here to—"

" The hell with it," said Gorwing. " That was yesterday. Come *on*, willya ?"

G-Note blinked at him. " Come ?"

" The car, in the car !" Gorwing half cried, in the tones of excessive annoyance applied usually to people who should know by now. It was unfair, because by now G-Note did *not* know. " Hurry *up*, willya ? What do I hafta do to make you hurry up ?"

Gorwing flung open the door, and G-Note peered out into sodden blowing black. " It's raining out."

Gorwing's tight lips emitted a single sibilant explosion, and he raced out, leaving the door open. A moment later there came the sound of a car door slamming. G-Note shrugged and followed, closing the door behind him, and, hunching his shoulders against the driving rain, made his way out to the car. Gorwing had started it and switched on the lights while he was negotiating the puddles, then flung open the door on the driver's side and slid over into the passenger's seat. He shouted something.

" Huh ?" G-Note grunted as he came poking and dripping into the car.

" I said Essex Street and Storms Road, right by the traffic light, and *get goin'*, willya ?"

G-Note got himself settled and got going. " Gosh, Gorwing," he said, protesting gently.

" Quitcher bitchin'," said Gorwing through clamped teeth and curled lips. " Tromp down on that thing."

" Where we goin'?"

" I told you."

" Yeah, but—"

" You'll see when we get there. There's some money in it. You think I'd come out on a night like this if there wasn't some money in it ? Listen, G-Note—" He paused with a mechanical abruptness, as if the machine gun with which he fired his words had jammed.

" What ?"

Unjammed as suddenly, Gorwing shot : " You wouldn't let me down."

" No, I won't do that, but I wish I knew what I was 'sposed to do."

They sloshed over the high crown of Storms Hill and down the winding slope on the other side. The slick blacktop

showed the loom of lights ahead before they saw the lights themselves—gold tinged with green, suddenly with ruby ; the intersection and the traffic signal.

" Cut him out. *quick* ! Don't let'm pick up that guy."

Peering ahead, G-Note saw a car slowing for a waving figure who stood at the far side of the intersection. G-Note seemed not to have heard Gorwing's crackling order, or to have understood ; yet it was as if his hands and feet had. The car lurched forward, cut in to the curb at the right of the other, and almost alongside. Startled, the other driver shifted and pulled away up the hill. At Gorwing's grunted order, G-Note stopped at the curb by the sodden and obviously bewildered pedestrian who had been trying to flag the other car. The man bent and tried to peer into the dark interior. Gorwing rolled down his window.

The man said, " Can you give me a lift ?"

Gorwing reached back and opened the rear door, and the man plunged in. " Thank God," he panted, slamming the door. " I've got to get home, but I mean quick. You going near Rockland Lake ?"

" We're going anywhere you say, mister," said Gorwing. " But it'll cost."

" Oh, that's all right. You're a taxi, hm ?"

" We are now." Gorwing's hard hand took G-Note's elbow squeezed, warned ; but, warning or no, G-Note gasped at what came next : " Rockland Lake costs one hundred bucks from here."

G-Note's gasp was quite lost in the newcomer's wordless and indignant sound.

" What's the matter," Gorwing rasped, " can't raise it ?"

" What kind of holdup is this ?" squeaked the man.

For the second time Gorwing reached back and swung the rear door open. Then he stretched across G-Note and shut off the motor. In the sudden silence, the sluicing of rain across the roof and the passenger's angry breath seemed too loud. Gorwing said, at a quarter the volume and twice the rasp, " I don't much go for that holdup talk."

The man plunged up and out—half out. He stood, with one foot still in the car, and looked up the road and down the road. Nothing moved but the rain. Clearly, they heard the relay in the traffic light saying *clock, chuck* ! as the dim sodden shine of the intersection turning from green to red. To anyone thinking of traffic and transport, it was a persuasive sight. At

three in the morning, chances of anything passing before daylight were remote.

He put his head back in. " Look, whoever you are, I've just got to get to Rockland Lake."

" So by now," said Gorwing, " we would be past Hook Mountain Road more'n halfway there. But you want to talk."

The man made his inarticulate sound and got back in. " Go ahead."

Gorwing, with a touch, checked G-Note's move toward the ignition. " A hundred bucks ?"

" *Yes*, damn you !"

Gorwing turned the dome light on. " Take a good careful look at him," he said. Since he might have said it to either of them, they necessarily looked at one another, G-Note twisting around in his seat to look back, the passenger huddled sullen and glaring in the rear corner. G-Note saw a soft-handed petulant man in his early thirties, with very fine, rather receding reddish hair and surprisingly bright blue eyes.

G-Note's great ugly head loomed over him like an approaching rockfall. The domelight, almost directly overhead, accentuated the heavy ridges of bone over his eyes, leaving the eyes themselves all but invisible in their caves. It gleamed from the strong fleshy arches that walled his wide nostrils and concealed the soft sensitivity of his thin upper lip while making the most of the muscular protruding underlip.

" You'll pay," said Gorwing, grinning wolfishly and switching off the light. " Drive," he said, nudging G-Note. He laughed. " I got a witness and you ain't," he said cheerfully.

" Just hurry," said the passenger.

G-Note, wondering more than anything else at the first laugh he had ever heard from Gorwing, drove. He said, unhappily, " This ain't a fun one, this time."

" Shut up," Gorwing said.

" Can't you go any faster ?" cried the passenger.

He got no response. Only the anxious would feel that this skilled hurtling was not fast enough. No object, including an automobile, was inanimate with G-Note's big hands upon it ; this one moved as if it knew its own way and its own weight.

" In here," said the passenger.

" I always wondered," said Gorwing. His meaning was clear. Many must have wondered just who lived behind these stone posts, these arresting NO ADMITTANCE and PRIVATE ROAD, KEEP OUT and NO TURNING and DEAD END ROAD signs. The drive climbed, turning, and in fifty yards one would have thought the arterial road below had ceased to exist. They came to a T. Neat little signs with arrows said SMITH on the left and POLLARD on the right.

" Left," said the passenger.

They climbed again, and abruptly the road was manicured, rolled, tended, neat. " This will do."

There was a turn-around ; the drive continued, apparently to a garage somewhere. In the howling wet, there was the shadowed white mass of a house. The man opened the door.

" A hundred bucks," Gorwing said.

The man took out his wallet. Gorwing turned on the dome light.

" I have only twenty here. Twenty-one."

" You got it inside." It could have been a question.

" *Damn it* !" the man flared. " Four lousy miles !"

" You was in a awful hurry," Gorwing drawled. He took the twenty, and the one, out of the man's hand. " I want the rest of it."

The man got out of the car and backed off into the rain. From about forty feet, he shrieked at them. He meant, undoubtedly, to roar like a lion, but his voice broke and he shrieked. " Well, I won't pay it !" and then he ran like a rabbit.

" Yes you will !' Gorwing bellowed. He slammed the back door of the car, which, if heard by the fleeing man, must have doubled his speed.

" Don't go out in that," said G-Note.

" Oh, I ain't about to," said Gorwing. " He'll pay in the morning. He'll pay you."

" Me ?"

" You drop me off home and then come back and park here," said Gorwing. " Don't for Pete's sake go back to bed. You want to sleep any more, you do it right here. When he sees you he'll pay. You won't have to say nothing. Just be here."

G-Note started the car and backed, turning. " Oh, why not just let it go ? You got more than it's worth."

Gorwing made a laughing noise. This was not the laugh that had amazed G-Note before ; it was the one that G-Note had thought was all the laughter Gorwing had. It was also all the answer Gorwing would offer.

G-Note said, sadly, " You *like* doing this to that fellow."

Gorwing glanced at the road-signs as they pulled out of the driveway. " Private Road," he read aloud, but not very. It was as if to say, " He can afford it."

" Well," said G-Note again, as they neared North Nyack, " This ain't a fun one, this time."

There had been " fun ones." Like the afternoon Gorwing had come roaring and snapping into his place, just as urgently as he had tonight, demanding to know if G-Note had a copy of *Trials and Triumphs, My Forty Years in The Show Business*, by P. T. Barnum ; and G-Note had ! And they had tumbled it, with a lot of other old books, into two boxes, and had driven out to the end of Carrio Lane, where Gorwing just knew there was somebody who needed the book—not who, not why, just that there was somebody who needed it—and he and G-Note had stood at opposite sides of the lane, each with a box of books, and had bellowed at each other, " You got the P. T. Barnum book over there ?" and " I don't know if I have the P. T. Barnum book here ; have you got the P. T. Barnum book there ?" and " What is the name of the P. T. Barnum book ?" and " *Trials and Triumphs, my Forty Years in The Show Business*," and so on, until, sure enough, a window popped open and a lady called down, " Do one of you men really have Barnum's biography there ?" and when they said they had, she said it was a miracle ; she came down and gave them fifteen dollars for it.

And that other time, when at Gorwing's urgent behest, G-Note had gone on a hot summer's day to stand blinking in the sun at Broad and Main streets, with a heavy ancient hand-cranked music box unwrapped on his shoulder, and the city man had come running up to him to ask what it played : " *Skater's Waltz*," G-Note had told him, " and *My Rosary*." " I'll give you a hundred bucks for it," the man had said, and, when G-Note's jaw dropped and fumbled for an astonished word, he'd made it a hundred and a quarter and had paid it, then and there.

Fun ones, these and others, and it hadn't mattered that the customers (or was it victims ?) paid exorbitantly. They did it it of their own free will, and they seemed really to *need* whatever it was. How Gorwing knew what was needed, and where—but never by whom or why—was a recurrent mystery ; but after a while you stopped asking—because Gorwing wouldn't stand catechizing on the subject—and then you stopped wondering ; you just went along with it, the way you do with automatic shifting, the innards of an IBM machine, or, if you happen not to know, precisely what chemicals are put into the head of a match to make it light. You don't *have* to know.

But this man, this passenger they'd charged twenty-five dollars per mile now ; it wasn't fun. He was a guy in trouble if ever G-Note had seen one, anxious, worried, even frantic—so anxious he'd say yes to a demand like that, even if he did take it back later ; so anxious he was stumbling homeward through the rain at three in the morning. You should help a fellow like that, you shouldn't use his trouble against him. Which didn't seem to bother Gorwing, not one bit : coming into the street-lit area of North Nyack, now, G-Note could glance sidewise at Gorwing's face, see the half grin, the cruel white teeth showing. No, it didn't bother Gorwing.

So . . . you found out new things about people all the time. Such a thing could be surprising, but, if you don't want surprises like that, you just keep away from people. Thus G-Note shrugged away the matter, as he asked, " Where you staying now ?" for Gorwing moved around all the time.

" Just drop me off by O'Grady's."

O'Grady's, the poolhall, was across town from G-Note's place, on the same avenue ; yet, passing his own shop, G-Note turned right and made the usual wide detour past the hospital. He made a U-turn at the poolhall and stopped. For a good-night, Gorwing had only, " Now you said you wouldn't let me down."

" All right," said G-Note.

" Forty-sixty, you and me," said Gorwing, and turned away.

G-Note drove off.

two

Eloise Smith hoped Jody wouldn't be mad. His was not the towering rage of this one nor the sullen grumps of that one, but a waspish, petty, verbose kind of anger, which she had neither the wit nor the words to cope with. She loved Jody and tried her very best to have everything the way he wanted it, but it was hard, sometimes, to know what would annoy him. And when anything did, sometimes she had to go through an hour or more of his darting, flicking admonishments before she even knew what it was.

She'd broken the telephone. Kicked the wire right out of the wall—oh, how *clumsy* ! But she'd done worse than that from time to time, and he'd just laughed. Or she'd done much less serious things and he'd carried on just terrible. Well . . . she'd just have to wait and see. She hoped she could stay awake, waiting—goodness, he was late. Elks nights were always the latest ; he was secretary, and was always left to lock the hall after the meeting. But he usually got home by two anyway—it was three already, and still no sign of—oh—*there* he . . .

She ran and opened the door. He spun in, dripping, out of breath. He slammed the door and shot the bolt, and pushed past her to peer out the front window. Not that anything could be seen out there. He turned from the window. He looked wild. She stood before him, clutching her negligee against her breast.

" Eloise . . . you all right ?"

" All right ? Why, of course I'm all right !"

" Thank God !" He pushed past her again, darted to the living room door, flicked his gaze across and back. " You all alone ?"

" Well, not since you got here," she said, in a hopeless attempt to produce some levity. " Here, you're wet through. Give me your hat. You poor—"

" It might interest you to know . . . you've driven me half out . . . of my mind," he panted. She had never seen him like this. He might be a little short of breath from running from the car to the house, but not this much, and it should be, well, tapering off. It wasn't. It seemed to get more marked as he talked. He was very pale. His red-rimmed eyes and the rain running off his bland features gave him the ludicrous expression of a five-year-old who has bumped his head and is

trying not to cry. She followed him into the living room and rounded on him, to face him, and for the third time he pushed past her, this time to fling open the dining room door. She said timidly, " Jody, I broke the telephone. I mean, I fell over the wire and it came out."

" Oh you did, did you."

He was still panting. " Jody !" she cried, " whatever is the *matter* ? What's *happened* ?"

" Oh, what's happened ?" he barked. His eyes were too round. " I call you up and somebody cuts the wire, as far as I know. I rush out of the hall to the car and the door slams behind me, that's all. My keys on the table. Can't get back in, can't start the car. Try my best to get here quickly. Hitch-hiking. Get waylaid by a couple of the ugliest hoodlums you ever saw, they *robbed* me."

" Oh dear—did they hurt you, honey ?"

" They did not. Matter of fact," he panted, " I told them off, but good. And they better not fool with me again. Not that they will—I guess they learned their lesson." Angrily, proudly, he hitched his shoulders, a gesture that made him aware of his wet coat, which at last he began to remove. She ran to help him. " Oh Jody, Jody darling, but you didn't have to rush back like that . . ."

" Didn't I," he said solemnly, in a tone dripping with meaning, not one whit of which she understood. He pulled himself glaring, away from her, and, while she stood clutching her negligee to herself again, he ponderously took off the coat, glaring at her.

" Oh, I'm *so* sorry. You poor dear." She thought, suddenly, of a woman she had seen in the parking lot at the supermarket, whose child had bolted in front of a car. People had shrieked, brakes had squealed, the woman had run out to scoop up her frightened but unharmed youngster—and, in her relief, had whaled the tar out of him.

That was it—Jody had been so terribly worried about her, he'd got into all this trouble rushing to help her, and now that he knew she was safe he was, in effect, spanking her.

She grew very tender, very patient. " Oh *Jody* . . ." she said fondly.

" You won't ' Oh Jody ' out of this one," he said.

" Well, I'm *sorry* !" she cried, and, " Oh, Jody, what is it ? Is it the telephone ? Will it be hard to get it fixed ?"

" The *telephone* can be fixed," he growled in a voice again inexplicably loaded with meaning. He passed through the dining room into the kitchen, again flicking his glance here, there, up, across. " Got everything put away," he said, looking at the glass cupboard, the dish shelf.

" Well, don't I always ?"

" Doubtless," he said bitterly. He opened the refrigerator.

" Let me fix—"

" I'll do it myself," he said.

Her tenderness and patience gave out at that point. She said in a small voice, " I'll go to bed then," and when he did not respond, she went upstairs, lay down and cried.

She managed to be silent, stiff and silent, when he came upstairs, and lay in the dark with her eyes squeezed shut while he undressed and washed and got into his pyjamas and into the other bed. She dearly hoped he'd say something, but he didn't. After a long time, she whispered, " Well, good night, Jody." He made a sound which might have been an offensive " Ha !" or just a grunt ; she couldn't be sure. She thought he fell asleep after a while, and then she did, too—lightly, troubled.

The glare of her bed lamp awoke her. Up through it, and up through the confusion of puzzlement and sleepiness, she blinked at Jody. Seen so, standing by her bed and glaring down at her, he looked very large. He never had before.

He said, " You'd better tell me all about it right now."

She said, " Wh-what time is it ?"

" Now you listen to me, Eloise. I've learned a whole lot of things in the last few hours. About you. About me. About—" Suddenly he raised his voice ; at the rim of the glare of light, the vein at the side of his neck swelled. " I'm just too dog-goned nice to everybody. When I told off those thugs, I tell you, something happened to me, and from now on I won't stand for it any more !"

" Jody—"

" Two of them, twice my size, and I told *them*."

" You did ?"

In retrospect, Eloise was to look painfully back upon this moment and realize that on it turned everything that subsequently happened between them ; she would realize that when she said, " You *did* ?" he heard "*You* did?"—a difference in inflection that becomes less subtle the more one thinks about it. Later, she thought a great deal about it ; now, however, she

could only shrink numbly down into the covers as he roared, " Yes *I* did ! You didn't think I had it in me, did you ? Well I did, and from now on nobody puts anything over on me ! Including you, you hear ?"

" But Jody—I—"

" Who was here when I called you up at two o'clock ?"

" Who was— *No*body !"

He sank down to the edge of his bed so their heads were more nearly on a level, and fixed her with a pink-rimmed, weepy, steely gaze. " I . . . heard . . . you," he intoned.

" You mean when you called ?"

He simply sat there with his unchanging, unnatural glare. Wonderingly, frightened, she shook her head. " I was watching a movie on TV. It was just ending—the very end ; it was a good one. And I—I—"

" You told your . . . your . . ." He could not say the word. " You told whoever it was not to talk. *But I heard you.*"

Dazedly she sat up in bed, a slim, large-eyed, dark-blonde woman in her late twenties—frightened, deeply puzzled, warding off certain hurt. She thought hard, and said, " I spoke to *you*—I said that to you ! In the picture, you see, there was this girl that . . . that . . . Oh, never mind ; it's just that in that last moment of the picture everything came together, like. And just as you rang and I picked up the phone, it was the last minute of the picture, don't you see ? I was sort of into it—you know. So I said to you, ' Don't say anything for a second, honey,' and I— Is *that* what you heard ?"

" That is what I heard," he said coldly.

She laughed with relief. " I said it to you, to you, not to anyone here, you silly ! And—well, I was sort of mixed up, coming out of the TV that way, to the phone, and you began to sort of shout at me, and I couldn't hear the TV, and I kind of ran to it to turn it up, just for a second, and I forgot I was holding the phone and the wire caught my ankle and I fell down and the wire pulled out and—*Jody* !" she cried, seeing his face.

" You're a liar, you bitch."

" Jody !" she whispered faintly. Slowly she lay down again. She closed her eyes, and tears crept from beneath her lids. She made no sound.

" I can handle hoodlums and I can handle you," he said flatly, and turned out the light. " And from now on," he

added, as if it were a complete statement ; he must have thought so, for he said nothing more that night.

Eloise Smith lay trembling, her mind assuring her over and over that none of this was really happening, it couldn't happen. After a useless time of that, she began to piece the thing together, what he'd said, what she'd said . . . she recalled suddenly what he had blurted out about the Elks' Hall, and the car, and all . . . what was it ? Oh : he'd called, apparently to tell her he was on the way ; and she'd murmured, " Don't say anything for a second, honey," and he'd thought . . . he must have thought oh dear, how *silly* of him !

" Jody !" she said, sitting up, and then the sight of his dim rigid form, curled away from her in the other bed, drove her back to silence, and she lay down to think it through some more . . .

And he'd got himself all upset and yelled, and then she'd broken the wire, and probably thought her—*her*—but she could not think the word any more than he had been able to say it—he'd thought whoever it was had gaily pulled out the wire to, well, stop his interruption. And then apparently Jody had gone all panicky and berserk, had run straight out to the car, got himself locked out of the Elks' Hall with the car keys still inside, had headed north—away from town, and gas stations, and other telephones—and had tried to hitchhike home. And something about hoodlums and being robbed on the way—but then he said he'd driven them off, didn't he ?

She gave it up at length. Whatever had happened to him, he obviously felt like a giant, or a giant-killer maybe, for the first time in his life, and he was taking it out on her.

Well, maybe in the morning—

In the morning he was even worse. He hardly spoke to her at all. Just watched her every minute, and once in a while snorted disgustedly. Eloise moved quickly with poached egg, muffin, coffee, marmalade ; sleepless, shaken, she would know what to do, take a stand, have a sensible thought, even—later ; not now.

Watching her, Jody wiped his lips, threw down his napkin and stood up. " I'm going for the car. If you're thinking of letting anybody in, well, look out, that's all. You don't know when I'll be back."

" Jody, Jody !" she wailed, " I never ! I *never*, Jody !"

He walked past her, smiling tightly, and got his other hat. " Oh boy," he said to the cosmos, " I just hope I run across one of those thugs again, that's what I hope." He banged the hat with the edge of his hand, and set it uncharacteristically at a rakish slant on his head. Numbly, she followed him to the door and stood in it, watching him go. He sprang up the steep driveway like a spring lamb. At the top he turned without breaking stride and came straight back—but not springing—scuttling would be the word for it. His face was chalky. He saw her and tried, with some apparent difficulty, to regain his swagger. " Forgot to call the phone company. Get a taxi, too."

" You can't," she said. " I broke the wire."

" I know, I know !" he snapped waspishly, though she felt he had forgotten it. " I'll call from Pollard's." He glanced quickly over his shoulder, up the driveway, and then plunged across the lawn and through the wet shrubbery toward their only neighbour's home.

She looked after him in amazement, and then up the drive. Over its crest, she could see the roof of a car, obviously parked in their turn-around. She was curious, but too much was happening ; she would not dare climb the drive to see who it was. Instead she went in and closed the door and climbed upstairs, where she could see from the bedroom windows. From this elevation, the car was plainly visible. It wasn't theirs. Also visible was the ugly giant lounging tiredly against the car, watching the house.

She shrank behind the curtain and put all her left fingers in her mouth.

After a time she saw Jody plunging across the long grass of the vacant acre that lay between their place and Pollard's. He pushed through the shrubs at the edge of the lawn, stopped to paddle uselessly at his damp trouser-legs and then sidled over to the driveway. He peeped around the hollyhocks until he could look up the drive. The ugly man had apparently detected some movement, for he stood up straight and peered. Jody shrank back behind the hollyhocks.

She thought then that he might come in, but instead he crouched there. There was a long—to Eloise, an interminable —wait. Then a taxi pulled in from the road and turned to stop next to the other car. Jody straightened up and began trotting up the drive. The ugly man leaned his elbows on the lower

edge of the taxi driver's window—he had to bend nearly double to do it—and began speaking to him. Of course she could not hear a word, but the ugly man and the driver seemed to be laughing. Then the ugly man reached in slapped the driver cheerfully on the shoulder and stood back. The taxi started up, backed around and pulled out of the drive. Jody, seeing this, for the second time made a U-turn and scuttled back to his hiding place behind the hollyhocks. He looked very little like a man who was over-anxious to meet some thugs.

Eloise moved closer to the window in order to see him better, for he was almost straight down beneath her. Perhaps he caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, or perhaps some sixth sense . . . anyway, he glanced up, and for a moment looked more miserable than a human being ought, caught like that—chagrined, embarrassed. Then, visibly, he began to grow angry again ; it began with her, she could see that. Then he wheeled and marched up the drive like a condemned man ascending the scaffold. The ugly man opened the right front door of his old sedan, and Jody got in.

For a long time Eloise Smith stood in the window, kneading her elbows and frowning. Then, slowly, she went downstairs and began to write a letter.

Smith's posture of pugnacious defiance lasted from the turn-around to the private road he shared with Pollard. Once out of sight of the house, he slumped unhappily into the corner of his seat and stole a quick glance at his captor.

