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NOVEMBER

WOMEN'S WORK

by Murray Leinster

144
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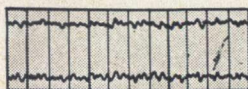


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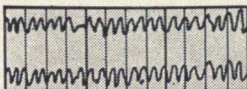
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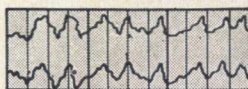
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Volume 7

Number 3

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November, 1956

THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

NOVEL

- HOMECALLING** *Judith Merril* 2
The ship crashed, and Dee was alone on a strange planet,
with her baby brother.

SHORT STORIES

- WOMEN'S WORK** (symbolized on cover)
..... *Murray Leinster* 89
Was the stranger a deserter or a spy?
TOOLS OF THE TRADE *Robert Randall* 112
The girl was thrilled to meet a real poet!
THE MESSIAHS *Alfred McCoy Andrews* 121
The life of "gods" can be very exacting ...
THE STRETCH *Sam Merwin Jr.* 127
This girdle really did things to a woman ...

FEATURE

- PARODIES TOSSED** *Isaac Asimov* 110
Dr. Asimov herewith prescribes a formula for success:
"How To Succeed At Science Fiction Without Really
Trying".

DEPARTMENT

- THE EDITOR'S PAGE** *Robert W. Lowndes* 137
In reference to John W. Campbell Jr.'s article in *Saturday
Review*, we note that "A Fact Is A Fact Is A Fact..."

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The Strange Child, and the smaller being with her, were comprehensible — up to a point. The fact that both responded to a homecalling proved that they were not hostile. But what was the meaning of the fear in the Strange Child's mind, and why did she continue to transmit mostly accurate, but entirely irrelevant mathematics?

HOME CALLING

NOVEL

by JUDITH MERRIL

(author of "Barrier of Dread")

illustrated by FREAS

THERE WAS no warning. Deborah heard her mother shout, "Dee! Grab the baby!"

Peter's limbs hung loose; his pink young mouth fell open, as he bounced off the foam-padded floor of the play-space, hit more foam on the sidewall at a neat ninety-degree angle, and bounced once more. The small ship finished upending itself, lost the last of its spin, and hurled itself surfaceward under constant acceleration. Wall turned to ceiling, ceiling to floor and Petey landed smack on his fat bottom against the foam-protected

toy-bin. Unhurt but horrified, he added a lusty wail to the evershriller screaming of the alien atmosphere, and the mighty reverberations of the rocket's thunder.

"...the bay-beeee... Dee!"

"I got him." Deborah hooked a finger finally through her brother's overall strap, and demanded: "What do I do now?"

"I don't know; hold on to him. Wait a minute." Sarah Levin turned her head with difficulty toward her husband. "John," she whispered, "what's going to happen?"

He gnawed at his lower lip, tried to quirk a smile out of



"It's like some kind of insect," Dee said to herself.

It's astonishing how many fundamental assumptions, which are never questioned, arise from what we refer to as the "natural order" of things. And, so far as human beings go, these assumptions are mostly quite sound. But a race of beings which we would call "alien", would have quite different fundamental assumptions, rooted in different "natural orders". Judith Merrill has presented here a fascinating and convincing picture of the thought-processes of a different species on a far world; and no little part of this arises from the fact that the Lady of the House could be so rationally intelligent, so logical and likeable — and wrong!

the side of his mouth nearest her. "Not good," he said, very low.

"The children?"

"Dunno." He struggled with levers, frantically trying to fire the tail rockets—now, after their sudden space-somersault become the forward jets. "Don't know what's wrong," he muttered fiercely.

"Mommy, it hurts..."

Peter was really crying now, low and steady sobbing, and Dee whimpered again, "It hurts. I can't get up."

"Daddy's trying to fix it," Sarah said. "Dee...listen..." It was hard to talk. "If you can, try to...kind of...wrap yourself around Petey..."

"I can't..." Deborah too broke into sobs.

Seconds of waiting, slow eternal seconds; then incredibly, a gout of flame burst out ahead of them.

The braking force of the forward rocket eased the pressure inside, and Dee ricocheted off a foamed surface—

wall, floor ceiling? She didn't know—her finger still stuck tight through Petey's strap. The ground, strange orange-red terrain with towering bluish trees, was close. Too close. There was barely time before the crash for Sarah to shout a last reminder.

"...right around him!" she yelled. Dee understood; she pulled her baby brother close to her chest and wound her arms and legs around his body. Then there was crashing splintering, jagged noise through all the world.

IT WAS too warm. Dee didn't want to look, but she opened an eye.

Nothing to see but foam-padded sides of the play space, with the toys scattered all over.

A bell jangled, and a mechanical voice began: "Fire...Fire...Fire...Fire...Fire..." Dee knew what to do. She wondered about letting go of Petey, but she'd

have to, she couldn't ask her mother, because the safety door was closed. Her mother and father were both on the other side in front—that was where the fire would be. She wondered if they'd get burned up, but let go of Petey, and worked the escape lock the way she'd been taught. While it was opening, she put on Petey's oxy mask and her own. She didn't know for sure whether they would be needed on this planet, but one place they'd been, called Carteld, you had to wear a mask all the time because there wasn't enough oxygen in the air.

She couldn't remember the name of this planet. They'd never been here before, she knew that much; but this must be the one they were coming to, or Daddy wouldn't have started to go down, and everything wouldn't have happened.

That meant probably, at least the air wasn't poisonous. They had spacesuits and helmets on the ship, and Dee had space-suit drill every week; but she was pretty sure she didn't need anything more than the mask here. And there wasn't time for space-suits anyhow.

The lock was all the way open. Deborah went to the door and recoiled before the blast of heat; it was burning

outside. Now she had to get away, quick.

She picked up Petey, looked around at all the toys, and at the closet where her clothes were; at the black-board, the projector, and the tumbled pile of fruit and crackers on the floor. She bent down and stuffed the pockets of her jumper with the crumbly crackers and smashed sticky fruit. Then she looked around again, and felt the heat coming through the door, and had to leave everything else behind.

SHE CLIMBED out, and there were flames in back. She ran, with Petey in her arms, though she'd been told never to do that. She ran straight away from the flames, and kept going as long as she could; it was hard work, because her feet sank into the spongy soil at every step. And it was still hot, even when she got away from the rocket. She kept running until she was too tired, and began to stumble, then she slowed down and walked—until Petey began to be too heavy, and she couldn't carry him any more. She stopped, and put him down on the ground and looked him over. He was all right, only he was wet—very wet—and the whole front of her jumper was wet too, from him.

Deborah scowled, and the baby began to cry. She couldn't stand that, so she smiled and tried playing games with him. Petey wasn't very good at games yet, but he always laughed and stayed happy if she played with him. Sometimes she thought he liked her better than anybody else, even Mommy. He acted that way. Maybe it was because she was closer to his size—a medium size giant in a world full of giant-giants; that's how people would look to Petey.

When he was happy again, she gave him half a cracker from her pocket, and a piece of fruit for his other hand. He tumbled over backwards, and lay down, right on the muddy grounds, smearing the food all over his face and looking sleepy.

Sooner or later, Dee knew, she was going to have to turn around and look back, meanwhile, she sat on the ground, crosslegged, watching Peter fall asleep. She thought about her ancestors, who were pioneers on Pluto, and about her father and how brave he was. She thought once, very quickly, about her mother, who was maybe all burned up now.

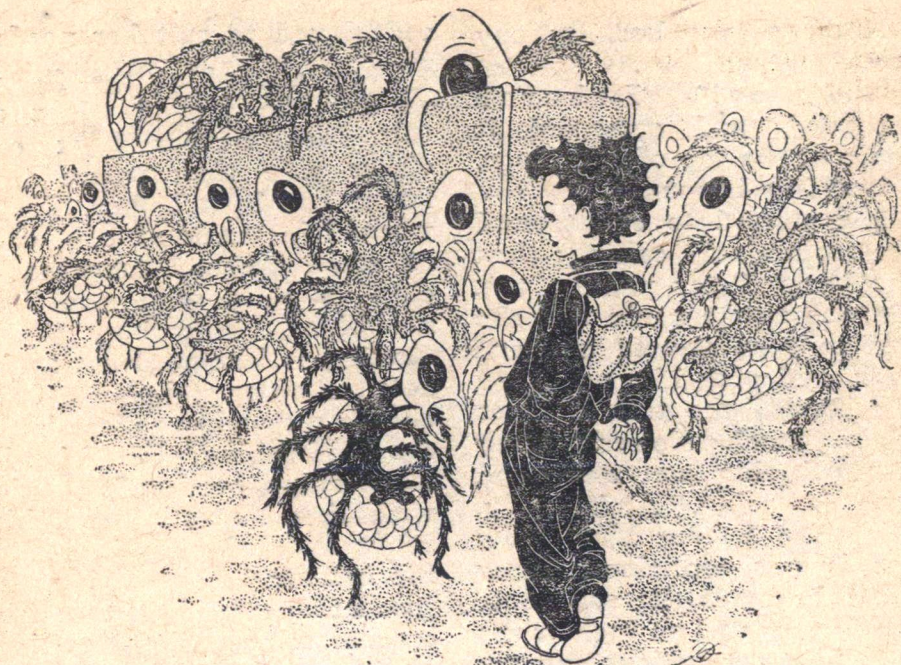
She had to be brave now—as brave and strong as she knew, in her own private self, she really was. Not silly-brave the way grown-ups ex-

pected you to be, about things like cuts and antiseptics, but deep-down *important* brave. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers and trials, with a helpless infant under her wing to protect. She turned around and looked back.

HER OWN footsteps faced her, curving away out of sight between two tall distant trees. She looked harder in the direction they pointed to, if the fire was still burning, she ought to be able to see it. The trees were far enough apart, and the ground was clear between them—clearer than any ground she'd ever seen before. There were no bushes or branches near the ground, higher than a rocket-launch—tall yellow orange poles with whispering foliage at the top.

The overhead canopy was thick and dark, a changeable ceiling with grey and green and blue fronds stirring in the air. She couldn't see the sky through it at all, or see beyond it to find out whether there was any smoke. But that made it dark here, underneath the trees, so Dee was sure she would be able to see the fire, if it was still going.

She got up and followed her own footsteps back, as far as she could go without



She was just as big as any of these bugs, Dee thought, except for that big one in the box.

losing sight of Petey, that was the spot where the trail curved away in a different direction. It curved again, she saw farther on; that was strange, because she was sure she'd been going in a straight line when she ran away. The trees all looked so much alike, it would have been hard to tell. She'd heard a story once about a man who went around and around in circles in a forest till he starved to death. It was a good thing that the ground was so soft here, and she could see the footprints so clearly.

Petey was sound asleep.

She decided she could leave him alone for a minute. She hadn't seen any wild beasts or animals, or heard anything that sounded dangerous. Deborah started back along her own trail, and at the next bend she saw it, framed between two far trees: the front part of the rocket, still glowing hot, bright orange red like the persimmons Daddy had sent out from Earth one time. That was why she hadn't been able to see it before, the color was hardly different from the ground on which it stood: just barely redder.

Nothing was burning any more.

"M o m m y!" Deborah screamed, and screamed it again at the top of her lungs. Nothing happened.

She started to run toward the rocket, still calling; then she heard Peter yelling, too. He was awake again and she had to turn around and run back, and pick him up. Then she started the trip all over again, much slower. Petey was dripping wet now, and still hollering. And heavy. Dee tried letting him crawl, but it was too slow. Every move he made, he sank into the soft ground an inch or so; then he'd get curious and try to eat the orange dirt off his fingers, so she had to pick him up again.

By the time they got back to the rocket, Dee was wet all over, plastered with the dirt Petey that had picked up, and too tired even to cry when nobody answered her call.

II

THE LADY OF THE HOUSE sat fat with contentment on her couch, and watched the progress of the work. Four of her sons—precision masons all—performed deft maneuvers with economy and dispatch; a new arch took place before her eyes, enlarged and

redesigned to suit her needs.

They started at the floor, sealing the jagged edges a full foot farther back on either side than where the frame had been before. They worked in teams of two, one to stand by and tamp each chip in place with sensitive mandibles, smoothing and firming it into position as it set; the other stepping off to choose a matching piece from the diminishing pile of hardwood chips, coating it evenly with liquid plastic from his snout and bringing it, ready for placement in the arch, just at the instant that his brother completed the setting of the preceding piece.

Then the exchange in roles: the static partner moving off to make his choice; the second brother setting his new chip in perfect pattern with the rest: Two teams, building the two sides of the arch in rhythmic concert with each other. It was a ritual dance of function, a mosaic of color and motion and form, chips and plastic, workers and work, each in its way an apparently effortless inevitable detail of the whole. Daydanda gloried in it.

The arch grew taller than ever before, and the Lady's satisfaction grew enormous, while her consort's fluttering excitement mounted. "But

why?" he asked again, still querulous.

"It is pleasant to watch."

"You will not use it?" He was absurdly hopeful.

"Of course I will!"

"But, L a d y... Daydanda, my dearest, Mother of our children, this whole thing is unheard of. What sort of example...?"

"Have you ever," she demanded coldly, "had cause to regret the example I set to my children?"

"No, no, my dear, but..."

She withdrew her attention entirely, and gave herself over to the pure esthetic delight of watching her sons—the two teams of masons—working overhead now on the final span of the arch, approaching each other with perfect timing and matched instantaneous motions, preparing to meet and place the ceremonial center-piece together.

Soon she would, rise, take her husband's arm and experience—for the first time since her initial Family came to growth—the infinite pleasure of walking erect through her own door into the next chamber.

Even the report, shortly afterwards, of a fire spreading on the eastern boundary, failed to diminish her pleasure. She assigned three fliers

to investigate the trouble, and dismissed it from her mind.

III

FOR A LONG, long time Deborah sat still on the ground, hugging Petey on her lap, not caring how wet he was, nor even trying to stop his crying—except that she rocked gently back and forth in a tradition as ancient as it was instinctive. After a while, the baby was asleep; but the girl still sat cross-legged on the ground, her shoulders moving rhythmically, slower and slower, until the swaying was almost imperceptible.

The rocket—the shiny rocket that had been new and expensive a little while ago—lay helpless on its side. The nozzles in the tail, now quiet and cool, had spouted flame across a streak of surface that stretched farther back than Dee could see, leaving a Halloween trail of scorched black across the orange ground. Up forward, where the fire in the ship had been, there was nothing to see but the still-red glow of the hull.

Deborah tried to figure out what flames she had seen when she left the ship with Peter; but it didn't make sense, and she hadn't looked long enough to be sure. She'd

been taught what to do in case of fire: *get out!* She'd done it; and now... The lock was still open where she'd climbed out before. Very very carefully, not to wake him, she laid her baby brother on the soft ground, and step by reluctant step she approached the ship. Near the lock, she could feel heat; but it was all coming from one direction—from the nose, and not from inside. She touched a yellow clay stained finger to the lock itself, and felt the wall inside, and found it cool. She took a deep breath, ignored the one tear that forced its way out of her right eye, and climbed up into the rocket.

IT WAS QUIET in there. Dee didn't know what kind of noise she'd expected, until she remembered the last voice she'd heard when she left, saying calmly, "Fire...fire fire..."

She thought that out, and knew the fire had stopped; then it was all right to open the safety door to the front part. Maybe...maybe they weren't hurt or anything; maybe they just couldn't hear her call. If there was just a *little* fire in there, it might have damaged the controls so they couldn't open the door, for instance.

She knew where the controls on her side were, and how to work them. Her hand was on the knob when she had the thought, and then she was afraid. She knew from T.Z.'s how a burning body smelled; and she remembered how hot the *outside* of the hull was.

Her hand withdrew from the knob, returned, and then withdrew again, without consulting her at all.

That wasn't any *little* fire.

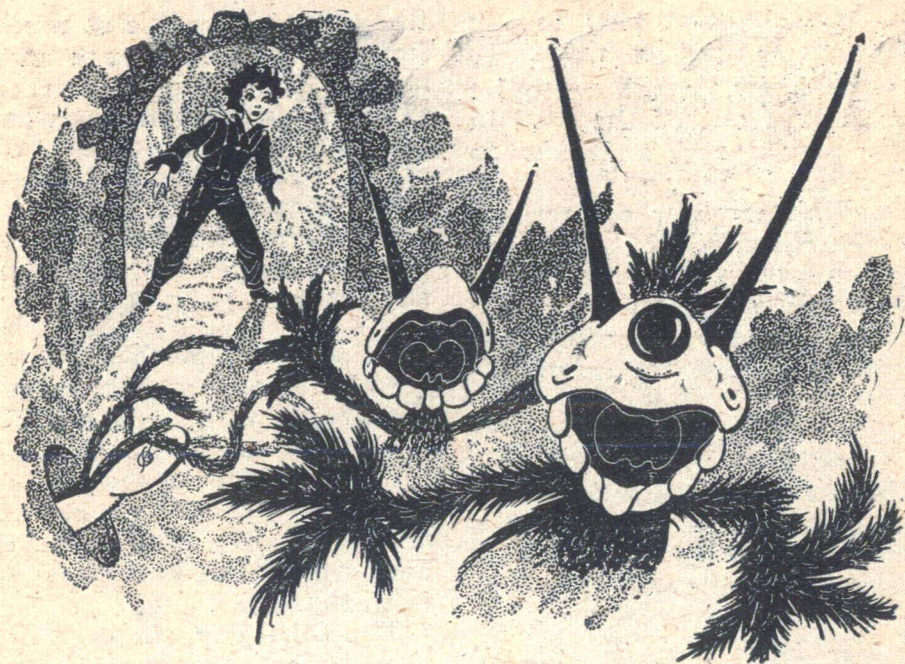
If they were all right, they'd find some way to open the door themselves; Daddy could always figure out something like that.

If people ask, she told herself, I'll tell them I didn't know how.

"Mommy," she said out loud. "Mommy, please..."

Then she remembered the tube. She ran to it and took the speaker off the hook, fumbling with impatience so that it fell from her hand and dangled on its cord. It buzzed the way it should; it was working!

She grabbed at it, and shouted into it. "Mommy! Daddy! Where are you?" That was a silly thing to say. "Please answer me. Please. Please!" I'll be good all the rest of my life, she promised silently and faithfully, all the rest of my life, if you answer me.



This time, it was the bugs who were scared; when they saw the light, they began to run like crazy...

But no one answered.

She didn't think about the door controls again. After a while she found she could look around without really seeing the locked safety door. She had only to try a little, and she could make-believe it was a wall just like the side-walls, that belonged there.

EIGHT AND a half years is a short span of time to an adult; no one seriously expects very much of a child that age. But almost nine years is a long time when you're growing up, and more

than time enough to learn a great many things.

Besides the sealed-off control room, and the bedroom-play-space, the family rocket had a third compartment, in the rear. Back there were the galley, bathroom facilities, and the repair equipment, with a tiny metals workshop. Only this last section held any mysteries for Deborah. She knew how to find and prepare the stored food supplies for herself and the baby; how to keep the waste-reuser and air-fresher operating; where the oxy

tanks were, and how to use them if she needed them.

She knew, too, how to let the bunks out of the wall in the play space, and how to fasten Petey in so he wouldn't smother or strangle himself, or fall out, or even get uncovered in the night. And she knew where all the clean clothes were kept, and how to change the baby's diapers.

These things she knew as naturally and inevitably as a child back on Earth would have known how to select a meal on the push-panel, how to use the slide-walks, how to dial his lessons.

For five days, she played house with the baby in the rocket.

The first day it was fun; she made up bottles from the roll of plastic containers, and mixed milk in the blender from the dried supply. She ate her favorite foods, wore all her best clothes, dressed the baby and undressed him, and took him out for sun and air in the clearing blasted by the rocket jets. She discovered the uses of the spongy soil, and built fabulous mud castles while Petey played. Inside, when he was sleeping, she read films, and colored pictures, and left the T. Z. running all the time.

The second day, and the third, she did all the same

things, but it wasn't so much fun. Petey was always crying for something just when she got interested in what she was doing. And you couldn't say, "Soon as I finish this chapter," because he wouldn't understand.

Deborah got bored; then she began to get worried, too.

AT FIRST, she had known that help would come; the people who lived on this planet would come looking for them. They'd rescue her and Petey; she'd be a heroin, and perhaps they'd never even ask if she knew how to open that door.

The third day, she began to think that perhaps there weren't any people on the planet at all—at least not on this part of it. There always had been a few people at least, whenever they went any place. The Government didn't send out survey engineers or geologists, like John and Sarah Levin, until after the first wildcat claims began to come in from a new territory. But this time maybe nobody knew they were coming. Or perhaps nobody had seen the crash. Or maybe this wasn't even the right planet.

She worried about that for a while, and then she remembered that her father always sent back a message-rocket when they arrived anyplace.

He'd told her it was so the people on the last planet would know they were safe; if it didn't come at the right time, somebody would come out looking, to see what had happened to them.

Dee wondered how long it would take for the folks back on Starhope to get worried and come and rescue them. She couldn't even figure out how long they'd been in space on the way here. It was a long trip, but she wasn't sure if it had been a week, or a month, or more. Trips in space were always long.

THE FOURTH day, she got tired of just waiting, and decided to explore.

She wasn't bothering with the masks any more. The dials still said *full* after the first three times they went out, and that meant the air had enough oxygen in it so that the masks weren't working. So *that* was no problem.

And she could take along plenty of food. The only thing she wasn't sure about was Petey. She was afraid to leave him by himself, even in the play space, and he was too heavy to carry for very long. She took his stroller out and tried it, but the ground was too soft to push it when he was inside.

The next morning, early, Deborah packed a giant lunch,

and took the stroller out again. She found out that, though it wouldn't push, it could be *pulled*, so she tied a rope to the front, and loaded it up with bottles and diapers and her lunch and Petey. Then she set off up the broad black avenue of the rocket jets; that way she could always see the ship, and they wouldn't get lost.

IV

DAYDANDA was tired. Truthfully, all this walking back and forth between chambers was a strain. Now she submitted gratefully to Kackot's fussing anxiety as he plumped the top mat here and pulled it there, adjusting the big new dais-couch to conform to her swollen body.

"I told you it was too much," he fumed. "I don't see why you want to do it anyhow. Now you rest for a while. You..."

"I have work to do," she reminded him.

"It can wait; let them think for themselves for once!"

She giggled mentally at the notion. Kackot refused to share her amusement.

"There's nothing that can't wait half an hour anyhow." He was almost firm with her; she loved to have him act that way sometimes. Content-

edly, she stretched out and let her weight sink into the soft layers of cellulose mat. Her body rested, but her mind and eye were as active as ever. She studied the new shelves and drawers and files, the big new desk at the head of the bed. Everything was at hand; everything in place; it was wonderful. The old room had been unbearably cluttered. Now she had only the active records near her. Everything connected with the departed was in the old room: easy to get at on the rare occasions when she needed it; but not underhand every time she turned around.

Daydanda examined the perfect arch her sons had built, and exulted in the sight of it. When she wanted anything on the other side, all she had to do was *walk right through*.

She was aware of Kackot's distress. Poor thing, he did hate to have her do anything unconventional. But no one had to know, no one who wasn't really *close* to them..."

"Lady! Mother Daydanda!"

KACKOT'S image blanked out. This was a closed beam, an urgent call from an elder daughter, serving her turn in training as relay-receptionist for messages from the many less articulate chil-

dren of the Household.

"What's wrong?"

"Mother! The Stranger Lady has left her wings at last! She came out from *inside* them! And with a babe in arms! She...oh, Mother, I do not know how to tell it; I have never known the like. She is *not* of our people. The wings are not proper wings. She has no consort. A Family of *one*! I do not understand..."

"Be comforted, child. There is no need for *you* to understand." With her own mind seething, Daydanda could still send a message of ease and understanding to her daughter. "You have done well. She is *not* of our people, and we must expect many strange things. Now I want the scout."

The daughter's mind promptly cleared away; in its place, Daydanda felt the nervous tingling excitement of the winged son who had been sent out to report on the fire in the east, and then to keep watch over the Strange Wings he had found there.

"Mother! I am frightened!"

The message was weak; the daughter through whom it came would be struggling with her curiosity. She was of the eighth family, almost mature, soon to depart from the Household and already showing signs of individual-

ism and rebelliousness. She would be a good Mother, Daydanda thought with satisfaction, even as she closed the contact with the scout and shut the daughter out with a sharp reprimand for inefficiency.

"There is nothing to fear," she told her son sharply; "tell me what you have seen."

"The Strange Lady has left her Wings. She has not enough limbs, and she uses a Strange litter to carry her babe. She..."

"She is a Stranger, son! And you have already quite adequately described her appearance. If you fear Strangeness for its own sake, you will never pierce the tree-tops, nor win yourself a Wife. You will remain in the Household till your wings drop off, and you are put to tending the corral..."

AS SHE HAD expected, the familiar threat reassured him as nothing else would have done. She listened closely to his detailed report of how the Stranger had left her Wings, and set off down the blackened fire-strip, pulling behind her a litter containing the Strange babe and some Strange, entirely unidentifiable, goods.

"She has not seen you?" the Mother asked at last.

"No."

"Good; you have done well. Keep her in sight, and do not fear. I shall assign an elder brother to remain near the Wings, and to join you when the Stranger chooses her new site. Do not fear; your Mother watches over all." But when the contact was broken, she turned at once in perturbation to her consort: "Kackot, do you suppose... please, now, try to use a *little* imagination... do you suppose...?" She caught his apprehensive agreement, even before the thought was fully articulated; clearly that was the case: "The little one is no babe, but her consort!"

That put a different complexion on the whole matter. The flames of landing clearly could not be considered an act of deliberate hostility, if the Strange Lady's consort were so small and weak that he could not walk for himself, let alone assist in the clearing of a House-site. The fire thus assumed a ritual-functional aspect that made good sense.

If the explanation were correct, there need be no further fear of fire. And since the Strangers' march now was in a direction that would carry them toward the outer boundary of Daydanda's Houseland—or perhaps over it, into neighboring territory

—there was no need either for immediate conflict of any kind.

Daydanda wondered that she did not feel pleased. As long as one assumed the smaller creature to be a babe, it would have meant that a fully-developed Mother was capable of leaving her home, and walking abroad...

Kackot, pacing restlessly across the big room, sputtered with derision. "A Mother," he reminded her irritably, "of a very Strange race!"

"Yes," Daydanda agreed. In any case, they had been wrong in assuming the smaller one to be a babe, simply because of size. Still, as she lay back to rest and think, the Lady was bemused by a pervading and inexplicable sense of disappointment.

V

IT WAS VERY hot. After half an hour of sweat and glare, Deborah compromised with her first plan of staying out in the open, and began following a path just inside the forest edge. She kept one tree at a time—and only one—between herself and the "road." That way she had shade and orientation both.

Lunch time seemed to come quickly, judging from her own hunger. She stepped out

from under the trees, and tried to look up at the sun to see how high it was. It was too bright; she couldn't look at it right. Then she realized she was fooling herself. You didn't need a clock if you had Petey. He would be wanting his bottle before it was time for her to eat. She trudged on, dragging the ever-heavier stroller behind her. Petey just sat there, quiet and content, gurgling his approval of the expedition, and refusing to show any interest in food at all.

Dee might have been less concerned with her insides if the exterior were any less monotonous. It didn't seem to matter where she was, or how far she walked: the forest went on endlessly, with no change in appearance except the random situation of the great trees.

After a while, she stepped out again and sighted back to the rocket; then off the other way. The end of the blasted road was in sight, now; but as far as Dee could see, there was nothing beyond it but more trees—exactly the same as the ones that stretched to left and right: tall straight dirty-yellow trunks, and a thin dense layer of grey-blue fronds high up on top.

At last Peter cried.

Dee was delighted. She tilt-

ed him back in his seat, and adjusted the plastic bottle in the holder, then fell ravenously on her own lunch.

When she was finished, she looked around again, more hopefully; at least they'd come this far in safety. Tomorrow, maybe, she'd try another direction, through the woods, away from the road. While Petey napped, she raised a magnificent edifice of orange towers and turrets in the soft dirt; when he woke, she pulled him home again, content.