The man was even bigger, and considerably uglier, in daylight than he had been in the dark. He said, " I sent away your taxi. He didn't mind. He's an old buddy of mine.

" Oh," said Jody.

He watched the scenery go by, and thought of how gentle the man's voice was. Very soft and gentle. Into this Jody Smith built vast menace. After a while he said sulkily, " This going to cost me another hundred ?"

" Oh gosh no," said the ugly man. " You bought a round trip. Where do you want to go ?"

Cat-and-mouse, thought Jody. Trying to get my goat. " Got to get my car at the Elks' Hall."

" Okay," the man said, nodding pleasantly. Deftly, he spun the wheel, turning into what Smith prided himself as being *his* short cut to the Hall. Obviously this creature knew the roads hereabouts.

They came to the built-up area, slid into an alley, crossed two streets and turned sharp right into the crunchy parking yard at the Elks. There were two other cars there, one Smith's, the other obviously the caretaker's, for the doors stood open and the old man was sweeping the step.

Timidly, Smith touched the door handle. The ugly man sat still, big gnarled hands on the wheel, eyes straight ahead. Smith opened the door and said, ". . . well—" Then, incredulous, he got out. The ugly man made no attempt to stop him.

Smith actually got two paces away from the car before sheer compulsive curiosity got the better of him. He went back and said, " Look, what about this money? You don't really expect me to pay a hundred dollars for that ride."

" I don't " said the big man, " Gorwing, I guess he does."

" Gorwing. Is that the little ape that—"

" He's a friend of mine," said the giant, not loudly, but just quickly. Smith dropped that tactic, and asked, " You work for him ?"

" With, not for. Sometimes."

" But you're doing the collecting."

" Look," said the ugly one, suddenly, " Gorwing, he wants sixty per cent of that money. Well, I wouldn't let him down. For me, I don't want it. Now, how much did he get off you last night ?"

" Twenty-one."

" From sixty is thirty-nine. You got thirty-nine bucks ?"

" Not on me." Astonished, he looked at the grotesque face. " Tell me something. What would you do if I wouldn't give you another penny ?"

The man looked at his gnarled hands, which twisted on the wheel. " I guess I'd just have to put it up myself."

Smith got back in. " Run me over to the bank."

The man made no comment, but started his engine.

" What's your name ?" asked Smith as they stopped for a light a block away.

" George Noat."

" Aren't you afraid I'll go to the police ?"

" Nope."

Smith recalled then, forcefully, what Gorwing had said : " I got a witness and you haven't." He imagined himself trying to explain what had happened to a desk sergeant, who would be trying to write it all down in a book. Outrageous, certainly

—but he had got into the car of his own free will, he had agreed to pay.

" How did you happen to come along when you did last night ?"

" Just driving by."

Smith found the answer unsatisfying, and he could not say why. He said, sulkily, " Friend or not, I've got to say that your Gorwing is a bandit."

" No he ain't," said George Noat mildly. " Not when all he does is get things people really need. You really need something, you pay for it, right ?"

" Yes, I suppose you—"

" And if you need something, and a fellow delivers it, nobody's getting robbed."

At that moment they came to the bank, and the subject was lost.

three

Jody Smith lived with the letter for a long time.

Dear Jody,

After the way you acted last night I don't know what to do except I have to go away from you. You have to trust a person. I always believed you but why did you make up all that about Mr. Noat I know him a long time and he is about the kindest man who ever lived he wouldn't hurt a fly.

I want you to think about one thing you said a lot about me and some man and all that, well I want you to know that there isn't any man at all and now that means your wife left you and there wasn't even any other man. I bet now you wish there was. I wish there was. No I don't Jody, oh my goodness I wish I could write a letter I never could you know, but I can't stay here any more. Maybe you could find somebody better I guess you better I won't stand in your way because I still want you to be happy.

Eloise..

Tell the market not to send the order I sent yesterday. We were supposed to have dinner at the Stewarts Tuesday. I can't think of anything else.

Now Jodham Swaine Smith was a man of independent means —this was the phrase with which on occasion he described

himself to himself. His parents had both come from well-to-do families, but Smith was two generations—three, on his mother's side—removed from the kind of fortune-getting that had got these fortunes ; latterly, it had become the Smith tradition to treat the principal as if it did not exist, and live modestly on the interest.

Independent means. Such independence means all Four Freedoms plus a good many more. Small prep schools—in small towns and with, comparatively, small fees—grey as Groton, followed by tiny, honoured colleges on which the ivy, if not the patina, is quite as real as Harvard's, make it possible to grow up in one of the most awesome independencies of all, the freedom from Life. In most cases it takes but six or so post-graduate weeks for trauma and tragedy to set in, and for the discoveries to be made that business is not necessarily conducted on the honour system, that the reward for dutifully reporting the errors of the erring gets you, not a mark toward your Good Citizen Button, but something more like a kick in the teeth, and finally, that the world is full of people who never heard of your family and wouldn't give a damn if they had.

Yet for those few who are enabled by, on the one hand, the effortless accumulation of dividends, and on the other, an absence of personal talent or ambition that might be challenged it is possible to slip into a surrogate of man's estate in its subjective aspects hardly different from the weatherproof confines of the exclusive neighbourhood, the private school and the honoured and unheard-of college. Jody Smith was one of these few.

Not that he didn't face the world, just as squarely and as valiantly as he had been taught to do. But it happened that, all unknowing, he gave the world nothing worth abraiding, and the world was therefore, as far as he could know, a smooth place to live with. In no sense did he withdraw from life. On the contrary, he sought out the centres of motion, and involved himself as completely as possible with the Elks, the Rotary, the Lions, and the Civic Improvement League. Strangely enough, these gatherings, filled as they were with real people, gave him no evidence of the existence of a real world. Jody Smith was always available for the Thanksgiving Dance Committee and Operation Santa Claus, but did not submit himself, and was somehow never proposed, for any chairmanship. In a word, he wasn't competition for anyone.

And he had gravitated to that same strange other—or no—world in what might laughingly he called his business. He was a philatelist. He ran small classified advertisements in the do-it-yourself and other magazines on a contract basis, and handled the trickle of mail from his little den at home. He made money at it. He also lost money at it. In the aggregate, he probably lost more than he made, but not enough to jeopardize his small but adequate and utterly predictable income.

He had, from time to time, wanted this or that. He had never for a moment *needed* anything. Eloise, for example—he had wanted her, or perhaps it was to be married to her, but he hadn't needed to. She helped him with his business, typing out some of the correspondence from form letters he had composed, and moistening stamp hinges. But he did not need her help. He did not need her.

Not even when she left. For a while. Weeks, in fact. And even then at first it was want, not need, and even then the want was to create some circumstance that would make her realize how wrong she had been. Then the wants widened, somehow. The television and the stamp hinges seemed after a time to be inadequate to fill the long evenings or to occupy the silence of the house. When no hand but his own moved anything about him, his hat would not go of itself into the closet but remained on hall tables where he himself had put it. And where at first he had rather admired himself for his cookery, for he was a methodical, meticulous, and, as far as cookbooks were concerned, obedient person, he began slowly to resent the kitchen and even the animal beneath his belt which with such implacability drove him into it. It seemed to him a double burden—that he should have to put in all that time before a meal, and then have nothing ready until he prepared it himself. To do things in order to make lunchtime come seemed ultimately enough, more than enough, for a man to be burdened with. Then to have to do things to make the lunch itself seemed an intolerable injustice.

These matters of convenience—and lack of it—grew into nuisances and then, like the pebble in the shoe, like the inability to turn over even in the most comfortable of beds, into sheer torture.

The breaking point came, oddly enough, not in the long night hours with the empty bed beside his, nor in some dream-wracked and disoriented morning, but in the middle of an otherwise pleasant afternoon. He had just received the new Scott's catalogue, and wanted to compare something in it with the 1954 edition. He couldn't find the 1954 edition, and he called out :

" Eloise—"

The sound of his own voice, and of her name, made something happen like the tearing of a membrane. It tore so completely, and with such suddenness and agony, that he grunted aloud and fell back on the couch. He sat there for a moment weaving, and his mouth grew crooked and his eyes pink, and there came a warning sting at the very back of the roof of his mouth that astonishingly informed him, as it hardly had since he was nine years old, that he was about to cry.

He didn't cry, beyond once whimpering, " Eloise ?' in a soprano half-whisper ; then for a long time he sat silent and stunned, wondering numbly how such a force could have remained coiled so tightly within him, undetected.

When he could, he began to take stock. It was a matter of weeks—six of them, seven—since she had left, and not once had he examined his acts and attitude. He had done nothing about locating her, though in that department there was little to be done—he simply did not know where she was. Her only relative was an ageing mother in a rest home out West, and she certainly had not gone there. He had not destroyed her letter, but he hadn't reread it either, nor thought about its contents. He hadn't wanted to think about these things, he now knew. He had thought . . . he hadn't *needed* to.

He needed to now, and he did. The letter gave him nothing at first but a feeling—not quite anger—more like a sullen distaste for himself. And one more thing, slightest of handholds—she apparently, somehow or other, knew George Noat.

And, on that slender evidence, he tore out of the house and got into his car.

Nothing was the way it should be. The trail was not obscure. The taxi-driver—Noat had said he was " an old buddy "—told him immediately where Noat and his business were, and there were no obstacles to his finding the place—it was within three blocks of the Elks' Hall. The fact that never once in Elks or Lions or Rotary had he heard Noat's name was only surprising,

not mysterious : such establishments as the Anything Shoppe look back, not forward, and are not found on the lists of forward-looking organizations.

It was only in the subdued light of the shop(pe), with the oldfashioned spring-swung doorbell still jangling behind him, that Jodham Swaine Smith realized that, though intuition and evidence had brought him here, they had not supplied him with the right thing to say. " Mr. Noat !" he bleated urgently, and then dried up altogether.

The proprietor glanced up at him from his work, and said easily, " Oh, hi. Give a hand here, will you ?"

Annoyed, which was uncharacteristic of him, and simultaneously much more timid than he ever remembered being, Jody Smith edged around the counter. Noat was squatting before an inverted kitchen chair, painted flat red, with a broken spoke and a split seat-board. " Just grab holt here," he invited. Smith took the legs as indicated and squeezed them together while Noat drove in corrugated fasteners. " Nothing wrong with the chair," said Noat philosophically between hammer blows. " It's people. People busted this chair. As for fixing it, if people had sense enough to have four arms like this thing has four legs, why, I wouldn't have to call on my neighbours. You like people ?"

The direct question startled Smith ; he had been about to interrupt, and was only half following what the big man said. He made a weak uncertain laugh, very like that of Sir Laurence in the Graveyard Scene, and said, " Sure. Sure I do."

He stood back while Noat turned the chair upright, set it on the counter and measured the missing spoke with an ancient and frayed dressmaker's tape. "You got to make allowances," Noat said to the tape. " This old thing's stretched, but you see I know just how much it's stretched. 14 inches here is 14 and 17/32nds actual. That's one way to make allowances. Then," he went on, laying the tape against a piece of square stock that was chuckled in a highly individual wood lathe, " if the tape says 14 on the chair, and I mark it the same 14 on the lumber, it comes out right and it makes no never mind *what* it is actual. People," he said, rounding at last on Smith, who prepared himself for some profound truth, " fret too much."

Smith lived for a moment with that feeling one has when mounting ten steps in the dark, then discovers there are only nine stairs. He grasped wildly at what he thought the man had

been talking about. " People are all right. I mean, I like people."

Noat considered this, or a turning chisel he had obviously made from an old screwdriver, carefully. Smith could not stand the contemplative silence, and ran on. " Why, I do everything for people. I join every club or lodge in town that does any good for people, and I work hard at it. I guess I wouldn't do that if I didn't like people."

" You don't do that for yourself." It was, if a statement, agreement and a compliment ; if a question, a searching, even embarrassing one, calling for more insight than Smith had or dared to have. It was voiced as a statement, but so nearly as a question that Smith could not be sure. He was, however, too honest a person to grasp at the compliment . . . and if he rejected it, he must be embarrassed, even insulted, and walk out. . . . but he couldn't walk out until he—" You know my wife don't you ?"

" Sure do. A very nice little lady."

He started the lathe. It made a very strange sound. The power looked like that from an ancient upright vacuum cleaner. Reduction was accomplished through gears that could only have come from one of those hand-operated coffee mills that used, with their great urn-shaped hoppers and scroll-spoked, cast-iron scarlet flywheels, to grace chain markets before they became supered. The frame was that of a treadle-operated sewing machine, complete with treadle, which, never having been disconnected, now disappeared in a blur of oscillation that transferred itself gently to everything in the place. One could not see it, but it was there in the soles of the feet, in the microscopic erection of the fibres in a dusty feather boa, in the way sun-captured dust motes marched instead of wandered. The lathe's spur-centre seemed to have been the business end of a planing attachment from some forgotten drill press ; it was chucked into a collet that seemed to have been handmade out of rock maple. The cup centre at the other end, turned freely and true in what could be nothing else but a roller-skate wheel.

Noat set his ground-down screwdriver on the long tool rest, which was of a size and massiveness that bespoke a history of angle-bracketship aboard a hay wagon. On the white wood a whiter line appeared, and a blizzard of fragrant dust appeared over Noat's heavy wrists. He carried the tool along the rest, and the whiter-upon-white became a band, a sheet. When he

had taken it from end to end, he stopped the machine. The wood was still square, but with all its corners rounded. Smith tore his fascinated eyes away from it and asked, wondering if Noat would still know what he was talking about, " How did you happen to know her ? '

" Customer."

" Really ?"

Noat squinted at the display window over the edge of his chisel. " Garlic press," he said, and pursed his lips. " Swedish cookie mold, by golly, she was here seven times over that. Little lady really gets two bits out of each two dozen pennies." He laughed quietly ; he had a good laugh. Smith's solar plexus contained a sudden vacuum at the mention of these homey, Eloise-y things. " And the egg seperators—two hundred egg separators."

" *What* ? I never saw—"

" Yes, you did. You went away to some kind of convention, and when you came back she'd done over the breakfast nook."

" The textured wall !"

" Yeah, those mash-paper cushions they put between layers in an egg crate. She cut and fit and put 'em up and painted 'em —what she say ?" He closed his eyes. " Flat purple with dull gold in the middle of each cup."

" She never told me," Smith informed himself aloud. " She said she'd . . . Well, I guess she didn't actually *say*. But I got the idea she saved up from the house money and had it done. She really did it herself ?"

Noat nodded gravely.

" I wonder why she didn't tell me," Smith breathed.

" Maybe," said George Noat, " she thought you might live with a textured wall where you wouldn't with egg separators."

There was a meaning here that he could not—would not —see, but that he knew would come to him most distastefully later. He compressed his lips. He had acquired too many things to think about in the last few minutes, and at least two of them might be insults. He glanced doorward, and said in farewell tones, " Well, I—" and then the handle of the chisel pressed into his palm stopped him. " You go on with that. I got to cook some glue."

Smith stared with horror at the chisel. " Me run that machine ? I never in my life—"

The giant cupped a hand under his left armpit and propelled him to the machine. " The one wonderful thing about a lathe, you couldn't tell a beginner's first job from Chippendale's last one. Don't ever get all big-eyed over beautiful work—chances are it was real easy to do. What I always say is, a Duncan Phyfe is only a piccoloful of whiskey."

" But—but—"

" Pull this chain, starts it. Rest your chisel here, cut light and slow at first. Anytime you want to see what you've done or feel it, pull the chain again, it stops. That's all there is." He started the machine, took the chisel, and, under its travelling point, the wood drew on a new garment of texture from end to end.

Timidly, Smith took back the chisel and nervously approached the spinning wood. It touched, and he sprang back, but there was a new neat ring around it. Fascinated, he tried it again, and again, and then looked up to ask if that was right : but Noat had confidently retired to the other end of the shop, where a disgraceful-looking glue pot sat upon a gas ring.

Nothing could have given him more assurance than to be trusted with the job like this. For a while, then, he entered the magical, never-quite-to-be-duplicated region of The First Time. You may challenge the world to find anyone who runs a lathe and who also forgets the first cut he ever made.

Disappointingly soon, the square wood was round ; but then he realized joyfully that this would be a new spoke for the chair, and must come down quite a bit more. He worked steadily and carefully, until at last his mind was able to watch it while it thought of other things as well—and it thought of Eloise, thought of Eloise in a way unknown to it for oh . . . oh, a long time ; and for such a brief while, too—there was something deeply sad about that. The day—no, two days—before he had stumblingly asked her to marry him, he had been in a drugstore, just like any other drugstore except for the climactic fact that it was in her neighbourhood, the one she always went to, *her* drugstore. He had walked in to get some cough drops and had suddenly realized this incredible thing about the place—that she had many times stood here, had bent over that showcase, had had that prim warm little body cupped there by the padded swivel seats at the soda fountain She had smiled in this place. Her voice had vibrated the sliding

glass over the vitamins, and her little feet must have lightly dotted the floor, from time to time, just after it had been waxed.

And so it was with the Anything Shoppe ; her hand had danced the spring-dangling doorbell, and she had bargained here and made plans, and counted money and held it for a moment, while the three fine " thinking " furrows—two long and one short—came between her eyebrows, and went quickly leaving no mark. She had smiled in this place, and perhaps laughed ; and here she had thought of him.

Textured wall.

The turning wood had grown silky, and now seemed to be growing a sheath of mist . . . he withdrew the tool and stood watching it through the blur until a bulky rectangular object on the tool rest distracted him. He blinked, and saw it was a box of tissues. Gratefully he reached for one and blew his nose and wiped his eyes. He gazed guiltily at Noat, but the big man's back was turned and he appeared to be totally absorbed in stirring his stinking glue. Let's not think about how he put the tissues there, or why . . . turn off the machine now.

George Noat found it not necessary to turn to him until he spoke : " Getting a cold, I guess . . . snff . . . time of year. Mr. Noat have a look at this now."

four

Noat lumbered back to the lathe and ran his hand along the piece. His hands were those a prep-school boy might see from the windows of the school bus, that a collegian with a school letter on the front of his sweater might see manipulating the mysteries under a car. One seldom noticed the skill of such hands, but ingrained black was dirt and dirt was, vaguely, " them," not " us." The idea does cling, oh yes it does, ingrained, too. Yet for all his distress in this moment, Smith was able to notice how the great grainy leather-brown hand closed all around the stainless new wood, was intimate with it from end to end, left not a mark. To Smith it was an illumination, to see such a hand live so with purity. All this subliminal ; still before his stinging eyes was the mist of hurting, and he said aloud, " she left me."

" That's just *fine*," said George Noat. He must have meant one thing or the other—probably he meant . . . for he

was taking up the red chair. He lifted it high and hung it casually on the handle of a scythe, which, in turn, hung to the beam overhead. An unbroken rung of the chair thereby lay at his eye level. He started the lathe, and with four sure sweeps and five confident pauses, he duplicated the unbroken rung complete to its dowelled ends. He stopped the machine, slapped away collet and tailstock and tried the new rung for size. Freehand, with a heyhole saw, he cut away excess at the tips. It fitted. He took it to the glue pot, dipped the ends, returned and set it in place ; then, with simultaneous blows right and left, he drove it home. A war surplus quartermaster's canvas belt plus a suitcase clasp of the over centre type formed a clamp for it. He left it where it hung, and in his strange way —he seemed never to move quickly, but all the same, could loom up over a man in a rush—he rounded on Smith. " You want her back ?

" Oh God," said Jody Smith softly, " I do."

" Hmp." Noat moved to the other end of the counter and gingerly capped the hot glue pot. " You need her," Smith thought he said.

Smith frowned. " Isn't that what I just said ?"

" Nope."

Jody Smith's quick petulance evaporated as quickly as it had formed ; he found himself fumbling for whatever it was this creature seemed to mean, or almost meant. " I said I want her back."

" I know. You didn't say you need her."

" It's the same thing."

" No, it ain't."

Half angry, half amused, Smith said, " Oh come on, now. Who'd split hairs about a thing like that ?"

" Some people might." He paused, looking at a piece of junk he pulled from a box. " Gorwing, he would."

" Gorwing, he won't," said Smith with asperity. " Look, I don't want this talked all over with the likes of that Gorwing.'

Noat gave a peculiar chuckle. " Gorwing wouldn't talk about it. He'd just *know*."

" I don't get you. He'd just—know ? Know what ?"

" If you should want something. Or need it."

Smith wagged his head helplessly. " I never know when you're kidding."

" This thing," said Noat soberly, staring at the object in his hand—it seemed to be the ring-shaped, calibrated " card " from a marine compass—" got three hundred and sixty degrees on it. More than any college graduate in the country." Without moving anything but his eyes, he regarded Smith. " Am I kidding ?"

In spite of himself, Smith felt moved to laughter. " I don't know." Sobering then, and anxious, " Have you any idea where she might have—"

" I really couldn't say," interjected the proprietor. " Here's Gorwing."

" Oh, for God's sake," Smith muttered.

Gorwing banged in, stopped, stared at Smith. He passed his hand over his eyes and muttered, " Oh, for God's sake."

Then both men turned to Noat, redly regarding his sudden burst of merriment.

" You settin' on a feather ?" rasped Gorwing.

" Just listening to the echoes," answered Noat, grinning. Then a quick concern enveloped his features. He leaned forward and watched Gorwing bend his head, gingerly touch the back of his neck. " What is it—him ?"

" *Him* ?" Gorwing glanced insultingly at Smith. " Him, too, you might say. You do anything ?"

" What do you want ?" asked Noat.

" Let's take a ride."

Noat, too, glanced at Smith, but not with insult. " Sure," he said. " Go on out to the car. Be with you soon's I . . . got something to finish."

Gorwing glanced inimically at Smith again. " Don't waste no time, now," he said, and slung out.

Smith made a relieved and disgusted sighing sound like *zhe-e-e-e* ! and shrugged like shuddering. Noat came round the counter and stood close, as if his proximity could add a special urgency to what he had to say. " Mister Smith, you want to see your wife again ? You want her to come back ?"

" I *told* you—"

" I believe you, especially now. Some other time we'll talk about it all you want. Now if you want to get her back, you go with Gorwing, hear ? You drive him where he wants to go."

" *Me* ? Not on your life ! I want no part of it, and I bet neither does he."

" You just tell him, it's with you or not at all ; you tell him I said so."

" Look, I think—"

" Please, Mister Smith, don't think ; not now—there isn't time. Just get out there."

" This is the craziest thing I ever heard of."

" You're absolutely right." Noat physically turned Smith around and faced him to the door. Outside, a horn blared. The sound seemed to loop and lock lassoolike round the confused and upset Smith. He allowed it to pull him outside. He might then have been frightened if he had been given a chance to think, but Gorwing roared at him : " Where's G-Note ?"

" You come in my car or not at all," Smith parrotted, his voice far more harsh than he had intended. He then marched to his car, got in and started the motor.

Livid, Gorwing sprang out of the other car. " G-Note !" he bawled at the unresponsive store front, then cursed and ran to Smith's car and slammed inside.

" Whose stupid idea was this ?" he snarled.

White and shaken, but, feeling that in some way he had already tipped over the lip of some long slide, Smith said, " Not mine. You going some place ?"

Gorwing hunched back against the door, as far from Smith as he could get. " You know the Thruway exit southbound ?"

" All right."

He turned out into the street and right at the main avenue. Once or twice he glanced at his passenger, the slick black hair, the fevered dark eyes, the lips ever curled back from the too-sharp, too-white teeth. It was a tormented, dangerous kind of face, and the posture—this had been true as he had seen Gorwing stand, walk, turn, sit—was always one of imminent attack, like some small furious cornered animal.

He knew a short cut just here, and was on it before he quite realized he had come so far. He swung the wheel abruptly and turned into Midland Avenue, and from the corner of his eye, seemed to see the feral silhouette of his passenger sink and disappear. Astonished, he glanced at Gorwing, to find him bent almost double, his hands clasping the back of his neck, his eyes screwed shut.

" You feel sick ?" He applied the brakes.

Gorwing unlaced the fingers behind his neck and, without opening his eyes, freed a hand for some violent semaphore. "Just drive," came his strained, hissing whisper. Puzzled beyond bearing, Smith drove. Was Gorwing in pain? Or—could this be it—was he hiding? Who from? There was a football field and a high school on the left, a row of houses—mostly nurses' residences for the nearby hospital—on the right. No one seemed to be paying special attention to the car.

Two blocks further on Gorwing slowly sat up.

"You all right now?"

In a very, very quiet voice, a deathly, a deadly voice, Gorwing spoke. He tipped the side of his mouth toward Smith as he spoke, but stared straight ahead. He said, "Don't you ever drive me near the hospital. Not ever."

Crazy as a coot, thought Smith. "Nobody told me."

"I'm telling you."

They came to the underpass and crossed beneath the Thruway, and Gorwing came out of himself enough to lean forward and scan the road and the sides of the road, ahead. Suddenly he pointed. "There he is. Pull over there."

Smith saw a young man in a grimy flannel suit and a white sport shirt, standing on the grassy shoulder just by the Thruway exit. There was a suitcase with a broken clasp on the grass by his feet. Smith pulled off the pavement and stopped.

The man picked up his suitcase and came toward them, trying to smile. "Give us a lift into town?"

Gorwing's tongue darted out to wet his lips, and his eyes seemed to grow even brighter. He waited until the man was abreast of the car, was even elevating his suitcase to let it precede him into the back seat, then sprang out and, chest arched, eyes flaming, blocked the man. "Lift hell," he snarled, "this town wouldn't give a cupo' water to the likes of you. Don't you set foot in it. We don't wancha."

The stranger slitted his eyes. "Now wait, Mac, you wait a minute here. Who the hell you think you are? You own this—"

"Git," said Gorwing, and his voice descended to something like the hissing, strained note that Smith had heard in the car. He mouthed his words—spittle ran suddenly from the corner of his mouth. As he spoke he walked, and as he walked the other man backed away. "You gawd . . . damn . . . junky . . . you think you can come here and pick up a fix, well this place

is cold turkey for you and you'd better be on your way out of it, never mind who I am, I killed a man once."

The man tried to shout him down, but Gorwing kept talking, kept crouching forward. " We're stayin' right here to see you walk up the pike or down the pike or hitch a ride, I don't care which way, an' don't think you c'n slide into town without my knowin', I got guys spotted all over town and your life ain't worth a bar o' soap if you so much as show your face let alone tryin' to find a pusher. There ain't no pusher an' if you meet another gawd damn hophead you can pass the word—" but it was pointless to go on ; suitcase and all, the man had turned by then and fled. Gorwing put his thumbs in his belt and watched the hitchhiker, white-faced, scampering to the northbound lane. Then Gorwing sighed, and turned tiredly back to the car.

" What a blistering," breathed the thunderstruck Smith as Gorwing got in and fell back on the seat. " Who was that ?"

" Never saw him before in my life," said Gorwing absently. With great tenderness he touched the back of his neck. He looked at Smith by rolling his fevered eyes, as if the neck were too tender to disturb. " I never killed a man," he said. " I just say that to scare 'em."

A thousand questions pressed on Smith's tongue, but he swallowed all but, " You want to go back now ?"

" How's our li'l buddy doing ?"

Smith peered down the ramp. Through the underpass, he could see the grimy-white of the hitchhiker's clothes. " He's still—no wait, I think he's got a lift."

Gorwing joined him in peering. They saw a green Dodge slow and stop, and the man climb in. " And good riddance," murmured Gorwing.

" I don't think he'll be back," said Smith, for something to say.

" He'll wish he didn't if he does," said Gorwing, so offhandedly that Smith knew the man, the episode, the whole subject was leaving Gorwing's mind ; and in a way this was the most extraordinary part of this inexplicable episode, for Smith knew that he himself would never forget it. Gorwing said, " Drive."

Smith made a slightly illegal turn and got the car headed back toward town. When he saw the yellow and black HOSPITAL ENTRANCE—500 FEET sign, he turned left and

went into a long detour. Gorwing sat abstractedly, and Smith was certain he had not noticed the special effort he was making, until they turned back again on to Midland Avenue, well past, and Gorwing said, " Hospitals, they give me the creeps."

" Me, too," said Smith, remembering a tonsillectomy when he was fourteen—his only contact with the healing arts in all his life. Gorwing laughed at him—a singularly unpleasant and mirthless laugh. Anything in Smith that was about to formulate conversation—maybe even a question out of his vast perplexity—dried up. Smith's petulant pink underlip protruded, and he drove without speaking until they pulled up in front of the Anything Shoppe. Smith had never been so glad to see anything in his life. He had had, as of now, exactly all he could take of this man.

He swung his door open but " Oh, hell," Gorwing said. He said it in the tones of a man who has conducted a theatre party in from the suburds and finds, under the marquee that he has forgotten the tickets. In spite of himself, "What's the matter?" asked Smith.

" Shut up," said Gorwing. Suddenly he closed his eyes and said again, " Oh hell." Then he opened his eyes and snapped, " Get goin'. *Quick*."

Reflexively Smith shut the door, then demanded of himself *why*? Argumentatively he asked, " Where do you want to go?"

" *Move*, will ya?" He waved vaguely toward Hook Mountain. " Up that way. I ll tell you.

" I don't see—"

Gorwing's words tumbled out so fast they were almost indistinguishable. " Dammit you want somebody should be dead it's your fault you didn't jump when I said jump now *drive* !"

The car was started and heading north before Smith was aware of it, so stunned was he by this hot spurt of language. When a man speaks like that, you want to throw your hands up over your face as if you had seen raging heat through sudden cracks in something you knew, too late, might explode.

A mile later Smith asked timidly, " What do you mean, dead?"

" Your place," Gorwing growled, directing, not responding.

They wheeled into the private road and up the hill. *Dead*? *My Place*? Smith was terrified. " Listen—"

" You got any rope ?" Gorwing snapped.

" Rope ?" Smith repeated stupidly. He went into his own driveway in a power-slide ; he hadn't known he could drive like that. " No, I haven't got any rope. What—"

" Oh, you wouldn't," spat Gorwing. " Chains. You got tyre chains ?"

" I don't—yes. In the trunk." He braked to a slithering stop in the turnaround. Gorwing was out of the car while it was still sliding, and tugging at the trunk lid. He roared to find it locked. Smith tumbled out with the keys and opened it. Gorwing flung him aside in his dive as he clawed through the trunk, throwing tyre iron, jack pedestal, a can of hydraulic fluid behind him like a digging dog. The chains were in a cloth sack ; he up-dumped the sack, shook out the chains, hooked the end of one into the end of the other, draped them over his shoulder and sprinted down toward the house.

" Wait you—" gasped Smith, and trotted after him.

Gorwing passed the house and plunged across the lower lawn into the woods, Smith after him, already panting. " Hey, watch yourself, that's full of poison ivy back there !"

Gorwing was already out of sight in the rank woods below the house.

Stumbling, gasping, Smith floundered after him, until he came to the edge of the cliff that overlooked the broad Hudson. At this point it was sheer about a hundred feet, then slanted down and away in a mass of weed-grown rubble almost to the railroad tracks. For a moment he thought Gorwing must have plunged straight over the edge, but then he saw him working his way along the ragged brink to the right.

"Hang on! Hang on! Gorwing yelled. Totally perplexed' Smith looked around him for whatever it was he was supposed to hang on to and failed to find it. He shrugged and stumbled after the man. Gorwing kept bellowing to hang on. Suddenly Smith saw him fall to his knees and crawl to the crumbling lip of the precipice. He yelled again, then moved on a couple of feet and hooked a free end of the tyre chains to itself around the trunk of a foolhardy pine tree with a ten-inch bole, which grew bravely at the lip of disaster.

At last, Smith reached Gorwing, who had hunkered down with his back to the tree. He had described the man to himself

before as " fevered "—he now looked sick as well ; there was a difference. " What are you—"

Gorwing motioned toward the drop. " You'll have to do it. I can't stand high places."

" Do what ?"

Gorwing pointed again. Smith heard a weak bleating sound that seemed to come from everywhere. But it was specifically outward that Gorwing had pointed. So he fell to his knees and crawled to the edge and looked over.

Eight or ten feet below him he saw the chalk-white, tear-streaked face of a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old boy. The child was hanging by his hands to a protruding root, which angled so sharply downward that it was clear no grip could last too long on it. The boy's toes were dug into loose earth, a fresh damp scar of which surrounded his feet and, widening, showed where to his left a ledge had fallen away. To his right was rock, almost sheer, and without a handhold.

" *Hang on* !" yelled Smith, at least half again as loud and urgently as Gorwing had. He caught up the end of the chain and lowered it carefully down. At its fullest extent it reached about to the boy's belt-line. Smith looked at Gorwing, who looked back out of sick black eyes. " You got to," he said in strained tones, " I tell you I can't. I just can't."

Smith, whose usual activities involved nothing more strenuous than stamp tongs, found himself on his stomach, hanging his legs over, hunting wildly with his toes for the rungs formed by the crosslinks of the tyre chain. Then he was stepping down, while the earth and grass of the edge rose up and obscured Gorwing like some crazy inverted theatre curtain. " Hang on," he said, and was startled when the boy answered, " Okay . . ." because that remark had been for himself.

1 Tyre chains may be roughly the size and shape of a small adder, but they take unkindly to it. The rungs roll and their parts pinch, and the whole thing swings and bends alarmingly ; *you* know they won't break, but do *they* ? Too soon the next rung under his seeking foot just—wasn't, and he withdrew the foot from nothing-at-all and stood on the last crosslink, gulping air. He was then of a mind to freeze to his shaky perch and stay there until somebody else figured a way out, but there came a whimper nearby and he saw clods and stones spin sickeningly down and away from the boy's toes.

He glanced at the boy's face, saw and would forever see the muddy pallor, the fear-bulged eye, the lips gone whiter than the

tanned cheeks. The youngster's foothold was gone, and only his grip on the slanted root held him. Afterward, Smith was to reflect that, if the kid had been standing on anything solid, he would never in life have been able to figure out a way to bring him in ; but now he *had* to, so he did.

" Lift your foot !" he screamed. " Give me your foot !"

The foot was already dangling, but for an endless, mindless moment the boy stretched downward with it, trying to make a toehold if he could not find one ; then Smith screamed again, and the boy brought the foot up slowly, shakily . . . and he said, " My hands, I can't . . ." but then Smith had the foot, leaning far sidewise to get it ; he lifted it, thrust it through the last " rung " down to the knee. One more reach, and he had the skinny upper arm in a grip that astonished both of them. " Let go," he panted, and the boy let go ; it may well be that he could not have held on any longer to the root if he had wanted to. With the release, the chains swung nauseatingly sidewise ; with one hand Smith ground steel into his own flesh, with the other drove flesh into the arm-bone ; but he had the boy, now, thrust the arm through the next rung. " Hold with your arms, not your hands," he said through his teeth.

When they stopped swinging, Smith freed his hand from the boy's biceps. It took a concentrated effort, so clamped, so cramped, was his hysterical hand. " Now rest," he said to both, for both of them. The boy kept whimpering, a past-tears meaningless, habitual kind of sound, dry and probably unfelt.

Some measureless time later he helped the boy get his other leg into the little twisted square of chain, so that he sat and whimpered, while Smith stood and panted, for however long it took to be able to think again. Then Smith had the boy stand up inside the circle of his arms, and climb until his buttocks were at the level of Smith's chest. Then they climbed together, Smith urging the boy to sit back on him when he had to, half-lifting him when they got the strength and the courage, each interminable time, to try another rung. And when at last the boy tumbled up and over and was, by Gorwing, snatched back from the edge, Smith had to stop achingly and wearily ponder out what had happened to the weight and presence of him, before he could go on.

Gorwing snatched him, too, away from the edge, where he lay laughing weakly.

" You," said Gorwing darkly, " you real gutsy."

" *Me* ?"

" I couldn'. Not ever, I could *never* do that." He made a sudden vague gesture, startling in its aimlessness, a jolting contrast to his vulpine appearance and harsh voice. " I never had much guts."

Smith held his peace, as does one in the presence of evidence too great for immediate speculation. He thought of Gorwing standing up to him about the hundred-dollar fare, and of Gorwing ravening, tearing, lashing out at the hitchhiking dope addict. Yet there was no mistaking his sincerity in what he said—nor in this frank compliment to him, Smith—a man who had, up until now, stimulated only open disgust. He promised himself he would think about it later. He said to the boy, " How do you feel, kid ?"

" Gee, all right." The boy shuddered. " Ain't going to do *that* again."

" What were you doing ?"

" Aw. Bunch of Nyack kids, they bet nobody could climb the cliff. I didn't say nothing, but I thought I could, so I tried it."

Smith stood up, held gingerly to the tree trunk and peered over. " Where are they ?"

" Oh gosh, I wouldn't try it when anyone's around. I just wanted to see if I could before I opened my trap about it."

" So no one knew you were there !"

The boy grinned shakily. " You did."

Gorwing and Smith shared a glance ; to Smith it meant nothing, but Gorwing rose abruptly and barked, " Let's get out of here." Smith sensed his sudden desire to change the subject, just as he sensed the impact of the boy's refusal to change the subject : " Hey, how *did* you know I was there ?"

Gorwing half turned ; Smith thought he sensed that glance again, but when he tried to meet it it was gone. " Heard you yellin'," Gorwing said gruffly.

" I live right here," said Smith. It satisfied the boy completely, but for the very first time Smith saw Gorwing look astonished. Yes, and in a way pleased.

five

They stopped at his house for something cool to drink, and then got in the car to return to Nyack ; the boy said he lived on Castle Heights Avenue. There was surprisingly little talk. Neither Gorwing nor Smith seemed to know how to talk to a thirteen year-old—a rare talent, at best, rare even among thirteen-year-olds—yet what occupied Smith's mind could hardly be discussed in his presence.

Gorwing. This rough, mad strange, unpredictable Gorwing . . . you couldn't like him ; and Smith knew he did not. Yet through him, with him, Smith had shared something new—new, yes, and rich. He had . . . it was as if he had had a friend for a moment there, working so dangerously together . . . and the work was for someone else ; that had something to do with it. . . .

Friend. . . . Smith knew many people, and he had no enemies, and so he had thought he had had friends ; but for a moment now he got a glimpse of the uncomfortable fact that he had no friends. Never had. Even . . . even Eloise. Husband and wife they were, lovers they had been—hadn't they ?—but could he honestly say that he and Eloise had ever been friends ?

He sank for a moment into a viscous caldron of scalding loneliness. *Eloise* . . .

" Hey." Gorwing's harsh note crashed into his reverie. " How we get this young feller to keep his mouth shut ?"

" Me ?" said the boy.

" You better keep your mouth shut, that's all," said Gorwing ominously.

Smith had no experience in talking to boys, but he could see this was the wrong tack. The kid was edging away from Gorwing, and his eyes were too wide. Smith said quickly, " He's right. I don't know your mother, sonny, but I'd say she'd be worried sick if you told her the story. Or maybe just mad."

" Yeah, maybe." He looked warmly at Smith, them timidly at Gorwing. " Yeah, I guess you're right. . . . Can't I tell *nobody* ?"

" I'd as soon you didn't."

" Well, anything you say," said the boy. He swallowed and said again, " Anything . . ." and then, " That's my house. The white one."

Smith stopped well away from the house. " Hop out, so no one sees you in the car. So long."

" So long." The boy walked away a slow pace, then turned back. " I don't even know your names."

" Delehanty," said Smith. And Gorwing said solemnly, " Me, too."

" Well," said the boy uneasily, " well, thanks, then," and moved toward the white house.

Smith backed into a nearby driveway and headed back toward the shop.

Gorwing said truculently, " How come you covered for me like that ?"

" I had the idea you wanted it that way. Up on the cliff I got that idea."

" Yeah. . . . You know all the time what people want ?"

" I don't think," said Smith slowly, with a frankness that stung his eyes, " I ever tried before."

They rolled along for what seemed a long, companionable moment. Then Smith added, " You don't always help people out for money, do you ?"

Gorwing shrugged, rolled down his window, and spat. " Only when I can get it. Oh man, could I use some about now."

" This," said Smith bitterly, " is my taxicab this time."

" Oh, I wasn't asking you for nothing. You watch yourself, Smith. I'm no panhandler."

Smith drove self-consciously, carefully. He knew his face was pink, and he hated himself for it. He wondered if he could say anything to this madman without making him angry. Angrier. He asked, without malice, " What would you do with money ?"

" Get drunk," said Gorwing, and immediately glanced at Smith's face. " Oh my God," he said disgustedly, " he believes me. I never drink anything. . . . What would I do with money ?" he mused. " 'Pends how much. Now there's a couple, the old man is dying. I mean, he can't last, not much more. The woman, she stays by him ever minute, don't go out even to buy food. Somebody don't go to the store for 'em, throw 'em a couple skins now and then, they . . . oh, you wouldn't know."

No, Smith wouldn't know. He had never been in need . . . or in danger, before today. Turning into Midland Avenue, he

glanced down a side street toward the river, where the wide-lawned pleasant houses gave way to the shabby-decent, the tenement, the shack. He had never done that before, not to *see* them. And then, the need you could see, starting with the shacks, was, when you came to think about it, surely not all the need there was ; need comes in so many colours and kinds. He brought the thought back up to the crisp-tended, tree-shaded homes on the Avenue and wondered what it was like to live in this world instead of—of whatever it was he had been doing.

He stopped in front of the Anything Shoppe, and they got out. " Here," Smith said. He took out his wallet and found a twenty-dollar bill. He looked at Gorwing and suddenly took out the ten, too—all he had with him.

Gorwing did not thank him. He took the money and said, " Well, all right !" and marched off.

Smith was still wagging his head as he entered the shop.

" I know how you feel," said G-Note, grinning.

" What *is* he ?"

G-Note grunted. " I never did really know, myself."

" I never thought I'd say this, but I sort of like him." Smith was feeling very warm inside about all this.

Oddly enough, the remark brought no smile this time. " I don't know if you can really *like* Gorwing," said Noat thoughtfully. " He sometimes . . . but anyway, tell me what happened."

Smith related his afternoon. Noat nodded sagely. "Junkies," he nodded at one point. " He can't stand 'em. Runs 'em out of town every time."

At the end of his story, Smith told him about the money. " Is that on the level, Mr. Noat? Or will he just go on a toot?"

" No, it's on the level. If he keeps out any for himself, it'll be what he barely needs."

" Doesn't he have a job or something ?"

Noat shook his big head. " No job. No home, not what you might call a place of his own. Moves around all the time, furnished rooms, back of the poolhall, here in the shop sometimes. I don't think he ever leaves town, though."

" Mr. Noat, how does he do it ?"

Noat cocked his head on one side. " Didn't you ask him ?"

Smith laughed weakly. " No." Then, with a sudden surge of candor, " Tell you the truth, I was afraid to."

" Tell you the truth, I'm afraid to, too," said Noat. " He . . . well, between you and me, I think he thinks he's some sort of freak. Or, anyway, he's afraid people will think that. He never lets anybody get close to him. He always does what he can to hide how he does what he does. Usually by blowing up in your face."

" He must . . . he seems to do a lot of good."

" Yes . . ." There was a reservation in the ugly man's voice.

" Well, doggone it, what *is* it he does ?"

" He, well, hears when somebody needs something, or maybe you might say smells it. I don't know. I don't know as I care much, except it works. Heck, you don't have to know how everything works—by the time you did, you'd be too old to work it." He turned away, and Smith thought for a moment he had closed the subject, but he said, without turning around, " Only thing I'm sure of, he knows the difference between wanting something and needing it."

" Want . . . you asked me that !"

" I did. I asked Gorwing, too, although maybe you don't remember."

" Eloise . . . you mean he'd know whether I—need her, or just want her ? Him ?"

Noat chuckled. " Feels like a sort of invasion of privacy, doesn't it ? It is and it isn't . . . what he knows, however he knows it, it isn't like anyone else knowing it. That Gorwing . . . but he does a lot of good, you know."

" I don't doubt it."

" Calla Pincus, she thinks he's some sort of saint."

" Who's she ?"

" Girl he—well, she was going to kill herself one time, and he stopped her. She'd do anything for him. So would the Blinker—he's kind of a poolhall rat—and there's old Sarge, that's a track walker for the West Side Line . . . I mean, he has sort of a raggle-taggle army, all through the town, that've learned to ask no questions and jump to do what he says. Sometimes for pay. And Doc Tramble, and one of the teachers at the high school and . . . and me, I guess—"

" And me."

Noat laughed. " So welcome to the fold."

" All these years in this town," Smith marvelled, " and I never guessed this was going on. Mr. Noat . . . does he know where my wife is ?"

" Did you ask him ?"

Smith shook his head. " Somehow I . . . I was afraid to ask him that, too."

" You better. You need her—you know that and I do and he does. I think you should ask him. . . . Now can I ask you something ?"

" Oh, sure."

" You never went to the police or anything. How come ?"

Smith looked down at his hands and closed them, then his eyes. He said in a low voice, " I guess because . . . You know, she said to me, whatever had happened, she still wanted me to be happy. I imagine I wanted the same thing for her. It was something she had to do ; I didn't think I should stop her."

" But you're looking now."

" Not with police."

" Hey, he's coming. Ask him. Go ahead—ask him."

Smith turned eagerly to the door as Gorwing banged in. " Hi !" He felt warm, friendly—pleasurably scared—anticipatory. Gorwing utterly ignored him.

Noat frowned briefly and said, " Hey boy. Smitty there, he's got something to ask you."

" He has ?" Gorwing did not even look around.

Smith hesitated, then caught Noat's encouraging nod. Timidly, he asked, " Mr. Gorwing . . . do you know where my wife is ?"

Gorwing flicked him with a black glance and showed his white teeth. " Sure." Then he turned his full cruel smile on Smith and said, " She don't need you."

Smith blinked as if something had flashed before his eyes. His mouth was dry inside, and outside shivery. He wanted to say something but could not.

Noat growled, " That ain't what he asked you, Gorwing. He says do you know where she is."

" Oh sure," said Gorwing easily, and grinned again. " She got a cold-water walk-up over on High Avenue, 'long with the guy she's livin' with."

Smith had never in his life physically attacked anyone, but now he grunted, just as if he had been kicked in the stomach, and rushed Gorwing. He struck out, a wild, round, unpracticed blow, but loaded with hysteria and hate. It never reached Gorwing, but planted itself instead in the region of Noat's left shoulder blade, for Noat, moving with unbelievable

speed for so large a man, had vaulted the counter and come between them. He came, obviously, not to protect anyone, but to launch his own attack. " You lousy little rat, you didn't have to do that. Now you get out of here," he rumbled, as with one hand he opened the door and with the other literally threw Gorwing outside. Gorwing tried to keep his balance but could not ; he fell heavily, rolled, got up. His face was so white his black hair looked almost blue ; still he grinned. Then he was gone.

Noat closed the door and came to Smith. " So now you know."