Maybe nobody lived here at all; maybe the planet had no aborigines. Then there was nothing to be afraid of, and she could wait safely with Petey till somebody came to rescue them. She was thinking that way right up to the time she stepped around the tail-jets of the rocket, and saw tracks.

There were two parallel sets of neat V-prints, perhaps two feet apart; they came from behind a tree near the ship, went almost to the open lock, and curved away to disappear behind another tree.

Two not-quite-parallel sets of tracks; nothing else.

Dee had courage. She looked to see what was behind the tree before she ran. But there was nothing.

THAT NIGHT was bad. Dee couldn't fall asleep, even in the foam bunk, even after the long walk and exercise. She twisted and turned, got up again and walked around and almost woke Petey, and got back in bed and tried to read. But when she got tired enough to sleep, and turned the light out, she'd be wide awake again, staring at shadows, and she'd have to turn the light on and read some more.

After a while she just lay in her bunk, with the night light on, staring at the closed safety door to the control room, where her mother and father were. Then she cried; she buried her face in the pillow and cried wetly, fluently, hopelessly, until she fell asleep, still sobbing.

She dreamed, a nightmare dream with flaming V-shaped feet and a smell of burning flesh; and woke up screaming, and woke Petey too. Then she had to stay up to change and comfort him; by the time she got him back to sleep again, she was so tired and annoyed that she'd forgotten to be scared.

Next morning, she opened the lock cautiously, expecting to see...almost anything. But there were only giant trees and muddy orange ground: no mysterious tracks,

no strange and horrifying beasts. And no glad crew of rescuers.

Maybe the V-tracks had never existed, except in that nightmare. She spent most of the morning trying to decide about that, then looked out again, and noticed one more thing. Her own footsteps were also gone; the moist ground had filled in overnight to erase all tracks. There was no way to know for sure whether she had dreamed those tracks or seen them.

THE NEXT two days, Dee stayed in the rocket. She was keeping track of the days now. She'd looked at the chrono right after they crashed, so she knew it was seven Starhope days since they came to the planet. She knew, too, that the days here were different, shorter, because the clock was getting ahead. The seventh day on the chrono was the eighth sunday here; and at high noon the dial said only nine o'clock. She could still tell noon by Petey's hunger, and she wondered about that: his hunger-clock seemed to have set itself by the new sun already. Certainly, he still got sleepy every night at dusk, though the clock told three hours earlier each time.

Deborah spent most of one

day working out the difference. She couldn't figure out any kind of arithmetic she'd been taught to do it with, so she ended up by making little marks for every hour and counting them. By evening, she was sure she had it right. The day here was seventeen hours instead of twenty. And then she realized she didn't know how to set days on the chrono anyhow; all that work was useless.

THE NEXT morning she went out again. Two days of confinement had made Petey cranky and Dee brave.

Nothing happened; after that, they went out daily for airings, as they had done at first. Dee made a calendar, and marked the days on that; then she started checking the food supplies.

They had enough of almost everything, too much to figure out how long it would last. But she spent one afternoon counting the plastic bottles on Petey's roll, and figured out that they'd be gone in just three weeks, if he kept on using four a day.

Someone would come for them before that; she was sure of it. Just the same, she decided that the baby was old enough to learn to drink from a glass, and started teaching him.

Eight days became nine and ten, eleven and twelve; still nothing happened. There was no sign of danger nor of help. Dee was sure now that she had dreamed those tracks, but somewhere on this planet she knew there were people. There always were; always had been, whenever they came to someplace new. And if the people didn't come to her, she'd have to find them. Deborah began to plan her second exploratory expedition.

There was no sense in covering the same ground again. She wanted to go the other way, into the woods. That meant she'd need to blaze a trail as she went; and it meant she couldn't use the stroller.

She added up the facts with careful logic, and realized that Petey would simply have to stay behind.

VI

THE BABY crawled well now, and he could hold things; he could pick up a piece of cracker and get it to his mouth. He couldn't hold the bottle for himself, of course, but...

She tried it, closing her ears to the screams that issued steadily for an hour before he found his milk.

But he did find it; her system worked. If she hung the bottle in the holder while his belly was still full, he ignored it; but when he was really hungry, he found it, and wriggled underneath to get at the down-tilted nipple. That gave her, really, a whole day to make her trip.

The night before, she packed her lunch, and for the first time, studied the contents of her father's workshop. There was a small blowtorch she had seen him use; and even in her present restless state Deborah was not so excessively brave that the thought of a weapon, as well as tree-marker, didn't tempt her. But when she found the torch, she was afraid to try it out indoors, and had to wait till morning.

At breakfast time, she stuffed Petey with food till he would eat no more. Then she clasped a bottle in the holder she'd rigged up, set the baby underneath to give him the idea once again, and went outside to try her skill with the torch. She came back, satisfied, to finish her preparations. When she left, a second bottle hung full and tempting in the play space; Petey's toys were spread around the floor; and a pile of the crackers in the corner would keep him happy, she

decided, if all else failed. There was no way to solve the diaper-changing problem; he'd just have to wait for her return.

AT FIRST, she tried to go in a straight line, marking every second tree along the way. After just a little while, she realized that it didn't matter which direction she took; she didn't know where she was going, anyway.

She walked on steadily, a very small girl under the distant canopy spread by the tall trees; very small, and insignificant, but erect and self-transporting on two over-alled legs; a small girl with a large hump on her back.

The hump disappeared at noon, or somewhat earlier. She stuffed the remaining sandwich and a few pieces of dried fruit into her pockets, and tied the emptied make-shift knapsack more comfortably around her waist where it flopped rhythmically against her backside at every step.

Never did she forget to mark the trees, every second one along the way.

Nowhere did she see anything but more trees ahead, and bare ground underfoot.

She had no way of knowing how far she'd gone, or even what the hour was, when the silence ceased. Ever since

she'd landed, the only noise she'd heard had been her own and Peter's. It was startling; it seemed impossible by now, to hear anything else.

She stopped, with one foot set ahead of the other in mid-step, and listened to the regular loud ticking of a giant clock.

It was impossible. She brought her feet into alignment and listened some more, while her heart thumped sympathetically in time to the forest's sound.

It was certainly impossible, but it came from the right, and it called to her; it promised warmth and haven. It was just an enormous alarm-clock, mechanically noisy, but it was somehow full of the same comfort-and-command she remembered in her mother's voice.

Deborah turned to the right and followed the call; but she didn't forget to mark the trees as she passed, every other one of them.

IF IT WEREN'T for the trail-blazing, she might have missed the garden entirely. It was off to one side, not directly on her path to the ticking summons. She saw it only when she turned to play the torch on one more tree: a riot of colors and fantasy shapes in the near dis-

tance, between the upright trunks.

Not till then did the ticking frighten her: not till she found how hard it was to move crosswise, or any way except right toward it. She wanted to see the garden. She *had* to see it. Most likely it was just wild, but there was always a chance...

And when she tried to walk that way, her legs didn't want to go. Panic clutched at her, and failed to take hold. She was an intrepid explorer on an alien planet, exposed to unknown dangers. Also, she was a Space Girl.

"I pledge my honor to do everything in my power to uphold the high standards of the human race," she intoned, not quite out loud, and immediately felt better. "A Space Girl is brave. A Space Girl is honest. A Space Girl is truthful. A Space Girl..."

She went clear down the list of virtues she had learned in Gamma Troop on Starhope, and while she mumbled them, her legs came under control. The ticking went on, but it was just a noise—and not as loud as it had been, either. She dodged scoutwise from behind one tree-trunk to another, approaching the garden. If, indeed, it was a garden. Two trees away, she stopped and stared.

Every planet had strange

new shapes and sights and smells; the plants in each new place were always excitingly different. But Dee was old enough to know that everywhere chlorophyll was green, as blood was red. Oh, blood could seem almost black, or blue, or pale pink, or even almost white; and chlorophyll could shade to dark grey, and down to faint cream-yellow. But growing gardens had green-variant leaves or stems. And everywhere she'd been, the plants, however strange, were unified. The trees here grew blue-green-grey on top. The flowers should not grow, as they seemed to do, in every random shade of color.

THERE WAS no way to tell the leaves from seeds from stems from buds. It was just...growth. A sort of arched form sprouted bright magenta filaments from its ivory mass. A bulbous something that tapered to the ground showed baby blue beneath the many-colored moss that covered it. Between them on the ground, a series of concentric circles shaded from slate grey on the outside to oyster white in the center, only it was so thin that a tinge of orange showed through from the soil below. Dee would not have thought it lived at all, until she no-

ticed a slow rippling motion outward toward the edges.

Farther in, one form joined shapeless edges with another; one color merged haphazard with the next. Deborah blinked, confused, and walked away, following the call of the great ticking clock, then mumbled to herself, "I pledge my honor to do everything..." She turned back to the puzzling growths again, aware now that the calling power of the sound diminished when she said the words aloud.

The colors were too confusing. She had to concentrate, and couldn't think about the garden while she talked to herself. Maybe the Pledge wasn't the only thing that would do it. She said under her breath: "That one is purple, and the other's like a pear..."

It worked. All she had to do was make her thoughts into words. It didn't matter what she said, or whether she whispered or shouted. As long as she kept talking, the summoning call would turn to a giant clock again, with no power over the movements of her legs. She went up closer to the baffling colored shapes, and made out a fairy-delicate translucent spiral thing and then a large mauve mushroom in the center.

Mushroom! At last she understood. They were so big, she hadn't thought of it at first: it was all fungus growth, and that made sense in the dim damp beneath the trees.

Strange it isn't every place, all over, she thought, and realized she was moving away from the garden again, and remembered this was one time it was all *right to talk* to herself out loud. "There must be some people here. Some kind of people or natives. That noise is strange, too. It couldn't just *happen* that way; *somebody* lives here..."

SHE DIDN'T want to touch the fungus, but she went up close to it. "Things *don't* just happen this way. That stuff would grow all over if it was wild; somebody planted it." She peered through the arch-shape to the inside, and jumped back violently.

The thing was lying on its side, sucking a lower follicle of the arch, its livid belly working as convulsively as its segmented mouth, its many limbs sprawled out in all directions.

Dee jumped away in horror, and crept back in fascination. "It doesn't know I'm here," she remembered to whisper. From around the other side

of the bulbous growth she watched, and slowly understood.

"It's like some kind of insect." It couldn't really be an insect, of course, because it was two feet long—much too large for an insect. An insect this size, on a planet as much like Earth as this was, wouldn't be able to breathe. They'd explained about why insects couldn't be any larger than the ones you found on Earth in Space Girl class. But men had found creatures on other planets that did look a lot like insects, and acted a lot like them, too. And even though people knew they weren't really insects, they still called such creatures "bugs"...

Well, this thing was as close to an insect as a thing this size could be, Deborah decided. It was two feet long, and that made sense when you stopped to think about it, what with the tall trees and the giant mushrooms. She counted six legs, and then realized that the other two in front, resting quietly now, were feelers. The two front legs clutched at a clump of hairy shoots on the arched moss, almost like Petey holding his bottle. The back leg that was on top was longer than the front ones; it was braced against the arch for

steadiness. The lower leg was tucked underneath the body; its lower middle leg also lay still on the ground, stretched straight out. The upper middle leg was busily scratching at a small red spot on the belly, acting absurdly independent of the rest of the feeding creature.

There was really, Dee decided, nothing frightening except the mouth. She looked for eyes, and couldn't see them, then remembered that some bugs on other planets had them on the backs of their heads. But that mouth...

It worked like Petey's on a nipple; but not like Petey's, because this one had six lips, all thick and round-looking instead of like people's lips, and all closing in toward each other at the same time. It was horrible to watch.

DEE BACKED off silently, and found herself walking the wrong way again. She tried the multiplication table while she made a circuit of the "garden," examining it for size and shape, and looking for a clear part that would let her see into the center.

She found, at last, a whole row of the jelly-like translucent things, lying flat and low, so she could look inside.

The ground beneath them was scattered with flashing jewel-like stones...

No, black stones, with the bright part in the middle, she thought in words. No, not the middle. At one end...each stone was lying partly on an edge of the jelly-stuff... about as big as my foot, she thought, and saw the tiny feet around the edge of every stone.

Eyes on the backs of their heads, she thought, and they have car...carpets?...carapaces! These bugs were smaller than the first one, and not frightening at all. Bugs only looked bad from the bottom, she realized, and instantly corrected that impression.

Something walked into the garden, and picked up four of the little ones. Something as tall as Dee herself when it went in, and half again as high when it left. It entered on four legs, and walking upside-down, head carried toward the ground, and looking backward...no, *facing backward, looking forward.* It entered calmly, moving at a steady even pace; approached the edge of the garden where Deborah watched the infants feeding...and froze.

An instant's immobility, then the big bug erupted into a frenzy of activity: scooped up the four closest little ones

—two of them with the long hairy jointed arms (or legs? back legs?), and two more hurriedly with two front legs (or arms?)—and almost ran out, now on just two legs, the center ones, its body neatly balanced fore and aft, almost perfectly horizontal, the heavy hooded head in front, the spiny rounded abdomen in back.

It scuttled off with its four tiny wriggling bundles, and as it left, Dee registered in full the terror of what she had seen.

She fled...and by some miracle, fled past a tree she'd marked, so paused in flight to find the next one, and the next, and followed her blazed trail safely back. The ticking of the forest followed for a while, then stopped abruptly. But while it lasted, it *pushed* away as hard as it had pulled before.

VII

DAYDANDA made the last entry in her calendar of the day, and filed it with yesterday's and all the others. Things were going well. The youngest Family was thriving; the next-to-youngest—the Eleventh—was almost ready to start schooling; ready, in any case, for weaning from the Garden. Soon there would be

room in the nurseries for a new brood.

Kackot was restless. She hadn't meant the thought for him at all, but he was sensitive to such things now, and he moved slightly, eagerly, toward her from his place across the room—perhaps honestly mistaking his own desire for her summons.

She sent a thought of love and promise, and temporary firm refusal. The new Family would have to wait. Within the Household, things were going well; but there were other matters to consider.

There was the still-un-solved puzzle of the Strangers, for instance. For a few hours, that mystery had seemed quite satisfactorily solved. When the Strange Lady left her Wings with a b a b e-o-r-c-o-n-s-o-r-t—now it seemed less certain which it was—to travel the path the flames had cleared for her, the whole thing had assumed a ritual aspect that made it easier to understand. Whatever Strange reasons, motives, or traditions were involved, it all seemed to fit into a pattern of some kind...until the next report informed Daydanda that the two Strangers had returned to their Wings—an act no less, and no more, unprecedented than their manner of arrival, or their strange appearance.

They had not since departed from the—

The House? she wondered suddenly. Could a House be somehow made to travel through the air?

SHE FELT Kackot's impatient irritation with such fantasizing, and had to agree. Surely the image of—*it*—re-layed by the flier-scout who had approached most closely, resembled in no way any structure Daydanda had ever seen or heard of.

But neither was it similar in any way, she thought—and this time guarded the thought from her consort's limited imagination—to o r d i n a r y, Wings, except by virtue of the certain knowledge that it had descended from the sky above the trees.

Today there had been no report. The fliers were all busy on the northern boundary, where a more ordinary sort of nesting had been observed. When the trouble there was cleared up, she could afford to keep a closer watch on the apparently not-hostile Strangers.

Meantime, certainly, it was best to let a new Family wait. Laying was hard on her; always had been. And with possible action developing on two fronts now...

Kackot stirred again, but not with any real hope, and the Lady barely bothered to reply. It was time to bring the young ones in. Daydanda began the evening Homecalling, the message to return, loud and strong and clear for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbors; a promise and renewal to all her children in the Household, young and old.

"LADY! OH, MOTHER!" Daydanda sustained the Homecalling at full strength, through a brief surge of stubborn irritation; then, suddenly worried—the daughter on relay knew enough not to interrupt at this time for anything less than urgent—she allowed enough of her concentration to be distracted so as to permit a clear reception.

"Lady!... nurse from east garden...very frightened, confused...message unclear...she wishes..."

"Send her in!" Daydanda cut off the semi-hysterical outburst, and terminated the Homecalling abruptly, with extra emphasis on the last few measures.

The nurse dashed through the archway, too distraught to make a ritual approach, almost forgetting to prostrate herself in the presence of the

Lady, her Mother. She opened communication while still in motion, as soon as she was within range of her limited powers. Daydanda recognized her with the first contact: a daughter of the fifth family—not very bright, even for a wingless one, but not given to emotional disturbance either, and a fine nurse, recently put in charge of the east garden.

"The Stranger, Mother Daydanda! The Strange Lady!... She came to the nursery... she would have stolen... killed...she would have..."

To the nursery!

The Mother had to quell an instant's panic of her own before she could commence the careful questioning and reiterated reassurance that were needed to obtain a coherent picture from the nurse. When at last she had stripped away the fearful imaginative projections that stemmed from the daughter's well-conditioned protectiveness, it appeared that the Strange Lady had visited the Garden, had spied on the feeding babes, and then had departed with haste when the Nurse came to fetch them home for the night.

"The babes are all safe?" the Mother asked sternly.

"Yes, Lady. I brought them to the House quick as I could,

before I came to you. I would not have presumed to come, my Lady, but I could not make the winged one understand. Will my Mother forgive..."

"There is nothing to forgive; you have done well," Daydanda dismissed her. "You were right to come to me, even during the Homecalling."

Breathing easy again, and once more in full possession of her faculties, the nurse offered thanks and farewell, and wriggled backward out of sight under the arch, quite properly apologetic. The Lady barely noticed; she was already in contact with the flier-scout who had been re-assigned from the North border by the daughter on relay, as soon as the nurse's first wild message was connected with the Strange Wings.

It was a son of the eighth Family, the same scout who had approached the Wings before, a well-trained, conscientious, and devoted son, almost ready to undertake the duties of a consortship. Daydanda could not have wished for a better representative through whose sense to perceive the Strangers.

YET, THERE was little she could learn through him. The Strange Lady had returned to the Wings...the

House? More and more it seemed so...where the small Stranger presumably awaited her. Now they were both inside, and the remarkable barrier that could be raised or lowered in a matter of seconds was blocking the entranceway.

Perception of any kind was difficult through the dense stuff of which the...whatever-it-was: Wings? House? ...was made. The scout was useless now. Daydanda instructed him to stay on watch, and abandoned the contact. Then she concentrated her whole mind in an effort to catch some impression—anything at all—from beyond the thick fabric of... whatever-it-was.

Eventually, there was a flash of something; then another. Not much, but the Lady waited patiently, and used each fleeting image to build a pattern she could grasp. One thought, and another... a wave of feeling... a hope of some kind... another thought, and...

To Kackot's astonishment, the Lady relaxed suddenly with an outpouring of amusement. She did not communicate to him what she knew, or thought she knew, but abruptly confirmed all his worst fears of the past weeks with a single command: "I

will go to the Strange Wings, oh Consort, Prepare a litter for me."

When she addressed him thus formally, he had no recourse but to obey. If she noticed his sputtering dismay at all, she gave no sign, but lay back on her couch, thoroughly fatigued, to rest through the night while her sons and daughters prepared a litter, and enlarged the outer arches sufficiently to accomodate its great size.

VIII

DEE WAS scared, and she didn't know what to do. She wanted her mother; it was no fun taking care of Petey now. She made him a bottle to keep him from screaming, but she didn't bother with his diaper or fixing up his bunk or anything like that. It didn't matter any more.

There were no people on this planet.

Nobody was going to rescue them; nobody at all.

It wasn't the right planet, at all. If anybody on Starhope got worried and went to look for them, it was some other planet they'd look on. It had to be, because there were no people here. Just bugs!

Petey fell asleep with the bottle still in his mouth, sprawled on the floor, all wet

and dirty. Deborah didn't care; she sat on the floor herself and fell asleep and didn't even know she slept till she woke up, with nothing changed, except that the clock said it was morning.

And she was hungry after all.

She started back to the galley, but first she had to open the outer lock. She actually had her hand on the lever before she realized she didn't want to open it. She was hungry; the last thing in the world she wanted to do was look outside again. She went back and got a piece of cake and some milk.

Milk for Petey, too. If she got it fixed before he woke up, she wouldn't have to listen to him yelling his head off again. She started to fix a bottle, but first she had to open the lock.

This time, she stopped herself halfway there.

It was silly to think she had to look out; she didn't want to.

Petey was awake, but he wasn't hollering for once. She went back and got the bottle, and brought it into the play space.

"Open it," Petey said. "Come out. Mother."

"All right," Dee told him. She gave him the bottle, went over to the lock, and then

turned around and looked at him, terrified.

He was sucking on the bottle. "Come on," he said. "Mother waiting."

She was watching him while he said it. He didn't say it; he drank his milk.

She didn't think she was crazy, so she was still asleep, and this was a dream. It wasn't really happening at all, and it didn't matter.

She opened the lock.

IX

ONCE SHE HAD flown above the tree-tops, silver strong wings beating a rhythm of pride and joy in the high dry air above the canopy of fronds. Her eyes had gleamed under the white rays of the sun itself, and she had looked, with wild unspeakable elation, into the endless glaring brilliance of the heavens.

Now she was tired, and the blessed relief from sensation when they set her down on the soft ground—after the lurching motion of the forest march—was enough to make her momentarily regret her decision. A foolish notion, this whole trip...

Kackot agreed enthusiastically.

The Lady closed her thoughts from his, and commanded the curtain at her

side to be lifted. Supine in her litter, safely removed from the Strangers under a tree at the fringe of the clearing, her vast body embedded on layers of cellulose mat, Daydanda looked out across the ravaged black strip. And the sun, in all its strength, collected on the shining outer skin of the Strange Wings, gathered its light into a thousand fiery needles to sear the surface of her eyes, and pierce her very soul with agony.

Once she had flown above the trees themselves...

Now her sons and daughters rushed to her side, in response to her uncontained anguish. They pulled close the curtain, and formed a tight protective wall of flesh and carapace around the litter. And from the distance, came a clamouring bloodlust eagerness: the Big heads, waking in answer to her silent shriek of pained surprise. She sent them prompt soothing, and firm command to be still; not till she was certain they understood, and would obey, did she dare turn any part of her mind to a consideration of her own difficulties. Even then she was troubled with the knowledge that her stern suppression of their rage to fight would leave the entire Big head

brood confused, and useless for the next emergency. It might be many days before their dull minds could be trained again to the fine edge of danger-awareness they had just displayed. If any trouble should arise in the meanwhile...

SHE SENT instructions to an elder daughter in the House to start the tedious process of reconditioning at once, then felt herself free at last to devote all her attention to the scene at hand. Tomorrow's troubles would have to take care of themselves till tomorrow. For now, there was disturbance, anxiety, and mortification enough.

That she, who had flown above the trees, higher and farther than any sibling of her brood, that *she* should suffer from the sunlight now...

"It was many years and many Families ago, my dear, my Lady."

Daydanda felt her consort's comforting concern and thought a smile. "Many years indeed..." And it was true; she had not been outside her chamber till this day—since the first Family they raised was old enough to tend the fungus gardens, and to carry the new babes back and forth. That was many years behind

her now, and she had grown through many chambers since that time: each larger than the last, and now, most recently, the daring double chamber with the great arch to walk through.

The Household had prospered in those years, and the boundaries of its land were wide. The gardens grew in many places now, and the thirteenth Family would soon outgrow the nursery. The winged sons and daughters of Seven Families had already grown to full maturity, and departed to establish new Houses of their own...or to die in failure. And through the years, the numbers of the wingless ones who never left the Household grew great; masons and builders, growers and weavers, nurses and teachers—there were always more of them, working for the greater welfare of the House, and their Mother, its Lady.

Through all those building, growing, widening years, Daydanda had *forgotten*... forgotten the graceful wings and the soaring flight; the dazzling sunlight, and the fresh moist air just where the fronds stirred high above her now; the bright colors and half-remembered shapes of trees and nursery plants. Not once, in all that time, had she

savored the full sensory sharpness of *outside*...

She thought longingly of the nursery garden, the first one, that she and Kackot had planted together when they lost their wings, while they waited for the first Family to come. She thought of it, determined to see it again one day, then put aside all thoughts, hopes, and regrets of past or future.

DAYDANDA directed that her litter be moved so that the opening of the curtain would give her a view of the forest interior. Then, while her eyes grew once again accustomed to their former functioning, she began to seek—with a more practiced organ of perception—the mind-patterns of the Strangers inside that frighteningly bright structure in the clearing.

It was hard work. Whether there was something in the nature of the dense fabric of the Wings, or whether the difficulty lay only in the Strangeness of the beings inside, she could not tell, but at the beginning, the Lady found that proximity made small difference in her ability to perceive what was inside.

Strangers! One could hardly expect them, after all, to provide familiar friend-or-

enemy patterns for perception. Yet that very knowledge made the brief flashes of contact that she got all the more confusing, for they contained a teasing familiarity that made the Strange elements even less comprehensible by contrast.

For just the instant's duration of a swift brush of minds, the Mother felt as though it were a daughter of her own inside the Strange structure; then the feeling was lost, and she had to strain every effort again simply to locate the image.

A series of slow moves, meantime, brought her litter gradually back round to where it had been at first; and though she found it was still painful to look for any length of time directly at the blazing light reflected from the Wings, the Lady discovered that by focussing on the trees diagonally across the clearing, she could include the too-bright object within her peripheral vision.

That much assured, she ceased to focus visually at all. Time enough for that when—if—the Strangers should come forth. Once more she managed to grasp, briefly, the mental image of the Strangers, or of one of them; and once again she felt the unexpected response within her-

self, as if she were in contact with a daughter of the Household...

She lost it then; but it fitted with her sudden surmise of the night before.

Now, in the hopeful certainty that she had guessed correctly, she abandoned the effort at perception entirely; she gathered all her energies instead into one tight-beamed communication aimed at penetrating the thick skin of the Wings, and very little different in any way from the standard evening Homecalling.

IT TOOK some time.

She was beginning to think she had failed: that the Strangers were not receptive to her call, or would respond only with fear and hostility. Then, without warning, the barrier at the entranceway was gone.

No...not actually gone. It was still there, and still somehow attached to the main body of the Wings, but turned around so it no longer barred the way. And the opening this uncovered turned out to be, truly, the double-arch she had seen—but not quite credited—through her son's eyes.

Two arches, resting on each other base-to-base, but open in the center: the shape of a hollowed-eye. Such a shape

might grow, but it could not be *built*. Half-convinced as she had been that the Wings, or House, or whatever-it-was, was an artificial structure rather than a natural form, Daydanda had put the relayed image of the doorway down to distortion of communication the night before. Now she saw it for herself: that, and the device that moving like a living thing to barricade the entrance...

Like a living thing...

It could fly; it was therefore, by all precedent of knowledge, alive. Reluctantly, the Lady discarded the notion that the Wings had been built by Strange knowledge. But even then, she thought soberly, there was much to be learned from the Strangers.

And in the next moment, she ceased to think at all. The Stranger emerged—the bigger of the two Strangers—and at the first impact of full visual and mental perception, Daydanda's impossible theory was confirmed.

X

DEBORAH STOOD outside, on the charred ground in front of the rocket, earnestly repeating the multiplication table: "Two two's are four. Three two's are six. Four two's..."

She was just as big as any of these bugs. The only one that was bigger was the one inside the box that she could only see part of—but that one had something wrong with it. It just lay there stretched out flat all the time, as if it couldn't get up. The box had handles for carrying, too, so Dee didn't have to worry about how big that one was.

All the rest of them were just about her own size, or even smaller, but there were too *many* of them. And when she thought about actually touching one, with its hairy, sticky legs, she remembered the sick crackling sound a beetle makes when you step on it.

She didn't want to fight them, or anything like that; and she didn't think they wanted to hurt her specially, either. She didn't have the knotted-up, tight kind of feeling you get when somebody wants to hurt you. They didn't *feel* like enemies, or act that way, either. They were just too...

"Four four's are sixteen. Five four's are twenty. Six four's are twenty-four. Seven..."

...too *interested*! And that was a silly thing to think, because how could *she* tell if they were interested? She couldn't even see their faces.

because all the ones in front were bending backwards-upside-down, like the one she'd seen in the garden...