" El—Eloise is . . ." and he began to cough.

" Oh, not that ! I mean, now you know about Gorwing. How can you figure it ? All he does is take care of what people need . . . and there's no kindness in him."

" Eloise is—"

" Your wife is taking care of an old sick man who'll be dead any time now."

" Who ?" Smith cried, agonized. " *What* old man ?"

" That you just gave the money for."

" I've got to find her," whispered Smith, and then heard what Noat had said. " You mean—*that* old man ? Wh—why, he told me it was an old *couple* !"

" I bet he didn't."

" You ! *You* know where she is ! You knew all the time."

Noat spread his hands unhappily. " You never asked me."

Smith's scorn made him appear a sudden four inches taller. ' Quit playing games !"

" Okay . . . okay. ' The big man looked completely miserable. " I just didn't want to hurt you, that's all." At Smith's sharp look, he said " Honest. Honest. . . . Gorwing, he's right you know. She doesn't need you. I wish you didn't make me tell you that. I'm sorry." He went back behind the counter, as if he could comfort himself with the tools, the clutter back there.

" You better tell me the whole thing," whispered Smith.

" Well . . . she, Mrs. Smith I mean, she came to me that day. She was all . . . mixed up. I don't think she meant to spill anything, but she sort of . . . couldn't hold it." He put up a swift hand when Smith would have interrupted. " Wait, I'm telling this all wrong. What I'm trying to say, she came here because she just didn't know where else to go to. She said

something about 'Anything Shoppe'; she wanted to know if 'anything' meant . . . *anything*. She said she had to have a job, something to do. She said never mind the money, just enough to scrape along, but something to *do*; that's what she needed."

"What she needed."

"I know what you're thinking. Yeah, Gorwing knew she needed something, and just what it was, too . . . y'see," he said earnestly, "he's always right. Even the lousy things he does sometimes, they're always right. Or at least . . . there's always a reason." He stopped, as if to ponder it out for himself.

"Look," said Smith, suddenly, painfully kneading his cheeks, "whatever it is you have to tell me, tell me. I'm all mixed up . . . and . . . and *where is she*?" Then he opened his blue eyes very wide—oddly like those of the boy he had saved on the cliff, when Gorwing had frightened him—and said piteously, "You mean she really doesn't need me? Gorwing was right?"

G-Note crouched over, elbows on the counter, his big hands holding each other in front of him.

He said, "What she needed, what she needed more than anything in the world, she needed something to take care of. You—well, she tried to take care of you, but— Don't you see what I mean?"

There was silence for a long time. Smith felt that somehow, if he could pull together the churned-up pieces of his mind, he might be able to turn it to this, make some sense out of it. He tried very hard, and at last was able to say, "You mean, when you come right down to it, there . . . was never very much for her to do for me."

"Oh, you got it. You got it. You . . . well, she told me some things. She cried, I guess she didn't mean to say anything, but I guess—she just had to. She said you could cook better'n she could."

"*What*?"

"Well, things you liked to eat, you could. And those were all the things you ever wanted. She took care of the house, but you'd 'a done just the same things if she wasn't there. She never felt she really *had* to . . ."

"But this old man—who's *he*?"

"One of Gorwing's . . . you know. Gorwing found him down by the tracks. Sick, wore out. Needing somebody to

take care of him—*needing* it, you see ? Not for long . . . Doc Tramble, he says he don't know how the old fellow hung on this long."

" God," said Smith, stinging with chagrin, " is that what she needed ? Maybe I should be dying—she'd be happy with me then."

" Ah, knock that off. She's only like most people, she has to make a difference to somebody. She makes a difference to that old man, and she knows it."

" She made a difference to me," whispered Smith, and then something lit up inside him. He stared at Noat. " But she never knew it." Suddenly he leaped to his feet, walked up, walked back, sat again bolt upright, holding himself as if he were full of coiled springs. " What's the matter with me ? You know what I did, I said she had somebody with her while I was at the Elks' that night, you know, the night you picked me up in the car. That's why she left." He hit himself on the forehead with sharp knuckles. " I know she didn't have anyone, she wouldn't ! So what made me think of it ? Why all of a sudden did I have to think of it, and even when I knew I was wrong, why did I have to go for her, curse at her, call her names the way I did, till she had to leave . . . why ?" he shouted.

" You really want me to tell you ?" Then Noat looked away from Smith's frantic, twisted face and shook his head. " I don't *know*," he said carefully, " I only know what I think. I don't know everything . . . I don't know you very much. All right ?"

" Yes, I understand that. Go ahead."

" Well, then." Noat watched his big brown hands press and slide on the counter until they squeaked, as if they had ideas under them and could express the words by squeezing. He raised them and looked under them and folded them and looked at Smith. " You hear a lot of glop," he said carefully, " about infantile this and adult that, and acting like a grownup. I've thought a lot about that. Like how you've got to be adult about this or that arrangement with people or the world or your work or something. Like they'd say you never had an adult relationship with the missus. Don't get mad ! I don't mean—well, hell, how adult is two rabbits ? I don't mean the sex thing." He opened his hands to look for more words, and folded them again. " Most people got the wrong idea about this ' adult ' business, this ' grownup ' thing they talk about

but don't think about. What I'm trying to say, if a thing is alive, it changes all the time. Every single second it changes ; it grows or rots or gets bigger or grows hair in its armpits or puts out buds or sheds its skin or something, but when a thing is living, it changes." He looked at Smith, and Smith nodded. He went on :

" What I think about you, I think somewhere along the line you forgot about that, that you had to go on changing. Like when you're little, you keep getting bigger all the time, you get promoted in school ; you change ; good. But then you get out, you find your spot, you got your house, your wife, your kind of work, then there's nothing around you any more says you have to change. No class to get promoted to. No pants grown too small. You think you can stop now, not change any more." Noat shook his craggy head. " Nothing alive will stand for that, Smitty."

" Well, but why did I think she . . . why did I say that about—some man with her, all that ?"

Noat shrugged. " I don't know all about you," he said again. " Just sort of guessing, but suppose you'd stopped, you know, *living*. Something's going to kick up about that. It don't have to make a lot of sense ; just kick up. Get mad about something. Your wife with some man—now, that's not nice, that's not even true, but it's a *living* kind of thing, you see what I mean ? I mean things change around the house then—but good ; altogether ; right *now*."

" My God," Smith breathed.

" 'Course," said Noat, " sooner or later you have to get over it, face things as they really are. Or as they really ain't." He thought again for a time, then said, " Take a tree, starts from a seed, gets to be a stalk, a sapling, on up till it's a hundred feet tall and nine feet through the trunk ; it's still growing and changing until one fine day it gets its growth ; it's grown up : it's—dead. So the whole thing I'm saying is, this adult relationship stuff they talk about, it's not that at all. It's *growing* up that matters, not *grown*up. . . . Man can get along alone for quite a long time ' grownup '—taking care of himself. But if he takes in anyone else, he's . . . well, he's got to have a piece missing that the other person supplies all the time. He's got to need that, and he's got to have something that's missing in the other person that they need. So then the two of them, they're one thing now . . . and still it's got to be like a living thing, it's got to change and grow and be alive.

Nothing alive will stand for being stopped. So . . . excuse me for butting in, but you thought you could stop it and it blew up on —you."

Smith stared silently at the big man, then nodded. " I see. But now what ?"

" You want to know where she is ?"

" Sure. By the Lord, now I can. . . ."

" What's the matter ?"

Smith looked at him, stricken. " Gorwing said . . . she didn't need me."

" Gorwing !" snarled Noat. Then he scratched his head. " I see what he meant. She never could take care of you much, and she awful much needs to take care of somebody. Now she's got the old feller. He needs her, God knows. For a little while yet. . . . Gorwing . . . hey ! Why d'ye suppose he tried to make you think—you know—about your wife ?"

" You know him better than I do."

" It comes to me," said Noat, inwardly amazed. " I see it. I see it. He makes it his business to take care of what people really need, need real bad. Right ? Good. How do you do that ?'

" Get 'em what they need, I guess."

" That's one way. Two—" he held up fingers—" you get 'em out of range. Like he does with dope addicts. Right ? Then—three. You fix it so they just don't feel they need it any more. I mean, if he was to fix it that you got so mad at your wife you wouldn't want ever to see her again—see ?"

" That poor little man ! He couldn't do that."

" He just tried. He has a gift, Smitty, but that don't mean he's bright."

" It doesn't ?" said Smith in tones of revelation. " It's bright enough. I need her—that's one big need, correct ? Now, suppose I go to find her, take her away from that poor old man. He starts needing her—and she starts needing to take care of somebody again. So—two big needs. That Gorwing, he knows what he's doing. I—I can't do that, Mr Noat."

" You mean, to the old man ?"

" Well, yes, that. But her . . . my wife. I need her. You know that, and I do."

" And Gorwing does."

" Yeah, but she doesn't. God, what do I have to do ? Do I really have to be dying ?"

" Living," said George Noat.

six

You're a freak.

Sometimes for days at a time he could content himself with the thought that all the rest of them were freaks. Or that, after all, what does anyone do ? When it gets cold, they try to get warm. When they get hungry, they go find something to eat. What people feel, whatever's crowding them, they get out from under the best way they can, right ? They duck it or move it or blast it out of the way, or use it on something else that might be bothering them, right ? And what bothers people is different, one from the other. Hunger can get to them all and cold and things like that ; but look, one wants some music, some special kind of music, more than anything else in life, more than a woman or a drink, while another needs heroin and another to have a roomful of people clapping their hands at him. Or needing, needing like life-and-death, some stupid little thing that would mean nothing to anyone else—something as little as a couple of words, like that Calla girl, about to jump off the Tappan Zee Bridge for wanting somebody to come up to her and say, " Hey, I need you to do something nobody else can do."

Or needing to feel safe from some something that lurks inside them, like the Blinker : you'd never guess it to watch him cuss and laugh and make the pass, and chalk the cue, just like anybody, but he was epileptic and he never knew when it was going to hit him. Or needing defence against things lurking outside of them, like Miss Guelph at the high school, crazy afraid of feathers, terrified one might touch her. So the things people need and the things they need to be safe from, they're all kinds of things : it doesn't make one of them a freak if his special need is a little different.

What if you never heard of anyone with a need just like yours ? Does that automatically make you a freak ? . . . There are lots of people who have to make it alone, who can't share what they have with anyone. Who can't drive a car for fear that faint-making, aching cloud will suck them down into it when they don't expect it.

Sometimes, too, you can get to believe that the very thing that's wrong with you makes you special. Well, it does, too. You have power over people. Now just how many people in this—or any—town could tell you a little kid two blocks away

was lost, and a woman three blocks the other way was looking for him ? Or look at the way you found that boy on the cliff—now that boy would be dead right now.

So if you're so special how come old Noat throws you out on your ear ?

You're a freak.

Now cut it out. You got it made. You got a nice spot. The town's just big enough so nobody much notices you, just small enough so when that faintness comes, and that ache, and then the picture in your head—of a traffic light or a building front or a green fence or a cliffside—you know just where to go to find the person who has that big noisy need for something. Remember that trip down to Fort Lee ? So big, so noisy ; God, you almost went out of your head. Plank you down in the middle of New York, say, you'd be dead in a second, all that racket. And the things they need, you'd never know where to get them in a big place, but here, heck, you know where to find anything if it's in town. Or old Noat will get it for you.

What he want to throw you out like that for ? Just trying to shut off the shrieking lonesomeness of that squirt Smith ; him and his Eloise, it gave him a headache.

Ow. Here comes one now. Shut your eyes. Ow, my neck. Shut your eyes tight, now. See . . . see a . . . see a street, store-front, green eaves over the window. Felt carpet slippers, a man's belt. That would be Harry Schein's Haberdashery on Washington Street. Somebody standing there, needs—what ? Sleep, wants to sleep, for God's sake, gets wide awake soon as hits the sack . . . a man. Screaming for sleep, frantic for sleep. Get some sleeping pills, everything closed now. Hey, this could be worth a buck. Go call Doc Tramble. Here, phone in the gas station. NY 7 . . . 0 . . . 0 . . . 5 . . . 1.

" Doc ? Gorwing here. Got some sleeping pills in your bag ? Oh, nothing serious . . . yes, I know what's dangerous and what ain't. No, not for me. Oh, five, I guess. I'll send the Blinker or somebody around for 'em, okay ?"

Ow. Guy walking toward Broad street now. Oh boy does he want some sleep. Where's dime . . . here. Call poolroom. . . . 4 . . . . 7 . . . . " Hi—Danny ? Gorwing. Hey, the Blinker there ? Hell. . . . Who else is around ? No . . . Nuh, not her. Smith ? What Smith—you mean that guy's been hanging around G-Note's ? Yeah put him on.

" Hello—Smitty ? Thought you'd be mad. You wouldn't want to do a little job . . . you would ? Well you'll have to

scramble. Get over to Doc Tramble's and say you want the pills for me. Yeah. Then take 'em over to Fordson Alley and North Broad—you know, right by the movie—there's a guy there frantic for 'em. See if you can get a dollar apiece. Sleeping tablets. Yeah. Hurry now. . . . He's moving, he's ambling up past the movie. *I* don't know what he looks like. Just look for a guy looks like he needs some sleep. Hurry now. See ya."

Now that's a surprise. I thought I'd butched it up with that Smith but for good. A good boy. Calmed down, too. Wonder if he's going to pull that wife of his away from the old man. Hope not. Set up a hell of a rattle, the two of 'em at once.

So Gorwing ambled through the evening, through the town. He walked in a cloud of, or in a murmur of, or under the pressure of, or through the resistance of the not-mist, not-sound, not-weight, not-fluid presence of human need. *Want* was there, too, but want of that kind—two teen-agers yearning for a front-drive imported car in a show window, a drowsy child remembering a huge bride-doll in Woolworth's, the susurrus of desire that whispered up in the wake of a white-clad blonde who, with her boy-friend, walked through the lights of the theatre marquee—this kind of want was simply there to be noticed if he cared to notice it. But the need . . . he watched for it fearfully, yet eagerly—for sometimes it paid off. He hoped that for a while nobody would get hit by a car without getting killed outright, or that some hophead wouldn't suddenly appear with that rasping, edgy scream of demand. Ow. Wish Smitty would get to that guy with the sleeping pills.

Need was a noise to Gorwing. No, not really a noise. Need was an acid cloud, a swirling blindness. Need might mount up out of the nighttime village and make him faint. Need might pay off. Need, other people's need, hurt Gorwing . . . but then each person had one or another difference, one or another talent ; this one had perfect pitch and that one had diabetes, and he wasn't, after all so different from other people.

You're a freak.

Strangely, it was not too easy to be funereal at this funeral. The flowers were sad, of course, such a scrappy little bunch, and the man was saying all the right things . . . and it was sad

how easily the men handled the coffin ; poor little old man, so wasted away. But you couldn't feel badly about him now ; he'd been glad to go, and it was good that he'd had, for those last weeks, just what he'd yearned for for so many sick lonesome years—someone who sat near and brought him things and listened to him ramble on about all the old places and the friends and family who were passed on, dead and gone and yet waiting eagerly for him, some place. No, it wasn't any tragedy. Sweetly sad, that was it . . . and oh, such a bright beautiful day !

Eloise Smith hadn't been out in the fresh air, the sunshine, since . . . " *Eeek* !"

It was a small scream, or rather squeak, and really no one noticed. But Jody, oh Jody was standing right next to her in a dark suit, with his hat—the one they called his Other hat—held over his heart, his head bowed. He looked . . . peaceful.

She bowed her head, too, and they stood quite close together until the man finished saying the old simple words, and the handful of earth went *tsk* !—a polite expression of sympathy—on the coffin lid. Then it was over. " *'By, you old dear*," she said silently but with her heart full.

Then there was Jody. " Oh, Jody. I don't think I—"

" Shh. Eloise, come home. I need you."

" Jody, you're going to make me sound mean, and I don't want to be mean. But you don't need me or anybody, Jody."

Smith moistened his lips, but loosened no special, justright winning words ; he said, could say, only : " I need you. Come home."

" Wait—there's Mr. Gorwing. . . . Wait, Jody ; I have to speak to him. Will you wait over there, Jody ? Please ?"

" Let me stay with you."

" Honey," she said, the wifely word slipping out before she realized it, " he's sometimes sort of . . . funny. Unpredictable. I wish you'd wait over there and let me talk to—"

" He won't mind. We're old friends."

" You know Mr. Gorwing ?"

" Sure."

" Oh dear. I didn't know. He . . . he's a kind of saint, you know." When Smith, coolly regarding Gorwing, who was talking to the funeral director, did not answer, she went on nervously—she had to talk, *had* to, oh *why* had he turned up like this, all unexpectedly ?—" If anyone's in need at all, he has a way of finding it out ; he—"

" I'm in need," said Smith. " I need *you.*"

" Jody, *don't.*"

" I do," he said softly, earnestly. "You've got to come back. I can't manage without you."

" Oh, that's silly ! You have your—"

" I have my nothing, Ellie. I—I gave the money away, almost all of it. I got a job, but I'm only beginning, and the pay isn't much. I'm running a wood lathe in the cabinet-maker's."

" You—*what* ?"

" You've got to help ; maybe you'll even have to go to work. Would you, if there's no other way ? I can't make it without you, Ellie."

What she was going to say through those soft trembling lips he would not know, for Gorwing interrupted. " Miz Smith—you know who he is ?"

She flashed a look at her husband and really blushed. Gorwing laughed that Wolf's laugh, that barking expression of mirth and hurt, and said, " I'll tell you who he is. He's the only person in the whole world who ever came up to me and asked *me* what *I* needed." He clapped Smith on the shoulder, waved a casual hand at Eloise and walked away toward the cemetery gate. She called him once ; he waved his hand but did not turn his face toward them.

" We'll see him again," said Smith. " Ellie . . . will you just let me tell you what this is all about ?"

" What *is* it all about ?"

" Can I tell you all of it ?"

" Oh, very well . . ."

" It'll take about twenty-three years. Oh Eloise—come home."

" Oh, Jody . . ."

The shy man crouched in the hospital stairwell and peered through the crack of the barely-opened door. There were no white-coated figures in the corridor that he could see. He had long ago abandoned the front way, the elevator and all. Slipping in through the fire doors during visiting hours was *much* better. He pushed the door open far enough to let him into the corridor, and let it swing silently closed.

He gasped.

" Hello, Johnny."

Right behind the door as he opened it, oh God, the doctor. Johnny bit his tongue and stared up into Doc Tramble's face. It blurred.

" Hey now, hold on," said the doctor. " You better come in here and sit down." He took Johnny's forearm—and for a split second they were both acutely aware of Johnny's tearing temptation to snatch it away and run ; and of its crushed quelling—and led him across the corridor into an empty private room, where he lowered the sweating visitor into an easy chair. Dr. Tramble pulled up a straight chair and sat close enough to force Johnny's gaze up and into his own.

" I don't know if you can take this, Johnny, all at once, but you're going to have to try."

" I got a second job, night," said Johnny hollowly. " With that I can catch up some on the bills. Don't put my wife on the charity list, doctor. She couldn't stand it. She—"

" Now you just listen to me, young fella." He reached into the wall, got a paper cup from a dispenser and filled it from the ice-water jet. With his other hand he reached into

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his side pocket and took out a folded paper, which he planked down on Johnny's knee. " The bill. I want you to look at it."

Painfully, Johnny unfolded it and looked. His jaw dropped. " So much . . ." Then his eyes picked up an additional detail on the paper. " P-p-paid ?" he whispered.

" In full," said Dr. Tramble. " That's point one. Point two, Madge gets her operation. MacKinney from the Medical Centre got interested in the case. He's going to do it next week. Point three—"

" Her operation . . ."

" Point three," laughed the doctor, " she gets that room to herself now, all paid up, and you have the privilege of telling that to her snide roommate. Point four, here is a cheque made out to you for five hundred. Drink this," and he pushed the water at him.

Johnny sipped, and over the cup said, "B-but wh-where . . ."

" Let's keep it simple and say it's a special fund for interesting cases from the Medical Centre, and you know these endowed institutes—all this money is interest and there's nobody to thank so shut up and get out of here. No—not to see Madge ! Not yet. You go down to the office and they'll cash that cheque for you. Then you grab a taxi and voom down the street and buy flowers and a radio and a big box of dusting powder and a fancy bed jacket. Git !"

Numbly, Johnny walked to the door. Once there, he turned to the doctor, opened his mouth, shook his head, closed his mouth and without a word went for the elevators.

Laughing, the doctor went down the corridor to the telephone booth, dropped a coin, dialed the poolroom.

" Gorwing there ?"

" Speaking."

" Tramble. All set."

" Yeah, doc, I know. I know. Oh, God, Doc, it's so *quiet* in this town . . ."

—Theodore Sturgeon

Edward Mackin's series of short stories dealing with Hek Belov the loveable but unpredictable cyberneticist has been the most popular this magazine has ever presented. Here is another new but longer one in which Belov enters the If world of a writer's creations.

BEHIND THE CLOUD

BY EDWARD MACKIN

I strolled into Emilio Batti's restaurant one bright, spring morning, and sat down at a convenient table with as much nonchalance as I could muster on a total of ninepence-halfpenny.

The rich odours of meats grilled and devilled, of steaming vegetables, of onion soup and mulligatawny, of bacon and mushrooms, and numerous other tasty items, with an undertone of fresh, warm pastry, teased my appetite, and flogged my stomach till it growled like a dog. The gentleman sitting opposite raised his head to frown at me, and then lowered it to get on with the serious business of eating.

Without any great enthusiasm I considered what I should order on my somewhat straitened means. Ninepence would buy me two bread rolls, or a cup of coffee; but it wouldn't satisfy my hunger. The mournful fact was, friends, that if I didn't get a job soon they would find a heap of bones in some secluded corner, and the world would have lost my unique talents for ever.

Just now the world didn't seem disposed to do anything about it. Times have never been so hard for the cyberneticist, what with the factories closing down due to the dreadful rumours of peace, and machines repairing machines. I'm lucky merely to be out of a job, I suppose. I could be in gaol for being without visible means of support, a species of financial levitation which our worthy Government frowns on, and not without reason.

Surely, friends, it is obvious that if the perfect system doesn't work it must be the fault of the individual, who is so often a rebel at heart? Of course it is. The Government has made this clear time and time again in its various pronouncements on the subject. Why, the crema-disposers are stacked high with the unclaimed, and intransigent ashes of these very rebels who have deliberately, and maliciously, starved themselves to death just to spite our expert planners, and our politicians—if I may be allowed to use a dirty word.

My thoughts were interrupted by Rosie, who had come over for the order. Looking her straight in the eyes, I said: "I'll have a large, porterhouse steak with saute potatoes, and fried onions, followed by cherry pie with fresh, dairy cream."

She put her plump hands on the table, and leant towards me. "Mr. Batti says I am to see your money first, Mr. Belov."

I glared at her. Such presumption! I was furious, I can tell you. Wealth may engender respect; but poverty should never be humble.

"How dare you!" I demanded. "If I wasn't a gentleman I'd create a scene! You can tell that mountainous slob that I am quite able to pay for everything I order, and the small amount that is at present outstanding will be paid in due course."

"The small amount," said Rosie, imperturbably, "is thirty - one - pounds - four - and - twopence. What are you having?"

"A cup of coffee," I said. "I've just remembered that the last time I had one of his steaks I had a very bad attack of food poisoning."

Rosie sniffed, and went away.

The fellow opposite paused with a morsel of steak halfway to his mouth, and gazed at me. He seemed worried about something.

" Food poisoning? " he echoed.

I nodded, and smiled. " My friend," I said, " Emilio is a very good cook; but, as you know, good meat is hard to come by in these stinking times. So, he has an arrangement with a kind of unofficial dog-catcher. The larger beasts are channelled his way. I don't think anyone has quite his touch when it comes to stray dog."

" Really," he said, thoughtfully, replacing the bit of meat on the plate. He pushed the plate away from him, and drew the cherry pie into a convenient eating position, probing it doubtfully with his spoon.

" Beetles' blood," I said, amiably.

" I beg your pardon? " he frowned.

" Emilio uses beetles' blood to get that rich, red colour," I explained. " It's a special kind of beetle whose name escapes me; but it has been known to the beauticians for generations. It forms the basis for lipstick, I believe. Of course, when it has been heavily sweetened . . . "

He got up, and almost ran out. I pulled the steak and chips, and the pie, over to my side of the table, and wired in.

" Belov! " bellowed a familiar voice, and the windows rattled.

It was Emilio; but I ignored him. Presently, the place began to shake, and several people left in a hurry. This was an old, wooden floor, the building having been constructed a century ago. The sensation was a minor earthquake. Emilio Batti, red-faced, and fuming was on his way. I just managed to cram the last of the steak into my mouth before he reached the table.

" So! " he breathed, ominously.

I looked up at his huge form, at the great, fat face, almost bursting with anger, and at the tall, chef's hat, mushrooming from his head, like some strange explosion.

" Is something wrong? " I asked after swallowing what I had with a deal of effort.

" Is something wrong? " yelled Emilio. He showed me a wicked-looking skillet knife. " You think perhaps you can sit there and eat without paying, is it? " he asked. " What you think I am, Belov? A mad Santa Claus? "

"In answer to your first question," I said, diplomatically, "my friend had to leave in a hurry. He'd forgotten his diet sheet, and he wasn't sure about the cherry pie. It seemed a shame to waste such good food."

Emilio pointed the knife at me. "What was it you say to him? Was it the dog and beetles' blood story that some of my customers tell me about? Belov, I should cut your liver out!"

I drew back, hastily. "Old Friend," I said, placatingly, "I assure you that you have it all wrong. May I be struck by lightning if I have maligned your cooking in any way."

There wasn't much chance of that. I never go out in storms.

"I should be that lucky," said Emilio, with a note of disgust. "You owe me so much that I take out insurance on you. I 'ave you insure against lightning damage, flood, fire, famine, and many other things. What the man call comprehensive." He brought his face closer to mine. "You 'ave a wide choice of accident,' he added, pointedly.

Straightening up he took the tablecloth by the four corners, and walked off with it, taking with him what was left of the meal.

"Very well!" I shouted, indignantly. "If that's how you treat your customers I'll take my patronage elsewhere!"

Then I left as fast as I could. That skillet knife had me bothered a bit. I was stopped just outside by a fairly well-dressed young man with an earnest look on his pale face.

"Do you happen to know a gentleman by the name of Hek Belov?" he inquired. "I understand he eats here sometimes."

"A gentleman indeed," I said. I removed my hat, and inclined my head slightly. "I regret to say that he died of starvation three days ago. The world has lost a great man, my friend. A very great man."

One has to be careful in my precarious position. He might have been a debt collector.

The young man shook his head, and frowned. "What a terrible way to die," he said, sympathetically. "I am sorry. I really am. You see, I had a job for him. Thank you, anyway."

Before I could stop him he had turned on his heel and jumped the fast ped-strip headed East.

I leapt after him, tripped and rolled over a couple of times and came up like a drowning man gasping for air. He ran towards me, and I clutched his arm. " You did say a job? " I inquired breathlessly.

He nodded. " I did."

" Hek Belov at your service," I told him. " The funeral has been postponed."

He disengaged my hand, and frowned at me. " You mean . . . " he began in a puzzled way, and then he gave it up. " Oh never mind. The point is do you know anything about solido equipment? "

" Everything," I claimed. " My friend, you are talking to one of the very few experts in solido equipment in the country."

" Good," he said. " We had a breakdown this morning," he added, " and the computer went on fire. The makers just won't look at it, so I had a fellow named Meerschraft in. Do you know what his advice was? "

" Bury it? " I hazarded.

He shook his head. " He suggested I buy a new one. But the company can't afford that. Business is falling off all the time. All we can afford is a cheap repair job."

" I see," I nodded. " Naturally he recommended me as being the only man in the country with the vast capabilities necessary to such a task. A great man, Meerschraft. I have always said so."

The young man allowed himself a slight smile. " Well, actually, he said that the work was too arduous and unrewarding for a cyberneticist of his status. He did recommend you, but as a kind of semi-skilled man who would do a cheap job not too inefficiently."

" The dog! " I said: "The slimy toad! The great, bladder-headed moron! He wouldn't make a good labourer. My friend, the truth is that the job frightened him."

It frightened me a bit, too. It looked as though I might be working for next to nothing.

" My fee," I told him, " is a thousand guineas, cash down."

I thought he was going to have a fit.

" A thousand guineas! " he repeated, in a high, hysterical voice. " A thousand guineas! That's rich, that is! It takes us all our time to break even. I doubt if old Garret would be prepared to pay more than fifty pounds, and even that should twist his guts in knots. There may be meaner men;

but I've never met them." He sighed. "It looks like we'll have to close the place down. Garret has been threatening to do it for some time now. He says it's the only unremunerative unit in his chain. I seem to have wasted your time, Mr. Belov . . ."

"Let's not be hasty," I said, quickly. "A thousand guineas wasn't what I meant. It was nearer a hundred. Figures always confuse me. Where did you say the place was?"

"Third Level, Eastway. It's the New Granada. Continuous viewing from midday until midnight. By the way, my name is Hepworth. Jeremy Hepworth. I'm the managing technician."

We shook hands.

"A pleasure," I said. "Now then, perhaps we can discuss a retaining fee. Just a nominal sum—say ten pounds."

He shook his head. "Not until I know whether you are actually taking the job," he told me.

He had a point there. What I knew about solido equipment was what I'd read, and that wasn't very much. I would have to rely upon my natural genius to see me through.

The New Granada was originally a 'deepie' theatre, a massive-fronted place that had obviously seen better days. Just the same, as Hepworth informed me, the owner had had it converted for solido, and had almost immediately got into difficulties. He sold out to Andrew Garret for the proverbial song, the latter having put up some of the money for the expensive conversion. The whole trouble was that it was too far East. Even Garret couldn't do anything with it. The natives around these parts preferred strong drink, and weak women. The vicarious thrills of solido had no attraction for them. If it comes to that they have none for old Belov.

We climbed the imitation marble steps and went through the foyer, where a bent, old retainer in a crumpled, red uniform creaked to attention. I followed Hepworth up a flight of stairs to the staging box, and computer room. The dimensional controllers, the node-box, and the other solido gimmicks were all back-stage. The first thing I noticed was a distinct smell of burnt insulation.

"There doesn't seem to be much left," I commented, after removing the servicing panels, and inspecting the interior of computer. "Not enough to choke a chow, in fact."

I tore out a handful of wiring from the guts of the thing, along with a dozen or so transistors. Hepworth squealed a protest, but I ignored him, and ripped out another handful, throwing it across the room. He tried to restrain me forcibly then.

"For heaven's sake what are you doing, man?" he bleated, hanging on to my arm.

"It's a kind of weeding operation," I explained. "You wanted a quick, cheap job doing, didn't you? Well, this is the way to do it."

"Just a moment," he said, dabbing his sweating brow. "There's no need to be so rash. We have a servicing volume somewhere. I'll feel better if you'll just have a look through it. I don't believe your methods are quite orthodox."

Which was very charitable of him, I suppose; but I knew what I was doing. I always know what I'm doing. It's just that sometimes I am apt to be a little flamboyant about it.

"Don't worry," I reassured him. "I was just trying to impress you."

"You did that all right," he said.

He went over to a cupboard, and searched around, finally producing a tatty looking book of about 1,000-pages. I took it off him, and examined it. It appeared to be a mass of figures interspersed with some incredibly ill-drawn diagrams. I threw it on the floor.

"Are you trying to insult me?" I asked him.

He looked at me, blankly. "What do you mean?"

"Mathematics," I said, "is a convenient language for people whose brains click like a computer, and who are able to think only in two dimensions. Tcha! Belov doesn't require such intellectual crutches. He thinks in terms of solid circuitry." I tore some more wiring out. Hepworth groaned slightly. "What time is it?" I inquired.

He glanced at his wrist. "Almost twelve-noon," he said.

I straightened up. "That will do for now," I announced. "Do we go out to lunch, or will you have something sent in?"

He looked at the computer, and shuddered. "What about cyanide for two?" he suggested, hollowly. "Old Garret isn't going to like this one bit."

What he didn't seem to know was that the Rike Mk. IV computer was a general purpose computer, and that many of

the three-million circuits were repetitive. I knew what I had to do. Most of the computer was a write-off; but I had seen that a single section could be re-routed, and used without overloading.

It took me about three hours to repair the thing. I gave it a test run-through, and it worked sweetly. I replaced the panels, and nodded to Hepworth.

" It looks as though you might be able to pack 'em in this evening at least," I told him. " I'm going down to the stage end to examine those dimensional controllers. I'll let you know when to switch on."

The dimensional controllers appeared to be all right, and the node box was operating quite smoothly, so I signalled Hepworth and watched the images form on the stage. The invention was almost a decade old; but it still fascinated me. Fascinated without attracting. I prefer a mediocre live show to a polished gimmickality. Not that the difference was immediately detectable. The actors were life size, apparently there in the flesh, and the outdoor shots were superb, the scenery seemingly unrolling for miles. It was just that one knew, that's all, and that it was no use clapping, and no use booing. That makes a difference.

I had no idea as to what the film was about, because I hadn't caught the blurb outside, and Hepworth hadn't switched the sound in. Two men were discussing something by a typical props department laboratory bench, and watching a beaker of pink hoo-ha gently steaming over a heater unit. I walked through them, and this pulled the images. Their bodies stretched to a good ten feet before they snapped back. I buttoned the inter-house video, and Hepworth's anxious face appeared on the screen.

" Let's have the sound," I said, " and turn the intensifier up a bit. The images are rather dull. You could do with some replacement tubes. Any in reserve? "

He nodded, and then there was a flash from the dimensional controllers, and the stage was suddenly empty.

" What the devil did you do? " I shouted, after I'd got him to the screen again.

" Only what you told me. It flashed out, and killed the computer, and then the indicator came in again. What's it like your end? "

" Marvellous," I told him. " Cancel that tube order, and send out for some flowers."

I'd got the inspection panels off, and was just peering inside the left-stage controller when a voice inquired, in tones still used by some ham actors when portraying an early twentieth-century English gentleman: " What the *hell* do you think you are doing? "

I looked up into the long, sharp features of a tall, bony middle-aged man, who was frowning at me.

" I'm sun-bathing on Miami beach," I informed this human horizontal-hold failure. " Mind you don't tread on my sand castle, or nanny will be furious."

" Very funny," he snarled, " if I could only afford to laugh; but it so happens that I am the owner of this place. Who are you? "

" Just make the cheque out to Hek Belov," I said, airily, as I probed at a recalcitrant relay.

" Cheque! " he echoed, almost choking.

I nodded. " For one-hundred guineas, plus any odd expenses that may occur to me later."

He leapt for the house video. " Hepworth! " he screamed, and when the manager's frightened face appeared on the screen: " What's going on here? And who is this idiot working on the controllers? "

Hepworth explained rather haltingly the circumstances which had led to his seeking outside assistance.

" Dolt! " exploded his boss. He switched off, and turned to me. " Fix it," he said, " and fix it good, or I'll have you arraigned for false pretences! "

" Just a minute," I requested. " Haven't I the doubtful pleasure of speaking to Andrew Garret? "

" Mister Garret to you! " he snarled.

" Well, Mister Garret," I said, agreeably, " you can cut the threats, and start talking in cash."

He tightened his thin lips. " Ten pounds. Take it, or take the consequences. I could have you for trespassing, and wilful damage. Just remember that. I didn't invite you here, and Hepworth has no authority to employ anyone without consulting me."

A mean man, I could see that, and probably a friend of the Police Commissioner. I somehow land the shabbiest of jobs, and the mangiest of employers. There seems to be a conspiracy to keep old Belov in the bread line.

Ten-pounds was out of the question, of course. I might be next door to starvation; but I had the dignity of the profession to consider. I considered it.

"Make it guineas," I told him.

"Very well," he agreed, with just the suspicion of a smile. "Nine guineas."

"I'll take the ten-pounds," I said, quickly, snapping my teeth at him, "you damned, elongated, ferret-faced, flim-flamming gypster!"

The smile broadened to a grin, and he walked away. Obviously, he was a man who liked to win, no matter what. I made a mental note to have three hot baths. One could catch something unpleasant from a swine like that.

There was a slight short to earth from one of the forming valves. I replaced this, and rewound the associated coil, which was spickled all over with a kind of brush discharge. We ran the tape through. Nothing happened.

I trekked back to the computer room. Garret was there breathing fire and brimstone, and the terrified manager was stuttering and stammering some sort of explanation, the gist of which was that the computer had commenced to smoke again, and then cut out. He added, rather rashly for him, that maybe the whole trouble was that the computer was part of the old 'deepie' rig, and should have been renewed, or overhauled when the solido was installed.

Garret cursed him, and turned to me. "How long is this repair job likely to take?" he wanted to know.

"Not having checked the computer," I said, "about three days as the crow flies. Unless, of course there is a bonus of some kind."

"You can have Hepworth's salary for the next three months," he offered, generously. "And now I have some other business to attend to. I'll expect to see everything in going order by to-night. Otherwise . . ." He left the sentence unfinished, and went out, banging the door after him as if he meant it.

"God bless you, Mr. Copperfield!" I said.

There might be meaner men, as Hepworth had remarked; but none so determinedly mean.

As it happened it was the memory block that was on the blink, and the smoke had been from an over-loaded transformer. Hepworth had the spares, and I banged them in, and connected up.

" Run it through again," I told him. " What's the show, anyway? I missed the outside blurbs."

" The God Behind The Cloud," said Hepworth. " It has been adapted from a book by Darok Ragnell. You know, the fellow who disappeared some months ago. You must have read about it."

I shook my head. " He should have my creditors. They'd have found him by now," I said, bitterly.

" Odd you never heard about him," said Hepworth. " He was acknowledged to be the greatest writer in the scientific adventure field that the world has ever known. He coined a new name for it, too. He called it ultra-fiction."

" Brilliant! " I exclaimed, snapping my teeth. " What did he use for brains? Sausage meat?"

Hepworth frowned at me. " You should read some of his novels. They're wonderful. They take you right out of this world."

" So does a rocket," I told him, sourly, thinking of my single experience in this connection; " but the feeling is far from pleasant."

" This story, ' The God Behind the Cloud,' " enthused Hepworth, " is the last one he wrote; but he never quite finished it. I've read all fifty-two of his novels; but this one is the best, although it leaves a question mark hanging in the air."

" Fifty-two? " I said. " The question is how he ever found time for the body's natural functions."

Hepworth nodded, completely missing the sarcasm. " Quite so. He was a dedicated man."

He commenced to run the tape. The scenes came up beautifully on the stage. We left it running, and went down to check the dimensional controllers. The hero, and various other hobbledehoys had landed on Mars, and Hepworth took a short cut across what was now the ' Martian desert.' I followed just behind. Everything was upset, of course. We were dragging the scene with us in long streamers of browns, and reds, and greys, as the controllers tried to cope, unsuccessfully, with our stray capacities.

I was just about to address a remark to Hepworth when I noticed the heat, and the fact that the scene had settled down, which was puzzling in itself. Not only that; but my feet were sinking into the hot, abrasive sand that was all around us.

Hepworth had noticed it, too. "What's happeneing?" he asked.

"I hate to think," I told him; "but I seem to be suffering from the hallucination of actually being on Mars, or what your favourite hophead called Mars. What about you?"

He looked frightened. One eye-lid had suddenly acquired a nervous tic. "It's no hallucination," he said. "This is real desert, and if we are where I think we are the nearest water is about a thousand miles away. Just look at that queer sky."

I looked. "Marvellous," I said, and shuddered. "I'm getting out of here."

I closed my eyes, and made a run for it, heading as near as I could in the general direction of where I had last glimpsed the controllers. The next thing was that I had tripped and fallen. I didn't need to open my eyes to realise that my attempt to reach normality had failed. I got up and dusted the sand from my clothes. Hepworth was there with a word of comfort.

"It's no use," he said, dolefully. "We're trapped."

I had to agree. "Trapped in someone else's sticky dreams. We've slipped into another level of consciousness, and I'm sorry I ever met you. Why didn't I just throw myself off top level like any sensible lunatic?"

"I know all about this place," he said, with gloomy pride. "I read the book four times."

"Don't ever blow your nose," I advised him, "or your head will implode. How the devil does that help?"

I wiped the sweat from my streaming brow, and looked all around. Nothing but sand, and great, red rocks reared grotesquely against the copper-coloured sky, which was streaked with what looked like vapour trails.

"Look," I said, pointing to them.

"Yes," he nodded. "They get that copper effect with filters."

"Who do? Oh, never mind. Those vapour trails. There's something up there."

He stared hard, shielding his eyes with his hands. "Inter-city rocket jobs," he informed me. "A bit careless of them; but this solido was made not far from London."

Before I could work this out I noticed two figures coming towards us. One was a man in his fifties, and as bald as a tax demand. The other was a tall, thin, ascetic looking

individual with a little, black beard. They were walking towards us with determination written across their faces. They seemed annoyed about something.

" You fellows there. What are you doing on the set? " inquired the one with the beard.

The other waved his hands about, and swore at us.

I looked at Hepworth. " Is this in the book as well? " I inquired.

" Get off at once," ordered the tall man, sternly. " How do you expect us to film with you two idiots trampling over everything. This isn't Brighton beach. It's supposed to be Mars."

The stout, bald-headed man shook his fist at us. " We'll have to re-shoot the whole thing again, damn you! " he yelled. " What the blazes are you supposed to be doing? "

Hepworth and I looked at each other. " You tell him," I said. " I'm beginning to lose touch."

" Well," began Hepworth, " we were trying to get this solido ready for the evening performance when . . . "

His voice trailed off, and he looked at me, helplessly. How do you explain the inexplicable? We weren't just trapped in the events of a book, or the film of the book, we were involved in another sequence as well, stemming from a different but associated time level. In most cases credulity is limited to probability and, metaphorically speaking, it is no use trying to force half-a-crown into a shilling slot.

" We were just looking round," I said. " Which is the way off? "

" The way off? " echoed the tall, bearded one. He seemed surprised. " You'd better follow us. I think the studio guards would like a word with you."

They moved off, the stout one still grumbling in a loud voice. We followed. I didn't care where we came out. I wasn't even fussy about the exact time level. I just wanted to get away from the hot sand, and that cursed, copper-coloured sky.

Suddenly, to my dismay, we were on our own again. One minute the two men we were following were there, and then they weren't. I swung around quickly; but they were nowhere to be seen.

" Where did they go? " asked Hepworth, anxiously.

"To hell for ice!" I said, testily. "How the devil should I know?"

Hepworth grabbed my arm, and pointed. "They're back," he said, excitedly. "There they are over there."

I looked, and saw the two men approaching us again; but they shimmered, and stretched, and almost vanished, like an image seen on a faulty video. On an inspiration, I pulled Hepworth along at right angles to their approach, and watched their images reform; but we were getting further from them. It was a dimensional problem as well. We tried a little back-tracking, still moving to the right, and now we could hear them. They were telling us to to stay where we were. We tried it, and the two men vanished again. As a last resort I rushed around in a mad way making every conceivable geometrical move, and countermove. Once I thought I glimpsed them; but I couldn't be sure, and finally I collapsed on the sand, and lay there, dizzy and gasping.

"They've gone," said Hepworth, approaching me.

I glared at him.

"What made you run about like that?" he asked, innocently. "Did something sting you?"

If I could have mustered the strength I'd have strangled him then and there.

"This heat is terrible," he complained.

"Why don't you turn over a couple of pages," I snarled, and got to my feet. "*I* should have written this damn book! I'd have had an oasis every thirty yards, with food dumps in between."

"Look!" shouted Hepworth, pointing. "The hairies."

Approaching us across the glaring, yellow sands were what I took to be a group of apes. As they came nearer I saw that their features were almost human, and that they wore a kind of loin cloth, and each one carried a club. The leader had what appeared to be a sling shot as well. They were at least seven feet tall, and their bodies were completely covered in long, yellowish hair, which made them difficult to see except against the huge rock from behind which they had appeared.

In a very short time we were surrounded, and urged by grunts and gesticulations we went towards the rock. There we were herded into a kind of cave which had its entrance on the other side. There were chisel marks, or something of

the kind, on the sides and roof, so it had been at least partly engineered.

The faint radiance inside came from the large, scintillating crystals, which protruded haphazardly from the dark stone. Our captors were chattering all the while in a language I couldn't understand, not surprisingly, perhaps, although I am a fair linguist. We were pushed ahead of them down a long, submartian passageway, twisting and turning, down and down, until we emerged suddenly into another immense cave, or amphitheatrical-like hollow, where there were crowds of the hairy creatures.

Here again a kind of bluish-white illumination, but much brighter, was provided by crystals set in the rock. Some of them were almost a foot across. We were dragged to one of a number of flat stones set in the middle of the place. They were raised a couple of feet from the floor, and the leader of the little group that had captured us began to shout and throw his arms about like a man introducing a prize fight. A crowd of his fellow creatures gathered about the rough block.

" If it's what I think it is," I said to Hepworth, " the odds are all against you, my friend. I was a very handy welter-weight years ago; but I shall try not to hurt you more than I can help."

" I don't think it will come to that," replied Hepworth, mildly. " In any case, Judo happens to be my hobby. I took it up about three years ago, so you don't have to worry."

The murderous swine!

" I have every reason to worry," I told him. " The contest is off." I poked the bellowing ape-man in the back. " I'm not fighting," I informed him. " I'm a pacifist."

He grinned, and poked me back. Then he said something to the gathering crowd. They all laughed, heartily. I nursed my sore ribs, and swore. He had a finger like a steel punch.

" God blast you," I said, " you hairy monster! You're lucky I am out of condition, or I'd tear your horrible head off! "

Hepworth nudged me. " He's trying to sell us," he whispered.

" What is this," I asked. " A slave market? "

Hepworth shook his head, and looked grim. " The meat market," he informed me.

Some of the crowd were bidding with their fingers, and finally a great, fat hairy one held up both hands, and looked around, triumphantly. We were dragged off the stone, and grabbed by the successful bidder, who proceeded to rope us together with a greyish length of something that had probably been part of the vegetation of Ragnell's Mars. Then he pinched us, and licked his protruding lips. I attempted a getaway, pulling Hepworth along with me; but we only got as far as the slack of the rope, and then we were jerked to the ground by our delighted owner. Everyone howled with laughter.

It was while we were lying there, and I was feebly cursing, that I heard an odd sort of sound. It was like an electronic organ operated by unskilful hands, and at varying pitch. Suddenly, our captors were gone. I sat up, and watched them bolt down the dozen or so passages all around us.

"The Nuds!" exclaimed Hepworth, in astonishment. "But it can't be. They were in an earlier novel by Ragnell called 'The Creatures From Ganymede'."