"...four's are twenty-eight. Eight four's are thirty-two. Nine four's are..."

...just standing there, the whole row of them, with their back legs or arms or whatever-they-were sticking up in the air, and their heads dipped down in front so they could stare at her out of the big glittery eye in the middle of each black head.

"...thirty-six. Ten four's are forty. Eleven..."

What did they want, anyhow? Why didn't they *do* something?

"...four's are forty-four. Twelve four's..."

The Space Girl oath was hard to remember if you were trying to think about other things at the same time; but Deborah knew the multiplication tables by heart, and she could keep talking while she was thinking.

DAYDANDA was fascinated. She had guessed at it, in her chamber the night before... more than guessed really. She would have been *certain*, if the notion were not so flatly impossible in terms of all knowledge and experience. It was precisely that conflict between perception and precedent that had deter-

mined her to make the trip out here.

And she was right! These two were neither Lady and consort, nor Mother and babe, but only two children: a half-grown daughter and a babe in arms. Two young wingless ones, alone, afraid, and... *Motherless?*

Eagerly, Daydanda poured out her questionings:

Where did they come from?

What sort of beings were they?

Where was their Mother?

"TWELVE four's are forty-eight. One five is five. Two five's are ten. Three..."

The important thing was just to keep talking—Dee knew that from when she had so much trouble at the garden. As long as she was saying something, anything at all, she could keep the crazy stuff out of her head.

"...five's are fifteen. Four five's are twenty. Five five's..."

It was harder this time, though. At the garden, with the drumbeat-heartbeat sound that felt like Mommy's voice, all she had to do was *think* words. But now, it was stuff like thinking Petey was saying things to her—or feeling like somebody else was ask-

ing her a lot of silly questions. And every time she stopped for breath at all, she'd start wanting to answer a lot of things inside her head that there wasn't even anybody around to have asked.

"...are twenty-five. Six fives are thirty."

THE ACHING soreness in her body from the jolting journey through the forest...the instant's agony when the sunlight seared her eye...the nagging worry over the disturbed Big-heads...all these were forgotten, or submerged, as the Lady experienced, for the first time in her life, the frustration of her curiosity.

Every answer she could get from the Strange child came in opposites. Each question brought a pair of contradictory replies...if it brought any reply at all. Half the time, at least, the Stranger was refusing reception entirely, and for some obscure reason, broadcasting great quantities of arithmetic—most of it quite accurate, but all of it irrelevant to the present situation.

Would they remain here? the Lady asked. Or would they return to their own House? Had they come to build a House here? Or was the Wing-like structure on

the blackened ground truly a House instead?

The answers were many, and also various.

They would not stay, the Stranger seemed to say, nor would they leave. The structure from which she had emerged was a House, but it was also Wings: Unfamiliar concept in a single symbol—Wings-House? *Both!*

Their Mother was nearby—inside—but—dead? *No! Not dead!*

How could the child possibly answer a sensible question sensibly if she started broadcasting sets of numbers every time anyone tried to communicate with her? *Very rude, Daydanda thought, and very stupid.* Kackot eagerly confirmed her opinion, and moved a step closer to the litter, as if preparing to commence the long march home.

The Lady had no time to reprimand him. At just that moment, the Strange child also broke into motion—perhaps also feeling that the interview was over.

“...THIRTY. Seven five’s are thirty-fi...”

One of them moved!

Just a couple of steps, but Dee, panicked, forgot to keep talking and started a dash for the rocket; her head was full of questions again, and part

of her mind was trying to answer them, without *her* wanting to at all, while another part decided *not* to go back inside, with a mixed-up kind of feeling, as if Petey didn’t want her to.

And *that* was silly, because she could hear Petey crying now. He wanted her to come in, all right, or at least to come and get him. She couldn’t tell for sure, the way he was yelling, whether he was scared and mad at being left alone—or just mad and wanting to get picked up. It sounded almost more like he thought he was being left out of something, and wanted to get in on the fun.

If he thinks this is fun...

“We’re lost, that’s what we are,” she said out loud, as if she were answering real questions someone had asked, instead of crazy ones inside her own head. “I don’t *know* where we are. We came from Starhope. That’s a different planet. A different *world*. I don’t know where... One five is five,” she remembered.

“Two sixes are seven. I mean two seven’s are twenty-one... I can’t think anything right!”

It *really* didn’t matter what she said; as long as she kept talking. If she answered the silly questions right out loud, that was all right too, because

they couldn't understand her anyhow. How would they know Earthish?

IT WAS POSSIBLE that the Stranger's sudden move to return to the Wings-House was simply a response to Kackot's gesture of readiness to depart. The Lady promised herself an opportunity to express her irritation with her consort—soon. For the moment, however, every bit of energy she could muster went into a plea-command-call-invitation to the Strange child to remain outside the shelter and continue to communicate.

The Stranger hesitated, paused—but even before that, she had begun, perversely, now that no questions were being asked, to release a whole new flood of semi-information.

More contradictions, of course!

These two, the Stranger children, were—something hard to comprehend—not-aware-of-where-they-were.

They were in need of help, but not helpless.

The elder of the two—the daughter who now stood wavering in her intentions, just beside the open barrier of the Wings-House—was obviously acting in the capacity of nurse. Yet her self-pat-

tern of identity claimed reproductive status!

Certainly, the girl's attitude toward her young sibling was an odd mixture of what one might expect to find in nurse or Mother. Possibly the relationship could be made clearer by contact with the babe himself. There was little enough in the way of general information to be expected from such a source, but here he might be helpful. Tentatively, with just a small part of her mind, Daydanda reached out to find the babe, still concentrating on her effort to keep the older one from departing...

"Food...m a m a...suck... oh, look!"

The Lady promptly turned her full attention to the babe.

After the obstructionist tactics, and confused content of the Strange girl's mind, the little one's response to a brushing contact was doubly startling. Now that she was fully receptive to them, thoughts came crowding into the Mother's mind, thoughts unformed and infantile, but bouyantly eager and hopeful.

"Love...f o o d...good... mama...suck...see...see..."

"THREE seven's are twenty one!" Dee remembered triumphantly, and be-

gan feeling a lot better. They were all standing still again, for one thing; and her head felt clearer, too.

She moved a cautious step backward, watching them as she went, and not having any trouble now remembering her multiplication.

"Four seven's are twenty-eight..."

Just a few more steps. If she could just get back inside, and get the door closed, she wouldn't open it again for anything. She'd stay right there with Petey till some people came..."

"...M A M A...SUCK...
see...see...good...love..."

It might have been one of her own latest brood, so easy and familiar was the contact. Just about the same age-level and emotional development, too. Daydanda was suddenly imperatively anxious to see the babe directly, to hold it in her own arms, to feel what sort of strange shape and texture could accomodate such warmly customary longings and perceptions.

"The babe!" she commanded. "I wish to have the babe brought to me!" But the nurse to whom she had addressed the order hung back miserably.

"The babe, I said!" The

Lady released all her pent-up irritation at the Stranger child, in one peremptory blast of anger at her own daughter. "Now!"

"Lady, I cannot...the light...forgive me, my Lady..."

With her own eye still burning in its socket, Daydanda hastily blessed the nursing daughter, and excused her. Even standing on the fringes of the bright-lit area must be frightening to the wingless ones. But whom else could she send? The fliers were unaccustomed to handling babes...

"Kackot!"

He was good with babes, really. She felt better about sending him than she would have had she trusted the handling of the Stranger to a nurse. Kackot himself felt otherwise; but at the moment, the Lady's recognition of his discomfiture was no deterrent to her purpose; she had not forgotten his ill-advised move a little earlier.

The consort could not directly disobey. He went forward, doubtfully enough, and stood at the open entrance-way, peering in.

"Oh, look!...l o v e... look!"

The babe's welcoming thoughts were unmistakable; Kackot must have felt them as Daydanda did.

Stranger or no, the near presence of a friendly and protective entity made it beg to be picked up, petted, fondled, loved—and hopefully, though not, the Mother thought, truly hungrily—perhaps also to be fed.

Meantime, however, there was the older child to reckon with. The babe was eager to come; the girl, Daydanda sensed, was determined not to allow it. Once more, the Mother tried to reach the Strange daughter with empathy and affection and reassurance. Once again, she met only blankness and refusal. Then she sent a surge of loving invitation to the babe, and got back snuggling eagerness and warmth—and suddenly, from the elder one, a lessening of fear and anger.

Daydanda smiled inside herself; she thought she knew now how to penetrate the strange defenses of the child.

XI

DEE STOOD still and watched it happen. She saw the nervous fussy-bug—the one that had scared her when he moved before—go right over to the rocket and *look inside*. He passed right by her, close enough to touch; she was going to do something about it, until

Petey started talking again.

He said, "Baby come to mama."

At least, she *thought* he said it. Then she *almost* thought she heard a Mother say, "It's all right; don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama."

"Mother's dead!" Deborah screamed at them all, at Petey and the bugs, without ever even opening her mouth. "Five seven's are thirty-five," she said hurriedly. She'd been forgetting to keep talking, that's what the trouble was. "Six seven's are forty-two. Seven..."

And still, she couldn't get the notion out of her head that it was her own mother's voice she'd heard. "Seven seven's..." she said desperately, and couldn't keep from turning around to look at the part of the rocket where Mommy was—would be—had been when—

The smooth gleaming metal nose looked just the same as ever, now it was cool again. There was no way of knowing anything had ever happened in there. *If anything had happened...*

Deborah stared and stared, as if looking long enough and hard enough would let her see right through the triple hull into the burned-out inside: the wrecked control room, and

the two charred bodies that had been Father and Mother.

"... seven seven's is forty—f o r t y—seven?... eight...?"

She floundered, forgetting, she was too small, and she didn't know what to do about anything, and she wanted her mother.

"It's all right. Stand still. Don't worry. Baby wants to come to mama."

IT WASN'T her own mother's voice, though; that wasn't the way Mommy talked. If it was these bugs that were making her hear crazy things and putting silly questions in her head... seven seven's... seven seven's is... just stand still... don't worry... everything will be all right... seven seven's... *I don't know...* don't worry, all right, stand still, seven's is...

"*Forty-nine!*" she shrieked. The fussy-bug was all the way inside, and she'd been standing there like any dumb kid, hearing thoughts and voices that weren't real, and not knowing what to do.

"Forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two," she shouted. She could have been just counting like that all along, instead of trying to remember something like seven times seven. *Get out of there, you awful hairy horrible old thing!*

"Fifty-three, fifty-four. You leave my brother alone!"

The fussy-bug came crawling out of the airlock, with Petey—soft little pink-and-wet Petey—clutched in its sticky arms.

"Fifty-five," she tried to shout, but it came out like a creak instead. *You leave him alone!* her whole body screamed; but her throat was too dry and it felt as if somebody had glued it together, and she couldn't make any words come out at all. She started forward to grab the baby.

"Come to Mama," Petey said. "Nice M a m a. Like Good."

SHE WAS looking right at him all the time, and she knew he wasn't really talking. Just drooling the way he always did, and making happy-baby gurgling noises. He certainly didn't act scared—he was cuddling up to the hairy-bug just as if it was a person.

"Come to Mama," the baby crooned inside her head; she should have made a grab for him right then, but somehow she wasn't sure...

The fussy-bug walked straight across the clearing to the tree where the big box was, and handed Petey inside.

"Oo-oo-oooh, *Mama!*" Petey cried out with delight.

"*Mommy's dead!*" Deborah heard herself shouting, so she knew her voice was working again. "Dead, she's dead, can't you understand that? Any dope could understand that much. *She's dead!*"

Nobody paid any attention to her. Petey was laughing out loud; and the sound got mixed up with some other kind of laughter in her head that was hard to not-listen to, because it felt *good*.

XII

HOLDING the babe tenderly, Daydanda petted and patted and stroked it, and made pleased laughter for them both. Cautiously, she experimented with balancing the intensities of the two contacts, trying to gage the older child's reactions to each variation. Reluctantly, as she observed the results, she came to the conclusion that the Strange daughter had indeed been consciously attempting to block communication.

It was unheard-of; therefore impossible—but impossibilities were commonplace today. The Mother's own presence at this scene was a flat violation of tradition and natural law.

Nevertheless!

The child had emerged from the Wings-House, in response to a Homecalling pattern.

Therefore, she was not an enemy.

Therefore, she could not possibly feel either fear or hostility toward Daydanda's Household.

These things being true, what reason could she have for desiring to prevent communication?

Answer: Obviously, despite the logic of the foregoing, the Strange child was *afraid*.

Why? There was no danger to her in this contact.

"Stupid," Kackot grumbled; "just plain stupid. As much brains as a Bighead. Lady, it is getting late; we have a long journey home..."

Daydanda let him rumble on. A child was likely to behave stupidly when frightened. She remembered, and sharply reminded her consort, of the time a young winged one of her own, a very bright boy normally—was it the fifth Family he was in? No, the sixth—had wandered into the Bigheads' corral, and been too petrified with fear to save himself, or even to call for help.

The boy had been afraid, she remembered now, that he

would call the Bigheads' attention to himself if he tried to communicate with anyone, so he closed off against the world. Of course, he knew in advance that the Bigheads were dangerous. If the Stranger here had somehow decided to be fearful *in advance*, perhaps her effort to block contact was motivated the same way...

"The Homecalling," Kackot reminded her; "she answered a Homecalling."

"She is a Stranger," Daydanda pointed out. "Perhaps she responded to friendship without identifying it... I don't know..."

But she would find out. Once again she centered her attention on the babe, keeping only a loose contact with the older child.

DEE KEPT watching the box on the ground that had the big bug inside it. She couldn't see much of the bug, and she couldn't see Petey at all, after the other bug handed him in. But it wasn't just Petey she was watching for.

It was that big bug that was—talking to her. Well, anyhow, that was making it sound as if Petey talked to her and putting questions in her head and...

She didn't know how it did it, but she couldn't pretend

any more that it wasn't really happening. Somebody was picking and poking at her inside her head, and she didn't know how they did it or why, or what to do about it. But she was sure by now that the big bug in the box was the one.

"Let's see now—seven seven's is forty-nine." Just counting didn't seem to work so well. "Seven eight's is... I mean, *eight seven's* is... I don't know I can't remember... We came for Daddy and Mommy to make reports. That's what they always do. Daddy's a Survey Engineer, and Mommy's a Geologist. They work for the Planetary Survey Commiss... I mean they *did*..."

It was none of their business. And they did know Earthish!

If they didn't, how could they talk to her?

"Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's is forty-nine. Seven seven's..."

AT THE FIRST exchange, the Lady had put it down to incompetence, but she could no longer entertain that excuse. The Strangers had no visible antennae, yet the ease of communication with the babe made it clear that they could receive as well as broadcast readily—if they wished.

The perception appeared to be associated with an organ Daydanda had at first mistaken for a mouth: small and flat, centered toward the bottom of the face, and enclosed by just two soft-looking mandibles.

In the babe, the mandibles were almost constantly in motion, and there was a steady flow of undirected, haphazard communication, such as was normal for the little one's apparent level of development. With the older child, it was apparent that the messages that came when the mandibles were moving were stronger, clearer, and more purposeful in meaning than the others. Unfortunately, the content of these messages was mostly nothing but arithmetic.

Yet even when the "mouth" was at rest, Daydanda noticed that there was a continuous trickle of communication from the Strange daughter—a sort of reluctant release of thought, rather like the babe's in that it was undirected and largely involuntarily, but with two striking differences: the eagerness of the babe to be heard, and the fact that the content of the older one's thoughts were not at all infantile, but sometimes startlingly mature.

Daydanda repeated her

questions, this time watching the mandibles as the answers came, and realized that the thin stream of involuntary communication went on even while mandible messages were being sent—and that the "opposite" answers she'd been receiving were the result of the differences between the purposeful broadcasts and the background flow.

The Strangers' Mother and her consort, it appeared, (gradually, the Lady learned to put the two answers together so that they made sense) had come here to survey the land (to look for a House-site, one would assume), and they had techniques as well for determining before excavation what lay far underground. However, they were now dead... perhaps... and...

More arithmetic!

"What is it that you fear child?" the Mother asked once more.

"I'm not afraid of those (unfamiliar symbol—something small and scuttling and unpleasant)," the daughter addressed her sibling, mandibling. "Scared, scared, *scared!*" came the running edge of thought behind and around it.

"DON'T BE scared,"
Petey told her.

"I'm not afraid of those old bugs!" she told him.

But it wasn't Petey, really; it was that big Mother-bug in the box. *Mother-bug*? What made her think that? That was what Petey thought...

Deborah was all mixed up. And she was scared; she was scared for Petey, and scared because she didn't know how they put things in her mind, and scared...

Scared all the time except when that good-feeling laughing was in her head; and then, even though she knew the—the *Mother-bug* must be doing that too, she *couldn't* be scared.

Deborah stood still, trembling with the realization of the awfulness of destruction she would somehow have to visit upon this bunch of bugs, if anything bad happened to Petey. She didn't understand how she had come to let them get him out of the ship at all; and now that they had him, she didn't know what to do about it. The first large tear slid out of the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

"**M**AKE FOOD for sibling?" the Mother inquired, as she watched the clear liquid ooze out of the openings she had at first thought to be twin eyes.

The Strange daughter was apparently receiving all communication as if from the babe, for her answer was addressed to him: a reassurance, a promise, "I will prepare (unfamiliar symbol) inside the..." Another unfamiliar symbol there—*ship*—but with it came an image of an interior room of Strange appearance; and Daydanda safely guessed the symbol to refer to the Wings-House. The first symbol—*bottle*, she found now, in the babe's mind—was a great white cylinder, warm and moist, and connected with the sucking concept... but no time to classify it further, because the older child was mandibling another message, this time directly to the Mother.

"Return the babe to me. The babe is hungry. I must prepare his food."

"You have food for the sibling now," Daydanda pointed out patiently. "Come here to the litter and feed him."

"**S**URE THERE'S milk," Dee said. "There's lots of milk, Petey. I'll give you a bottle soon as we get back inside," she promised, and warned the big bug hopefully: "That baby's hungry; he's awful hungry—you wait and see. He'll start yelling in a minute, and then you'll see."

You better give him back to me right now, before he starts yelling."

"THERE IS much food inside the ship," the child told the babe, but all the while a background-message trickled out: "There isn't; there really isn't. It won't last much longer." And even as the two conflicting thoughts came clear in her own mind, Daydanda saw a large drop of the precious fluid roll off the girl's face and be lost forever in the ground.

"Come quickly!" she commanded. "Now! Come to the Mother, and give food to the babe. Quick!"

But the doltish child simply stood there rooted in her fears.

MAYBE IF she just walked right over and lifted him out of the big box, they wouldn't even try to stop her...but there were too many of them, and she didn't dare get much further away from the rocket.

"You better give him back to me," she cried out hopelessly.

IT TOOK a while to sort out the sense from the nonsense. Of course, the child believed the babe to be hun-

gry because the message about feeding came to her through him. Actually, the little one was warm and happy and content, with no more than normal infantile fantasies of nourishment in his mind. His belly was still half-full from earlier feeding.

But half-full meant also half-empty. If the older child was now producing food, and could not continue to do so much longer—as seemed clear from the contradictory content of her messages—the babe should have it now, while it was available. The daughter's reluctance to provide him with it seemed somehow connected with the *bottle* symbol. It was necessary to go into the Wings-House to get the *bottle*...

DAYDANDA searched the babe's mind once again. *Bottle* was food...? No...a *mechanism* of some sort for feeding. Perhaps the flat mandibles were even weaker than they looked; perhaps some artificial aid in nourishment was needed...

And that thought brought with an equally startling notion in explanation of the Wings-House...a Strange race of people might possibly need artificial Wings to carry out the nuptial flight...

That was beside the point for now. Think about it later. Meantime... she had to reject the idea of artificial aid in feeding; the babe's repeated sucking image was too clear and too familiar. He nursed as her own babes did; she was certain of it.

Then she recalled the Strange daughter's earlier crafty hope of finding some way to return to the Wings-House with the babe, and emerge no more. Add to that the child's threat that the babe, if not immediately returned to her, would start yelling—would attempt to block communication as the girl herself did. It all seemed to mean that *bottle* was not a necessity of feeding at all, but some pleasurable artifact inside the *ship*, somehow associated with the feeding process, with which the daughter was trying to entice the babe.

"You wish to feed?" Daydanda asked the little one, and made a picture in his mind's eye of the girl's face, with liquid droplets of nourishment falling unused to the ground.

"NOT-FOOD," came the clear response. "Not food. Sad." Then there was an image once again of the tubular white container, but this time she realized the color of

it came from a cloudy fluid inside... *milk*. "Milk-food, Tears-crying-sad."

Tears-crying was for the face-liquid. It was useless, or rather useful only as emotional expression. It was a waste product... (and she had been right in the first guess about twin eyes!) ...and then the further realization that the great size she had at first attributed to the *bottle* was relative only to the babe. The thing was a reasonably-sized, sensibly-shaped storage container for the nutrient fluid the babe and child called *milk*; and it was furthermore provided with a mechanism at one end designed to be sucked upon.

Out of the welter of freshly-evaluated information, one fact emerged to give the Lady an unanticipated hope.

There was food—*stored*, *portable* food inside the winged structure. The Strangers were *not biologically tied* to the Wings; there was no need to return the babe in order to satisfy its hunger. Babe and Strange daughter both could, if they would, return to Daydanda's House, there to communicate at leisure.

It remained only to convince the daughter...and Daydanda had not forgotten that the child was suscepti-

ble to the Homecalling and to laughter both.

XIII

DEBORAH walked behind the litter where Peter rode in state with...with *the Mother*... and all around her walked a retinue of bugs; dozens of them. They walked on four front legs, heads carried down and facing backward, eyes looking forward. The tallest of them was just about her own height when it stood up straight. Walking this way, none of them came much above her waist; they weren't so awful if you didn't have to look at their faces.

Certainly they were smart—so smart it scared her some...but not as much as it would have scared her to keep on staying in the rocket. She was just beginning to realize that.

Dee still didn't know how they made her think things inside her head; or how they made Petey seem to talk to her; or how they knew what she was thinking half the time, even if she didn't say a word. She wasn't sure, either, what had made her decide to do what *the Mother* wanted, and pack up food to

take along back to their house. She didn't even know what kind of a house it was, or where it was. But she was pretty sure she'd rather go along with them than just keep waiting in the rocket alone with Petey.

Wherever they were going, it was a long walk. Dee was tired, and the knapsack on her back was heavy. They'd started out right after lunch time, and now the dimness in the forest was turning darker, so it must be evening. It was hot, too. She hoped the milk she'd mixed would keep overnight; but she had crackers and fruit, too, in case it didn't. It wasn't the food that made the knapsack so heavy, though; it was the oxy torch she'd slipped into the bottom, underneath the clean diapers.

These bugs were smart, but they didn't know *everything*, she thought with satisfaction. They never tried to stop her from taking along the torch.

IT WAS HOT and damp, and the torch in the knapsack made a knobby hard spot bouncing against her back. But the bugs never stopped to rest; and Dee walked on in their midst, remembering that she was a Space Girl, so she had to be brave and strong.

Then suddenly, right

ahead, instead of more trees, there was a bare round hill of orange clay. Only when you looked closer, it wasn't just a hill, because it had an opening in it, like the mouth of a cave. Only it wasn't a natural cave, because the edges of the arch were smooth. It was even on both sides, and perfectly round on top; it had little bits of rock or wood set in cement around the edges to make it keep its shape.

She couldn't tell what was inside. It was dark in there. *Too dark.* Deborah paused inside the entranceway, oppressed by shadows, aghast at far dim corridors. One of the bugs tried to take her hand to lead her forward. The touch was sticky. She shuddered back, and stood stock-still in the middle of the arch.

"*I hate you!*" she yelled at all of them.

"Not hate," said Petey, laughing. "Fear."

"I'm not scared of anything," she told him; "you're the one who's scared, not me. Petey's afraid of the dark," she said to the big bug. "You give that baby back to me right now. That's not your baby. He's *my* brother, and I want him back."

THE ROCKET, lying helpless on its side in the bare black clearing, seemed very

safe, and very far away. Dee didn't understand how she could have thought—even for a little while—that this place would be better. Everything back there was safety: even the burned-out memory of the control room was sealed off behind a *safety* door. Everything here was strange and dark, and no doors to close on the shadows—just open arches leading to darker stretches beyond...

"'Fraid of a *door*!" said Petey.

"I'm not afraid of any old door." Deborah's voice was hoarse from pushing past the choke spot in her throat that was holding back the tears. "You give me back my brother, that's all; we're not going into your house. He is, too, afraid of the dark; and *he* hates you too!" *A Space Girl is brave*, she thought, and then she said it out loud, and walked right over to the shadowy outline of the big bug's box, and reached in and grabbed for Petey.

Only he didn't want to come. He yelled and wriggled away; held on tight to the Mother-bug, and kicked at Dee.

She didn't know what to do about it, till she heard that good laughing in her head again. Petey stopped yelling.

and Dee stopped pulling at him. She realized that she was very tired, and the laughing felt like home, like her own mother, like food and a warm room, and a bed with clean sheets—and maybe even a fuzzy doll tucked in next to her as if she were practically a baby again herself.

She was tired, and she didn't feel brave any more. She didn't want to go inside, but she didn't want to fight any more, either—especially if Petey was going to be against her, too. She sat down on the ground under the arch to figure out what to do.

"Light?" a voice like Mother's asked gently inside her head. "You want a light inside?"

"I've got a light," Dee said, before she stopped to think. "I've got a light right here."

She dragged the knapsack around in front of her and dug down into it. She was going to have to go on in after all; there wasn't anything else to do. She got the torch out, and turned it on low, so it wouldn't get used up too fast. Then she started laughing, because this time it was the bugs who were scared. They all started running around like crazy, every which way, and half of them ran clear way, inside.

THE CHILD was certainly resourceful, Daydanda thought ruefully, as she issued rapid commands and reassurances, restoring order out of the sudden panic that the light had caused among the sensitive unpigmented wingless ones.

No daughter of mine, she thought angrily, with admiration, no daughter of mine would ever dare to act this way!

"So you begin to see, my dear Lady..." Kackot was obviously irritated and *not* impressed... "They have no place in the Household. Useless parasites... Why not admit...?"

"Quiet!"

Useless parasites? No! *Dangerous* they might well be; *useless* only if you counted the acquisition of new knowledge as of no use. The child would certainly have to be watched closely. This last trick with the light was really quite insupportable behavior: rudeness beyond belief or toleration. Yet the bravado of the Stranger's attitude was not too hard to understand. Still unequipped for Motherhood, she had already acquired the instincts for it; she was doing, in each case, her inadequate best to protect both sibling and self

from any possible dangers. And each new display of unexpected—even uncomfortable—ingenuity left Daydanda more determined than before to make both Strangers a part of her Household.

There was much to be learned. And...

DAYDANDA was many things:

As a Mother, she felt a simple warm solicitude for two unmothered creatures.

As the administrative Lady of her Household, it was her duty first to make certain that the Strangers were so established that they could do no harm; and then to learn as much as could be learned from their Strange origins and ways of life.

As a person—a person who had flown, long ago, above the treetops—a person who had only a short time ago walked through the enlarged archway in defiance of all precedent and tradition—a person who had just this day dared the impossible, and ventured forth from her own House to make this trip—Daydanda chuckled to herself, and wished she knew some way to make the Stranger understand the quite inex-

plicable affection that she felt.

The child said the babe feared darkness; this was manifestly untrue. The Mother still held the soft infant in her arms, and she *knew* there was no fear inside that body. As for the older one—it was not lack of light that *she* feared, either. Yet if the presence of accustomed light could comfort her—why, she should have her light!

"Come, child," Daydanda coaxed the girl gently through the mind of the babe. "Inside, there is a place to rest. You have done much, Strange daughter, and you have done well; but you are tired now. Inside, there is safety and sleep for the babe and for you. Come with us, and carry your light if you will. But it is time now to sleep; tomorrow we will plan."

At the Lady's command, the litter-bearers picked up her stretcher once more, and the lurching forward motion recommenced. The child on the ground stood up slowly, holding her light high, and followed after them. All down the dim corridors, Daydanda's warning went ahead, to spare those whom the little light

might hurt from the shock of exposure.