A group of hairies who had bolted up one of the passages came belting out again, and behind them were three slim, pale creatures, hardly five feet tall, with pointed heads, no shoulders, and each with a single eye set in the middle of an almost featureless face. The nose was flat, and very small, and the mouth just a slit. They wore tube-like belted garments of some shimmering material that reached to the ground so that their feet were invisible.

As the hairies shot across the open space one of the creatures pulled what looked like a short, white stick from the belt of his garment, and levelled it. A streak, or flash of intense blackness reached out, and enveloped them. There was a soft explosion, and the hairies had vanished.

That crazy music must have been a kind of hunting song, or something of the sort. It ceased locally; but we could still hear it tally-hoing down the passages. The Nuds were making mice-twittering noises, as they communicated with each other. It was like a wet finger rubbed on glass. Finally, the three of them came towards us. We scrambled to our feet, and eyed them, warily.

One of them reached into an inner pocket, and pulled out one end of a length of tubing, or cable, which terminated in a sucker-like pod. This he placed on my forehead. It proved

to be a kind of telepathic aid. I was being asked questions right inside my brain, which had retreated to the back of my skull, and was making hissing noises like some trapped animal. I noticed that Hepworth had been similarly hooked up to one of the other Nuds.

"Who are you?" demanded my questioner. "What are you doing here? Who is your companion? When did you arrive? Where is your ship?"

More questions followed; but before I could gather my bemused wits together he had snatched the sucker connection away impatiently, and connected up to Hepworth. After a while they removed the things and stuffed them away. One of them turned to me—it was the one who had written me off as an informant—and squeaked, in passable English: "We have absorbed the small amount of knowledge in your puny brains, and we will be able to communicate with you in your own primitive fashion. This should be less terrifying to your tiny minds. Now you must follow us. We have a vehicle outside. Come."

He pulled on the rope, and I dug my heels in and pulled the other way. It was the indignity that riled me. Anyone would think we were just steak on the hoof.

"Why don't you get back in your book!" I snarled.

For an instant the whole scene changed, and I caught a glimpse of the interior of the solido theatre. Then everything steadied again, and the Nud drew his weapon-stick.

"Come!" he said, menacingly; but there seemed to be less confidence in his tone, and his voice was almost human.

We followed them outside to where a dozen similar aliens were waiting. The vehicle was a black cylinder, about six-feet high, and three feet in diameter. It was standing on its end. More Nuds came out of the cave, and someone squeaked an order. Everyone formed into a single file, and went towards the cylinder, passing right through the casing. Altogether there must have been upwards of thirty aliens in front of us; but all of them found room in that three-foot cylinder, and I began to wonder if most of the vehicle, if vehicle it was, was not perhaps below the ground.

It wasn't. It was all there on the surface, approximately three-feet through, and yet a few minutes later we were escorted down a corridor, which must have been quite fifty-feet long, and about seven-feet wide. This inside a three-foot cylinder! Presently we came to a perfectly ordinary door.

This was opened, and we were shoved inside. The door was closed, and locked.

We found ourselves in a kind of cell, which was bare of furniture except for a kind of metal bench down one side. We sat on this, and it promptly collapsed like an inadequate prop. Even the rope broke.

"Cut!" a stentorian voice bellowed, and I had a brief glimpse of half-a-dozen camera crews, and a director stamping about, pointing at us, and complaining, voicelessly now, in a very tearful fashion.

I stood up, and ran towards them, and almost stunned myself on the opposite wall. The scene had vanished, and it was as you were. I went back, and joined Hepworth on the floor.

"That's a kind of breakthrough, isn't it," he said, interestedly.

There was no possible, or adequate answer. Perhaps I was going mad. I didn't know. It was sparse comfort to reflect that I had company. My unique brain was at hazard, and yet he could display a scientific interest in the manner of its destruction.

"God forgive you!" I said, with deep emotion.

He digested this with raised eyebrows.

"You swine!" I added, feeling my damaged nose.

He rubbed the side of his chin, and presumably cast about for some other topic of conversation.

"Darok called it inter-dimensional engineering," he said at last, and observing my blank stare: "You know, Darok Ragnell, the author. This business of getting an immense space into a comparatively small envelope. He explained how it could be done in the book; but it was a bit beyond me."

"I'll bet it was," I said. "It's a bit beyond me, too, and if you consider the economics of it, supposing anyone could, it's even wackier. The whole of Greater London could be packed into one of its own buildings. It's enough to make an estate agent die of noughts on the brain. What other surprises are we likely to encounter? What about that weapon of theirs?"

"The Nuds are experts in negative phenomena," he explained. "That shadow gun of theirs is a product of this. If I remember correctly, you start off by predicating that

far from darkness being an absence of light, light is an absence of darkness. You may say that a shadow has no substance; but what substance has light? The thickness of a reflection is the thickness of a shadow, and just as we can beam light these people are able to beam darkness. Light can kill, as you know. It could burn a hole in a man if concentrated into a sufficiently brilliant beam. The same applies to darkness if it is sufficiently concentrated."

"If a man like that had two heads," I observed, scathingly, "he'd be worrying about the middle one."

I got up to try the door, and immediately fell back again on the metal floor.

"We're off!" said Hepworth, almost cheerfully. "These things can dawdle at ten-thousand miles an hour, or travel at the speed of light. It only takes them thirty-seconds to achieve maximum speed."

"We'll be crushed to a pulp!" I cried, hugging the floor. "Hold on for your life!"

Hepworth smiled in a superior fashion. "It's quite all right," he reassured me. "All the Nud ships are fitted with para-magnetic equalisers. There's no sensation whatever after the initial thrust. They are probably taking us to their fabulous city of Morga, which is in the other hemisphere, or it would be," he corrected himself, frowningly, "if we were on Ogar instead of Mars."

Whatever damned world we were on it was only seconds later that I felt the thing settle on the ground, and rock slightly. The Nuds came for us, and we were taken outside. Two of them hustled us on to a dull grey, circular plate, with a central control pillar, on which were some odd looking switches. One of the Nuds took up his position there. The rest of the crew piled on after us.

I remember looking round at the rock-strewn sandscape, and catching a glimpse of two enormous, but familiar, figures striding across the horizon towards us, and then there was just a slight vibration, and we were no longer on the surface of Mars; but somewhere else.

It was an altogether different, and fantastic, place. We were gazing down upon a city that was utterly alien, with magnificent buildings that were apparently crystalline-inspired. There was no other way of describing the strange

multiplicity of design, and the odd, geometrical shapes. Yet nothing stood alone. Everything merged into everything else. Stone, and metal, and clear, hard, transparent plastic, all inextricably bound into a gleaming, flashing whole, which threw back the sun's rays in a riot of colour, iridescent, and changing with every move of the observer. There were no roads. The structures were cheek-by-jowl, and back to back, on every possible level, and with no two adjacent sides alike. The city stretched out to the eye's farthest limits whichever way one looked.

I suddenly realised that we were standing on a mere disk, and that it was a long way down. We were floating at about a thousand feet. No-one seemed worried, except me. Some of the Nuds were standing right on the edge.

"Teleportation," whispered Hepworth. "Something like that, anyway. Ragnell called it matter-shift."

"That earns him half a cheer," I snarled. "If this thing tips we've had it."

Hepworth shook his head. "We're surrounded by a force-screen. You coudn't fall off even if you wanted to. By the way, I don't remember this place being in the book. I'm not sure that I like it."

"Neither do I," I said; "but we're stuck with it. I believe the swine's still writing. He's got us involved, and he's still writing."

Hepworth's jaw dropped. "You mean . . . ? Good heavens!"

"I'll tear his head off when I see him!" I swore. "He must be around here somewhere."

Presently, I saw that we were heading for a thick bank of cloud, and then we were right into it, and the city had vanished. I began to shiver with the cold. The Nuds seemed unconcerned. When we broke out of the cloud I was astonished to see that we were no longer in the land of the Nuds; but slipping softly through the warm, spring sunshine of familiar London, and almost scraping the higher levels.

Nothing else was moving. Not a thing. That was the frightening part of it. We passed a helicab frozen in air, the driver plainly visible. His passenger, a fat, middle-aged business type, was frowning fiercely, his mouth wide open and probably arrested in the act of giving the jet jehu a piece of his mind about slow avoidance in fast traffic.

Below us the customary crowds were poised in jostling action, limbs in the oddest positions; and everywhere silence. Soul-tearing silence. I am not a nervy man. I venture to say that I have courage; but I felt the inexplicable awfulness of it. Terror almost took possession of me. Hepworth began to whimper, and then we had swept into a building through the wall without so much as disturbing the dust.

The vehicle vanished beneath our feet, and we were left standing on the carpeted floor of what appeared to be a board room. Behind a massive desk, of the kind beloved by business executives with more presence than ability, sat a clean-shaven individual of uncertain age carefully screwing a cigarette into the longest holder I have ever seen.

"Ragnell!" breathed Hepworth. "Darok Ragnell!"

The man behind the table, which was littered with typewritten sheets, and perhaps a dozen or so reference books scattered haphazard about the polished surface, wound a blank sheet into an old, electric typewriter before replying. Then he picked up the smoking gimmick, which he had laid down to perform this operation, and pulled on it delicately with his thick, sensuous lips. The cigarette glowed into life. He smiled, sardonically.

"I have that honour," he said, briefly.

He seemed to me to be acting a part. Perhaps a part he had written for himself.

"Shall I strangle him now?" I asked Hepworth. "Or shall I just detach a limb or two, and strangle him later?" Then I remembered the Nuds, and glanced round for them.

They'd gone!

"Did you have a nice trip?" asked Ragnell, casually.

I was still looking for the Nuds.

Hepworth frowned at me. "This is Darok Ragnell, the ultra-fictioneer," he informed me, severely.

"God bless him!" I said. "But I'd already gathered that. What happened to his little playmates?"

"If you are referring to the Nuds," said Ragnell, "they failed to break through. Now then, if you wouldn't mind just sitting down at this table . . ." We sat down, and I glared at him, all my senses alert as I wondered what was coming next. "You might as well relax," he told us, "while I set the facts up for you. An explanation of some kind seems to be in order at this stage." He smiled, benignly. "Do you

know what's out there? " he asked, indicating the window behind him.

I nodded. " Timelessness."

" Ah," he said, " an initiate. You know the nature of time, then? "

I leant towards him. " If old Belov doesn't know then no-one knows. Time, my friend, is the great life-force, sweeping through the unmoving, yet ever-changing puppets, like light through a film of events; giving an illusion of movement where there is no movement. Somehow, it seems to me, you have managed to insert yourself like a parasite between the layers of unfolding time, a fraction of a second behind the main pulse."

" How did you do it? " asked Hepworth, suddenly interested.

With the cigarette holder held vertically, Ragnell made tiny smoke rings by moving his wrist in a rhythmical fashion. He watched them disappear, and then smiled at us like a scientist who has just performed a successful if minor experiment.

" It's all bound up with this negative phenomena nonsense," he explained, " except that it isn't nonsense to the Nuds. They seem to have achieved a separate existence, somehow, if they didn't already have it. The laws of our universe don't apply to them, or else they are governed by a sort of seetee inversion of them. I don't quite know."

" These are fictional characters, aren't they? " said Hepworth, bewildered. He shook his head. " No, maybe not. They seemed real enough."

Ragnell pulled on his cigarette, and regarded us with that somewhat enigmatic smile. " No, they're fictional all right," he said; " but that cuts surprisingly little ice. It was Huxley, I think, who once said that fictional man keeps the really tremendous ideas alive in concrete form. Man, in general is nothing compared with the really profound fictional man.

" Price, who was Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford University around this time said that a mental image, once created, may have an independent existence of its own outside its author's subconscious. He also said that what anybody thinks has some tendency to come about in fact, just because it is thought of, and still has that tendency even when it is no longer in anybody's consciousness. Ideas, in fact, are dangerous things because they have a tendency to

come true. That's what happened to the Nuds. They began to function independently.

"I created them, and I am the only obstacle to their invasion of the real world. They thought to use you as a shield against me, to break through into this universe with you. They failed. They may not always fail. As their knowledge deepens, and broadens, and takes in Terran concepts so will their power increase."

"Marvellous!" I exclaimed. "Now I've heard everything."

"Not quite everything," observed Ragnell. He tapped the table with his cigarette holder. "Has it occurred to you that a fictional character to be fully rounded out must have thoughts and ideas of his own. The fictional author, for instance, must in his turn be able to create characters that pulsate with the vibrancy of life breathed into them by their

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creator, by the creator of their creator, if you like, and so on, perhaps to infinity.

"That is the ideal. How near has anyone ever come to attaining it?" Again that sardonic smile. "I suggest, gentlemen, that the answer is all around you. Life itself. Life, in fact, is a Chinese puzzle box in a hall of mirrors, reflecting and re-reflecting until the original is lost among the maze of minds. Not only lost; but perhaps unimportant. The archetypal mind can die, or disappear in some other way, leaving no trace except the reflections, which grow and change, and re-conceive, and carry on just the same."

"What you are saying in effect," I summed up, "is that we are probably all fictional characters, and that the original may no longer exist."

He inclined his head. "Precisely."

I looked at Hepworth. He was gripping the edge of the table, his eyes fixed on Ragnell, and his jaw slack. Life for him, it seemed, had suddenly mounted its big guns.

"One more revelation," I said, "you blasphemous swine, and my friend here will have a seizure!"

I didn't feel too good myself. I went over to the window, and wrapped the end of the curtain around my fist. Then I punched the glass out . . .

A jigsaw of mirror pieces falling all around me, reflections within reflections, and then I was standing in a neglected, and derelict room before a broken window. Outside everything was back to normal, and the busy, bustling city was bustlingly busy again. Darok Ragnell had gone; but Hepworth was still sitting there at a table thick with dust, and otherwise completely bare. He was in a state approaching stupefaction.

"Come on," I said, urgently, "let's get out of this before that lunatic's creations reach out for us, too."

We fled from the room, and took the grav-lift to the fourth level. There I said goodbye to my companion.

"We must have a reunion," I said, "in about ninety years time. If I'm not around don't wait for me."

I left him with his problems, and headed for Emilio's. All the way there I shook hands with people.

It was good to be back in the rat race.

—Edward Mackin

New Australian writer Lee Harding makes his debut to authorship with this intriguing story of a man who became lost to the everyday world. Was the world a figment of his imagination—a dream—or was he but a part of another's thoughts?

DISPLACED PERSON

BY LEE HARDING

The restaurant was almost empty. This fact annoyed Jason Barker because he had been waiting nearly half an hour for what should have been a quick, five-minute snack.

He sat in a far corner of the room, a tall, dark and rather sombre young man in his early thirties, and brooded over this latest manifestation of his problem. He approached it in much the same way a dog would approach a rubber bone. He nibbled and snapped at it from every angle and still it refused to make sense.

He frowned down at his wristwatch. Twenty-six minutes had now passed since he had given his order for coffee and sandwiches to the waitress. His dark eyes glared out at the other tables, noting down the half-dozen or so early lunchers with their noses buried in the paperback novels. Every one of them had come in after him.

A young waitress stepped briskly past his table.

"Excuse me," Jason called out.

The girl's steps faltered slightly, her head began the merest suggestion of a turn.

"*Excuse me,*" Jason repeated, louder and with impatience accentuating the words.

The girl turned around and walked back to his table. "Has your order been taken, sir?" she enquired.

"Of course it has," Jason grunted. "You took it half an hour ago."

"Oh." The girl coloured under his sour scowl. "I'm terribly sorry. What was it again, sir?"

Jason suppressed a groan. "Just coffee and mixed sandwiches," he said, slowly and with infinite patience. "*If* you would be so kind?"

The girl gave a sickly smile of apology and hurried back out to the kitchen.

Jason resumed his impatient waiting. The fingers of his right hand drummed irritably on the bare table top. Inefficiency had always annoyed him. His own life had always been as precise and orderly as he could manage to make it. It was so much more convenient than the chaotic confusion that seemed to surround other people's lives.

There had been a time when he had found this lack of order in beings less fortunate than himself only mildly irritating. Tolerance was a quality Jason always felt ready to declare his own, the simple thing that made life bearable with people less efficient than himself. He had never expected this annoyance to reach the monstrous proportions it had in the last week or so.

The minutes ticked by. Finally, after another ten minutes, he was able to stare down at the small plate of sandwiches before him and feel all hunger drained from within him. He knew even before he tasted the coffee that it would be barely luke-warm. That was only to be expected; it had probably been standing out in the kitchen for the best part of half an hour.

He ate and drank without relish, feeling the gnawing pangs of uncertainty nibbling away at his insides. When he had downed the last of the tepid coffee he stood up and made his way through the tables and towards the front door.

He didn't bother to wait for a check. He was beginning to learn a few things. Maybe he wouldn't have had to ask two or three times for it before the girl wrote one out. Maybe . . .

" That's okay, dear," he said, grinning at the old dowager behind the till as he deposited the right number of coins on the counter. She made as if to say something in reply. Perhaps she did, but by that time Jason was standing outside on the pavement and making a mental note to avoid the place in the future.

I wonder, he mused, pushing his way through the hurrying lunch-time crowd, if it could really have been just bad service?

Why the hell do people keep forgetting me?

His thoughts were wandering again, checking and rechecking. He was remembering the number of times previously when he had sat for what had seemed like an eternity in numerous restaurants for meals that always seemed to take ages to prepare. And the taxis that never arrived after he had phoned for them, the newsboys who kept forgetting to deliver his morning and evening papers and having to be constantly reminded of the fact. The staff at Raglan Advertising who continually rattled him with their endless deafness to his orders. Not to mention Anne, who never seemed to remember a single, solitary thing he told her.

He stopped and let the river of humanity flow past him. A memory jostled at his thoughts. He glanced at his wristwatch and saw that it was almost one o'clock. His appointment with Dr. Martin was for one fifteen. There wasn't much time. He quickened his steps in the direction of Collins Street.

His head was beginning to ache again.

The plate on the door proclaimed to all and sundry: *DR. PHILLIP MARTIN: PSYCHOANALYST*. Jason opened it and walked in.

The girl was blonde and attractive and she sat seductively behind a contemporary reception desk. " Yes? " she enquired, large blue eyes upraised.

" Jason Barker," he replied, a little shakily and wondered why the hell his body suddenly felt too heavy for his legs. " I have an appointment with the doctor for one fifteen."

" One moment, Mister Barker," she said, waving one hand to a chair. Jason accepted it thankfully. His eyes wandered idly round the room while the girl spoke quietly into a little black box on her desk.

Minutes later, a door opened behind and to the left of the seductive secretary. A pleasant faced little man approaching middle age emerged and extended a friendly hand.

"Ah, Mister Barker, is it? Come in would you?"

Somehow Jason got to his feet and followed the little doctor into the room. His eyes took in the walls, the ceiling, the tasteful furnishings, the van Gogh above a desk in the far corner. The couch.

It took about five mnutes to get him on to the couch and another fifteen to relax. And all the time the friendly features of the little man were exuding warm friendliness.

"Now, Mister Barker," the doctor began, "just what seems to be the trouble?"

"It's going to sound silly," Jason spluttered, wondering why the couch felt like a bed of nails.

"Probably." It was obvious that the doctor was very patient.

Jason took a deep breath. "Well, it's just that people seem to keep forgetting me."

"How do you mean?"

Jason wriggled down into the concrete slab beneath him and tried to make his words sound sensible. "Well, they just seem to keep forgetting everything I tell them."

"A rather common human failing, I would think," the little doctor observed.

"Sure, doctor. But *all* the time? I mean, it's getting ridiculous; nobody seems to remember a thing I tell them! Not only that—even my best friends don't seem to recognise me anymore." He explained how familiar faces had passed him in the street without so much as a 'good day' and how they'd looked surprised when he chased them up, and guilty when they realised who he was.

Not to mention the magazines that refused to acknowledge his subscription renewals: he hadn't had a *Readers' Digest* for seven months. What the hell was the matter with the subscription department, anyway? And the taxis that never arrived in response to his phone calls, the staff at Raglan who continually frustrated him with their humbling inefficiency and Anne, his wife, who never seemed to remember anything he told her.

"Doc, what the blazes is happening to me?"

The psychoanalyst pursed little lips in a little face.

Jason mopped sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. He felt as sick as a dog and was beginning to wish he had never set foot inside the headshrinker's office. They didn't seem to be getting anywhere at all at this rate.

" There are a number of possibilities," the little man finally began. " The first and most important of them being that your memory might be playing tricks on you."

Jason could only stare, puzzled. " *Memory?* " he echoed.

The other nodded. " That's right. To use a hackneyed phrase, Mister Barker, the mind is a funny thing. Perhaps you haven't really mentioned these things to people, it is only the thought of doing so that has lodged in your memory, along with the natural assumption that the act has been carried out. And these so-called 'old friends' you mentioned; are they really as close to you as you believe, or are they instead merely chance acquaintances given increased importance by an unreliable memory? "

" But I've known Benny Teare all my life! " Jason protested. " We went to the same school for six years; we've been pals ever since. And yesterday he walked out of a lift and straight past me without so much as a nod. When I grabbed hold of his arm he looked at me as though I was a complete stranger."

Dortor Martin frowned thoughtfully. " And? "

Jason shrugged. " Well, he finally did get around to recognising me. But it took him a hell of a long time."

The little man was silent for a moment. " Well, there are several explanations for that incident," he finally said. " One is that your friend Benny had a genuine moment of forgetfulness. Another is that this whole thing never happened and is simply a fabrication of your subconscious." He waved back Jason's indignant reply. " And then there is the possibility that what you have told me is the truth and that Benny, for some reason we are as yet unable to define, *could* not recognise you.

" And now, I think we had better begin at the beginning. Just when did all this start . . . ? "

Jason left the psychoanalyst's office an hour later with the blank feeling of having accomplished nothing. The feeling persisted all through the following week, seven days underlined by increased anger and frustration at the uncaring world around him. Instead of the situation improving since his

session on the psychiatric couch it had become progressively worse. The task of getting his ideas across to other people was becoming virtually impossible. Nobody, but nobody seemed to *care* about him any more.

Last night, he mused, as he walked along the hallway to Doctor Martin's office, Anne had even forgotten to put on dinner for him until he had arrived home.

Jason found his second hour on the couch easier than the first. The extreme pleasure of pouring out his tale of woes to another human being was a privilege for which he would have gladly paid double the doctor's usual professional fee.

Towards the end of the second session the little man with the parental features touched upon the subject of *deja vu.*

" Deja *what?* " Jason echoed, puzzled over the strange words.

" *Deja vu,* Mister Barker. Let me explain. Have you ever been doing something, either engaged in some familiar task or perhaps merely thinking random thoughts, and then for a barest fraction of a second you are acutely aware of having done the very same thing at some other time? Almost as if you are re-enacting a part of your life over again. The whole fleeting moment assumes a fourth-dimensional quality, and then it is gone and we cannot recapture the strangely eerie feeling. This is known as *deja vu,* the " I-have-been-here-before " feeling. Old timers pointed it out as evidence of re-incarnation. Today we know it to be nothing more than a mental short circuit, a simultaneous remembering of an act the precise instant it is performed. I mention it because there is the possibility of these, ah, lapses of yours being a similar manifestation. Perhaps at the instant you decide to perform some function or utter some pronouncement you automatically *remember* doing so, thus negativing further action on your part. You've done it, so you are naturally frustrated when there is no evidence of your having done so. This would explain these inexplicable cafe encounters of yours. Could this frustration arise simply because you remember giving a waitress an order that, in reality, was never given? "

Jason nodded, slowly. It seemed reasonable enough. " But hell, doctor, who can you trust if you can't trust your own mind any more? "

The little man smiled his paternal smile. " Why, you can trust *me,* Mister Barker. I'm here to help you."