XIV

DEBORAH lay on her back on a thick mat on the floor. It had looked uncomfortable, but now that she was stretched out on it, it felt fine. She had no blanket, and no sheets, and she'd forgotten to bring along pajamas. At first she tried sleeping in all her clothes, but then she decided they were only bugs after all, and they didn't wear anything; so she took off her overalls and shirt. The room was warm, anyhow—almost too warm.

She got up and went across the room to the other mat, where Petey was, and changed his diaper and took off the rest of his clothes, too. She didn't know what to do with the dirty things; there was no soil-remover here. Finally, she folded them up neatly—all except the dirty diaper, which she wadded up and threw in a far corner. The rest of the things they'd have to wear again tomorrow, dirty or not.

Then she propped up Petey's almost empty bottle, and went back to her own mat, lay down again, and turned the oxy torch as low as she could, without letting it go

out altogether. She could barely see Petey across the room, still sucking on the nipple, though he was just about asleep.

They hadn't really been captured, she told herself. Nobody tried to hurt them at all. It was...the way she felt now, it was more like being rescued. She didn't know what would happen tomorrow, except one thing—and that was that she would have to go back to the rocket to get some clothes, at least. It was a long walk, though. Right now, she felt warm and safe and sleepy.

These bugs were smart, but there were plenty of things they didn't know at all...

She was pretty sure they wouldn't understand anything about the safety door, for instance. Unless...

Maybe they could find out about it in her mind. But even if they did, they wouldn't *understand*...

And they couldn't even find out anything, if she just didn't *think* about it any more...

That was the best way. *I'll just forget all about it*, she decided.

She felt very brave. The Space Girl Troup Leader on Starhope would be proud of her now, she thought, as she reached out and turned the

light all the way off before she fell asleep.

PETEEY was crying again. "Shut up," Dee said crossly; "why don't you shut up a minute?"

Her eyes felt glued together. She didn't want to wake up. She was warm and comfortable and still very sleepy; and now that it was all over, why didn't Mommy come, and...?

She opened one eye slowly, and couldn't see anything. It was pitch dark in the room; no lights or windows...

She reached out for the oxy torch, her hand scraping across the smooth clay floor, and it wasn't there. The bugs had taken it away. They had come in while she was sleeping and taken it...

Her hand found the torch, fumbled for the switch, and she had to close her eyes against the sudden bright flare of light. Petey, startled, stopped crying for a minute, then started in again just twice as loud.

The knapsack was in the corner, back of the light, and there was a bottle all ready for him inside it, but Dee still didn't want to get up. If she got up, it would be admitting once and for all that this was real, and the other part had been a dream—the part where she'd been waking up in a

real bed, with Mommy in the next room ready to come and take care of them and give them breakfast.

It still felt that way a little bit, as long as she lay still with her eyes closed. *Mother in the next room... Dee* didn't want the feeling to stop, but she couldn't help it if the food was in this room. *Mother can't feed me...* That was a silly thing to think. She was a big girl; nobody had to feed her...

Dee got up and got the bottle for Petey, and some fruit and crackers for herself. She was wide awake now and she knew she wasn't dreaming; but when she was all done eating, she didn't know what to do. There was still some food left, but she wasn't really hungry. She knew she might need it later on, so she just sat around listening to Petey making sucking noises on his bottle, and wondering what was going to happen next.

XV

THE MORNING pattern of the Household was a familiar and punctilious ritual: a litany of instruction and response, of order and affirmation. Each member of each Family knew his role and played it with conditioned ease; the sum of the parts produced a chore-

ography of timing and motion, such as had delighted the Mother on that day when she watched her mason sons construct the new arch in her double chamber.

Daydanda's great body rested now, as then, on the couch of mats from which she had once thought she would never rise again; but her perceptions spread out of the boundaries of her Household, and her commands and reprimands were heard wherever her children prepared for the day's labor.

Some of the pattern was set and unvarying: the nurses to care for the babes, and the babes to the gardens to feed; the growing sons and daughters to their classrooms, workrooms, and the training gardens; those whose wings are sprouting to instruction in the mysteries of flight and reproduction.

The winged ones whose nuptial flight time has not come as yet wait in their quarters for assignments to scouting positions for the day; the builders breakfast largely to prepare cement, and gather up clay and chips for work in some new structure of the House; the growers, gardeners, and harvesters spread out across the forest, clearing the fallen leaves and branches, sporing the

fungi, damming or redirecting a flow of water to some more useful purpose, bringing back new stores of leaf and wood and brush to fill the storage vaults beneath the House.

IT WAS NEVER precisely the same. There was always some minor variation in the combination of elements: a boundary dispute today on this border, instead of the other; a new room to add to the nursery quarters, or an arch to repair in the vaults; a garden to replant into more fertile soil. And on this particular morning, two matters of special import claimed the Lady's attention.

The most urgent of these was the reconditioning of the disturbed Bigheads. Two of the eldest winged daughters—both almost ready for nuptial departures from the Household—had been assigned to work with the nurses who ordinarily tended to the needs of the corral. Under different circumstances, Daydanda would have considered the process worthy of her own direct supervision. Now, however, she contented herself with listening in semi-continuously on the work being done. The program was proceeding slowly—too slowly—but as long as some prog-

ress was being made, she refrained from interfering, and concentrated her own efforts on a matter of far greater personal interest: the Strangers in the House.

Or, rather, the Strange daughter. The babe was no great puzzle; his wants were familiar, and easy to understand. Food and love he needed. The latter was easy; the former they would simply have to find some way to provide...

She pushed aside the train of thought that led to making these new arrivals permanent members of the Household. No telling how much longer their supply of their own foods would last; nor whether it would be desirable to keep them in the House. For the time being, Daydanda could indulge her curiosity, and concentrate on the unique components of the Strange daughter's personality.

THE CHILD was a conglomeration of contradictions such as the Mother would not previously have believed possible in a sane individual—in one who was capable of performing even the most routine of conditioned tasks, let alone initiating such original and independent actions as those of the Stranger.

And yet, the confusions

that existed in the child's thought patterns were so many, and so vital, it was a wonder she could even operate her own body without having to debate each breath or motion in her neurones first.

Fear! The child was full of fear. And of something else for which there was no proper name at all: *I should-I shouldn't.*

Impossible confusion, resulting even more impossibly in better-than-adequate responses!

Hunger...Mother...h u n g e r...Mother?...

The drifting thoughts merged with the Lady's reflections, and for a moment she was not certain of the source. Too clearly-formed in pattern to be the babe...and then she realized it was the older one, just waking from sleep, and still stripped of defenses.

"I cannot feed you, child," she answered the Strange daughter's unthinking plea. "Not yet. You brought food with you from your...ship. Eat now, and feed the babe; then we will make plans for tomorrow."

But in her own mind, Daydanda knew, there was no question of what plans to make. If there were any way to do so, she meant to have

the Strangers stay within her House. She meant to have the secrets of the Strange Wings-House explored and uncovered and to learn the Strange customs and knowledge. It remained only to determine whether it was possible to feed them and care for them adequately within the Household...and to convince the strange daughter to stay.

The Mother opened her mind once more to her sons and daughters, at their tasks, and found that all was well throughout the Families. Then she waited patiently till the Strangers were done feeding.

PETEY WAS sleeping. All he ever did was drink milk and go to sleep and yell and act silly. Dee got up and walked around the room, but there was nothing to see and nothing to do.

She didn't even remember which way they had come to get to this room last night, and she didn't know whether they'd let her go out if she wanted to. There was no door closing the room off from the corridor—just another open archway. But outside there was only dimness and darkness.

Abruptly, she picked up the torch and walked to the doorway, flared brilliance out

into the hall, and peered up and down. After that she felt better, at least they weren't being *guarded*. She had seen half a dozen other open arches along the corridor, but not even a single bug anywhere.

When Petey woke up, she decided they'd just start walking around until they found some way to get out. She'd have to wait for him to get up, though, because she couldn't carry the lighted torch and the baby both; and even if she didn't need it to see with, she had to have the torch turned up real bright, because that's what they were afraid of. They wouldn't bother her...

They're not all scared of the light, she thought. Just the white-colored ones are. She wondered how she knew that, and then forgot about it, because she was thinking: *If we did get out of here, I don't know how we could get back to the rocket.*

It was a long way, and she'd have to carry Petey most of the time; and she didn't know which way it was, and...

I'm going to go find the Mother-bug! she decided. For just an instant after that she hesitated, wondering about leaving Petey, but somehow she felt it was all right. He was asleep, and she figured if

he woke up and started yelling, she could hear him; any place in here she'd be able to hear him because there weren't any doors to close in between.

She picked up the torch again, and turned it down low, so there was just enough light to see her way. *Don't scare them, she thought. They're friends.* But it was comforting to know, anyhow, that she *could* scare them just by turning it up. The white ones were the only ones who couldn't *stand* it, but none of them were used to bright light.

She wondered again how she knew that, and tried to remember something from last night that would have let her know it, but by that time she was too busy trying to figure out which corridors and archways would take her to the Mother-bug's room.

XVI

A TREMENDOUS excitement was building up inside Daydanda's vast and feeble bulk, while she guided the Strange child through the labyrinth of the House from the visitor's chamber near the outer walls to her own central domain.

Yesterday, for the first time in many years of Motherhood, she had expe-

rienced once more—with increasing ease and pleasure through the day—the thousand subtly different sensations and perceptions of direct vision. Through all the years between, she had known the *look* of things outside her chamber—and of beings outside her own Families—only through the distortions and dilutions of the minds of her sons and daughters, travelling abroad on missions of her choosing, and reporting as faithfully as they could, all that they saw and touched and felt for her appraisal.

But no image filtered through another's brain emerges quite the same as when it entered...and no two beings, not even those as close as Mother and daughter, can ever see quite the same image of an object. Certainly, Daydanda had perceived both more and less of the winged object in the clearing when she viewed it with her own eye, than when she had watched it through the mind of her scouting son.

And now she was to have the Strange child here before her eyes again, to watch and study! The thought was so far-removed from precedent and past experience, it would not have occurred to her at all to have the girl come to her chamber. But when she

tried to make the child aware of her desire to converse, to exchange information, the prompt and positive response had come clearly: *I want to see the Mother. I want to try and talk to her.*

And behind the response was a pattern Daydanda

dimly perceived, in which two-way communication was *commonly associated* with visual sensation. The girl seemed to assume that an exchange of information would occur only where an exchange of visimages was also possible!

(Daydanda)

(Deborah)

AND NOW the child was standing in the entrance to the new chamber, and the background pattern of her mind was a complaint about the difficulty of seeing clearly.

"You may have more light, child, if you wish to see me more clearly," the Mother assured her. "I told you before, it is only the ones unpigmented who are harmed by the brightness, and only the wingless who fear it at all."

An instant later, she real-

DEBO RAH stood in the open archway between the two big rooms, and peered intently at the great bulk of the Mother-bug on the couch of mats against the far wall. Then she decided it was all right now to turn the torch up high, so she could see something more than her own feet ahead of her.

The shadows jumped back, and the gently heaving mass on the cot sprang suddenly into full view. Deborah stood still,

(Daydanda)

(Deborah)

ized she had been boasting. The flaring-up of the light caused her no agony, such as she had experienced the day before; but it was quite sufficient to cause her to turn her face abruptly toward the stranger, so as to shield her eye.

And then there was a far worse pain than anything her eye could feel. The Mother's vanity was almost as carefully fed, and quite as much enlarged, as her great abdomen; certainly it was far more vulnerable to attack.

and gawped at ugliness beyond belief.

The big bug's enormous belly was a mound of grey-white creases and folds and bulges under the sharp light, reflecting pinpoints of brightness from oily-looking drops of moisture that stood out all over the dead-looking mass.

And up above the incredible belly, a cone-shaped bulbous lump of the same whitish grey that must have been a face despite its eye-

Nobody had ever thought her anything but beautiful before. The Stranger child, at the first clear look, thought she was...

Ugly and awful and frightening and fat!

It was the clearest, sharpest message she had had at any time from the Strange daughter... that she was *hideous*!

SHAME and disappointment both receded before a sudden access of fury. Reflexively, Daydanda shot out a spanking thought; and in the very next instant, regretted it.

"I am sorry, child. I should not have punished you for what you could not help thinking, but... I am not *used* to such thoughts."

less lack of any expression, tapered into six full thick lips just like the ones of the baby bugs in the fungus garden.

It was a good thing, Dee thought, that she hadn't seen the Mother-bug this close the day before. She never could have made herself believe that anything that looked... that looked like *that*... could possibly be friendly.

SHE TRIED now to believe it was true, tried to remember that good-feeling laughter that she was certain had come from the big bug; but the inside of her head had begun to prickle, just as if somebody was sandpapering in back of her eyes. She shook her head,

"*You did that?*" the child demanded, and angrily: "*You meant to do it?*"

"I did not *plan* to do it; but it was done with volition, yes."

The Stranger, Daydanda felt, had no clear concept in her mind to understand that distinction. A thing was done either—*on purpose* was the child's symbol, or else involuntarily. Nothing in between. Well, it was a common enough childish confusion, but not one the Mother would have expected in this uncommon child.

"It was a punishment," she tried to explain, "which I had no right to administer. You are my guest, and not my

rubbed at her stinging eyes, sniffled, and the feeling went away as suddenly as it had come.

Then she got mad. "You did that on purpose!" she gasped. And then a moment later, she had a crazy thought come through her head that the Mother-bug wanted her to feel better, like sometimes Mom... the way a mother, maybe, would feel bad after she'd spanked a child.

The idea of being a big fat bug's little girl was too silly, and she couldn't help laughing.

Then she felt the same kind of *patting* inside her head that she remembered from last night, and she knew what the Mother-bug thought.

daughter. I offer apology."

"I AM laughing," came a mandible message; but the background was a quick shiver of fear. Daydanda tried to soothe the fright away, and the laughing stopped, to be replaced by a sturdy mandibled denial of the fear that was, truthfully, already considerably lessened. And then an apology! "I am sorry," the child said. "It was most improper of me to laugh." And the background message was not different, but only more specific: "It was very rude of me to be frightened at the idea of being your daughter."

This time Daydanda repressed her re-

"I AM NOT scared," she said emphatically. "What do you think I do? Laugh when I get scared?" Then she thought it over and decided it wasn't very nice of her to laugh at an idea like that—about being the Mother-bug's child—if the big bug really *could* read her mind, so she apologized.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I guess it wasn't very nice of me to laugh at you." And she had a feeling as if the Mother-bug knew she had apologized, and was telling her it was all right.

The big old bug was ugly, all right, Dee thought, but so were a lot of

flexive irritation. "Laugh when you like, child," she said; "perhaps it is a good way to release your fear."

Promptly, she was rewarded by a clear, unmandibled, but strong reply: "You're good; I like you. I don't care what you look like."

THE WOMAN'S vanity quivered, but her curiosity triumphed. The child, at long last, was receptive to communication. Daydanda withdrew from contact entirely, to calm her wounded feelings, and to formulate carefully the question now uppermost in her mind: how to gain more knowledge of the Wings-House in which the Strangers had arrived.

people she'd seen ... and the bug was really pretty nice. *Good*, sort of, the way a mother ought to be...

JUST THE same, Dee realized, she didn't want to stay here. She didn't want to stay in the rocket either, though. *I don't know which is worse*, she thought mournfully; then she decided *this* was worse—even though a lot of ways it was better—just because she didn't know whether she could get out if she wanted to.

She had to find that out first. She had to get back to the rocket. Once she was safe inside again, with Petey, she could make up her mind.

XVII

“I HAVE TO go back to the rocket,” Dee said out loud. “I have to go back and get us some clothes, anyhow, if we’re going to stay here.”

Then she thought she felt cold, but there was a question-y feeling in her mind; she decided the Mother-bug must be asking her if she was cold, and finally realized that that was because she had said they needed clothes.

“No, I’m not cold,” she said. “We have to have some clothes, that’s all. The ones we wore yesterday are dirty. Unless...” Unless they had a soil-remover. Then she’d have to think of some other reason to go back to the rocket. “Unless you have some old clothes around,” she finished up craftily. But it sounded silly, and her voice sounded too loud anyhow, everytime she said anything, as if she were talking to herself...and how did she know she wasn’t, anyhow? How did she know she wasn’t making it all up?

The feeling she got was so exactly like the sound of her own mother’s little impatient sigh when Dee was being stubborn, that it was suddenly impossible to go on doubting at all.

When the Mother-bug

laughed, it tickled in her mind; when the Mother was angry, it prickled. When the Mother called to her, it was a feeling that came creeping; when she didn’t want to hear, it came seeping anyhow.

Tickle-prickle; creep-seep. I spy. I speard you. It was like seeing and hearing both, if you let it be, or just like knowing what you didn’t know a minute before. It could be without the see-ing part, as when she thought she heard Petey’s voice; or it could be without hearing, just a picture full of meaning, without any words. You didn’t really see or hear; you really just found out.

AND IF you let yourself know the difference, you could tell what was your own idea, and what was coming from the Mother-bug...such as thinking she was cold for a minute a little while ago. You could tell, all right, if you wanted to...

It was a lot smarter to make sure you knew the differences to watch for when the Mother-bug was putting something in your head, so you wouldn’t get mixed up and start thinking you wanted something yourself, when it was really what she wanted. Or like thinking Petey wanted her to open the

door in the rocket, where it was really the Mother-bug...

No it wasn't either... Petey *did* want her too, because he heard the Mother-bug calling them from outside, before Dee heard it... or he understood better what it was, or... *she's telling me all this; I'm not thinking it for myself!* Up to that part about Petey being the one who wanted her to open the door, she *had* been thinking for herself; after that, it was the bug. It was getting easier, now, to tell the difference.

"How do you know Earthish?" she asked out loud, but there wasn't any kind of answer except the question-y feeling again. "I mean the language we use. I mean how do you know the words to put in my head...?" She stopped talking because her head was hurting; then she realized the Mother-bug was trying to explain, only it was too complicated for her to understand. Part of it was that the bugs *didn't* know Earthish, though. She understood that much well enough, and lost the hope she'd had for just an instant that other people were here already. She didn't try to understand the rest. "How do you make Petey put things in my head?" she asked instead.

IT FELT as if the Mother was smiling. She didn't *make* Petey say things at all. He was always saying things, only mostly Dee didn't know how to listen—except, somehow, when the Mother-bug was around, it was easier...

Her head was starting to hurt again, so she stopped asking questions about that. "Listen," she said; "I still have to go back to the rocket."

She didn't know whether she wanted to come back here or stay there. No—that was true, all right, that she didn't know; but right now it was the Mother-bug *asking* her what she wanted to do.

"I don't know," she said, not trying to pretend anything, because the Mother-bug would have spy-heard that part already. "Only I have to get back there anyhow; so I'll wait till I get there to decide."

She'd leave Petey behind, and return at least for a visit?

"No!" she said. That was one thing at least she was sure about. Even if she was sure she was coming back, she couldn't leave Petey all alone here with these bugs. Mommy would... *anybody* would get mad at a kid for doing a thing like that!

"No!" she said again. "I've got to go, and Petey has to go

with me; that's all there is to it." She thought she sounded very firm and grown-up, until she felt the Mother smiling again in the way that made her remember her... somebody she used to know.

XVIII

THE MORE she learned, the less she seemed to know. The Strange child, though still inexplicably frightened, was at last being communicative and cooperative. Yet each new piece of information acquired during the morning's interview had only served to make the puzzle of the Strangers more complex or more abstruse.

How and why they had come here... even whence they had come... their habits, customs, biology, psychology... the nature of the *ship* in which they lived, and flew... the very fact of the existence of the older child's continuing fear and doubt... and Strangest of all, perhaps, the by-now irrefutable fact that *neither of the children knew whether their Mother was alive, inside the Ship, or had departed...*

None of these matters were any easier to comprehend now than they had been the day before; and most of them

were more confusing.

However, there was now at least some hope of solving some parts of the puzzle... two parts, in any case. The Strange daughter had agreed, after only slight hesitation, to allow a flying son to come inside the *ship* with her, and to explain to the Mother, watching through her son's eyes, as much of what was to be found there as she could. The child apparently had felt that by permitting the exploratory visit, she was securing the right of the babe to accompany her on the trip... a right she would in any case have had for the asking. And there was some further thought in the girl's mind of perhaps not returning... but Daydanda was not seriously concerned about it. She had refrained carefully from proffering any insistent hospitality, since the daughter's fear of remaining alone with her sibling seemed even greater than that of remaining with the Household, provided only she did not feel herself to be a captive in the House.

IT STILL remained to be seen, of course, whether it would be possible to provide for the two Strangers within the biological economy of the Families. That, however, was the other part of the puzzle

that was already on the road to a solution. The daughter had most fortuitously, before leaving the Lady's chamber, expressed an urgent need to perform some biological functions for which, apparently, a waste "receptacle" of some sort was required. Daydanda had issued rapid orders to one of the more ingenious of the mason sons, to manufacture as best he could a receptacle conforming to the image she found in the child's mind. Then she had seized the opportunity to ask if she might have a nursing daughter take some samples of the *milk* and other food that had come with them from the *ship*, and of such other bodily by-products as she had already observed the Strangers to produce; the tears that came from the eyes in the release of grief, and the general bodily exudation for which the child's symbol was *sweat*, but whose purpose or function she seemed not to understand herself.

ONCE AGAIN, as she had had occasion to do many times before, the Lady regretted the maternal compulsiveness of her own nature that had stood in the way of producing a Scientist within the Household. As matters now stood, the samplings she had secured from the Strange

children would have to be flown two full days' journey away, to the Encyclopedic Seat, for analysis. If she had been willing—just once in all these years—to inhibit the breeding of a full Family in order to devote the necessary nutrient and emotional concentration to the creation of a pair of Scientists, she would be able to have the answer to the present problem in hours instead of days, and without having to forego the services of two of her best fliers for the duration of the trip there and back. Then, if it appeared necessary to utilize the more varied facilities of the Seat, she could submit her samples with the security of knowing that her own representative there would keep watch over her interests; and that everything learned about the Strange samples would be transmitted instantly and fully from the brother at the Seat to the twin in the Household. Daydanda knew only too well how often in the past the Seat had seen fit to retain information for its own use, when the products for analysis came from an unrepresented House...

No use in worrying now, either about what might be, or about what had not been done. *One* matter, at least, would be resolved before the

day was done... the baffling question of what lay inside that double-arched opening in the wall of the Wings-House... and along with it, the answer, perhaps, to the puzzle of the Strange children's Mother.

XIX

THIS TIME, they rode in the litter; and the trip that had taken a long afternoon the day before was accomplished in a short hour of trotting, bouncing progress. Yesterday, the pace had been slowed as much by the litter-bearers' efforts to spare their Lady any unnecessary jostling, as by the shortness of Dee's leg; today Daydanda's laboring sons were inhibited by no such considerations.

At the edge of the clearing they paused, their eyes averted from the shiny hull.

Dee laughed out loud, and ran out into the sunlight. It felt good. She knew she was showing off, but it made her feel better just to stand there and look straight up, because she knew there wasn't one of them that would dare to do it.

"Sissies!" she yelled out, there was no answer... not even a scolding-feeling from the Mother-bug.

She went back to the litter,

got Petey out, and parked him on the muddy ground near the airlock, wondering if it was safe to leave him out there while she went inside. They wouldn't do anything like grabbing him and running off, she decided. The Mother-bug wanted to know about the rocket too much; and the Mother-bug wanted *her* to come back, too—not just Petey.

Still, she didn't make any move to go inside. It was good standing there in the sun, even without the show-off part of it. She watched Petey grab big chunks of yellow mud and plaster himself with them, and felt the sun soak into her shoulders and warm the top of her head.

This place wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if it wasn't for the trees everywhere, cutting out the sun. Inside the forest, it was always a little bit drippy and damp, and the light was always dimmed. But when you got out into it, the sun here was a good one—better than on Starhope. It felt like the sun used to feel, she thought she remembered, when she was almost as little as Petey, before they went away from Earth.

SHE WISHED she could remember more about Earth. Mommy always told

her stories about it, but Mom...

Don't think about that!

She wished she could remember more about Earth. It was green there. Green like in the forests here, where the treetops lent their color to everything? That wasn't what Mom...what the stories meant, she was sure. For just an instant, there was a picture in her mind; and because it came so suddenly, she suspected at first that the Mother-bug put it there, but it didn't feel that way. Then she wasn't sure whether it was something she remembered, from when she was very little, or whether it was truly a picture—one she'd seen at school, or on the T-Z. But she was sure that that was how Earth was supposed to look, wherever she was remembering it from.

The trees there were called Appletrees, for a kind of fruit they had, and they grew separated from each other on a hillside, with low branches where the children could climb right up to the tops of them like walking up steps. Then you'd sit in the top, and the breeze would come by, smelling sweet and fresh like Mom...the way lavender looked. And you would eat sweet fruit from the swaying branch, and...

SHE JUMPED as a hairy arm brushed her hand. It was the one with wings who was supposed to go with her into the rocket. It...he, the Mother said it was her son, pointed to the air-lock, and Dee got the question-y feeling again. Then there were words to go with it.

"Go inside now?"

It was surprising at first that his "voice" "sounded" just like the Mother-bug's. Then she realized it was the Mother-bug, talking through his mind. Dee understood by now that the words she "heard" were supplied by herself to fit the picture or emotions the other person—that was silly, calling a bug a person!—"sent" to her; but she was pretty sure that the words or the sort-of-a-voice-sound she'd make up for one person—bug—would be different from the way she'd "hear" another one.

Anyway, the Mother wanted her to go inside. She decided against leaving Petey outdoors by himself, and picked him up and lifted him in before she climbed through the airlock. The bug with wings came right behind her.

The playroom was a mess. Living in there all the time, Dee hadn't realized how everything was thrown

around; but now, when she had a visitor with her—even if he was just a bug—she felt kind of ashamed about the way it all looked. Maybe he wouldn't know the difference...but he would. She remembered how the inside of their big House was neat and clean all over; and not just the inside...even the woods were kept tidy all the time. She'd seen a bunch of bugs out picking up dead branches, and gathering leaves off the ground on the way over here.

THIS BUG didn't seem to care though. He looked around at everything, with his head bent down backwards so he could see, and Dee got the idea he wanted to know if it was all right to touch things. She icked up a toy and some clothes, and put them into the hands on his front legs. After that, he went around looking and touching and handling things all over the playroom, while Dee hunted up some clothes to take back with them.

She couldn't find very much that was clean, so she took a whole pile of stuff from the floor, and went in back to put them into the soil remover. The bug followed her. It—he—watched her put the clothes into the square box; he jumped a little when

she turned the switch on and it started shaking, as it always did, a little. Dee laughed. Then she went around turning on all the machines that she knew how to work, just to show the bug. She wished she knew how to use the power tool, because that made a whole lot of noise, and did all kinds of different things; but Daddy never let...but she didn't know how to, that's all.

The bug just stood still in the middle of the room, looking and listening. He didn't even want to touch anything in here, Dee figured; so she asked him out loud, didn't he want to feel what the machines were like? And then she found out she *could* tell the difference in one bug's voice and another's, because the Mother said a kind of eager, "Thank you—are you sure it will do no harm?" But the son-bug said at the same time, kind of nervous-sounding, "No, thank you; these devices are very Strange..." and then he must have realized what his Mother wanted, because he said, "I am afraid I might damage them."

DEE FELT the Mother's smiling then, and with the smile, a question: "Where do they breathe? With what

do they eat?"

"Who?" Dee said out loud.

"Those others... the *machines*, is your symbol for them." And at the same time, she saw inside her head a sort of twisty picture of the room all around her. She saw it with her own eyes, the way it really was; and at the same time, she was seeing it the way the Mother-bug must be seeing it—which was the way her son was seeing it, and "sending" the picture to her. It wasn't *much* different, mostly just the colors weren't as bright. And somehow, all the machines, the way the Mother-bug saw them, were *alive*.

Dee laughed. Those bugs were pretty smart, but there were lots of things she knew that they didn't.

"They *don't* breathe," she said scornfully; "they're just machines, that's all."

"?????"