" Sure, sure," Jason mumbled, absently. And stared up at the blank ceiling. " But now that we've found the cause, what do we do about a cure? "

" That," replied the doctor, " may take some time . . . "

" Going *up!* "

The elevator boy looked straight through him. Jason sighed and followed the other passengers into the lift. He burrowed into a corner and let the wall of grey flannel suits build up around him while the lift ascended towards the offices of Raglan Advertising.

This is something new, he thought. Now Alex doesn't even recognise me. He stared at the back of the crew-cut head visible between the grey flannel shoulders in front of him and shook his head, wonderingly.

The four walls began the rhythm of stopping and starting that lulled Jason's senses and let his thoughts wander along familiar pathways. He was wondering what Doctor Martin would think of this latest manifestation of his ' neurosis ' or whatever it was. Once, he remembered, the young elevator boy had always greeted him with a smile and a ' Good morning, Mister Barker ' or ' Good afternoon, Mister Barker ', and Jason would nod and the elevator door would slide shut and up they would ascend to the twenty-third floor and the offices of Raglan Advertising. They would make small talk about the weather, politics, the latest car designs and Alex would let him out at his floor with a smile and a respectful ' Good day '.

I wonder how the headshrinker would explain *this one*? he wondered. His eyes wandered to the bright yellow thermometer resting alarmingly on the twenty-seventh floor.

" Damn! " he cursed, unaware that he had spoken the word aloud. He pushed past the few remaining passengers in the lift and struggled outside just before the doors slid shut. Still angry, he glared back at the boy's face as it rose out of sight behind the glass window. It was blank and unconcerned.

Alex would never have let me overpass my floor, Jason realised. *Never.*

" What's got into the boy? " he grumbled, setting off down the side stairs to his office four flights below. His head, which had been aching all the way back from Doctor Martin's consulting room, began to spin crazily and he had difficulty retaining his balance and vision. It continued to ache

abominably as he made his way slowly down the stairs and he knew no amount of aspirin would ease it.

Raglan Advertising spread like a greedy amoeba across the twenty-third floor of Tower Buildings. It had claimed all but three suites during the course of its rapid growth and there were rumours that it would soon occupy even this small remainder. Jason's private office could be reached only by negotiating an aisle between a round dozen clattering typists and stenographers. Somehow, in his groggy condition, Jason managed to do this, and with the door of his inner sanctum closed heavily behind him, he collapsed in a tired bundle over his desk. After a while his mind stopped heaving as though it were about to throw up something awful and the ache and pain in his skull ebbed away to an insidious background murmur.

It was some time before his mind retreated in panic from the unscaleable walls of unreason and settled once more on the sober light of business. When he finally managed to perform this heavy task it was with a sudden annoyance as he noticed the bare desk before him.

He looked up. The clock on the wall said two-fifteen. God, but it was late. He flicked a toggle on the inter-office phone.

" Marcia? I thought I told you to have those Reilly contracts on my desk after lunch? " He glared at the impersonal black box while apologetic squeaks squirted out into the room.

" All right, all right," he snapped. " Just see that I get them in here right away." He flicked the toggle off and glared angrily at the door in front of him.

For a while he had been upset over the elevator boy's behaviour but now he realised that the little doctor's parting words of advice had been right.

" Don't fight your hullicinations, Mister Barker. Don't worry them like a bone. Let them take their course and retain all your strength for the battle ahead."

" Hallucinations." He let up a cigarette and exhaled shakily. " That's a comforting thought."

Relax. Take it easy.

Okay.

He frowned down at the desk top and ran one finger along the polished surface.

How long since the janitor had cleaned the place out? he wondered. His eyes took in the two ash trays overflowing on to the desk and the dull fog covering the chrome fittings. He made a mental note to lodge a firm complaint with the caretakers.

A minute passed.

Two.

Fifteen.

Where the hell was Marcia?

A gradual coldness began to spread throughout his body. It began at the base of his spine, sending exploratory fingers of ice throughout what remained of his nervous system. His hands were shaking so much it was difficult for him to raise the cigarette to his lips. He stabbed it viciously into the messy ashtray. With the other hand he flipped the toggle on the inter-office phone.

" Marcia, where the hell are those contracts? "

Very faintly he could hear the background murmur of the outer office almost, but not quite, subdued by the familiar clatter of Marcia's typewriter.

" Marcia! " he repeated, shouting into the black box. The sounds from outside were vaguely taunting with their seeming unreality.

Why wouldn't his secretary reply? He flicked the toggle angrily up and down. " Marcia," he repeated. *" Marcia! "*

With apalling clarity he heard the sounds from the phone fade away and disperse like water down a drain hole until finally there was nothing to remain but a great, heavy silence. He stared stupidly at the black box, refusing to believe his ears.

The phone was dead. His strength seemed to flow out and dissipate into the air around him. He slumped back in his chair, weak, pale and exhausted.

He waited. For a long time. And although his position with Raglan Advertising caused a hundred different letters and forms to pass across his desk every day nobody came into his office while he was there and deposited the familiar bundle of typescript before him. Nor did the two outside phones ring even once. To all apparent purposes the firm was doing without him. It didn't make sense; but what did, these crazy days?

Marcia never appeared with the urgent Reilly contracts. He found time to wonder, between his immobile periods of despair, as to what was being done about them. And had they ever really existed or were they just another fabrication of his unreliable mind?

After a while he remembered to consult the wall clock and realised with a shock that it was almost five-o'clock. His one thought now was that he needed help, and he needed it badly, before things got completely out of hand. He could feel the hungry winds of insanity battering at the feeble shutters of his mind. Only Doctor Martin could help him, the little man with the friendly smile and the paternal manner.

He got up from the chair and walked unsteadily towards the door. He opened it and walked through the outer office without a glance either to the right or to the left. It was the first time he could remember that his passing had failed to cause a single head to stir from its allotted task.

" Down," said the elevator boy. And looked right through him at the people behind.

Jason nodded wearily and entered the lift. All the way down he stared at the back of the boy's crew-cut head as though his willing alone could make the boy say something familiar.

" Ground floor."

The door slid open. Jason hurried out without a backward glance.

The plate on the door proclaimed: *DR. PHILLIP MARTIN: PSYCHOANALYST.* Jackson opened it and went in.

The blonde receptionist looked up. " Yes? "

" I . . I would like to see Doctor Martin," Jason said, and wondered why his words sounded vague and indistinct.

" Do you have an appointment? "

" No. But I . . . "

" I'm sorry," the girl interrupted, obviously annoyed with Jason's intrusion and anxious to resume whatever task she was engaged upon. " The doctor can't see anyone without an appointment. Besides, he's in consultation at the moment and can't be disturbed."

" But this is urgent! " Jason protested, feeling the sweat breaking over his body in cold, clammy droplets. " I *must* see him! "

"If you wish to make an appointment now," the girl continued, "you might possibily be able to see the doctor within the next two days, if it's as urgent as you imply."

"No. I want to see him now. I've *got* to see him. Don't you understand? You know how I . . ." He stopped then, his words frozen in a black, sickening pit deep in his stomach. It was the way the receptionist was looking at him. There was no sign of recognition in her blue eyes, only mild annoyance.

A door behind the reception desk opened and Doctor Martin walked out. His usually pleasant features were screwed up into suppressed anger. "What's all the fuss about, Belle?"

"Doctor," Jason began, feeling relief begin to flood his system. "Am I glad to see you. Something crazy's happening . . ." He took a step forward but let the foot fall to the carpet with a heavy thump. The little man was staring curiously at him.

"I don't believe I have your name Mister, ah . . ."

"Barker," the blonde volunteered. "Jason Barker. He seems anxious to see you about something." Her tone was only mildly concerned with the goings on before her eyes, eyes that even now were turning absently back to the papers before her on the desk.

"Doctor Martin," Jason said, swallowing dryly. "You remember me, surely. You know, *deja vu* and all that?"

The doctor's brows furrowed in a perplexed manner. His words, when he spoke, seemed to have been lifted with great difficulty from some very far off place.

"If you wish," he said, "you may make an appointment with my secretary. Perhaps I might fit you in this evening if it is as . . . as urgent as you seem to think."

Jason stared back at the remote and somehow uncaring eyes of the little man. "Doctor," he almost croaked, "you do remember me. You *must!*"

But the doctor had turned away and was addressing his receptionist. "Have you sent out that account to Mrs. Frobisher? I think she was expecting it today otherwise . . ."

Jason felt the last fragment of solidity crumbling beneath his trembling feet. With stunning clarity he realised that there was nothing more he could do, that the horrible nightmare was coming to a head and he was nothing more than the slave of events more powerful than himself.

He willed his shaking body to move. He left the doctor and the blonde talking softly to each other in the confines of the office. He didn't bother to say goodbye or excuse his actions for they were only too obviously unaware of his existence. Like many others, they had quite simply forgotten all about him.

A forgotten man wandered aimlessly through the city park and attempted to rationalise the world around him. It was silent with the approach of evening. A few people dawdled around the paths while dusk crept slowly down from the roofs of the tall skyscrapers bordering the parklands. And Jason Barker wondered if he were really going mad.

That simple fact stopped everything from making sense. If he were insane, why question the fact. Wasn't an insane person supposed to be sublimely indifferent to the fact? Do they all, he asked, fight as much as I? It would be so simple, he thought, to say: I am a paranoid. This is some fantastic plot concocted by the rest of the world and directed against me, personally . . . but to what end? Why were people acting as though he didn't exist?

Jason shivered. Why did that last sentence frighten him so? *As though he didn't exist . . .*"

There was always the possibility, he reasoned, that the whole thing might be a colossal nightmare, only he couldn't really bring himself to believe that. *I'm going home,* he decided, at least that was Somewhere.

As a car driver Jason had never been one to fight the traffic. He had infinite patience with the vagaries of peak hour traffic and the imbecility of other drivers. Only in acceptance of the inevitable was there satisfaction, so when one realised the impossibility of making the traffic move any faster or making some mug driver perform in a saner manner, Jason just sat back and moved along with the traffic. It was this philosophy that enabled him to live out the terrible nightmare imposed upon him; he couldn't fight it, so there was nothing to do but except it and see where it took him. He didn't attempt thinking what that *where* might ultimately be. He sincerely hoped it was not insanity.

He walked out of the park, feeling the silence descending around him like a too heavy cloak. Something was wrong. Everything seemed *too* quiet for a change. The city should be humming with the sounds of merging traffic, yet there was

nothing but a faint murmur disturbing the stillness. Even the birds were mute. Something was terribly wrong.

New tendrils of fear began to encircle Jason's twitching mind. Was he going deaf as well as mad? He strained his ears into the stillness, searching for a sound, any sound, and found none except that oddly familiar murmur. He realised that if that almost inaudible whisper were magnified a thousand thousand times it might, perhaps, resemble the missing sound of the city.

He snapped two fingers before him and heard the sound crack through the stillness around him with the certainty of a firecracker. Thankfully, he realised he was not going deaf. But what had happened to the world to make it so still and quiet?

He began to run quickly up the crowded street towards the underground.

It was at the station that the nightmare really began. In the midst of the familiar crushing, milling herd of commuters he struggled vainly for a ticket and no matter how much he shouted and banged on the windows he couldn't get anyone to sell him one. Every time the face behind the grille relaxed into patient immobility while the queue behind him undulated with steady firmness. It was almost as though the whole world had come to stop and was waiting for Jason Barker to remove his spanner from the works and let it take up where it left off. At least, that was the way it seemed to Jason.

He tried four windows before he gave up and stormed angrily on to the platform. Nobody seemed to mind. He walked up to a kiosk and helped himself to a newspaper and a packet of cigarettes. He walked away, expecting and hoping for the hand on his shoulder or the loud cry of the kiosk attendant that would have announced his return to the normal world. But none came. Shakily, he lit up one of the cigarettes and settled down to wait for his train.

The 7.05 whispered soundlessly into the station. Jason climbed aboard and had no difficulty finding a comfortable seat.

The journey homeward was a frozen period of time, punctuated by furtive attempts to analyse this latest development of his nightmare. With severe difficulty the sound of the train in motion through the bowels of the city became a softly

swishing sound on the fringe of audibility, rather like the sounds heard over a long distance phone call. Doors slid open and closed with the suggestion of a cigarette paper being withdrawn from a packet. And the biggest sound in the whole, wide universe was the frantic beating of Jason's heart.

It had been dark for a long time when he arrived home. He walked up the sideway to the back door, wondering what he would say to Anne. How could he explain the weird thing that had happened to him? He had little time to think at the moment that his nightmare had only just begun.

He opened the door and walked into the kitchen. His wife was bending over the sink washing out a cup with her back to him. Her blonde hair shone brightly under the fluorescents.

"Hello, darling," he said. "Guess I'm a bit late."

She didn't answer. After a moment she turned around and placed the cup back on the table. Then she turned back to the sink and ran a glass of water from the tap.

"What's the matter, Anne?" he enquired. "No speaks, eh?"

His wife drank the glass of water very slowly. Jason watched her throat working slowly and felt the numbing horror blossom inside of him. She turned around and walked over to the table and checked the setting of the tableware. And then she sat down and began to stare thoughtfully at nothing in particular.

Jason's throat was suddenly dry. "No," he croaked, softly and to himself, "not *you*, honey, not *you* too."

He looked at the clock. It was five past eight. He was never later than seven; why wasn't she worried?

But he was *here*.

He sat down opposite her, felt the familiar softness of the upholstery yield beneath him. "Anne," he said, "it's me, Jason."

And still she stared smilingly into nothingness, as though amused at some private joke. As he watched, the smile faded and was replaced by a severe frown.

"Anne!" he shouted, "Anne, can't you see me? I'm here, I'm real, for God's sake say something! I don't want to go mad . . ."

His wife got up again and walked over to the range. He watched in dumb amazement while she dished out a steak and vegetables on to her plate and then sat down again to her dinner.

Panicking, he reached out to grab hold of her shoulders and shake some sense into her. His hands grasped nothing and flailed empty air where she sat.

He let his arms drop limply to his side. She was there; he could see her but he could not touch her. What new madness was this? What crazy world was he in?

"Help me," he pleaded, brokenly. "Someone please help me."

He stumbled out of the kitchen and made his way to the bedroom. His one thought was to collapse into the realm of sleep and perhaps wake up from the whole horrible nightmare. It was all he could think of to do. He crumpled over the bed and sprawled into a thankful oblivion.

An eternity later he awoke to a foggy greyness. His mind struggled reluctantly up from the morass of half-awareness and he stared up at the ceiling. Later, he sat up and realised that he was fully dressed and that Anne's discarded nightie was alongside him. For a brief moment he thought he was coming out of a rather foggy hangover and that the crazy, mixed-up thoughts going round and around in his head were really portions of some grisly nightmare. But no hangover had ever felt like *this*.

He got up and walked over to the window. One glance outside and the memories flooded back. *So it's all true,* he thought. *The whole bloody mess.*

Outside, the city was awakening to a new life. But it was a life of eerie silence. Something new had been added, he noticed. It must be a sunny day, for the shadows were sharp and clearly defined; but over everything was a grey, foggy pallor. Everything looked washed out, colourless. Jason blinked his eyes. No use. It still seemed as though he were looking at the scene through smoked glasses. He held his two hands up to his face and his world was flooded with colour. Against the drabness of the outside world his hand and clothes seemed cast in Kodachrome.

He shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room. He had long since resigned himself to what was happening. He reminded himself again that the whole silly mess was

out of his control. There was nothing to do except hope that someday it would all be cleared up. Perhaps he might wake up one morning and . . .

Anne wasn't in the kitchen. A dirty coffee cup told the story. She had had her breakfast and was probably in the lounge. He moved around inside the grey walls of the house and finally worked up the courage to go into the lounge. His wife was sitting in one of the chairs with a rapt look on her pretty face. She could be listening to the radiogram but it was only a guess. Perhaps she was just thinking.

How the hell, he wondered, could we sleep in the same bed without her knowing it? Apparently the world was getting on all right without him, so why should he worry about it?

He took one long, lingering look at his wife before a mist blurred his eyes and he turned around and fled outside and into the street. He couldn't bear to be with her any longer. It was the most terrible torture he could envisage.

He moved slowly through a world of shadows peopled by unfamiliar shapes and patterns. He walked down familiar streets and became aware of them having grown oddly different in their insubstantial greyness. Colours became progressively drab and lifeless until they appeared to disappear altogether. People moved past him like phantom shadows, devoid of sharp details so that it was almost impossible for him to recognise anyone he might have known. The only sound in the whole grey world was the steady fall of his own footsteps on the pavement.

I wonder what comes next? was his recurring thought. For the first time since the nightmare had begun he felt strangely calm. He was beginning to wonder if there was a point well past the pinnacle of fear that made it impossible to feel afraid any more. Something like, he decided, the point that exists beyond the limit to physical pain.

He concentrated again on the world around him. It was almost like watching an old-time movie, he decided, watching the figures hurry past him in the shadowy, silent world. Insubstantial, like an image on some vast projection screen, the river of life flowed around him. Occasionally, he held out a hand to touch a passerby and felt his fingers sail through nothingness. He felt strangely light-hearted. In feeling divorced from the rest of the world he also felt dis-

placed in space, almost as if he were living out his life in a different plane of existence to the rest of the world.

He crossed intersections against the lights and felt cars hurtle past him and at him and *through* him. His confidence knew no bounds. With every passing minute the world around him seemed to get progressively duller and harder to define.

It is all slipping away, he realised. Everything. Nothing remains that is real except me, Jason Barker, the ultimate centre of the universe. First only the sounds of the familiar world had disappeared, but now he knew with stunning clarity that *everything* must go, a little at a time.

Go where?

He found himself boarding the greyish silhouette of a bus and marveling that he could still do so.

What is real? he asked himself.

Cogito ergo sum. The familiar phrase sprung readily to his mind. *I think, therefore I am;* how proud, how egotistical that famous sentence now seemed. To imagine oneself the centre of all things and creation a product of your own imagination was surely the most advanced form of paranoia, or so Jason believed. He delved in his mind for memories of an earlier age when he had steeped himself in the philosophies of creation and existence, returning again and again to the theory that all life is but an illusion.

But whose?

Paranoia. The thought returned again. Delusions of grandeur. The paranoid believes himself the focus of all events and that everything else is conspiring against him.

Well, Jason thought, why couldn't it be? After all, it was his nightmare. Why shouldn't he be real and everything else a product of his imagination? Wasn't that the basis of all dreams? Wasn't the universe nothing more than a bad dream of his own making?

Why not?

A new thought sank its teeth into the remnants of his sanity. What if the shadowy world around him was the real world and he himself but a figment cast out from reality and returning to the limbo from whence he came.

"No!"

He realised with a shock that he was standing alone and that the bus was gone and how the hell had that happened?

While he was pondering over the incident a sound intruded into his world.

At first he couldn't believe his ears. The sound had arrived in the midst of melancholic despair, giving him hope that all was not lost. He listened intently and the sound came again, much closer this time. It was the lonely wail of a dog.

He watched it approach out of the grey mist of nowhere, a skinny little mutt with downcast eyes and hesitant footsteps. Born in some dark alleyway and doomed to haunt the concrete canyons of the city for as long as its short life lasted. Just a dog, a scruffy little mongrel with sad eyes, but it was real and it was solid and it was part of Jason's world.

Slowly, Jason knelt down on his haunches and waited for the dog to come closer. It took its time, nose sniffing warily, eyes strangely hurt and pleading, and tail only beginning to wag very reluctantly. He watched its cautious approach from out of the greyness and marvelled at his good fortune. Finally, the dog nuzzled up against his trouser leg, a low, lonely whine breaking the long silence.

Jason laughed. It was a lound, healthy, man-made noise of which he had begun to think himself incapable. Here at his feet was living proof that he was not going mad and that he was not alone in this crazy not-world.

He felt immeasureably happy. He snapped his fingers and said: "C'mon boy, let's go somewheres."

The little mongrel stuck to his heels like glue, happy like himself at having found a friend in the eerie stillness.

It was a while before Jason realised that he was doing a lot of walking and not getting anywhere much. The fact that everything had now merged into a grey, treacly smudge around him made it difficult to judge progress. He was still worrying over this when he bumped into the back of the Ford.

He staggered back, startled. He had become so used to wandering unhindered in his not-world that he hadn't expected to encounter anything solid. He walked very slowly around the gleaming new car, noting that it was locked and that no key was in the ignition. The dog sniffed around the wheels, finally finding one to his taste and paying a dog's tribute.

Jason was frowning thoughtfully as he set off again, the dog hurrying to catch up with him. Here was new evidence

that he wasn't alone, that there might possibly be a rational explanation for the whole crazy mess he had got into. He began to study the grey murk around him more carefully.

Later, how much later he couldn't measure, the world had grown very dark indeed and he was beginning to feel afraid again. The dog still trotted by his heels but the Ford had long since faded from view. He was becoming increasingly certain that he was doing a lot of walking and making little progress. He had even begun to believe that was not really moving at all.

He stopped and sat down on the greyness beneath him. His calmness was beginning to disintegrate with apalling rapidity.

" C'mere, fella," he called. The dog trotted up and nuzzled his hand.

" We're in a fix, you and I," he said, his words loud in the stillness but not louder than his beating heart. The darkness seemed to be pressing in upon them like a tangible thing. Jason stared out in the formless world and tried desperately to think.

A while later he became aware that the dog's muzzle was no longer pressing warmly against his hand and when he looked down the animal was gone. He gave a short, high-pitched cry and jumped to his feet. He spun around and probed the encroaching darkness for some sign of the little mongrel but it had gone as inexplicably as it had come.

Jason was alone again. He sat down and buried his head in his hands. It was no use, he rationalised, trying to go on. Better to just sit and wait for the world to come to an end. His right hand dropped to his side and rested on the dark firmness beneath him. His hand brushed against something, gripped, and came up holding a discarded cigarette packet. Jason examined it carefully, turning the empty container over and over in his palms.

The explanation burst suddenly upon him. He almost wept for joy as a pattern began to unfold before his tired eyes.

Jason was not a religious man in the accepted church-going sense of the word. He was a firm agnostic who believed that Somewhere, Somebody was responsible for mankind. Not a holy diety with a long white beard sitting patiently on some throne in the sky, but a nameless, formless something beyond man's comprehension. Something vastly more com-

plex than the God of the Bible. Man and the Universe were too well designed to have just happened. Everything must have a beginning and an end as well as a reason for existence, and there had to be something behind the familiar reality.

Sometimes, Jason reasoned, that Something or Somebody goofed. And when that happened items got displaced from reality. The universe was a big place and there were a lot of items of which to keep track. Items, he mused, from a man to a packet of cigarettes. Or a new motor car and a mongrel dog. Items that every now and again through the fault of some cosmic filing clerk got mislaid. Or perhaps some great Planner forgot for a moment a particle of his creation and it ceased to exist in the normal way while the world continued on ignorant of its absence.

Or have I, Jason wondered, simply been written out of the human race by some infinite author?

He recalled the experiences of the past few hours and felt anew the strange feeling of other-dimensionless of his existence. At least, it was an explanation of sorts. But in finding an Answer it caused no hope to flutter and grow inside him. Whatever happened now he was done, finished. Scratched from reality. He wondered vaguely about missing persons and what percentage of them had suffered his fate.