"They're machines; they do things for people. You turn 'em on and make them work, and then when you're done, you turn them off again. They run on electricity."

"?????"

She couldn't explain electricity very well. "It's like... lightning."

But the Mother didn't know what she meant by that either. "Don't talk," the big bug

told her; "make a picture in your head. Stand near the machine-that-cleans, and make pictures, not words, in your own head, to show how it works for you."

DEBORAH tried, but she'd never seen what the machinery looked like inside the soil remover. There wasn't very much of it anyway. Da...somebody had explained it to her once. There was just a horn—or something like a horn—that kept blowing, without making any noise; at least not any noise that you could hear. The blowing shook all the dirt out of the clothes, and there was a u-v light inside to sterilize them at the same time. That was all she knew, and she didn't know what it really *looked* like, except for the u-v bulb; and she didn't even know what made *that* work, really.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'd make a picture for you if I could."

"Is there one of these creatures...machines...you have seen inside?"

She'd seen the inside of the freeze unit when it was being fixed once. She tried to remember just how that looked; but it was complicated, and the Mother still didn't seem to understand.

"The little pipes?" she asked, and Dee wasn't sure whether she meant the freezing coils or the wires; but then she was sure it was the wires. "They bring food to the creature so it can work?"

"No. I *told* you. It's not a 'creature.' It doesn't even ever eat. The wires just have electricity in them, that's all. Don't you even know what an electric wire is?"

"Where do the pipes... wires... bring the *electric* from?"

Dee looked around. The generator was... it was in...

"There's a generator someplace," she said carelessly. "It makes electricity; that's what it's for. I can show you how the T-Z works, because somebody I know showed me once." She went out to the playroom, and started talking, describing her favorite toy, and making pictures in her mind to show the Motherbug how it worked, and what some of the stories looked like. She talked fast, and kept on talking till she had to stop for breath; but then she realized she didn't have to talk out loud to the Mother, so she went on thinking about stories she'd seen on T-Z, and she decided she'd take it back with some of the film strips, so the Mother could see for herself how it worked.

MACHINE! An entity capable of absorbing energy in one form, transmuting it to some other form, and expending it in the performance of work... work requiring judgement, skill, training... and yet the Strange child said these things were not alive! Daydanda rested on her great couch, but felt no ease, and wished again that she had had the fortitude to go out with the small group. To see *for herself*...

But she could never even have gotten through the narrow double-arch entrance to the *ship*. The ship... that too, then, was a machine! It was a structure; a builded thing; *not-alive*; yet it could fly...

These two Strangers were very different creatures from a very different race; she began to understand that now. The striking similarities were purely superficial. The differences...

The thought of the babe tugged at her mind, asking warmth, asking food, and she could not think of him as Strange at all. There were differences; there were samenesses. No need now to make a counting of how many of which kind. Only to learn as much as could be learned, while she determined whether it was possible or desirable to keep the two Strange ones

within the Household.

Very well then: these *machines* are not alive...not all the time. They live only when the Strange daughter permits it, in most cases by moving a small organ projecting from the outside. Not so different, if you stopped to think of it, from the Bigheads, who might be counted not-alive most of the time. It was hard to adjust to the notion of working members of a Household existing on that low level, but...these were Strangers.

And still the child maintained the *machines* were not alive at all, not members of her Household, merely structures, animated by...

By what? The things absorbed energy from somewhere, through the little pipes...apparently almost pure energy, the stuff the child called *electric*. What was the source of the *electric*?

THE STRANGE daughter had a symbol and not-clear picture in her mind: a thing with rotating brushes, and a hard core of some kind. A thing kept under a round shelter, made of the same fabric as the ship...*metal*. From under this *metal* housing came *wires* through which *electric* flowed to the *machines*...much as cement

flowed from the snout of a mason, or honey from the orifice of a nurse.

Into this machine, food was...no, the child's symbol was a different one, though the content of the symbol was the same; food designed for a *machine* was *fuel*. Very well: *fuel* was fed only to the...the *Mother-machine*!

Now the whole thing was beginning to make sense. The *machines* were comparable—in relationship to the Stranger's Household—to the winged or crawling creatures that sometimes co-existed with the Household of Daydanda's own people, sharing a House in symbiotic economy, but having, of course, a distinct biology and therefore, a separate Mother and separate reproductive system.

The *generator*, said the child, supplied warmth and nourishment and vital power to the other *machines*; the *generator* was fed by the *humans* (the child's symbol for her own people); the *machines* worked for the *humans*.

"Is the generator of *machines* alive?" the Lady asked.

"No. I told you before..."

"Am I alive?"

"Yes. Of course."

The wonder was not that the Strange daughter failed

to include the symbiotes in her semantic concept of "life," but rather that she *did* include Daydanda, and Daydanda's Household. The Lady abandoned the effort to communicate such an abstraction, and asked if she might be shown the Mother-machine.

Wavering impression of willingness, but...

THE THING was on the other side of a door. The daughter went through one doorway into the room she had first entered, approached the far wall, and turned sideways, to demonstrate in great detail a mechanism of some sort (not one of the *machines*; no *wires* connected it to the Mother-machine) whose function apparently was educational. It created visual, auditory, and olfactory hallucinations, utilizing information previously registered on strips of somehow-sensitized fabric inside it...roughly analogous to the work of a teaching-nurse, who could register and retain for instructive purposes information supplied by the Mother, and never fully available to the nurse in her own functioning, nor in any way necessary for her to "know." Thus an unwinged nurse could give instruction in the art of flying, and the biology of reproduction. But, once

again, the Strangers' mechanism was—or so the child said—simply an artifact, a *made* thing, without life of its own, and this time it was even more puzzling than before, because the object in question was self-contained—had its own internal source of *electric*, and needed no connecting wires with the Mother-machine.

Mother - machine...
Mother!

Daydanda reacted so sharply to the sudden connection of data that Kackot, asleep in the next chamber, woke and came rushing to her side. Smiling, she shared her thoughts with him.

Machine-Mother and Stranger-Mother both...behind a door! The same door?

"THE SOURCE of *electric* is behind the other door?" The Mother-bug's question formed clearly in her mind this time. Dee looked up from the T-Z. There *wasn't* any other door. She looked all around but she couldn't see one. There was just the airlock, and the door to the workroom and kitchen in back, but the Mother didn't mean either of those.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, and went back to get the clothes out of the soil-remover, and

thawed out a piece of cake from the freeze.

DAYDANDA looked at one and the same time through the eyes of her son in the Strange ship, and through those of the Stranger. Both focussed on the same part of the same wall. Through the son's eyes, the Lady saw a rectangular outline in the surface of the wall, and a closure device set in one side. Through the child's eyes, she could see only a smooth unbroken stretch of wall.

"There is no door," the child informed her clearly... then turned around and left the room, once more broadcasting meaningless symbols, and accurate, but inappropriate, arithmetic.

DEE MADE sure she had enough clothes for a while. She didn't want to come back here right away. Maybe later on. She'd have to come back later on, of course. She couldn't really stay with the bugs. But...

She took a long strip off the roll of bottles, and a lot of milk, and all the powdered stuff she could find that looked any good. They probably had water there, anyhow. Things out of the freeze would spoil if she took them, so she left them for later,

when she came back to the rocket.

She had to make a couple of trips to get everything out to the litter: the clothes and food and the T-Z and Petey and some toys for Petey; and the Mother-bug or the son-bug, one of them, kept trying to say things at her, but she wouldn't listen. She just started saying the Space Girl oath again; and when she couldn't remember it, even some of the silly multiplication, because she didn't feel like talking right now.

XX

DAYDANDA was short of time, and entirely out of patience. The Strange child's antics had gone from the puzzling to the incomprehensible, and the Lady of the House had other concerns...many of them now aggravated by inattention over the preceding days. She simply could not continue to devote nearly all her thought, nor nearly so much of her time, to any one matter.

The children had brought back with them provisions sufficient for a few days at least, and the Mother was satisfied that their presence in the Household for that period represented no menace to the members of her own Families.

There was no purpose to thinking about their continued stay until the Encyclopedic Seat completed a biological analysis. Nor could she determine how much responsibility she was willing to take for possible damage to the Wings-House in further exploration and examination, until she knew for certain that she could offer the Strange children a permanent home in her own Household.

The flying son who had accompanied the two of them on their trip to the *rocket*, had informed her that the barrier on which the daughter's fear seemed centered was, like the rest of the Strange structure, composed of *metal*, and that this *metal* was the hardest wood he had ever seen. It could be cut through, he thought, but not without damage to the fabric that might not be repairable. As for discovering the secret of the mechanism that was designed to hold the *door* closed or allow it to open, he was pessimistic.

There was nothing to do, then, but put the matter from her mind until she had more information.

Accordingly, the Mother gave instructions—when all her children were in communion, after the evening Home-

calling—that every member of the Household was to treat the Strange guests with kindness and respect; to guard them from dangers they might fail to recognize; to cooperate with their needs or wishes, insofar as they could express them; and to offer just such friendship—no more and no less—as the young Strangers themselves seemed to desire. She then assigned a well-trained elder daughter (a nurse might have done better in some ways, but she wanted a written record of any information acquired, and that meant it had to be a winged one) to maintain full-time contact with the Strange daughter, so as to answer the visitors' questions and to keep the Household informed of their activities.

With that, she turned her mind to more familiar problems of her Household.

DEE WAS glad she'd decided to come back. Of course, they couldn't really stay here, but just for a little while, it was interesting.

The bugs were really pretty nice people she thought, and giggled at the silly way that sounded...calling bugs *people*. But it was hard not to, because they thought about themselves that way,

and acted that way; and once you got used to how they looked, (And how they looked at you, too: it still felt funny having them turn their backs to you when you talked to them, so they could see you.) it was just natural to think of them that way.

Anyhow, they were all nice to her, and especially nice to Petey. She could "talk" to them pretty easily now, too; but she had an idea she wasn't really doing it herself. There was a...*big-sister*?...bug who was sort of keeping an eye on her, she thought. Not a real eye, of course; she giggled again. Just the kind of an-eye that could see pictures in somebody else's head. But any time she wanted to know something, such as whether it was all right to go out, and where could she find some water to mix the food with, and—as now—how to get to one of those gardens—the big-sister-bug would start telling her almost before she asked. And Dee thought that probably most of the other bugs she talked to were at least partway using the big-sister's mind—the way the Mother-bug had helped her "hear" what Petey "said"—because now they all seemed to have pretty much the same kind of "voice." But it was different from the Mother's, or from

the one who went to the rocket with her.

THAT GAVE her a strange feeling sometimes... thinking that maybe the big-sister one was *listening in* on her all the time, but at least it wasn't like with the Mother-bug, who'd make that prickly hurting if you thought something she didn't like. The big-sister-bug didn't try to tell her what to do or what not to do, or put ideas in her head, or anything like that. So if she wanted to just listen all the time, Deborah supposed it didn't matter much. And it certainly was useful.

Petey was stuck in the mud again; Dee helped him get loose. She couldn't carry him around all the time, so she'd finally settled for not putting any clothes on him except a diaper, and just letting him get as gucky as he wanted to. He'd learned to crawl pretty well on the soft surface; it was just once in a while that he'd put an arm in too deep, or something like that. But he didn't mind, so she didn't either.

She still couldn't see any garden; just the trees and the mud. "How far is it?" she asked...or wondered.

"Not much more," Big-sister told her. "Walk around

the next tree, and go to...to your right."

Just a little farther on, after she turned, Dee saw the sudden splurge of color. It was a different garden from the one she'd seen the first time; at least the big-sister-bug said it was. The other one was for the tiny babies—the ones who were really about the same age as Petey, but about half his size. This one was for the next oldest bunch, but they were all just about Petey's size, so maybe he could play with them.

IT LOOKED just the same, though; the same kind of crazy combinations of colors and shapes. Everything was just as she remembered, except for not being scared now; and when she got right up to it, she saw these bugs weren't nursing on the plants the way the others had been doing. Once in a while, one of them would stop and suck a little while on a tendril; mostly, though, they were chasing each other around, and kind-of playing games—just like kindergarten kids anyplace.

There were two big bugs—the kind that had dark-colored skins, and had eyes, but didn't have any wings. These ones were nurses, Dee figured. There were others just

like these, with different kinds of noses—and some with different kinds of hands—who did other things; but these ones had to be nurses, because they were watching the kids. They were sitting outside the garden, not doing anything, and Dee felt funny about going inside, partly because it was supposed to be for *little* kids, partly because she was afraid she'd step on one of the plants or something like that. So she let Petey crawl right on inside, by himself, and she sat down next to the nurses, and just watched.

IT WAS WARM in the forest. It was always warm there, but she was getting to like it. She wasn't wearing anything except shorts now, and the only thing she minded was always feeling a little bit *damp*, because the air was so wet. But altogether, she had to admit it was better at least than being in the rocket all by themselves; shut up in there as they had been, Petey was always cranky and fussing about something. Now he was having a good time, so he didn't keep bothering her. And she had the T-Z set back in their room, now, and you didn't even need a light on to work that. Of course, she didn't have very many film-

strips for it; she'd have to go back to the rocket pretty soon and get some more.

They'd need some more food, too, and she'd have to get Petey's diapers clean again. She wished there was some way to take along frozen food; then she wouldn't have to fuss around with mixing things with water, and all that, but...

The big-sister-bug was asking her what she meant by "frozen food," but she'd tried to explain that before.

Anyhow, she had to go back there pretty soon, if she and Petey decided to stay here for a while, because she had to leave a message, so that when somebody came to rescue them, they'd know where to look.

"You wish to visit the Wings-House now?" Big-sister asked.

"It's kind of late today," Dee said; "tomorrow, I guess." Sometimes she talked out loud like that, even though she knew it didn't make any difference. All she had to do was *think* what she meant, but sometimes she just talked out loud from habit.

"The litter goes swiftly," said Big-sister. "If you wish to make the visit now..."

Tomorrow! This time she didn't say it...just thought

it extra hard. Big-sister stopped bothering her about it, and she sat still and watched Petey crawling around and grabbing at the pretty colors.

XXI

DAYDANDA received the report personally, and trusted not even her own memory to retain it all, but relayed to three elder daughters, so that whatever errors any one might make in transcription, the records of the others could correct. There was so much technical symbology throughout the message—even though the clerk at the Seat tried to keep it intelligible—that she could not try to comprehend it entirely as it came. She would have to study and examine the meaning of each datum, before she could fully determine what it meant in terms of the questions she had to answer for her Household and the Strangers.

If she had *only* had a pair of Scientists! Communicating with each other, they would have known the purpose of the analysis; communicating with her, Mother and sons, there would have been no problem of translation of symbols. But it was hardly possible to give full

information to the Scientists at the Seat, when many of them were from neighboring or nearby Households, whose best interests were by no means identical with her own. Of course, they vowed impartiality when they took up Encyclopedic work, but...

The next breeding, *definitely*...! (Kackot, daily more sensitive, came to the archway and peered in. He had taken to working and napping in the other room these past few days. She sent a gentle negative.) The very next breeding would have to be limited to a pair of Scientists! Though now that she had put it off so long, and the youngest babes were already growing too big for fondling...

Scientists it would be! The Household needed them. All very well to follow easily along the drive to procreate, but it was necessary, also, to safeguard those already born. And right now, the problem was not one of breeding, or breeding inhibition, but of making enough sense out of the message so that she could come to some decision about the Strangers.

SHE HAD the three daughters bring her their copies, and lay for a long while on her couch, studying

and comparing, and making rapid notes. Finally, she called to Kackot, and thought as she did so that it would perhaps do something to soothe his wounded feelings, if he felt she was unable to make this decision without his help.

He listened, soberly, and did what she knew she could count on him to do: reformulated, repeated, and advised according to what she wished. Since the report clearly established that the Strangers represented no biologic danger to the Household—their exudations were entirely non-toxic, and some of the solid matter was even useable, containing large quantities of semi-digested cellulose—it was clearly her duty to keep them in the Household, and learn as much as possible from them. Since the report further indicated that normal food would be non-toxic to the Strangers (and Mother and consort both tended to avoid the question, unanswered in the report, of whether normal feeding would supply *all* the nourishment the two Strange children needed), it was possible to extend indefinite hospitality to them.

(After all, if there were elements of nourishment they required beyond what the fungus-foods and wood-hon-

ey offered, they could continue to make use of their own supplies...which would last longer if supplemented by native food. So Daydanda eased her conscience.)

The question of how far to go in examining the *rocket* was more complicated. The ethic involved...

"There is no ethic," Kackot reminded her stiffly, "above the duty of a Mother to her Household. The obligations to a Stranger in the House are sacred, but..." He dropped his formality, and ended, smiling and once more at ease "...*non-biologic!*" So, again, Daydanda soothed her conscience.

Still, it would be better at least to try to get the child's agreement, even though it was a foregone conclusion that they could not expect her cooperation. The Lady summoned the Strange daughter once more to her chamber.

"I COULD write the message here, I guess," Dee said thoughtfully. "If you're going to send somebody to the rocket anyhow, there's no reason for me to go." It wasn't as if she couldn't trust them; they wouldn't hurt anything. And anyhow, the Mother said she wanted to keep showing Dee what

the son was doing, so they could ask questions whenever they didn't understand something.

Right now, the Mother-bug was feeling a question. "Write a message?" Dee stopped thinking herself, and then she understood. The bugs only used writing for keeping records of things. When they wanted to tell somebody something, it didn't matter how far away the person was; so they didn't write things down for other people. Just for themselves, and to make a kind of history for other bugs later on. The Mother wanted to know: wouldn't she "be aware" of the rescue party when it came.

She shook her head, and didn't try to explain anything, because it was just too *different*. "I've got some crayons in my room," she told the Mother-bug, "but I used up all the paper already."

"We have paper." The funny jumpy Father-bug jumped up in his funny way, and went over to a kind of big table full of cubby holes, even before the Mother was done "talking," and got a piece of their kind of paper, and gave it to Dee. The Mother was asking about crayons, what they were and how they worked, but Dee was asking

her at the same time for something to write with, and what kind of paper was this?

THE PAPER was made out of tree bark, and covered with a kind of waxy stuff that they made in their bodies. They seemed to make everything right inside themselves—as if each bug was a kind of chemicals factory, and you could put in such and such, and turn some switches inside, and get out so-and-so. It was certainly useful, Dee thought, with vague distaste, and then realized nobody had given her a pencil or anything yet.

But you wouldn't use a pencil on this kind of paper. You'd use a stylus, or something sharp.

"Very soon," the Mother-bug said. "My daughter brings you a sharp thing to write with." Then she raised her arm to show Dee where a little sharp horny tip was, on the back of her elbow, that she used herself.

"But how can you see what...?" Dee started to ask, and then she felt the Mother-bug laughing, and then she laughed herself. It was so hard to get used to people with eyes in the backs of their heads.

One of the nurse-type bugs came in, bowing and crawling the way they always did

if they got near the Mother-bug, handed Dee a pointed stick, and crawled out again.

"I am staying with some bugs in a big house," Dee scratched as clearly as she could through the wax. The bark underneath was orengy-colored, and the wax was white, so it showed through pretty well. "My baby brother Petey is with me. Please come and get us." Then she signed it, "Deborah (DEE) Levin." And then realized she hadn't put anything in about how to find them. She tried to ask the Mother, but so far they hadn't been able to get together on that kind of thing at all. The bugs didn't use measurements or distances or directions the same way; they just seemed to *know* where to go, and how far they were.

"We will know if Strangers come," the Mother promised her; "we will go to them."

Dee thought that over, and added to her message: "P.S. If some big bugs come around, don't shoot. They're friends; they're taking care of Petey and me." And put her initials at the end, the way you're supposed to do with a P.S.

“WHEN IS he going?” she asked. “I mean,

should I stay here, so you can ask me questions, or do you want me to come back later?" Petey was getting kind of restless, and he wanted something, but she wasn't sure what.

"The brother wishes to return to the garden," the Mother explained. "He understands what I told you about the food. He wanted to suck on the sweet plants before, but was afraid. Now he desires to return to the garden and to the other children, and suck as they do." Then she said her son was going to the ship right away; but if Dee wanted to go to the garden with Petey, that was all right; the Mother-bug could talk to her just as well that way.

"I'd rather... I'd kind of rather *look* at you when we talk," Dee said. She knew it seemed silly to them, because they weren't used to it, but she couldn't help it. Anyhow, she got a kind of good feeling being in the Mother-bug's room. The first time she came in here it was *awful*, but right now she felt nervous or something. She didn't know why, but she *did* know she'd feel better if she stayed here with the big old bug.

"Stay then, my child."

One of the ones with wings came in; this kind just bowed, they didn't crawl. He took

the message from Dee, and went back to the garden; then they just waited for a while.

THE MOTHER was busy, thinking someplace else, and the Father-bug gave her a funny feeling when she tried to talk to him, because he wasn't like a Daddy at all. Not the way the big fat bug was like a real Mother. The skinny, jumpy one was nervous and fussy and worried; and Dee thought he probably didn't like her very much. So she just sat still, squatting on the floor with her back against the wall, and thought maybe she'd go get her T-Z set and look at something till the Mother-bug was ready. But it was warm and comfortable and she didn't want to go away, out of this room, where the Mother was just like a Mother was a Mother—so she sort of rolled over a little bit, and curled up right on the floor and closed her eyes. If she didn't *look* at the piled-up mats and the ugly old belly on top, it felt more like a Mother than ever before for a long time since it was so warm, hot, glowing red, and the voice said, *fire ... fire ... fire ...*

That was on Hallowe'en, all black and orange, witches and ghosts, and the witch said, "Fire! Fire! Run! Run!" but

the ghost looked like a big fat bug, only white, except the white ones don't have eyes; and this one had two great big hollow eyeholes; and it was crying because it couldn't find the little girl who should have opened...opened her eyes, so she could see, why didn't she open her eyeholes, so she could see the little girl? Because the little girl had no eyes, only it didn't matter as long as the door was closed, the ghost couldn't get through a safety safety safe; the little girl is safe, on Hallowe'en when the ground is black and behind the door is black, black, black you can't see, and black it's all burned up, and the ghost is white; so there's no ghost there in the black, only a great big ugly bugley belly all swoll up with white dead long time...*No!*...all black for Hallowe'en, black, black...

XXII

THE LADY heard; and by her lights, she understood. It was a sick and ugly thing to hear, and a terrible sad thing to comprehend.

A Mother of fourteen Families is, perforce, accustomed to grief and fear and failing; she has suffered time and again the agonies of flesh and

spirit with which her children met the tests of growth; the fears of battle, terror of departure, pains of hunger, the awful skinking from death. The time they almost lost their House to swarming hostile Families; the time the boy died in the ravenous claws of their own Bigheads; the time the rotten-fungus-sickness spread among them...time after time; but never, in all the crowded years of life-giving and life-losing had Daydanda known a sickness such as now shouted at her from the Strange girl's dream.

Even her curiosity would have faltered before this outpouring, but she *could* not turn away. One listens to a troubled child's dream to diagnose, to find a remedy... but *this!* If it were possible to invade the barriers of a full-grown Mother of crime, one might find sorrow and fear and torment such as this.

As the sunlight had seared her eyeball, so the hellfires of the childish dreaming burned her soul.

The girl desired that they should find her Mother dead!

There was no other way to make sense of it. Daydanda tried. Everything in her fought against even the for-

mulation of such a statement. It was not only evil, but impossible...unnatural. Non-biologic.

The child wanted to know that her Mother had been burned to death.

WITHIN THE shining rocket, Daydanda's son moved curiously, feeling and touching each Strange object cautiously, examining with his eager eye each Strange and inexplicable shape. He waited there, unable to be still in the presence of so much to explore; too fearful of doing damage to explore further till his Mother's mind met his. But the Lady could not be disturbed, the sibling at relay duty said; the Lady was refusing all calls, accepting no contact.

Wait!

He waited.

NON-BIOLOGIC...

But what did she know of the biology of a Stranger? Even as much as the clerk at the Seat had told her, from the analysis of scrapings and samplings—even that much she did not fully understand, and that could not be more than a fractional knowledge in any case.

She could not, would not, believe that the Strange daughter's Strange complex

of feelings and fears and desires was as subjectively *sick* as it seemed, by her own standards and experience, to be. A different biologic economy—which most assuredly they had—or a completely different reproductive social organization...

It was possible. The child's independence and resourcefulness...her untrained awareness of self and others...her lack of certainty even as to whether her Mother still lived...the very existence of two siblings of such widely divergent age and size, without even a suggestion of others who had departed, or been left behind...

Till now, the Mother had been trying to fit these two Strange children somehow into the patterns of her own world. But she remembered what she had considered at the time to be childish over-statement, or just a part of the confusion of the girl's mind as to place, time, and direction.

From another world...

FROM ABOVE the tree-tops, but that had not been startling. A nesting couple always descended from above the trees, after the nuptial flight. From above the tree-tops, *but not from below them. From another world...!*

Kackot was hovering nervously above her. The daughter on relay was asking again on behalf of the son at the Strange ship. The daughters in the corral wished to report...

To Kackot and the son both, imperative postponements. She clamped control on her seething mind long enough to determine that it was no emergency in the corral, then closed them all out again, and tried to think more clearly.

The dream was still too fresh in her mind. And now there was more data to be had. Don't think, then... just to regain one's sanity, detachment, ability to weigh and to consider. One cannot open contact with the child while looking upon her as a monster.

(A monster! That's how I seemed to her!)

Perspective returned slowly. She groped for Kackot's soothing thoughts, refusing to inform him yet, but gratefully accepting his concern. Then the son, waiting restively inside the Strange Wings-House. And last, the child... Strange child of a Strange world.

"Very well," she told them all calmly, or so she hoped. "Let us commence."

of fun, looking at things the way the son-bug saw them, and watching how clumsy he was every time he tried to do anything the way she told him. Even if these bugs didn't have any machines themselves, you had to be pretty dumb not to be able to just turn a knob when somebody explained it to you.

She realized she was being rude again. It was hard to remember, sometimes, that you shouldn't even *think* anything impolite around here. It would be pretty good for some kids she knew, to come here for a while...

"Other children... others like yourself?" the Mother felt all excited. "Of your own Family?"

Dee shook her head. "No; just some of the kids who were in the Scout Troup on Starhope."

"Others... brothers and sisters... from your Household then?"

She had to think about that, to figure out the right answer. A town or a dome or a city was kind of like the Household here... but of course, the other kids weren't brothers and sisters, just because you played with them and went to school together. "Petey's the only brother I have," she said.

She didn't think she'd made

DEE WAS getting tired of it. For a while, it was sort

it very clear, but she had a feeling that the Mother was kind of glad about the answer. She didn't know why; and anyhow, it had nothing to do with the rocket. The son-bug was waiting for his Mother to pay attention to him again.

For a minute, everybody seemed to go away. *Telling secrets!* Dee thought irritably. She was beginning to get very bored now, just sitting here answering a lot of silly questions. They'd already put the message on the waxbark up where anybody who came in could see it, and the son-bug had a batch of diapers cleaned for Petey, and a lot of food picked out of the dry storage cabinet. She hoped it was stuff she liked. She couldn't read the labels when she was looking through his eye; anyhow they didn't need her around any more.

"DON'T BE silly," she said out loud. "There isn't any door to open; they're both open." *Now what did I say that for?* "Listen, I better go see how Petey's getting along. I don't like him trying out that fungus food all by himself. I better..."

She started to stand up, but the Mother said quietly, "Soon. Soon, child. Just a little more. You did not un-

derstand; we wish to know how to *close* the door... just how to operate the mechanism. My son is eager to try his skill at turning knobs to make machines work."

"You mean the airlock? You can't close that from outside. But if he just wants to try it out while he's inside, I guess that's all right. It's kind of complicated, though; he might get stuck in there or something, and..."

"No child. The airlock is the double-arch opening in the outer wall, is it not?"

"...yes, and I don't think he better..."

"He does not wish to experiment with that one. My son is brave, but not foolish. Only the other, the inner door. If you will..."

"Okay, but then I want to go see Petey, all right?"

"As you please."

"Okay. Well, you have to turn the lever on the right hand side..."

"No, please... make a picture in your mind. Move your own hand. Pretend to stand before it, and to do as you would do yourself. Think a picture."

No! It won't open again! That was a silly thing to think. *But all the food's in there!*

"He will not close it then, child. Only show him *how* it

works, how he *would* close it if he did. He will not; I promise he will not."

She showed him. She pretended to be doing it herself, but she felt strange; and when she was done showing him, she took a good look through the Mother and through him to make sure he hadn't really done it. The door was still open though.

"Thank you, my child. You wish to go to the garden now?"

Dee nodded, and felt the Mother go away, and almost ran out. She felt very strange.

WEARILY, the Lady commended her son for his intelligent perception, and queried him about his ability to operate the mechanism. He was a little doubtful. She reassured him: such work was not in his training; he had done well. She ordered two of her mason-builder sons to join their winged sibling in the ship, and left instructions to be notified when they were ready to begin.

She tried to rest, meanwhile, but there was too much confusion in her mind: too much new information not yet integrated. And more to come. Better perhaps to wait a bit before they tried that door? *No!* She caught herself with a start, realized

that she had absorbed so much of the Strange daughter's terror of...of what lay beyond...

What lay beyond? Because the child feared it, there was no cause for *her* to fear as well. It was all inside the girl's subjective world, the thing that was not to be known, the thing that made the door unopenable. It was all part and parcel of the child's failure to be aware of her own Mother's life or death, of...

Of the *sickness* in the dream. She, Daydanda, had brought that sickness into her Household. It was up to her now, to diagnose and cure it—or to cast it out. Such fears were communicable; she had seen it happen, or heard of it at least.

WHEN A MOTHER dies, there is no way to tell what will happen to her sons and daughters. Even among one's own people, strange things may occur. One Household she had heard of, after the sudden death of the Mother, simply continued to go about the ordinary tasks of every day, as though no change were noticed. It could not last, of course, and did not. Each small decision left unmade, each little necessary change in individual perform-

ance, created a piling-up confusion that led at last to the inevitable result: when undirected workers no longer cared for the food supplies; when the reckless unprepared winged ones flew off to early deaths in premature efforts to skim the tree-tops; when nurses ceased to care for hungry Bigheads, or for crying babes, the starving soldiers stormed the corral fences, swarmed into the gardens and the House, and feasted first on succulent infants; then on lean workers, and at last—to the vast relief of neighboring Households—on each other.

For a time, Daydanda had thought the Strange child's curious mixture of maternal and sibling attitudes to be the product of some similar situation—that the girl was simply trying not to *believe* her Mother's death, and somehow to succeed in being daughter and Mother both in her own person. But the dream made that hopeful theory impossible to entertain any longer.

Nor was it possible now to believe that the two children were the remnants of any usual Household. The girl had been too definite about the lack of any other siblings, now or *in the past*.

WHAT THEN? Try to discard all preconceptions. These are Strange creatures from another world. Imagine a biology in which there is no increase in the race—only replacement. The Lady recalled, or thought she did, some parasitic life in the Household of her childhood wherein the parent-organism had to die to make new life...

The parent had to die!

Immediately, her mind began to clear. Not sickness then...not foul untouchable confusion, but a *natural* Strangeness. Daydanda remembered thinking of the fires of the landing as a ritual...and now more fire...the Mother must be burned before the young one can mature? Some biologic quality of the ash, perhaps? Something...if that were so, it would explain, too, the child's persistent self-reminder that she *must* return to the rocket, even while she yearned to stay here where safety and protection lay.

It was fantastic, but fantastic only by the standards of the familiar world. Mother and consort bring the young pair, male and female, to a new home; and in the fires of landing, the parent-creatures die...*must* die before the young pair can develop.

She thought a while soberly, trying this fact and that to fit the theory, and each Strange-shaped piece of the puzzle fitted the next with startling ease.

Perhaps, if a world became too crowded, after many Households had grown up, some life-form of this kind might evolve, and...yes, of course!...that would explain as well the efforts at migration over vast distances across the glaring sky.

The Lady was prepared now to discover what lay behind the door; her sons were waiting on her wishes.

XXIII

PETNEY WAS chasing a young bug just a little bit bigger than he was round and round a mushroom shape that stood as high as Dee herself. Out of the foot-wide base of the great plant, a lacy network of lavender and light green tendrils sprouted. Deborah watched them play, the bug-child scampering on all sixes, Petey on all fours; and she didn't worry even when they both got tired and stopped and lay down half-sprawled across each other, to suck on adjoining juicy tendrils.

One of the nurses had already told her that Petey had tried some of the fungus

juice when he first came out to the garden. That must have been a couple of hours ago, at least. Dee wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep, there in the Mother-bug's room, but she thought it was getting on toward evening now. And she knew that a baby's digestion works much more quickly than a grown-up's; if the stuff was going to hurt him, he'd be acting sick by now.

Probably she shouldn't have let him try it at all, until she tested some first herself. She still didn't really want to, though; and when the Mother said it was all right for him, she hadn't thought to worry about it.

She couldn't keep on fussing over him every minute, anyhow. Besides, that wasn't good for babies either. You have to let them take chances or they'll never grow up... *where did I hear that?*... somebody had said that...

She shook her head, then smiled, watching the two kids, Petey and the bug, playing again. Petey was chortling and laughing and drooling. She decided it was probably pretty safe to trust whatever the Mother-bug said.

THE STRANGE Mother and her consort were indeed inside the ship, behind

the door the child wouldn't see; and they were most certainly dead.

"It is...they look..." Her son had not liked it, looking at them. "I think the fire's heat did as the teaching-nurse has told us might happen when we go above the tree-tops, if we fly too long or too high in the dry sun's heat." He had had trouble giving a clear visimage to her, because he did not like to look at what he saw. But the skin, he said, judging by that of the children, was darkened, and the bodies dehydrated. They were strapped into twisted couches, as though to prevent their escape. That and the locked door...the *taboo* door?

Each item fitted into the only theory that made sense. For some biologic reason, or some reason of tradition on an overcrowded home-world, it was necessary that the parents die as soon as a nesting place for the young couple was found. And the curious conflict in the Strange daughter's mind—the wish that her Mother was burned, with refusal to accept her Mother's death...

After all, many a winged one about to depart forever from the childhood home—not knowing whether happiness and fertility will come,



or sudden death, or lonely lingering starvation...many a one has left with just such a complex of opposite-wishes.

But Daydanda could not tell, from what her son had said, or what he showed, whether the parents were *burned*, within the child's meaning of the word. The son was not too certain, even that the heat had been responsible for death, directly. The room, when he first opened up the door, was filled with a thick grey cloud which dispersed too quickly to make sure if his guess was right; but he took it to be smoke...cold smoke. No one could breathe and live through a dozen heartbeats in that cloud, he said.

WHETHER THE cloud formed first, or the heat did its work beforehand, the two were surely dead when

their children came back from the first swift trip into the forest, that much was sure.

Whether they had themselves locked the door, and placed a taboo on opening it, or whether the daughter had obeyed the custom of her people in sealing it off, was also impossible to determine—now.

This much, however, was clear: that the children had had ample opportunity to learn the truth for themselves if they wished, or if it were proper, for them to do so. There had been no difficulty opening the door, not even for her sons who were unused to such mechanisms. The daughter knew how to do it; the daughter would not do it. Finally: the daughter had been *purposefully* set free to develop without the protection of her Mother.

If Daydanda had been certain that the protection of a foster-Mother would also inhibit the growth of the Strange children, she might have hesitated longer. As it was, she asked her consort what he thought, and he of course replied: "It might be, my Lady, my dear, that these Strange people live only as parasites in the Houses of such as ourselves. See how their Wings are a semi-House, not settled in one

location, but designed for transport. See how they chose a landing place almost equidistant from ourselves and our neighbors, as if to give the young ones a little better chance to find a Household that would accept them. It would seem to me, my dear, my Lady, that our course is clear."

Daydanda was pleased with his advice. And it was time for the Homecalling. The Lady sent out her summons, loud and clear and strong for all to hear: a warning to unfriendly neighbors; a promise and renewal to all her children, young and old.

DEE LAY on her mat in the chamber she still shared with Petey, and watched the T-Z, but she did not watch it well. Her mind was too full of other things.

The Mother wanted them to stay and... "join the Household." She wasn't sure just what that would mean. Doing chores, probably, and things like that. She didn't mind that part; it would be kind of nice to *belong* someplace... until the rescue party came.

That was the only thing. She hoped the Mother understood that part, but she wasn't sure. They couldn't just *stay* here, of course.

But it might be quite a while before anybody came after them, and meanwhile... she looked at Petey, sleeping with a smile on his small fat face, and on his round fat bottom a new kind of diaper, made by the bug-people the same way they made the sleeping mats, only smaller and thinner. That was so she wouldn't have to bother with cleaning the cloth ones any more.

Petey was certainly happier here, but she'd have to watch out, she thought. If the rescue party took too long to come, he'd be more like a bug than a human!

She went back to watching

the T-Z set. She had to learn a lot of things, in case she was the only person who could teach Petey anything. Tomorrow, the very next day, she was going to start really teaching him to talk. He could say words all right, if he tried. And with the bugs just in and out of your head, the way they were, he'd never try if she didn't get him started right away.

She turned back the reel, and started the film from the beginning again, because she'd missed so much.

The Lady of the House was pleased.



NEXT TIME AROUND

The cover illustrates Isaac Asimov's latest short story, which relates what happens in a closed society when a pariah—who happens to hold a vital office—goes on strike... No doubt you've seen articles "exposing" the Bridey Murphey hoax—but did you know that the same sort of thing happened back in 1913? L. Sprague de Camp gives the fascinating details in "Bridey Murphey and the Martian Princess." And if your father or grandfather is around, you might ask him if he remembers hearing or reading about Patience Worth!



This stranger had to be one of three things: a spy, a deserter, or a shot-down airman, as he claimed. But what could a spy possibly uncover at this station?

WOMEN'S WORK

by **MURRAY LEINSTER**

(author of "Be Young Again")

illustrated by **EMSH**

SERGEANT WILMOT, Army Observation Corps, sat on a folding canvas chair and conscientiously regarded the various dials and the five luminescent screens on a strictly-improvised table before her. The screens were not exactly radar-screens, but the middle one did give comparable information about this part of the battlefield; and the others gave similar data about two adjoining sectors on either side. The battle went on outside the dugout-cave in which Sergeant Wilmot sat on duty.

All was quiet. The entrance into the observation-post opened upon a sunshiny valley which showed absolutely no other sign of

One of the final blows to any rational theory of Male Superiority came during the last war, when experience throughout industrial and other fields proved that, in general, a woman could handle nearly any job a man could, and handle it as well — in some cases, better. One particular aspect when the female came out ahead consistently was in routine, precision operations requiring long periods of intense concentration upon none-too-interesting tasks. In this story, Murray Leinster, who has earned the title of Dean of Science Fiction if anyone has — he's been writing science fiction consistently, at a gratifyingly high average level of merit for considerably more than the thirty years that science fiction magazines have existed — indulges in some highly plausible prophecy.

the existence or the destructive instincts of men. There were trees, waving gently in the breeze; there was a spot where rabbits played innocently together. Down in the center of the valley a small group of mule-deer grazed contentedly, though a sentry of their number checked on their safety from time to time. A similar tranquility reigned for many hundreds of miles to the east and west and for four hundred miles to the southward. But this was the battlefield; some people called it Armageddon.

One of the quasi-radar fields showed something, and Sergeant Wilmot made quite sure and then pressed a button. The screen flashed brightly, and dimmed, and flashed again. Sergeant Wilmot waited. Back at Battle Plot—four hundred miles south—a duplicate of this screen should have flashed.

A photocell relay should have called the attention of a combat-officer to it among the thousands of similar other screens; he should attend to the matter Sergeant Wilmot had notified. Had Sergeant Wilmot failed to draw attention to this matter, a second and a third and a fourth line of observation-posts should have caught the omission.

THERE WAS a blip on the screen; it moved very slowly southward. Sergeant Wilmot watched it. For nearly twenty seconds nothing happened; then a corresponding but even smaller blip appeared on the southern border of the screen—Sergeant Wilmot glanced professionally at the other screens—The new and tiny blip moved swiftly to meet the original speck of brightness. That speck turned sidewise; the second blip adjusted course

to intercept it, and the northern blip seemed to slow. To an informed eye it was decelerating with an eye to reversal of course. It did slow; it stopped. It began to accelerate back toward the north again.

The second blip leaped ahead in a sudden doubling of its velocity; it left a tiny trail of persisting luminescence on the screen. The northern blip swung frantically to right and left, and the pursuer overhauled it vengefully. They seemed to merge.

Then there was a very large bright spot on the screen. It was the mass of ionized gas from the explosion of the pursuer's warhead. This new spot seemed to stay perfectly still; but presently it could be seen to be drifting, very gradually, toward the north and east.

Sergeant Wilmot took no further action; this was the battle. She and Corporal McGinnis, at this observation-post, were here to push buttons when such situations arose. A guided missile had come over the North Pole and tried to penetrate the defense-screen that extended all across Canada, and even Hudson Bay. Because Sergeant Wilmot had pushed a button early enough, an Achilles Mark IV intercep-

tor had met it, chased it when it tried to run away, and blasted it with the baby A-bomb in its nose. The incident had happened all of sixty miles to the west, and probably somewhere between twelve and thirty miles high. The flare of the explosion could have been seen out the dugout-door had Sergeant Wilmot looked for it at the proper moment; the sound would arrive in four minutes plus. It would not be loud; it would be a remote rumbling, infinitely low-pitched—hardly a sound at all.

SERGEANT WILMOT
Sawmanned; the event just past had happened many times before. This was the battle which must determine the fate of humanity for four or five centuries. On the other side of the Pole, people were trying to make a guided missile which could either nullify the detection-devices of the battlefield, or else dodge, or detonate the warheads of interceptors before they came too close. From time to time, the enemy sent over a test-rocket to find out if they had the problem solved.

On this side of the Pole, even more urgent research went on. It was understood that, in the American view,

orbital missiles were most promising. So far, they were hopelessly inaccurate, even for hell-bomb carriers; but the problem of accuracy was feverishly worked on.

And this was the conflict which was the battle which some people called Armageddon. If or when a guided missile got through the defense-line, or an orbital missile really hit its target squarely, the battle would be over. What one rocket could do, dozens could, or hundreds; and hundreds would be sent to do it. After that, peace might be made. There would not be much left to make peace with, but the formality might be observed.

THERE WAS a stirring in the personnel-quarters section of the dugout in the hillside. This was the area behind a hung-up blanket. Corporal McGinnis appeared. She had her uniform cap on at a very fetching angle. She said absorbedly, "I think I've got it right. What do you think?"

"Turn around." Sergeant Wilmot regarded her companion with professional care, then said sardonically, "It's lovely! Little rebellious curls that look like you tried to make them military, and couldn't. Nice! But

who's going to see it?"

Corporal McGinnis said restlessly, "Sometimes there's a man on the supply-copter."

"Not lately, and you know it! They could get plenty of volunteers, but hell hath no fury like us women. Observational efficiency would go to blazes with all of us mooning about the guy we saw yesterday, or last week. We're on this job because we're better at it than men; we'd be worse than useless if we saw a man every two weeks or so."

Corporal McGinnis looked at herself in a hand-mirror, and Sergeant Wilmot regarded her with sympathy. Corporal McGinnis was twenty; Sergeant Wilmot was twenty-seven. She felt like a very old woman, compared to the corporal.

"Look, honey," she said gently, "this is tough business; don't make it tougher! In three months, you'll get back to rear echelon. They'll assign you to hospital duty for a month. You'll wait on sick men, and burned men, and wounded men; you'll fall in love with half a dozen of 'em, and it won't matter because all you can do is wait on 'em—they'll be too sick to care. Then you'll get leave, and you can be a girl for a while; then you'll come back

up here. But while you're here, better just think of yourself as nursemaid to a lot of office machinery. Don't think of anything else. Wait! This is our job. We women do all the tedious work of the world, anyhow. We're built so we can stand it, and men can't. Just think about your job, honey."

"I heard all that in indoctrination," replied Corporal McGinnis, bitterly.

SERGEANT WILMOT sighed. She'd served four tours of duty on the battlefield. Men couldn't take the deadly routine of round-the-clock attention to instruments; women could. But even they were human. Even she herself...

There was movement outside the cave; a clattering of hooves. The mule-deer fled madly up the valley. Corporal McGinnis went to the door and looked out. Sergeant Wilmot said drily, "Those deer are scary. Maybe they smelled a wolf—four-legged variety. Or a wildcat. Nothing to worry about."

Corporal McGinnis stared restlessly out the opening; then, abruptly, she grew tense. She moved to see more clearly. "There's something moving over yonder! I think it's a man!"

Sergeant Wilmot irritably glanced at the five screens and the dials. She went to the doorway. "It could be a bear," she said soothingly. "You don't look for men under the bed, honey; don't look for them in this wilderness!"

"Look!" said Corporal McGinnis, brittly.

Sergeant Wilmot looked. Something seemed to surge about in head-high weeds and underbrush. The valley itself—the battlefield—spread out in the sunshine. There was grass and there were trees; the sky was infinitely blue. There were small quiet clouds floating in it.

Then there was violent upheaval in tall weeds at the edge of a grassy spot. A figure came out of it. It was a human figure, clad in the remnants of a uniform. One arm—the right one—hung in an improvised sling made of dirty cloth. The figure stared up and down the valley. It carried a glittering pistol in its left hand; it looked hungrily after the vanishing mule-deer.

CORPORAL MCGINNIS drew in her breath sharply. The man across the valley stared about him; it seemed that he looked squarely into the dark opening from which they peered.

"He's got a gun," said Corporal McGinnis, her teeth chattering. "If he sees us, he'll know we're alone. Just us two—."

"Yeah," agreed Sergeant Wilmot, sardonically. "Two lone defenseless females, with nothing but automatic rifles, hand-grenades and side-arms to protect ourselves with. Tough!"

Corporal McGinnis swallowed. "I—didn't think," she said shakily. "What'll we do?"

"Just what you think. Do you want to do it?"

Corporal McGinnis hesitated for a bare moment; then she wetted her lips and nodded. Her hands went to her hair. She took one step.

"Sidearms, honey," said Sergeant Wilmot with sugary sweetness. "He *could* be a shot-down flier from our side. But he could also be an enemy though why he'd be this side of the Pole..."

Corporal McGinnis stopped and buckled on a pistol-belt that had a small side-arm in its holster. Her face was singularly intent; she stepped out of the dugout-cave which was the observation-post.

The movement drew the man's eyes. He had been staring along the skyline above the post, and it was possible that he'd seen the camouflage about the communication-aer-

ials. The movement in the doorway drew his eyes at once.

Corporal McGinnis called through cupped hands, "Who are you?"

THE MAN did not answer; he marched toward her. Sergeant Wilmot regarded Corporal McGinnis with a comprehending but humorless scorn. Corporal McGinnis was a girl, and she had not seen a man for months. It was abnormal—as abnormal as for a man not to see a woman for months. Normal human contacts involve the frequent sight of people of both sexes. To be confined exclusively with one produces a tremendous nostalgia, a peculiar homesickness for the natural and accustomed presence of more than one kind of human being.

Sergeant Wilmot buckled a side-arm belt about herself. She found her own hands adjusting her uniform to attractiveness, and scowled.

"Hello," said the man. He halted perhaps thirty feet from the opening from which Corporal McGinnis had emerged. He still had the pistol in his left hand; his right was in the sling. His eyes burned hungrily. "Can you give me something to eat?"

Corporal McGinnis tried to

speak and could not. Sergeant Wilmot said very drily indeed from inside the cave, "Easy enough. Put down that pistol, soldier; then give your name and serial number and advance in a military manner. How'd you get loose?"

The man scowled. He was reasonably young, bearded as if he had not shaved for weeks. He was thin and gaunt. He must have eaten very inadequately for a long time. His uniform—which once had been American—was ripped and torn. He hesitated, then put his pistol back in its holster. The holster was for a right-handed man, and replacing the pistol was an awkward job. Then he moved forward again.

"Pilot," he said harshly. "My engine conked out on me; I had to jump. Three weeks ago. Got a double break in my arm in a fall down a cliff ten days ago. I'm a lousy shot with my left hand and I'm pretty well starved."

"We'll feed you," said Sergeant Wilmot, "and then make out a requisition in quadruplicate for authorization so it won't be taken out of our pay. Come in."

CORPORAL MCGINNIS trembled slightly as the man passed close to her. Sergeant Wilmot knew ex-

actly how the younger women felt: Enormously intent and enormously fascinated—and bitterly ashamed because of it, despising herself because she was shaken and agitated by the sight of the first man in months. The shame was not justified, of course. She would have been emotionally stirred by the newspaper in months, or the the first ice-cream soda, or room at home with her own possessions about her. Her feelings were partly a terrible loneliness for the normal and the commonplace and the rational. But there was, too, an instinctive reaction to the fact that this was a man.

"Give the guy some food, Corporal," said Sergeant Wilmot in an authoritative voice. She regarded the five screens and the instruments. She turned back to look at the man.

Corporal McGinnis turned the wire key that started the self-heating of a hot-meal ration can. She began to wind off the top. The can got hot; she almost dropped it. She put a cloth around it to hold it while she finished the opening. The smell of hot food filled the dugout. Corporal McGinnis' color was high. She was embarrassed. The man's mouth worked. He swallowed.

Sergeant Wilmot's eyes were keen and suspicious, but she was almost convinced by the ravenous look on the man's face. She glanced again at the five screens, in succession. She turned back. Corporal McGinnis began to set out the food. The man could not wait; he snatched up the steaming, opening packet of moistened, seasoned spinach, crammed the food into his mouth, chewing. Veins stood out on his forehead; his face flushed. He swallowed the stuff, hot as it was and only partly chewed. When Corporal McGinnis had emptied the ration-can, he was breathing fast and still feverishly reaching for more.

He had not once used the plastic fork, or the plastic knife with its thin, thin ribbon of a metal cutting edge. He was not satisfied; he looked still at the empty ration-can like a dog looking at the bowl from which it has been fed.

SERGEANT WILMOT inspected the five screens and turned back to regard him. Corporal McGinnis' cheeks were brightly red. She moved self-consciously, picking up the plastic plates formed from the food-containers by plastic memory before they cooled. The man

snapped: "More! I'm starved."

"You want a stomach-ache, soldier?" asked Sergeant Wilmot. "Easy; you wolfed that! Your table manners are lousy, too. You've got enough inside you to hold you for a while. Come on, now! Name, rank, and serial number, please!"

His eyes went angry, raging. Then he grinned. "What's the matter, think I'm a spy? Okay! Tell back echlon you've got a spy who won't give his serial number; I'll swear I did. How'll your record look?"

Sergeant Wilmot's face went impassive; it was awkward. If she reported a suspicious soldier arrived on the battlefield, there would be an impressive force diverted to take care of the matter. There'd be Johnny-Jump-Up ships to land here right away, in case he had companions. There'd have to be a search-force of copters to hunt for a possible counter-observation post reporting back across the Pole. And the top brass would not like to divert ships and men for such a matter, and then find a shot-down pilot angrily insisting that a couple of hysterical women wouldn't believe him when he gave proper identification. They would believe the pilot,

because he was a commissioned officer.

Sergeant Wilmot could understand the feeling of a man who had been starving and alone for weeks, and had found this place. Men on duty were kept isolated from women, too; romance interfered with war. So this man would not to be too anxious to return to tense and desperate duty in the man's part of this singularly stalemated conflict.

"What you want," said Sergeant Wilmot with reserve "is some unofficial leave. Is that it? You want a rest?"

THE MAN talked angrily. He'd been, he said, making a low-level jet sweep over Hudson Bay shoreland. He'd been worn out ten such sorties in one-week. (Low-level flying in a jet is nerve-racking, but air-born devices do not work on terrain from a high level.) The man raged at the killing amount of work required of fliers in his branch of the service. They were worked until they cracked up, and then given psycho treatment and sent back to work again. His ship had crashed. He'd been three weeks trying to stay alive and contact the outside world. He'd starved; he'd nearly died. His arm had broken in a fall down a cliff

ten days back, and he'd set it himself and splinted it—starving—and then he'd had to try to get food with nothing but a pistol he'd had to use left-handed. He wanted to rest! They could report him if they liked, as a spy or a deserter; he'd swear they lied. He'd swear they were hysterical—cracked up from the loneliness of a lonely post; and he'd get away with it!

"Honey," said Sergeant Wilmot to Corporal McGinnis, "the gentleman means he wants to board with us a while. Country surroundings; good table; a place to relax from the anxieties of the times. He likes it here; he wants to recuperate before he returns to the stresses and fatigue of active military service. Get it?"

CORPORAL MCGINNIS'S newly-arranged charming curls under her military cap were somehow remarkably visible. She changed color; then she said, in a low tone, "I—I guess it would be all right..."

Sergeant Wilmot blinked at her, grimaced, then said, "You're a heel, soldier. A commissioned officer's supposed to be a gentleman. It's not necessarily so. But if we do raise cain, and planes come and you check up all right, we can catch the devil. Okay! We'll

call it battle fatigue and cover you up for—three days. Then the showdown. But—” Her voice was stern. “But we feed you and we let you loaf, and that’s all; we don’t look at the moonlight with you. Maybe you were a bundle from heaven for your mother, but you’re no gift to us. Understand?”

The man grinned again. “Sure,” he said. “Sure! But I’ve had three weeks of hell. I want some rest before I get interrogation and all that stuff. And my belly’s got something to work on for the first time in a long while! I’m going to sleep!”

He moved toward the hung-up blanket which divided the personnel-quarters from the observation-post proper. Sergeant Wilmot laid her side-arm across her lap and said grimly, “Outside, soldier! Maybe we’re two lone females, but you don’t go setting precedents yet! You don’t sleep in here—not even an afternoon nap! Give him a blanket, honey, and let him bunk down somewhere outside in the shade.”

Corporal McGinnis disappeared behind the screen. Blushing, she gave the man a folded government-issue blanket; he grunted and went out. Corporal McGinnis and Sergeant Wilmot, together,

watched him hunt for and find a place in the shade of a suitable tree. At this latitude the sun never rose high; but in this valley, summer temperatures obtained right now in the daytime. Night would be cold, but it would be short. Now, though, the man spread out the blanket and practically collapsed upon it. There could be no doubt about his exhaustion or his hunger.

SERGEANT WILMOT said coldly, “The dirty, gold-bricking so-and-so!”

Corporal McGinnis said restlessly, “I don’t know... He’s had a bad time...” Then she said, “If he were shaved—he wouldn’t be—bad-looking.”

“Honey,” said Sergeant Wilmot, “when a girl hasn’t seen one for months, no man is bad-looking!”

She turned back and carefully examined the five screens which represented contour-maps of five separate sectors of the battle-front. They also showed all solid or moving objects in the sky. The screens reported nothing worthy of attention.

Corporal McGinnis said restlessly, “I think I’ll put on my other uniform. He didn’t notice the way I fixed my hair.”

“He will, honey!” said Ser-

geant Wilmot sardonically. Then she added, "He was looking at our aerials when you called him. While he naps, honey, you climb up and check the camouflage; something might happen to it. There's nobody to see, but we're supposed to keep everything out of sight."

"There are—bears and things," objected Corporal McGinnis.

"Sure! And if something scares you, you yell. He'll come running, and so will I—if necessary."

She turned back to the screens, which had to be watched. Corporal McGinnis went behind the hung-up blanket. She came out again in a fresh uniform, and adjusted her hair very carefully. Sergeant Wilmot glanced up at her. Corporal McGinnis said breathlessly, "I'm—I'm going."

"Yeah," said Sergeant Wilmot. "But listen, honey! If you yell for help without any reason, I personally will snatch those lovely curls and leave you bald-headed! You can *hope* for a bear, but you'd better not fake one!"

CORPORAL MCGINNIS went slowly out of the dugout. She did not look at the man on his blanket, a little distance away; she went

up the route that had been proved practical for getting at the aerials of the communication-devices.

Sergeant Wilmot swung out a microphone and pressed a button. She pressed it again; after a moment she said in a clipped voice, "Emergency report, Sectors 2116-21, first line observation posts. Tactical instructions needed in a hurry!"