Where to now? he wondered. Death? Where the little dog had vanished to? *Where?*

He let the empty cigarette pack drop from his hand and it fell and kept falling and falling and falling . . . There was nothing beneath him any longer. He was suspended in space and devoid of contact with all things. Strangely enough, he felt no panic. Life after all seemed a hopeless thing from his vantage point. His one thought was: *Somebody's inventory is sure going to be shot to hell and gone,* and cursing the bungling little cosmic filing clerk who was probably responsible for the whole silly mess.

There was a period of conscious drifting while the darkness gradually became complete and he knew the taste and texture of nothingness. And after that there was no sensation of . . . anything. He felt neither suspended nor floating, still or in motion, and when he raised one hand to rub his forehead there was nothing to rub and nothing to rub with, for there was nothing left at all.

He screamed, and no sound was made. This is the end, his mind cried out, the God-damned awful end. His mind burst

out in a torrent of anger that finally subsided into a mumbling murmer that began to carry away the last vestiges of consciousness. And then . . .

A fragment of consciousness flickered dimly in the limbo beyond nothingness. It drifted yet was motionless, it cried out and mute, it existed and was unborn. It was an abstract remnant of thought lost in the endless void beyond creation. And yet, there had been more; this much it had ascertained. But the thought, the fragment, the frail concept of mere existence was slowly disintegrating. Layer after layer of awareness was flaking away and floating off into the surrounding nothingness. The fragment was gradually losing the power to retain the slivers of memory that held it together.

Once, it knew, there had been more to existence than this. Once it had been a part of many parts that, together, had made up a thing called mind.

And there was more, much more. Once, it had been a man . . .

There was a great sickening wrench that shook the fragment and tossed it bodily back into the framework of reality. The fragment felt a great light blossoming towards it out of the eternal dark as life was thrust quickly upon it.

" I think it's about time we turned in," Anne was saying.

" Sure, darling," was Jason's familiar reply. He looked up and his wife was switching off the radiogram. He looked at the walls, the furniture, again at his wife and and finally at his own hands. *I'm back,* he realised, *I'm really back.* And for a brief moment he held the knowledge that his strange not-world had not been the end of all things after all, merely a dimensional resting place. For every piece of mislaid reality there came a time when some cosmic filing clerk got around to taking his equivalent of a stock audit and discovered the mislaid pieces. And when that happened . . .

He smiled and opened his mouth to explain everything to Anne, and it was as if a giant hand swept quickly down and erased the slate of his recent memories and left it clean and bare and sane.

" Were you going to say something? " his wife asked.

Jason shook his head. There had been something, he was sure. Only he couldn't remember.

But Somebody had.

—Lee Harding

Continuing this fascinating series of studies of the Old Masters of science fiction and fantasy, Sam Moskowitz now turns to one of the most forceful European writers of the twentieth century—Capek.

KAREL CAPEK

BY SAM MOSKOWITZ

While the passage of the years had given science fiction an unshakeable stature as prophecy, and the efforts of Edgar Allan Poe and H. G. Wells had admitted it to the canons of accredited literature, its material had not leant itself readily to theatrical adaption. Though Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* enjoyed more than a century of revivals as *Presumption, or the Fate of the Monster*, with script by Richards Brinsley Peake, it scarcely can be treasured as one of the masterpieces of the stage.

Science fiction as meaningful drama came into its own under the brilliant efforts of Karel Capek, " Father of the Czechoslovakian theatre." Together with his brother Joseph Capek, he produced, between the periods of World War I and World War II, these science fiction and fantasy plays : *R. U. R.*, *The Insect Story*, *The Makropulos Secret*, *Land of Many Names*, and *Adam the Creator*.

Today, there is scarcely a collection of great modern European plays that does not include one of them. Capek has

become the most internationally renowned of all Czech composers of plays.

The quality of his plays far exceed the requirements of dramatic entertainment; they profoundly changed the direction of science fiction since their appearance introduced the word "robot" to the language of many nations and distinctly affected the thinking of the Western World. Interspersed with his plays came books; three of them science fiction novels, which further enhanced his already glittering reputation.

Karel Capek was born January 9, 1890, in Male Svatonvici, Northern Bohemia, an area that was then part of Austria-Hungary. The son of a physician, he found the means were readily available for his education. He studied at Prague, Paris and Berlin, finally graduating from the University of Prague in 1917.

Philosophically, he was a disciple of the Americans William James and John Dewey exponents of pragmatism, a method of thinking which regards "the practical consequences and useful results of ideas as the test of their truthfulness, and which considers truth itself to be a process." His college thesis was written on the subject of pragmatism.

More closely, Karel Capek was influenced by the views of his talented older brother Joseph, born three years earlier, who was to make a reputation as a playwright, fiction writer, artist, producer, scene designer and art critic. Their attitudes and outlook were so similar that collaborations were extraordinarily successful.

A series of short stories and sketches, some in collaboration with his brother, created Karel Capek's first literary reputation. They showed so deft a touch in their handling that he deservedly was termed the Czech Chekov. A collection published in 1916, *Luminous Depths*, is of special importance, inasmuch as it contains a short story "L'Eventail," which utilizes mechanical dolls much in the manner of E. T. A. Hoffman.

An even earlier reference to robots may be found in Capek's essay, "System," which appears in his collection, *Krakonos's Garden*, issued in 1918, but actually written between 1908 and 1911. It becomes obvious that the concept of the artificially created man was something that intrigued Capek over a period of years.

In his short stories, Capek openly acknowledges a debt to Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde and Charles Baudelaire, and in method he was an experimental modernist. He was at the forefront of a group of European writers attempting to write what amounted to impressionistic prose. Readers sampling Capek for the first time are frequently startled by the daring, almost sensational handling of his prose. Though his spectacular methods struck a chord of affinity with the youthful generation, it was his subject matter and not his style that brought him fame.

Almost without exception his short stories were off-trail, either in theme or approach. Lovers of the detective story will find his volume *Wayside Crosses*, published in 1917 and later translated as *Money and Other Stories* to be a bitter but highly original collection of " whodunits " *without solutions.*

The end of World War I and the creation of the new republic of Czechoslovakia marked the turning point in the career of Karel Capek. During the course of the war, Karel, with his brother Joseph, managed a theatre in Vinohrady, in what was later to become Czechoslovakia. With the granting of Czechoslovakian independence on October 28, 1918, the National Theatre became the cultural centre of the new nation and Karel Capek allied himself with that theatre.

World-renown followed unexpectedly and swiftly. The increasing trend toward mechanization, the scientific slaughter of the First World War, and the efficient mass-production methods of the United States made a profound impression on Karel Capek. A modernist in thought and action, Capek did not feel that the idea of scientific progress in itself was bad. However, he was concerned with the use to which new discoveries were being put and their effects on the lives of people around him.

Karel Capek conceived the idea of *R. U. R.* " quite suddenly in a motor car when the crowds around him seemed to look like artificial beings," claims Jessie Mothersale, a close friend. The word " robot " as the term for the synthetic men in the play was allegedly suggested to him by his brother Joseph and was derived from the Czech word *robititi* or *robata*, meaning " to work " or, in a certain connotation, " a worker."

The play *R. U. R.* (Rossom's Universal Robots) opened in Prague, Czechoslovakia, January 26, 1921, and was a stunning success. Overnight it made Capek Czechoslovakia's top

dramatist, a distinction he was to retain the remainder of his life. The audacious drama, though even in the narrowest, sense bonafide science fiction, still proved magnificently effective theatre.

The story is laid in the near future, on an island whose location is not specified. Here, a formula to chemically produce artificial humans for use as workers and servants has been adapted to mass production and hundreds of thousands of such creatures are being made and sold annually. These chemical machines are replacing human workers everywhere ; the only thing staving off worker revolt is the fact that the lowered cost of labour has dropped prices of the essentials of life to an all-time low. The robots are even increasingly being purchased for armies. The manufacturers justify their position on the grounds that eventually robots will free men from all toil and a utopia will emerge.

Unfortunately, one of the chemists alters the formula and the robots, who have hitherto been without emotions, assume the desires for freedom and domination that previously has been characteristic only of the human race.

The emotionally advanced leaders among the robots organize a revolt of their minions, which now number millions in key positions through out the world. The rule of man is cast off and the human race is ruthlessly exterminated.

At bay on their little island, the robot manufacturers suspensefully stave off robot attack, but are betrayed by the misguided Helena Glory, president of the Humanitarian League, who even burns Rossum's original formula for the creation of robots. Since the sexless robots cannot reproduce their kind without it, they might have accepted it in barter for the lives of the remaining humans.

Remorselessly the robots destroy all but one man, whom they command to rediscover Rossum's formula. They offer him the world if he can help them rediscover the secret of the creation of life. However, he is only a builder, not a scientist, and cannot duplicate the method. Finally, he turns to them in recrimination and asks why they destroyed mankind.

" We had learnt everything and could do everything. It had to be," Radius, leader of the robot revolt, replies.

" We had to become masters," explains a second robot.

" Slaughter and domination are necessary if you would be human beings. Read history," clarifies Radius.

With almost all hope gone for the continuation of any type of human life, a male and female robot who apparently have naturally developed sex organs are discovered, and the implication is that they may become the new Adam and Eve of the world.

Fame of *R. U. R.* spread rapidly. It was produced in Germany, where Erica Matonek, writing for Britains' *Life and Letters Today*, in 1939 reported, " that it was a ' smashing success in Germany, too'." The play then opened in London and New York simultaneously, October 9, 1922. Under the auspices of the Theatre Guild, its production at the Garrick Theatre, New York, was the event of the season, and it ran 184 performances. Reviews were enthusiastically provocative :

" It is murderous social satire done in terms of the most hair-raising melodrama. It has as many social implications as the most handy of the Shavian comedies, and it also has so many frank appeals to the human gooseflesh as ' The Bat ' or any other latter-day thriller. In melodramatic suspense and in its general illusion of impending and immediate doom, this piece from Vienna makes on the alarmed playgoer across the footlights somewhat the same impression as would an infernal machine of which the mechanism had been set and the signal given."—*New York Herald.*

Under the critical surgery of the most absolute standards, *R. U. R.* showed some scar tissue holding its components together. Yet time, the supreme judge, finds that this play, with the possible exception of *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Liliom*, is the most frequently anthologized of modern European scripts.

While an acknowledged lightning bolt to world theatre, *R. U. R's* effect was even more far-reaching on the development of science fiction. The term " robot " became an integral part of the language of science fiction as well as an addition to the dictionaries of the world. Beyond that, the isolated stories of creation of artificial life of the past, such as Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bierce's *Moxon's Master* had been clothed by Capek in such thematic richness that henceforth they would constitute a phase of science fiction exceeded in popularity only by the interplanetary story. Never before, in science fiction, had artificial life been created in wholesale, factory lots. Given

that hypothesis, the robot could influence the entire pattern of man's culture and through its numbers create its own culture. The plot potentialities were vast and unplumbed.

If the author wanted to imagine a civilization in which machines gained absolute control, it was now possible, such as in Miles J. Breuer's novel, *Paradise and Iron*, published in the Summer, 1930, *Amazing Stories Quarterly ;* the necessity for built-in safety factors to protect humans from a Capek-like fate were the contributions of Isaac Asimov in his book, *I, Robot ;* the next step was a metal man with beneficent motives which may be found in Eando Binder's series concerning *Adam Link*. The possibility of an affectionate relationship between androids (science fiction terminology for a human-like robot as opposed to an all-metal one) was touchingly explored by Lester del Rey in *Helen O'Loy* and eventually humour built around robotic machines, notably Lewis Padgett's *Robots Have No Tails* . . . swung to the other extreme from that of the Frankenstein-monster concept.

That *R. U. R.* was written in and first electrified audiences of Prague, the home of the Golem, synthetic monster of Hebrew legend, is no coincidence. Not only did Capek admit to being thoroughly familiar with and influenced by Rabbi Judah Loew's mass of clay cabbalistically infused with life, but he had several reminders that may have directly sparked his inspiration.

What was the background and origin of the Golem legends, whose influence on the writing of *R. U. R.* specifically, and on science fiction generally, proved so powerful ?

Late in the thirteenth century, a book had been compiled by a Spanish Jew named Moses de Leon titled *Zohare* (the " Splendour "), which purported to reveal the real secret behind the words of the Torah (Bible). Since *Zohare* was theoretically a commentary on the Bible, even the religious Jews could not be prevented from reading it. Its pages, filled with a fantastic melange of magic words and numbers, demons, angels, incantations, evil eyes, spealls and all the paraphernalia of superstition was seized upon as intellectual playing by the learned, and as a ray of hope in their drab existence by the ignorant. Eventually the book itself was often referred to as the *Cabala*.

Few men could unravel the " secrets " of the *Cabala*, but the supreme master of its magic and certainly the most frequently

quoted authority was Rabbi Judah Leow of 16th Century Prague. Not only his disciples, but most of the people of 16th Century Prague, were ready to accept the story that this brilliant man had created a Golem to be able to virtually read minds and thereby detect those who meant harm to the Jews. The Golem was impervious to pain, could not be killed by fire or water, and had immense physical strength. Golems were sexless as were Karel Capek's robots in *R. U. R.*

Capek's theatrical success in *R. U. R.* proved no accident. In 1921, working in collaboration with his brother Joseph, he followed *R. U. R.* with *The Insect Play*, a fantasy in which a society of insects is shown whose foibles parallel in composite those of humans. Alternately known as *The Insect Play*, *The Insects*, *The Insect Comedy*, *The World We Live In*, *And So Ad Infinitum* and *From Insect Life*, this effort not only achieved international success, but was hailed by many critics as a better unified piece than *R. U. R.* The critic of the *New York Globe* enthused : " A finer thing than *R. U. R.* Finer in scope, feeling, philosophy. Better than the original production in Prague." (The critic saw this play abroad.) His feelings were echoed throughout America as the play was taken on a triumphal tour.

The satirical lines of the script are pointed and pungent. Capek unmercifully flails the shortcomings of humanity ; at the same time, the insect characteristics, as authentically transferred from J. H. Faber's *La vie des Insectes* and *Souvenirs Entomologiques* gives the lie to the banal old saw that the animals and insects in the field are more noble or more sensible in their actions than mankind !

Though he gives credit to the reading of a theory by Professor Metchnikov, famous Russian scientist, as the origin of the idea for his next play, *The Makropulos Secret* (sometimes called the *Makropulos Affair*), which was first produced in 1923, actually Capek has borrowed from the classic Wandering Jew legend. Though this play did not enjoy the success on the boards of Capek s previous two efforts, its effect on the imortality theme in science fiction was at least as emphatic as that of *R. U. R.* on the development of robot stories.

In *The Macropulos Secret*, a woman is discovered who has lived 300 years as the result of an elixir perfected by her father. The woman seeks to regain the formula, which is no longer in her hands, so she can renew her life. Others, suspecting the

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value of the document, vie with her for its possession. Finally, through an appeal for understanding, she convinces her opponents that immortality becomes a frightful vacuum as too much is seen and felt and eventually nothing has value or desirability because there is no end of it. When they give her the formula, she destroys it.

To the well-read individual, even at the time of its appearance, *The Makropulos Secret* might have seemed just another repetition of an old idea. In fact, the charge was brought against Capek that he had received his inspiration from George Bernard Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* which appeared several years earlier. Capek denied ever having read or seen Shaw's effort, and pointed out that from what he had heard, *Back to Methuselah* regarded the achievement of immortality as a prerequisite of paradise, whereas his play took the opposite tack.

In correspondence, he later debated the desirability of longevity with Shaw, finally topping Shaw with the perfect squelch : " We still have no experience in this sphere."

While in the original legends of the Wandering Jew, immortality is a curse which finds its possessor yearning for eternal peace and rest, it is also true that the desire for eternal life is ingrained in humanity. Capek tries to show that, in reproduction of its species, the human race does have a certain kind of immortality.

Capek's device of the meeting of a lover, grown senile, with the ever-youthful Makropulos woman, echoes in the achingly beautiful and popular lines of *Mr. Moonlight ;* it is sketched poetically in Stanley G. Weinbaum's *Dawn of Flame*, where old Einar totters again into the life of Margaret of Urbs, the immortal woman who loved him in his youth ; it is revealed again in the ironic whim of Naga, heroine of Ross Rocklynne's *The Immortal*, published in *Comet*, March, 1941, who commands her lover to go away for " awhile." But how long is " awhile " to an immortal woman ?

The same years as *The Makropulos Secret*, Joseph Capek, without the aid of Karel, produced a science fiction allegory titled *Land of Many Names*, which deals with a continent that suddenly rises from the bottom of the sea. This new continent is offered as the land of hope, where each may build anew and achieve his innermost desires.

Nations incite war for its control and possession. Instead of a land of dreams, the newly-risen mass becomes the land of the dead. Finally, when one of the nations has triumphed and engineers and government officials lay plans for exploitation, the continent sinks back into the sea.

The moral is obvious : wars are organized by the greedy and selfish and fought by the deluded dreamers who ultimately wake to reality and disillusionment. The play enjoyed only a modest success, possibly because the blank verse which set out to be expressionistic resolved itself into a stylized tableau.

The year 1924 was a year of transition for Karel Capek. He had begun as a lyric poet, made his mark as a short story writer, won international renown as a playwright, and now he would become a novelist. A science fiction idea—the discovery of atomic energy—carried by a daringly experimental narrative technique, combined with his proven artistry at dialogue and characterization range the bell in *Krakatit*.

" And I've discovered atomic explosions," Prokop, the inventor, tells his associate Thomas. In trying to get the secret Thomas blows himself, and most of the countryside, up, and Prokop loses his memory.

The point Capek makes is that a discovery too big, like atomic energy, can do more harm than good. " It is better to invent something small and useful," is Capek's credo. Capek saw clearly, in 1924, the implications of atomic energy and the fact that it was more likely to be used for war than for the betterment of mankind.

He scores the telling point made by L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wizard of Oz*, who, in an earlier book titled *The Master Key ; An Electrical Fairy Tale*, published in 1901, has a Demon give to a small boy the power of anti-gravity as well as an offer of force screens, wireless communicators and life restorers. The Demon is the slave of whomever strikes the " master key " of electricity, but is chagrined when, after various misadventures, the boy thrusts his gifts back like an ingrate.

" Why, oh why did not some intelligent person strike the Master Key !" the Demon moans.

" Accidents are always liable to happen," the boy replies. " By accident the Master Key was struck long before the world of science was ready for it—or for you. Instead of considering

it an accident and paying no attention to it you immediately appeared to me—*a mere boy*—and offered your services."

Convinced of the possibility of atomic energy, Karel Capek wrote a second novel on the theme, *The Absolute at Large*, in 1927. This follows the plot pattern of *R. U. R.* The inventors of the process have set up a company and sell atomic devices to anyone who will pay.

" The division for atomic motor cars has got the roof on," the company head is informed. " The section for atomic flying-machines will begin work during the week. We are laying the foundations for the atomic locomotive works. One wing of the department for ships' engines is already in operation."

" Wait a minute. You should start calling them atomobiles, atomoters and atomotives, you know. How is Krolmus getting along with the atomic cannon ?"

Atomic energy brings about overproduction and war. The world destroys itself and in the end the secret is lost.

Though clumsily constructed, a fault of many of Capek's novels, *Absolute at Large* is written with a light touch and the reader is rewarded with frequent flashes of brilliant wit and shining humanity.

One last time Karel Capek ventured a fantasy play, again in collaboration with his brother Joseph. *Adam the Creator* which was first produced in 1927, was not a commercial success in the theatres where it was performed. Yet, in printed form it possesses undeniable potency, which probably accounts for its frequent appearance in anthologies.

Adam, dissatisfied with the world God has created, wipes the slate clean and begins a new process of creation. However, everything turns out wrong. Some of the outstanding men and women he creates adopt an air of pagan superiority and revile him. Where temples of worship are set up, he finds that he is barred ; and commercialism, not piety, seems to be the objective. When, occasionally, humans accept him as their creator, he is reminded that his lack of foresight, not their own actions, is responsible for the plight of the world.

When Adam, in his wrath, threatens to destroy the world with his Cannon of Negation, it is the wretch who personifies the poor and downtrodden who most determinedly acts to prevent him.

Finally, Adam realizes that he has botched the matter of creation, and decides the only thing to do is to give the sorry world a chance to work out its problems alone.

To follow was a gracious period in which Karel Capek travelled and wrote numerous books of observations with such titles as *Letters From Spain*, *Letters From Holland*, *Travels in the North ;* books on dogs and cats, gardening, fairy tales, newspapers and the theatre. These volumes were filled with a charm, wit, humanity and sagacity that can only be compared to Mark Twain.

These were the good years when Capek was one of the most illustrious literary figures in Europe, the epitome of a civilized human being. He had married the beautiful Czech actress, Olga Scheinpflugowa, and enjoyed a gracious social life as well.

However, the seeds of his influence were coming to the surface in European literature. In the wake of the moving picture produced by her husband, Fritz Lang, for Germany's UFA in 1926, Thea von Harbous' melodramatic but compelling novel, *Metropolis*, became a best-seller across the Continent. A focal figure in the novel was a metal and glass robot, fabricated in the form of a woman, who turns the head of the son of a great industrialist. The basis of the story is enslavement of the workers to the machine by the greedy few.

When it seemed that Capek's years of writing science fiction were a thing of the past, *War With the Newts*, sometimes titled *The Salamander War*, appeared in Czechoslovakia in 1936. This long novel is Capek's science fiction masterpiece and the one most likely to endure. It concerns the evolving in the sea of a strange, non-human sea race called the Newts. The Newts are intelligent creatures, easily taught, with gentle, pliable natures. Gradually, man exploits them for profit, but in the process the Newts are learning. The day comes when they revolt against man and slowly begin to undermine the continents so they sink into the sea. In the end they have all but destroyed the humans and set up their own nations and culture.

However, Capek sees them developing factionalism, warring among themselves, finally exterminating their kind ; man comes out of hiding to build anew. There is one puzzling note. The world capitalist tycoon in *War With the Newts*, G.

H. Bondy, has the identical name as the leading industrialist in *The Absolute at Large*. If this was deliberate, it could only mean that Capek felt that such men were all of the same mold and it was senseless to distinguish them with new names.

Despite his blows against the evils of capitalism, Capek was anything but a Communist. In his book, *On Political Things or Zoon Politics*, published in 1932, Capek states : " When all is said, communism is out to rule, not to rescue ; its great watchword is power, not help. For it poverty, hunger, unemployment are not an unendurable pain and shame, but a welcome reserve of dark forces, a fermenting heap of fury and loathing."

In addition to his other activities, he worked daily in the editorial offices of the newspaper, *Lidove Noviny*, from 1917 to 1938. As a newspaperman, the ominous implications of Adolf Hitler's Germany were frightfully clear.

When it became unmistakeable that Czechoslovakia was threatened by its warlike neighbour, his friend Eduard Benes enlisted Capek's aid.

On June 22, 1938, Karel Capek addressed the Sudetan Germans from Prague radio, reasoning for tolerance :

" If we could in one way or another collect all the good that is, after all, in each one of us sinful human creatures, I believe that on it could be built a world that would be surely far kinder than the present one."

Four months later, the robots marched. Goose-stepping, eyes empty of all but hate, they moved on Prague.

As Capek had predicted, the robots would look like humans.

At the age of 48, Christmas Day, December 25, 1938, Karel Capek died of pneumonia, his will crushed by the realization " that an alliance of violence and treachery was stronger than truth."

—**Sam Moskowitz**

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