She spoke in a very low tone. In seconds more, she was talking fast, in a bare murmur. Even as near as the doorway, nobody could have heard what she said. Perhaps one question was loud enough.

"He says he fell down a cliff heading south. Any cliffs to north of us that could've happened on?" And again she said, "I don't know. But when he turned his back, his shirt was a different color, like he'd had a pack he was carrying until just now." ... And a third time she said fervently, "Scared? I'm scared to death! There could be other guys..." On those three occasions, her voice might have been heard as far as the doorway, but the rest of her speech was inaudible.

WHEN CORPORAL MCGINNIS came back—disappointed—Sergeant Wilmot was conscientiously watching

the five screens which together scanned the terrain and the sky over a front of one hundred and twenty-five miles. She turned over the watch to the corporal for a four-hour trick, and retired behind the blanket for some sleep. But she slept with her ears cocked for voices.

However, the man slept all afternoon, he did not wake till the long shadows reached the middle of the valley, and the air grew chilly. The cold waked him. He sat and smoked until night fell; then he came toward the dugout again. He called from the new-fallen darkness. "Hello! When's chow?"

Corporal McGinnis smiled at him. She was twenty years old; she looked younger, because her eyes were shining. "We were just going to call you," she said warmly. "Come in!"

The man came in from the darkness. He was ravenous again. He looked disinterestedly about the small cave and paid no apparent attention to the five screens and the instrument-dials beneath... His eyes brightened when Corporal McGinnis brought out the ration-cans; he regarded them with hungry anticipation.

Sergeant Wilmot asked questions. He said curtly that

his name was George, and then added sarcastically that that would have to do for the next three days. Right now, he was hungry. He barely looked at Corporal McGinnis, though she was newly made-up and her nails were freshly tinted. She had taken off her uniform cap, and the curls she had labored over were in view. But the man only watched her fingers opening the ration cans. And he devoured the food as if he had not eaten hugely some three hours since.

He ate with something like ferocity, his table-manners were atrocious. Sergeant Wilmot observed that he made no effort to use a fork, though even a man who customarily eats with his knife usually holds a fork in his left hand.

"Maybe," said Sergeant Wilmot, "I'd better take a look at that arm of yours. If you set it ten days ago, I can't do much about that; but I ought to do a better job of splinting."

HE NODDED as he stuffed himself. Later, Sergeant Wilmot carefully cut through his clumsy knots and said, "Seems like you could've made better knots, even with one hand."

He did not answer; he was looking at Corporal McGin-

nfs. She glowed. A girl is accustomed to being looked at by men, and does not feel normal if men don't look at her. Corporal McGinnis had not been looked at by a man for months. His attention had the satisfying quality of the familiar and the appropriate and the natural, for which one has been homesick and lonely and starved in all of its aspects. A girl likes to be appreciated for being a girl.

The man blinked when the re-splinting was finished. Corporal McGinnis—at a word from the Sergeant—gave him more blankets. They were Corporal McGinnis' blankets. He went to the door, looking back at her. She looked as if she felt delicious all over. When he had gone she said convincingly, "He's nice! If he'd only shave, I think he'd be good-looking."

Sergeant Wilmot said evenly, "Honey, I'll tell you something. That guy won't give us his name or serial number, in three days or any other number of 'em. He's—"

"He's not!" said Corporal McGinnis hotly; "you're just jealous because he looked at me instead of you."

SERGEANT WILMOT shrugged. She seemed to deliberate before she spoke; then she said in a dry voice,

"Did you ever hear of a deserter, honey—the guys who beat it away from the fighting and hide out where they think they're safe? This character—it's not a happy life he's picked, but I'll bet you that if we ever start to clamp down on him for identification he'll light out. He won't be here when the supplycopter arrives; he'll be gone. And he'll figure that we won't tell he ever was here, because we've fed him without reporting him right away, and we'll have to keep our mouths shut! And we would!"

"Deserter?" said Corporal McGinnis fiercely. "Why don't you say he's a spy? One's as likely as the other!"

Sergeant Wilmot said calmly, "I don't say it because you'd tell him—to give him a chance to prove he's as good an American as we are! You'd tell him, honey. And if I were twenty years old, and this was my first tour of duty, and a man came along, and I hadn't seen a man for months—why—I'd get all romantic and do the same thing. We women can do a job up here that men couldn't do, but we're still females."

With compressed lips, Corporal McGinnis cleared away the opened ration-cans and the unfolded plastic plates. She disposed of them: In icy

silence, she went behind the hung-up blanket which partitioned off the personnel-quarters.

Sergeant Wilmot looked relieved. It was deep-dark outside, by then. She set the snooperscope alarm pointing out the door; it would give warning of the approach of any warm-blooded animal during the night. She turned off the trigger-alarm, kept an eye on the screen. But also she conscientiously regarded the five quasi-radar screens which watched the sky over this part of the battlefield.

THERE WAS no sound for a long, long time, but presently the sound of steady, even breathing came from behind the blanket partition.

Sergeant Wilmot settled down for a grim night of watchfulness. From time to time, she watched the five screens which reported guided missiles from across the Pole. Most of the time she looked steadily at the small screen of the snooperscope. The valley looked very odd, seen by infra-red light. Things which looked dark by daylight showed bright upon the screen, because they radiated more heat than light-colored objects.

Presently Sergeant Wilmot caught her breath. She saw a tiny object, which was some-

thing warm-blooded, moving across the valley. *It* was the man, going away from the observation-post; he disappeared into the curious appearance of tall weeds in infra-red light.

Sergeant Wilmot swung out the microphone, touched a button, and said in the lowest of murmurs, "Emergency report, sectors 2116-21 front line observation post. Tactical instructions needed—and fast!"

It was as if somebody had been waiting for her call. She talked urgently, whispering. It would have needed very keen ears to hear even behind the blanket "...gone across the valley...maybe he cached something there...there wasn't anybody but him. His arm's really broken, and he tied the knots with his left hand...You've got to figure it, I can't..."

Presently she went back to the snooperscope. Conscientiously, from time to time, she inspected the five screens; they showed nothing of interest. After a long time, the snooperscope warned that a warm-blooded creature was coming back across the valley. Sergeant Wilmot reported it in a whisper to some unseen, unknown person hundreds of miles away. On orders, she set the snooperscope outside the

door, aimed it at the hillside in which the observation-post was dug. A warm-blooded creature started up the hill.

SERGEANT WILMOT reported that in a hurried whisper, and got final orders. She ceased to communicate, put away the snooperscope, and went back to the grim, tedious examination of the five screens on the table. But she watched the dials under the screens with keen eyes. Nearly three-quarters of an hour after the man had climbed the hill, the needles all flickered for the fraction of a second. It could have gone unnoticed: if she had not been watching for exactly that, she would not have observed it. She swallowed, with a dry throat.

She took her small pistol out of its holster and sat very tense during the rest of the night. Corporal McGinnis slept on, past the time when she should have relieved the Sergeant. A little before dawn, all the needles flickered again. Sergeant Wilmot swallowed once more, but she looked as if she felt better.

When dawn came, there were stirrings in the valley, and Sergeant Wilmot looked hungrily outside. She saw nothing. Birds which usually hopped and pecked and flew

among the trees at this hour now went out of the valley altogether. The rabbits did not show themselves; the mule-deer which customarily trotted down the center of the valley to drink, today did not appear.

But the man came, yawning. He looked more rested, now. He regarded Sergeant Wilmot with eyes in which an estimating interest began to appear. "When's chow?"

"Aren't you interested in anything but chow?" asked Sergeant Wilmot, sweetly.

"Sure I am!" said the man. He dropped his voice, "How about your friend?"

SERGEANT WILMOT heard stirrings behind the hung-up blanket. Corporal McGinnis was awake—roused by the sound of the only man's voice she'd heard in months. She was dressing in feverish haste.

"Aren't you," asked Sergeant Wilmot, "going to tell me the same stuff you tell to all the girls?"

The man's eyes became caressing. He looked almost possessive; his chest swelled a little. He said in the same low tone, "Can she hear?"

"Sure she can hear," said Sergeant Wilmot blandly.

The man looked at her, his head on one side. Then he

grinned complacently; his expression was that of a man who knows that he is irresistible. He knew that the two women had seen no other man in months, and grinned more widely.

"Let's not have arguments," he said amusedly. "No sense in jealousy; up here it don't make any difference—"

Sergeant Wilmot's eyes flamed, but she asked very mildly as if in pure, detached curiosity, "You don't expect to fascinate *both* of us, do you?"

"Why not?" asked the man, grinning. "What's the difference?"

Corporal McGinnis came from behind the hung-up blanket. She was deathly pale; her eyes were at once dazed and heartbroken. She had her belt in her hand. She was trying to get something out of its holster. Every female soldier had side-arms, but none had yet been known to shoot them except on the pistol-range.

"You," cried Corporal McGinnis with the sick fury of the disillusioned, "you—get out of here! Get out! You hear me? Get away from here before I kill you!"

THE MAN'S hand made a jerk toward his own belt, but Sergeant Wilmot had her

side-arm out and bearing. She wouldn't have fired it, but the man couldn't know that. "Clear out, George!" she said drily. "Quick!"

Her finger tensed. The man suddenly turned and fled. Corporal McGinnis stood still for a moment, her face working; then she threw down the belt and the holster and the pistol. She sobbed; she bawled. Horribly.

"I had to do that, honey," said Sergeant Wilmot soothingly. "You'd need to be over him before—"

There was a shout outside; then a shot.

"The marines have landed," said the sergeant. "Listen, honey, there's a bunch of soldiers from back echelon outside, now; they're here for the duration! All kinds, up to majors and colonels! And just you and me! But we've got to work fast, at that..."

Corporal McGinnis gasped. She stared at Sergeant Wilmot with absolute, stark incredulity. Almost numbly, she peered out the door. She went rigid, then her hands went automatically to her hair. Then she tore back behind the hung-up curtain that divided personnel quarters from the observation-post proper.

There were many voices outside, now. Men's voices.

Sergeant Wilmot looked at herself in the indifferent mirror provided by the central one of the five luminescent screens. She adjusted her complexion, nattified her uniform. Corporal McGinnis spoke shakily from behind the curtain. By the way the words were formed, Sergeant Wilmot knew that she was making up her mouth. "Where'd they come from? The—men outside, I mean! Why'd they come?"

"I sent for 'em, honey," said Sergeant Wilmot. "George's a spy, though I didn't dare tell you. An American always picks up a fork, even when he eats with a knife; a commissioned officer always! And an American always makes a couple of passes before he takes a girl for granted; George didn't."

Corporal McGinnis came from behind the hung-up blanket. She looked young and radiant, and altogether delectable. Her hair looked as if she had tried to make it look military, and had failed. She looked as if she had been poured into her uniform, which was immaculate. She even looked as if the illustrious designer who had created the Observation Corps uniform had worked with

Corporal McGinnis in mind.

"How do I look?" asked Corporal McGinnis anxiously.

"Mmmmm," said Sergeant Wilmot. "You'll do! And listen, honey! We're not competing! There's a raft of 'em outside. Let *them* do the competing; get me?"

Corporal McGinnis looked out the door. Color came into her cheeks. She nodded, speechless with excitement.

IT WAS a lieutenant-colonel who kindly explained everything to Sergeant Wilmot. She knew rather more about it than he did, but she listened admiringly as he told her what was what. Corporal McGinnis had other instructors, but the lieutenant-colonel briefed Sergeant Wilmot on what she had accomplished when she detected George as a spy and so reported him.

On a modern battlefield, she was informed, a spy couldn't do much; a spy is after information. When the fighting is twelve miles high and up, all a spy can hope to steal is information from the observation-posts on the battlefield. And the only information the observation-posts have is about the detection and destruction of guided missiles. But a self-reporting missile will tell of its own destruction. So what was left for a spy to learn?

SERGEANT WILMOT said breathlessly that she could not imagine, though she had gotten tactical orders and used a snooperscope and generally stage-managed the whole affair.

"The enemy wanted to know if he'd really gotten a non-detectable guided missile," said the lieutenant-colonel painstakingly. "He thought he had, but he wanted to be sure. So they sent this George to find an observation-post. They dropped him from a low-flying plane."

"He didn't try to kill us," said Sergeant Wilmot, anxiously.

The lieutenant-colonel explained that it was George's mission to tap the transmitting antenna, and beam part of it—with apparatus he'd carried in a shoulder-pack—to a relay-station somewhere on the arctic ice-pack, from where it could be relayed across the Pole. And George had accomplished it. For several hours, the enemy had actually watched the information sent back to American battle-plot by five sectors of its front-line observation system. And actually, since sunrise, the enemy had sent one of its supposedly undetectable guided missiles squarely above this very valley.

Sergeant Wilmot looked

prettily panicky; she hadn't seen anything of the sort on the screens! She'd reported George, and she was glad help had come, but—

"You did the necessary," said the lieutenant-colonel warmly. "When you reported a spy, we knew what he had to be after. So we took off and air-dropped below the horizon, and piled into wilderness. Jeeps were air-dropped, too; and we got there very quietly before the dawn. We inspected your aerial; it was tapped, and we found the extra beam-mirror. But we gimmicked your detectors and let everything stand."

SERGEANT WILMOT looked terrified, though she had noticed the jiggling of the dial-needles both when George tapped the aerial and when the military made other arrangements. The lieutenant-colonel pressed her hand reassuringly.

"The beam kept going to enemy headquarters, but it didn't report a thing! When they sent their test-missile over, it didn't show on the screen, and they thought it didn't show on any screen we had! The second line of observation-posts had orders to ignore anything coming through here. We had a rocket-plane up to discover it by

seeming accident and blast it with wing-rockets; but the enemy blew it up himself, to keep us from knowing he could penetrate our defenses!"

Sergeant Wilmot looked bewildered. Privately, she was thinking of a lace train and a veil; but she looked quite young and helpless, and the lieutenant-colonel felt wise and strong and protective.

"Which," he said gleefully, "probably wins the war! You see, the enemy thinks now we can't detect his new missiles! So he'll send them over in a mass-attack to wipe out all civilization on this continent!

"But we can detect them! We can shoot them down! And we have a new little trick of our own—"

He explained the new American technical triumph, which was not an orbital missile at all; it was a tracking-rocket. It could follow a trail of ionized gases—the track of an enemy rocket—back to its source. The lieutenant-colonel was rather technical about it, and Sergeant Wilmot found his discussion of sidewind velocities and correction of age-of-trail-error by final trajectory confusing.

But she was suitably impressed. She did grasp clearly that American trailing-rockets would not waste their hell-bombs on enemy cities;

they would land where enemy rockets had started out. If the enemy could be lured into an all-out attack, there could be all-out destruction of the places from which that attack had been launched. And the enemy ought to feel safe in trying a blitz offensive now, because of the bravery and courage and womanly charm of a delightful little Sergeant in the Observation-Corps.

THE LIEUTENANT-COLONEL looked rather idiotic as he beamed at Sergeant Wilmot, but there came a babbling outside the cave. There were shoutings. The lieutenant-colonel and Sergeant Wilmot ran to see; it seemed quite natural that they ran hand-in-hand.

There were detector-screens in the jeeps, which had taken over the actual reporting job of the gimmicked observation-post. Men looked at those screens and gloated.

From the north, across the ghostly contour-lines the screens displayed, tiny bright spots moved. There were six on one screen; eight on another; five on a third; ten on a fourth, and seven on a fifth...

All were enemy-guided missiles, assured of concealment by some highly-scientific device—which did not work.

They did not show on the screens in the dugout, and therefore they did not show on the screens working on a relay to the other side of the Pole. And all along the three-thousand-mile battlefront below Hudson Bay—and probably along all the longer battle-lines at sea—the messengers of destruction were winging their way through the heavens. They would be ten—twelve—twenty miles high. This was a mass attack of such potential destructiveness as no previous war had ever dreamed of. When those missiles landed, vaporizing cities...

From the south, smaller bright specks moved swiftly to meet them. There were more of the small speedier specks than of those moving down from the North. The southward-moving specks seemed to waver. Some of them shifted course; some swerved wildly. The smaller specks doubled their speed and hurtled forward.

One speck from the south met a dodging larger speck from the north; then there was a large bright spot on the screen, which did not seem to move at all. There was another large bright spot. Bright, stationary spots appeared here and there and everywhere. Six on one

screen; eight on another; five on a third; ten on a fourth, and seven on a fifth...

THERE WAS no movement on the screens for a matter of perhaps thirty seconds after the last moving speck was still. Then new objects appeared on the southern edges of the screens. They moved northward; they swerved around the bright markings of ionized gases from small, tactical A-bombs. Then they straightened out, fell into the tracks the south-bound bombs had followed; they speeded up, following those tracks back toward their source.

They went northward and the edges of the screens. They went on and on, and on, they would home upon the spots from which the now-blasted invading bombs had been fired. They would explode there. Not in cities, nor empty rural spaces; they would explode over launching-sites, and rocket-bases, and military strongholds from which missiles had been launched and others might be ready for launching...

Sergeant Wilmot listened absorbedly—or with the appearance of absorption. Actually, she knew all this. She was thinking satisfiedly that the lieutenant-colonel's ears

stuck out a little too much. That kept him from being handsome—handsome men are conceited—and it would be the thing which left him putty in her hands. He was already putty in her hands; it was very, very satisfying.

THE SUNSHINY valley was quite tranquil, though the men in it made sounds of infinite rejoicing. All over the continent to southward, celebrations were beginning now. Cities which had been enemy targets would be beginning celebrations and simultaneous thanksgivings; and everybody would change from one activity to the other. But the cities on the other side of the Pole—which were targets now if American wished to make them so—were stricken and still. Because they heard the explosions of the American rockets, the most terrible explosions ever made on Earth.

After a long, long time, Ser-

geant Wilmot went back into the dugout to repair her make-up. There was a song ringing vaguely in her ears, something about a voice breathing o'er Eden. It was a bit premature—but not much, she knew. She was reshaping her lips when Corporal McGinnis came in on the same errand, with shining eyes.

"Well, honey," said Sergeant Wilmot through the side of her mouth—she was using lipstick—"we're heroines, and the war's over, and we get part of the credit."

"He—he's a captain," said Corporal McGinnis rapidly. "He—he's already told me that the very first instant he saw me—"

Sergeant Wilmot grunted; she put down the lipstick. "Easy!" she said sternly. "You've got to play hard to get! Anyhow a *little* hard to get! *Mmm*. Want to make it a double wedding?"



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If you want a receipt for a popular fantasy,
Or for delightful and bright s. f. tales,
Then come to me, fellows, for I'm just the man to see,
Hear my instructions and you'll make those sales.
Take plot complications by me, (Isaac Asimov),
Bradbury's feeling and Matheson's spark,
(They're something of which no good yarn ever has enough),
Plausible backgrounds of Wyndham and Clarke.
Anderson's daring de Campian mockery,
Supergalactics like E. E. Smith writes,
And time-travel stories with twisted tick-tockery,
Always present one with special delights.
Some Sturgeon or Farmer at their very sexiest,
Witches by Boucher (or Gold) at their hexiest,
Some Henry Kuttner-ship, also van Vogt-erie,
Kornbluth, Dick, Simak and all of their coterie,
Clement, Gunn, Heinlein, del Rey, Campbell (John),
Oliver, Sheckley, Knight, Hubbard (L. Ron).
Take of these gentlemen all you can plagiarize,
You just weren't made to be blind or to cage your eyes,
Stir up the words and submit the result,
And then you'll become the next fan-clubbish cult.
If you want inspiration that can't ever fail a man,
Read all you can of the chiefs of the art.
Remember, it takes quite an effort to jail a man,
Just for reciting R. Garrett by heart.
There's Hamilton (Edmond), whose menaces shatter all,
Blish, Tenn, and Leinster (the dean, as you know),
Another Smith boy and his V. Equilateral,
V. stands for Venus, the Smith is G. O.
Psionics (see Bester and Jones) you must brush up on,
Smashing atom'ic doom now you must hush up on,

(illustration by GARRETT)



Then there are women like Merrill and Clingerman,
 Talented (ah, me) so much as to sting a man,
 Seabright and Kathy Maclean, also Moore,
 Brackett, de Ford, Curtis—none of them poor.
 Take of these ladies the bits you can carry off,
 Small-minded critics you always can parry off,
 Copy like mad and be sure to keep mum,
 And a classic s. f. tale's the residuum.

Cadenza, by The Editor:

*Go ahead; try it! But after your trouble, you
 Can't hope to sell it to Lowndes, Robert W.*

*It's not too much of a step, perhaps,
from a machine which can translate
prose to a machine which can
create poetry.*

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

by ROBERT RANDALL

(author of "No Future In This")

illustrated by FREAS

ROBIN CHESLEY disentangled himself from the little cluster of argumentative sculptors he had blundered into, and managed to make it across the room to the autobar. "An old fashioned," he said

The robot bartender buzzed its acknowledgement. "Cliklik," it said. "Clink. Chonk. Gurglurglurgle." A little door slid open, and Robin reached in to get the drink. As he pulled it out, the door started to close, and he narrowly missed spilling liquor all over the floor trying to jerk it out in time.

"At times," he said, "I get the feeling robots don't like me."

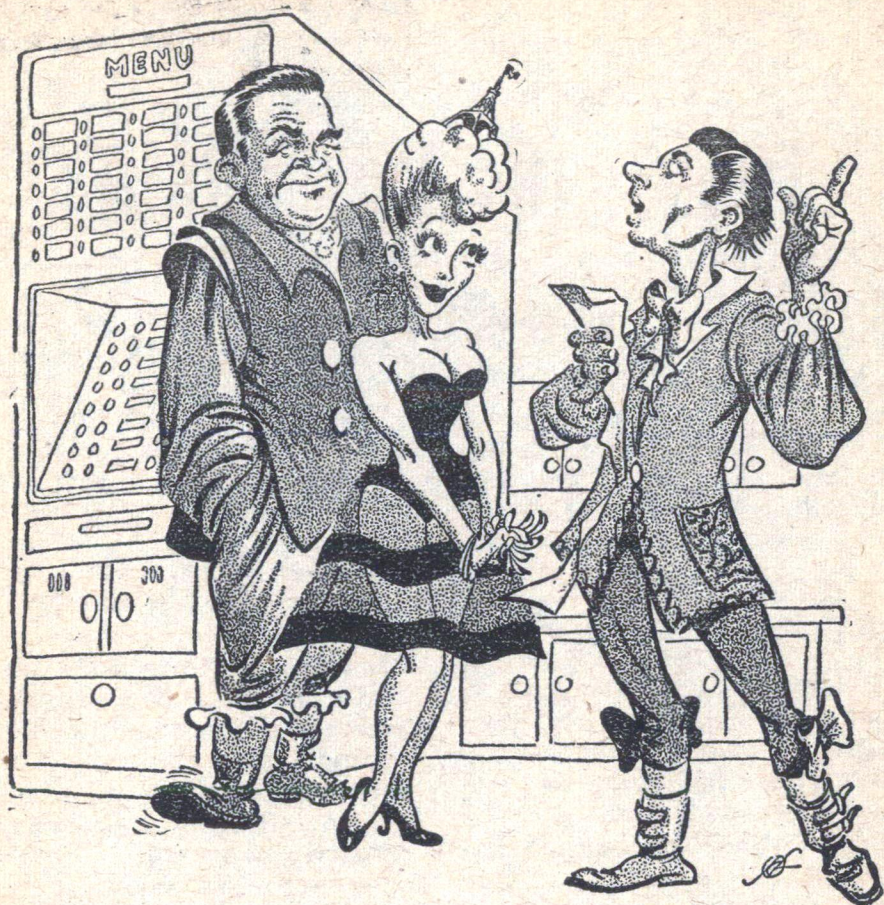
Nelda, the girl with the or-

chid hair, smiled dazzlingly. "Nonsense, Mr. Chesley; anyone can tell from your work that they must love you. Such poetry! Such taping technique!"

He smiled and sipped at his drink. "You're very kind, Miss Venner."

"Let's make it 'Nelda,' Mr. Chesley." Her eyes positively sparkled as she said it.

"Fair enough; let's make it 'Robin,' Nelda," Robin said, smiling back. He took another sip of the drink and looked around, studying the other guests. None of them seemed to be watching what was going on at the autobar. The hot little group of sculptors was still holding forth in one cor-



ner, standing around a gleaming post-Brancusi; the rest were engaged in energetic debates of their own. The man who had come with Nelda was talking to two other women at the far end of the living room.

He looked back down at the orchid-haired girl. "Why is it we've never met before?" he asked suddenly, bluntly.

SHE SMILED and started to say something clever, but never got her *mot* off. Mrs. Tedly, the hostess, hove into view, moving through the crowd like a battleship breasting the waves. "Robin! We have a question going! You must answer; you simply must!"

She grasped him firmly by the arm and propelled him

across the room, to where a group of older men was arguing over their drinks. Robin was gratified to see that Nelda was tagging along behind.

"Really," a fat, balding man was saying, "I hardly see how you can compare poetry with light-art. And a *novel*? Well—" He spread his hands, as if dismissing the whole concept.

A serious-looking, dark-haired young man frowned. "I don't think you're being objective, Lawrence. Tell me: what do you use? A Mark III Creative and Recreative Differential Integrator and Calculator, right? So do I. What's the difference?"

The man addressed as Lawrence closed his eyes and raised his eyebrows. "It isn't the tool one uses, my dear boy; it's the *product* one gets."

Mrs. Tedly maintained her firm grip on Robin's arm. "Robin, I want you to meet some people. The gentleman who is prattling about the superiority of light-art is Lawrence Kincaid; his opponent is Leslie Ferril, the novelist. Lawrence, Leslie, this is Robin Chesley, the poet. He's just arrived here to stay."

LESLIE FERRIL shot out his hand. "I've read your *'Chord From an Angel's Harp'*," he said. "Masterful

piece of work. You must tell me your theory of robot tapping some time."

Robin fished for something complimentary to say in return, but he couldn't for the life of him remember having read any of Ferril's work. Then a title popped into his head. "You did *'Carpenter's Rule'* didn't you?" he asked.

The young man beamed. "You liked it?"

"Very much," Robin replied, lying in his teeth.

"How did you like that ending? When that thing rolled out of my CARDIAC, I got a real thrill. The ending certainly surprised me."

I'll bet it did.

Lawrence Kincaid, looking mildly bored and mildly interested, ran a nervous hand through his thinning hair. "Are you working on a new book of verse, Mr. Chesley?"

Ferril frowned. "Poetry, Lawrence; *not* verse."

Robin didn't mind. "I think of it as verse myself," he said. "Yes, I am working on a new one. Sort of an emotional biography; it's to be called *'Chants of a Lifetime'*."

Kincaid considered that and smiled broadly, almost burying his eyes in his chubby cheeks. "I say! That's good! That's very good; I'll make a note of it. Do you follow any particular school of tapping?"

ROBIN FELT a twinge of shame, but concealed it. "Only my own," he said. "In the Congo, hobbies run more toward architecture—buildings and things, you know. I actually never had much contact with other poets until I came to New York."

"Buildings?" Kincaid's eyebrows went up again. "It doesn't seem as though they'd get much esthetic satisfaction from that."

"You'd be surprised," Robin told him. "There's a great deal of room, you see. People design their own houses, room by room, then integrate and feed the resulting tape to a Builder robot."

Ferril's purse-lipped face registered shock. "But—but, really Mr. Chesley, that's a *trade*! A—a profession! Surely you don't mean—"

"Things are a little different in Africa, Mr. Ferril," Robin said quietly. "We have some eccentrics who actually work with their hands."

There was a shocked silence, as Robin had known there would be. He felt glad he had shocked them; they were all such bores.

It was Nelda who broke the quiet. Diplomatically changing the subject, she asked, "Did you hear what happened to Sam Blenwyck?"

Kincaid nodded. "They caught him retouching; his

reputation's ruined, of course. Not that it ever was much, nor ever could have been, if he operated that way. Imagine any fool who would think he could paint better than a robot."

Go ahead, Robin thought. *Imagine one.*

"That's why I do light-art," Kincaid continued. "There's never any suspicion of hand-work there. Oh, it *could* be done, but it's much easier to retape if there's an error in your logic. It's almost impossible to tamper with a light-painter."

"That's the point he was driving at a minute ago," Ferril said to Robin. "He insists that light-art is the only true art, because it can't be forged. He says that poetry and novels are mere word juggling."

KINCAID patted the air with a hand. "Now, now: I'll admit that some first-rate material has been done, but I don't think it's necessarily art. Anyone can feed data like that into a memory bank."

"That's not true!" Nelda said hotly. Robin liked the way her eyes took fire as she spoke up. "People think that all a poet or a novelist has to do is put a dictionary into a CARDIAC, and push a button, and it all comes out right. But the individuality of a new work depends on the

person who puts in the data."

"Exactly," said Ferril. "I remember when I first tried it. I fed in all the old poetry that I liked, and a rhyming dictionary, and then taped in a program. You know what came out?" He struck a pose and declaimed.

*"Out of the night that
covers me,
And into the din and
the glare,
Black as the pit, a stran-
ger came,
Dog-dirty, and loaded for
bear."*

Lawrence Kincaid almost collapsed with laughter. "So you gave up with poetry and studied the novel, instead. A wise move!"

Ferril started to frame a heated retort, but Robin decided he'd had enough. "Excuse me a second," he said, just as Ferril was ready to unload. "I want to get another drink." He headed back to the autobar; he had the good sense to grab Nelda's wrist as he did.

"Double bourbon," he told the robot. The robot snickered, and gargled its reply.

"YOU KNOW, Robin," Nelda said suddenly, "I think you're one of the most fascinating men I know."

"That so?" Robin asked, downing the drink. "Why?"

"I don't quite know if I can

put my finger on it. I've read every one of your books, of course. You're one of the most famous poets in the world today; but you're awfully mysterious."

"Me? Mysterious? Why, I'm the most transparent man alive." Robin was secretly enjoying everything the girl said. He had had his eye on her ever since she'd arrived at Mrs. Tedly's party on the arm of a bored-looking beanpole of a man who'd promptly dumped her.

She shook her head, and Robin noticed the faint glimmer of synthetic diamonds in her orchid hair. "No, you're not. You don't act like most of the other poets I know."

"Ummm. A very acute observation," he said. "I'm *not* like the other poets you know. My stuff is good." He grinned.

"How modest you are!" she said, laughing gaily. He joined in her laughter, feeling a warm glow compounded equally of the whiskey within him and her friendliness to him, and the tingle of desire. He put his arm around her and guided her toward a door. "Let's sneak out in the kitchen," he said softly. "I don't want to argue with our light-art friend any more."

THE KITCHEN was silent and gloomy; there wasn't

even the comforting hum of the robocook, which had been shut off. Robin looked all around, then grinned conspiratorially. "I think we'd better not go out again for another drink. We'd get trapped by some boob who wants to talk."

"What are you going to do?"

"Watch." He turned on the kitchen's master switch. The robots buzzed and came to life. "Two glasses," Robin said to the pantry utensil sorter. "A bottle of bourbon," he told the pantry. "A quart of ice water," he said to the liquids dispenser.

When he had them all, he ordered a table and two chairs, which rolled into place from the furniture locker. He poured two drinks—with his own hands. The girl didn't say anything.

"I think I will make a poem to you," he said, when the drinks were ready.

"To me?" The dazzling smile came back. "Why, I think that's wonderful. You're sweet. But you're still mysterious."

"How so?"

"I guess you just don't act like a New Yorker."

"I suppose not," Robin said reflectively. "We do things differently in the Congo."

"Was it true—what you said about people working?"

"In a way," he hedged. "I

don't mean really *work*, you know; I made that crack just for the shock value."

She nodded. "I thought so. I mean, there's no reason for anyone to work, is there? Not with the robots around. It's like stealing things. It's not only indecent, it's so pointless."

"Yes, but we're not afraid to talk about our jobs in the Congo."

"No? But why? Oh, I don't think it's awful or anything; it's just so dull. Sure, everyone has to work for two hours a day; but the rest of the time, we do what we want to do—what we like to do. Why talk about two deadly dull hours a day?"

"Damned if I know," said Robin; "the hell with it. Let's talk about you. What do you do?"

SHE LOOKED at him, startled. "Why, to be frank, I run a medical tech robot."

"Please; now you're embarrassing me. I didn't mean that. I meant your hobby."

She smiled again. "I'm a poet, like you. Of course, I haven't done anything really good yet, but I feel that I'm approaching it."

"Good, good." He poured another brace of drinks.

"The thing that still bothers me," she said, is my tap-

ing technique. Evidently I'm missing something—something vital."

"Possibly.... Tell me: did you know you have beautiful eyes?"

"Thank you." She paused. "Tell me something—"

"Sure. Any little old thing at all," he said, smiling expectantly. When the question came, it jolted him.

"What sort of robot do you use for your poems?"

"What sort—I use a CARDIAC, like everyone else, of course. Why talk about such dreary things?" He reached out and took her hand, and held it out. She had mirror-polish on, and five distorted little images of his face leered up at him.

"I don't find them dreary," she said, softly chiding. "Poetry is the most important thing in my life. I'm working on sonnets these days, using the Petrarchan mode—but I find them leaning a little more toward Spenser. Have you ever read—"

"I think you could be the most important thing in my life," Robin said softly. "You're almost a poem yourself."

"That's beautiful," she said. "Do you really use a CARDIAC? I'm sure you must have redesigned it somehow."

HE FROWNED. "Believe me, there's nothing unusual about my robot. Must we keep talking about it?"

"I'm sorry; I don't mean to be a bore. I know how you feel about those dull people inside—"

As if on cue, the door burst open and Edmond Hillyer, Nelda's lanky escort, came in. "Oh, hello. You're Chesley, aren't you?"

Robin acknowledged the fact.

"I'm Hillyer—Edmond Hillyer. Poet." He turned to Nelda. "Should I read him the new one?"

"Please, Edmond," she said in annoyance.

"I will, anyway," Hillyer said. He drew forth a long, grimy sheet of paper and began to read:

*"From death to Thurs-
day is an infinity,
But October is further
away.
The sad silences of the
autumnal stars, dear,
Burn limpidly in my
heart,"*

"Fine stuff, Hillyer," Robin said brusquely. "I'd like to see more of your work some time. Would you excuse us, now?"

"But there's another fifty lines," Hillyer protested.

"Congratulations." Robin gently but firmly pushed

Hillyer through the door and turned back to Nelda.

"Awful, isn't it?" she said. "The poor boy works his CARDIAC to a frazzle, and that's the best it can do!"

"Don't be hard on him, Nelda. We may be sneering at the next Spenser." Robin took her hand again.

"WHERE DO you live?" she asked suddenly.

"On the East Drive," he replied, wondering what she was thinking of.

"Wouldn't you like to leave this dull old party, Robin? We could go over to your place, and—"

"Yes?" His eyes brightened, and then dulled again.

"No," he said. "Out of the question. My place is such a fright I wouldn't dare let you see it. But there's a hotel right nearby—"

"But your robot is at your place," she said. "We couldn't take it to the hotel, could we?" Then a look of outrage came into her eyes, and she turned a bright red.

"Some poet you are," she snapped angrily, close to tears. "Just like any common banker or business man! I know what's on your mind!"

She stalked out in a fury. Robin watched her go, amazed. After a while Hillyer came back in.

Robin greeted him glumly.

"Thought you might want to look at my poem some more, now that Nelda's gone," Hillyer said.

"Sure." He took the manuscript and skimmed it cursorily. It was more of the same, sheer incomprehensible rot. He handed it back.

"You have great promise," he said solemnly; "keep it up." He stared at the other. "Looks like Nelda is angry with me."

"I think you disappointed her," Hillyer said coldly.

"I'm a stranger here; I don't know all the local customs yet. Tell her I'm sorry I offended her, will you, like a good chap?"

Hillyer nodded. Robin left him standing there, still nodding, and got his coat from the door robot.

Mrs. Tedly bustled up to him. "Leaving already, Robin! Why, you've only just arrived!"

He stared at her soulfully. "I must leave immediately, with many regrets. I have an inspiration, you see; I must get home and—and feed it to my CARDIAC."

"Oh! How wonderful! I shan't delay you, then. But do come back soon, will you, Robin?"

"Of course, dear." He pressed her hands fondly and made a hasty retreat.

SHE LOVES me for my robot, Robin thought bitterly, as he walked home, deliberately disdaining any public conveyances. *That's what I get for hanging around with that crowd of crazy esthetes. All she wanted out of me was a chance to feed some poetry through my CARDIAC.*

The night was cool and he pulled his shabby overcoat tighter around him. A policeman came by, wearing a light but self-heating jacket. Robin greeted him, looking enviously at the jacket, wishing he could afford one.

Love my robot, love me first. Damned crazy esthetes—

FINALLY, he reached his apartment. Still shaking his head about Nelda, he pressed his thumb against the plate and the door slid open.

"Grunk? Quazznok?" his robot said, as he entered.

"Grunk to you," Robin re-

plied, "you useless piece of junk." He threw his coat down on the bed and walked to the window, then walked back, picked up the coat, and draped it over the robot.

"There. Be useful for once. You make a fine coatrack."

He sat down at his desk and looked around him. The apartment, like all personal units, was nicely decorated. The robocook worked fine, since the subsidies covered it. But nobody repaired a CARDIAC for free; a person was supposed to supply his own hobby material.

Hobby, he thought. Some hobby. And some robot.

He grinned despite himself. Wouldn't Nelda have been surprised to find that he had no job, that he actually earned his living writing poetry? Horrors!

None of those phony sculptors and novelists had any

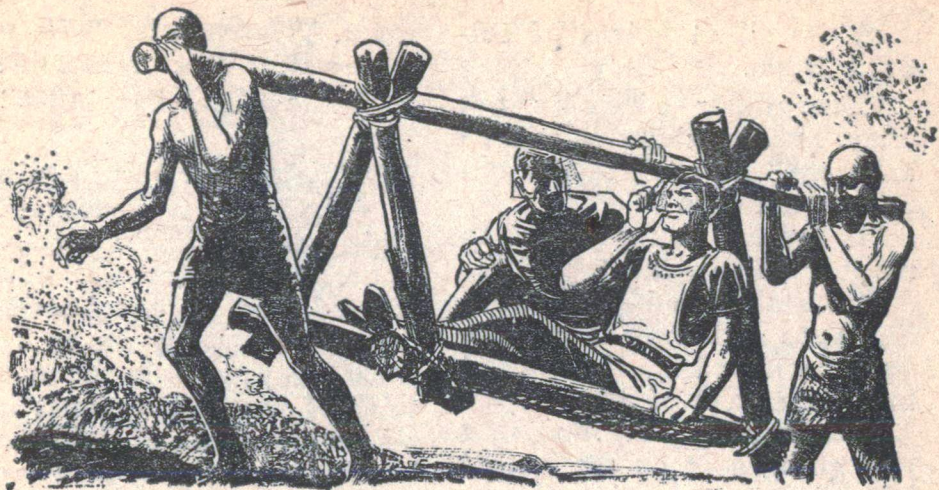
[Turn To Page 126]

There's a neat problem to be solved in **Robert Randall's** latest space-service novelet. We refer to

DEUS EX MACHINA

and it's only one of the headliners in the November issue of

SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY



THE MESSIAHS

by ALFRED McCOY ANDREWS

illustrated by LUTON

Primitive peoples have often taken civilized folk for gods, so perhaps otherworld humanoids might make the same convenient error. But there are so many kinds of gods...

THE SHIP ran just under the speed of light in a place where there is no light; deep space. It was a small four hundred ton cargo carrier. Hawkes watched the control-board carefully as it cried out yellow, red, green and white

with its silent voices of colored lights.

"Everything checks out okey, Marlin; this trip will be a breeze," he said, to the tall man at his side.

"A breeze, you say, but to me it is an ill wind."

Hawkes turned to Marlin, his eyes grinding him like steel heels and his lips pulled into the curves of a sneer.

"For crying out loud, are you going soft on me again! What are you griping about; you have a stack of credits in the bank a light-year high?"

"It isn't the money, Hawkes; there is such a thing as ethics."

Hawkes laughed, but there was no humor in it. It was a laugh of ridicule and disgust. Then his voice took to turning the burning blade of torment deeper in the wound.

"Dr. Marlin, big man, big ethics; well, don't forget this. You were a disbarred bum; a snow-bird hooked on the needle, till I picked you out of the gutter. Who was it that burned up years in this black hell? Who was it that found Dundune? Dundune, a little bit of nowhere, thrown in among a thousand crazy orbiting planets whirling around a double-sun. A mote of cosmic garbage, inhabited by a few hundred low-grade natives and a giant lode of siri-

dium. Who was it? Who was it, my dear Doctor Marlin?"

"I know, Hawkes, but—"

"**Y**EAH, AND *but* again. I had been prospecting for eight years before I hit Dundune. No one knew Dundune existed, and no one knows it now; and I am going to keep it that way; back in the mountains of that little planet is a mile-wide streak of siridium. I barely made it back to the ship with those natives screaming bloody hell at my heels. They would have sliced me like bread if they had ever caught me. Then I blasted off to Sol-Side.

"I'm the one who picked you out of the gutters of Earth and brought you upstairs; and I'm the one who kept you off the needle until you found what I wanted. Eight months I kept pushing you and your experiments until you came up with the right answer. But I'll hand it to you, Doc, you finally found it; pentol, the only drug in the universe that would make those demon devils hit the dreams and behave. So we pumped a few of the natives we captured with it and turned them loose. It didn't take long before they all were begging for the stuff, and we were their Gods of the Dreams. And I was the lad

that gave them the pitch: dig siridium for us, and we will give you the potion that makes the beautiful dreams."

"That's just it, Hawkes; they're killing themselves digging that ore."

"**A**LL RIGHT, let them die, just as long as they dig me a payload of a hundred and fifty tons every six months; they'll die happy, anyway. What do you want me to do, Marlin, set up a modern mining process on Dundune? I'm not that stupid. Siridium is a metal that no one knew about fifty years ago; then they found slight traces of it in the Mars-Jovian asteroid belt. Now it's worth more than gold. If I bought a lot of mining equipment, the World Government would start checking and snooping; then one sweet day they would crack down so fast we wouldn't know what hit us.

"But I let the natives dig it, then bring it in slowly. The secret plant refines that hundred and fifty tons of ore down to one hundred pounds of top-grade siridium; and we black-market it slowly—but at very fancy prices. I pay those two greedy-fisted customs officers plenty to check it through customs as though it were low tax moon-

dust. So, I advise you not to go holy on me!"

Sam Marlin's eyes stared at the tiny heat cracks in the deck, as though they were trying to burrow into them, and carry his mind with them. "All right, Hawkes, it's your show; but why do you still want me?"

"It's simple, Doc; with the weird metabolism those natives have, they might become immune to the pentol injections. They may be humanoid in form, but they're still alien. So if the stuff stops working, you have the data on them, and it would be easier for you to find something new. Anyway, Doc, you know too much—as they say—to be cut loose."

MARLIN looked out into the depths of blackness, and the little diamond-lights of stars seemed to laugh sinfully at a broken man. There was no way out as long as Johnny Hawkes wanted him in.

"Don't look so somber, Doc; we're gods you know."

"Yes, but even gods die."

It was hard to tell whether that was a prayer or a remark.

Light-years out, the little ship used its directional thrusts to establish an orbit, then began backing down on

its screaming rockets. In a few minutes, the ship had settled on the sun-strown south plain of Dundune, and its stems sneaked from its hull as its gyros worked to bring the ship into a horizontal position. Once the stems touched ground they began to retract in unison, so that finally the ship lay with its belly on the soft sands ready for the loading of its cargo holds. Hawkes and Marlin put on tinted goggles to guard against the glare of the double suns, and climbed down to the ground. Hawkes' eyes swept the area on all sides with annoyance.

"Where the hell are those devils? They're supposed to be here every sixteen sun-turns with the carts loaded with ore to fill the holds."

"Maybe, they've all died pulling those heavy carts," Marlin said softly, but with meaning.

"Shut up! When I want your ethical thoughts I'll ask for them. Bring the injection kits, but they'll get no shots until those holds are filled. We might as well go into the village and see what the devil is going on."

"Hawkes, I don't like this."

"So, who asked you. Come on, and get the lead out!"

The two men started their long walk to the village; yel-

lowish sand slipping and sliding like demons underfoot. It had been necessary to put the ship down on the plains; to the north, volcanic action in its rage had spewed mountains into the air, cut great, long gorges in the land and tumbled the terra into a marl of madness. The siridium lode lay fairly deep in the body of the mountains, and working with only picks and shovels in those heat-traps was pain and torture. Hawkes had brought the natives little; picks and shovels, hammers and nails and wood to build the hauling carts. The cost was frugal, and the returns were fabulous.

THE TWO gods walked into the village. It was quiet and still, as though some hand had shut off the power of living and all things rested in haunting inertia. There was no sign of life from any quarter. The gods walked slowly.

"Damn it, where are they?"

"Hawkes, there is something strange here. I don't like it."

Before Hawkes could answer, they turned a corner and were suddenly confronted by the natives of Dundune. There were some five hundred in one massive

group. They were tall, powerful men, but their bodies showed the gauntness brought on by the toil in the mountains. Their bluish skin was sheened in sweat. Marlin and Hawkes stopped short, startled by their sudden appearance. The natives moved forward quickly, and before either could do or say anything, they were lifted up on to a rudely-constructed litter, borne on the shoulder of four natives.

"Good Lord, Hawkes, what are they doing with us?"

"I don't know; I—"

Hawkes was unsure and rattled, then his eyes caught the look on the faces below him. They were all smiling and jabbering; there was an unmistakable tenor of great joy running through the whole body.

"Sit down, Marlin; there's nothing to worry about. This is just some new ceremony they have thought up to honor their God of the Dreams; sit back and act as if you expected it, you holy idiot."

"I don't know, Hawkes."

"Well, I do; sit back and keep your mouth shut."

As the natives bore the litter up towards the hills, Hawkes became more sure that this unexpected turn of events was just an honoring

ceremony. History proved it didn't it? Give ignorant people a god, and in no time they were building god-like idols, making mystic signs and paying all sorts of homage to their newly found deity. Why this was really a stroke of luck; he could even demand a bigger payload and there would be no back-talk.

The joyous procession ended its march as it reached the brow of a low, wide hill. The litter was lowered and the two gods stepped off. The gods were suddenly seized by many hands, and their clothes were ripped from their bodies. The gods struggled, but to no avail; and as the joy-filled crowd parted Hawkes saw...

SPACE-BISHOP Kentrell guided his small cruiser through the loneliness of the Creator's star-flecked universe, yet there was no loneliness in his heart. It was his mission to carry the Gospel to any living souls that he might find during his travels. True, there were times when he felt weary of this duty, but these were dispelled when he did find some isolated races who had never heard the Gospel. And tonight he felt repaid for all the dreary stretches of loneliness, for he had only a few

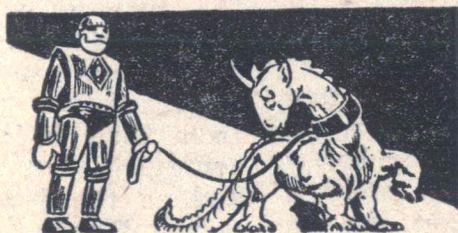
hours ago rocketed up from the tiny planet, Dundune. There he had preached the message to the natives; of course, they had some heathen gods, which they told him of in sort of sign-language, for that was the way he had talked to them. But he had explained that a

god was not really a great god unless he died for his people. And they had seemed fascinated by the beautiful pictures of the Messiah on the Cross. Why, even now, perhaps they were doing some good deed.

Yes, perhaps, they were.

Tools Of The Trade

(Continued From Page 120)



real talent; they had no idea of what to feed into a memory bank, or how to tape a CARDIAC properly. But they went right on doing it because they had soft, well-paying jobs on the side.

He looked at his own useless robot and sighed. It had done pretty well until he'd burned out the memory coils. He would have liked to have it replaced, but who ever heard of a poet with money?

He thought of Nelda with the light purple hair.

"Urgle," said the CARDIAC.

"Exactly," Robin agreed. "I hope every girl I meet in New York doesn't want to come up and see my busted robot."

Oh, well, he thought, at the rate his stuff had been selling since the CARDIAC went on the fritz, maybe he could get it fixed soon.

He rolled another sheet of paper into the ancient, battered manual typer and began to tap the keys.

"The soul of man—if soul it is—

Can not be bound by tubes and steel..."



Here was a girdle which really did the unbelievable for a woman . . .

THE STRETCH

by SAM MERWIN Jr.

(author of "Day After Fear")

NITA BARENTZ was lissom as a flame, and cold as dry ice. At the moment of barging into Paul Carden's office, she was angry as a quadruple scoop of hot lava. Flinging the nylon-and-lastex girdle on his unoffending desk, she said, in her flat, husky Manhattan contralto, "What are you trying to do now, Cardy—strangle me?"

Since, at the moment, Carden was in the process of selling his next year's line of foundation garments to a pair of chain-store buyers from the Middle West, he considered her suggestion with something like pleasure. But since Nita Barentz was un-

questionably the best girdle-display machine in the whole garment district, and was continually receiving enticing offers from his bitterest rivals in a cutthroat business, he sighed and picked up the offending girdle and asked her what was wrong with it.

"*Wrong with it!*" Nita's contralto rose a full notch. "Don't ask me—ask those Comanche-cut geniuses who design these instruments of torture. It pulls me this way"—with definitive hip-wriggle—"this way"—with another—"and *this* way at once. It makes me feel all torn up."

"That will be enough hula

dancing during office hours," said Carden, removing his cigar. "Report to Miss Herrin and get something else to model."

He watched, not unappreciatively, the indignant flirt of non-existent bustle with which Nita left the room. With an inward sigh, he saw that the two buyers were looking longingly after her. It was going to be quite a trick to get them back into the proper detachment of a buying mood. He got up, opened the cellarette against the far wall. He said, "Well, gentlemen, what'll it be?"

WHEN THEY were gone, he tested the offending girdle, even held it against his own mid-section in front of the mirror. It looked all right, it felt all right. It had both firmness and plenty of stretch. A little later, he summoned Miss Herrin and asked her if there had been any other complaints.

Bluebell Herrin, a large and very Junoesque ex-model who had graduated to higher estate as display manager for Cardenwear, shook her head and said, "I don't know what got into Nita, darling. You know how unpredictable she is."

"That's what I like about you, Bluebell," he said, slipping

an arm about her willing waist. "You're always right on the beam."

Bluebell looked pleased. Then a hint of worry flickered across her smooth forehead. She said, with the trace of a pout, "I hoped you called me in to tell me you'd changed your mind about taking me to the Copa opening tomorrow night."

Carden sighed and said, "Honey, you know we can't risk being seen together in a place like that. Someone would be bound to tell Letitia, and then the fat would really be in the fire. We'll have to stick to your apartment. And that's not too bad, is it, honey?"

It was Bluebell's turn to sigh. She said, "Of course not, honey, but it's a hell of a way for a girl to waste the best years of her life."

"Don't worry, baby," said Carden, on familiar ground. "It won't last forever. Something's got to give soon."

"Meanwhile it seems to be me that does all the giving," said Bluebell, moving clear of his one-arm encirclement and sedately toward the door. Carden looked after her, frowning. All too evidently, this wasn't his day.

BECAUSE he was feeling mean, and because the gir-

dle was still there on his desk at the end of the day, Carden had it wrapped up and took it home as a present to his wife. Letitia, plump and popeyed as usual, examined it with a distressed look and said, "It's very thoughtful of you, Paul, but I don't see how you expect me to get into it."

"Try," he said. "It's the latest thing." Like all successful makers of women's foundation garments, he possessed a sound streak of sadism. While he shaved, he listened with almost seraphic expression to the grunts and gasps of anguish that sounded sporadically from the bedroom at his back. He hurried through his shaving, anticipating a ringside view of the contest. Wife versus girdle—the battle of the century.

But when he finished mopping lotion dry and turned, he saw that, in some miraculous way, Letitia had won. She was actually wearing the girdle, standing before the pier glass and studying with disbelief the new trimness it gave her overfull hips, the phenomenal absence of compensating bulges.

"Darling!" she said, seeing his reflection. "I don't know how you've done it, but this is—is... *Unngh!*" She made a strange, spasmodic, writhing movement that Carden had never seen matched in bur-

lesque hall or stag smoker.

"O-o-oh!" she gasped. "Yipe!" Undulating like a plump anaconda, she blinked furiously to keep sudden tears from spoiling her mascara.

"Hey!" Carden was alarmed. "Better take it off if it's not comfortable."

To which Letitia replied, somehow controlling another spasm, "Are you out of your mind?"

THE FOLLOWING evening, when he took Letitia to the Copa, she had things under control. Happily, she whispered while they were dancing, "I'm getting used to it. And did you see the way Mr. Markell looked at me just now?"

"That wolf!" said Carden self-righteously. Letitia giggled and wriggled happily in perfect mambo rhythm.

That night, after they got home, she disappeared. When Carden, wearing his pajamas and a case of heartburn, entered the bathroom to brush his teeth, his wife, clad only in the new girdle, was happily looking at herself in the pier glass. When he emerged, ready for bed, she had vanished.

Only the girdle remained, lying crumpled and clueless on the wall-to-wall carpeting

The police talked of everything from another man to murder. The papers talked of Charley Ross and Judge Crater. Bluebell didn't talk about anything for a while. She merely looked at Paul Carden with an expression blended of worship and fear. Two weeks later, at the next Copa opening, she shared Carden's table.

LATER, in the privacy of her apartment, she said, "Paul, we don't have to go on like this now, do we? I mean, it all seems so furtive and sordid. I should think, with all the money Letitia left you, you could—well, we could afford something a little better."

"Did you see the size of that check I signed at the Copa?" he asked, aggrieved. "Get smart, baby. I've still got the cops on my tail. I don't know what happened to Letitia any more than they do—but they think I do. And if I give them any cause for suspicion..." He drew the edge of a hand significantly across his throat.

"Honey, you can tell me." She was close to him, almost overpowering him with the clouds of perfume that emanated from her lush ex-model's body. "What really *did* happen?"

He said, "If I knew, don't you think I'd tell you?"

And she said, "Oh, honey, I don't know. That depends..."

He looked at her narrowly and said harshly, "Then you think like the cops do—that I murdered her."

She turned to jelly under his stern regard.

AS TIME went on, Carden began to consider himself a lucky man. Thanks to the conditions of Letitia's disappearance, he would not be able to marry again for seven years—unless her body were found. Which, he thought, God forbid.

If he had to wait that long to inherit her fat estate, well, he still had the business and it was booming. Apparently, being suspected of having murdered his wife made him more interesting to deal with, rather than a pariah. He invented a whole new line of foundation garments, labeled them with somewhat sinister humor, *Invisible*. They sold like a flash fire.

If his domestic life was hardly ideal, it had not been perfection before. In fact, as time wore on and Bluebell's demands grew greater, he began to compare her unfavorably to Letitia. He even began to talk about it. "Look at you," he said one night when

They were again in her apartment. "You're letting yourself go all to hell. You're getting rolls—and bulges. And you work for me, a girdle maker."

She began to cry and said, "It runs in my family; we all get fat after thirty. What can I do about it, Paul? What can I do?"

He looked at her with contempt. Then, as he turned away, he remembered the girdle that had done such wonders for Letitia, just before she disappeared. The next day, he had it dug out of the drawer in which it had been reposing, neatly folded, had it rewrapped and presented it to Bluebell.

"This may not be very comfortable at first," he told her, "but it will do wonders for you. You need a miracle. Here it is."

He wondered what it would do for her—certainly it had made the departed Letitia almost palatable. And, fugitively, he wondered if it would make Bluebell disappear, too.

THE NEXT day, when Bluebell came to work, she confessed to Carden that the girdle was killing her. "It makes me feel pulled all out of shape," she said, twisting a little.

"Throw it away then," he

growled, eyeing her regained trimness of figure.

"Are you crazy?" she asked him, her blue eyes dancing. "Look what it does for me!"

Rolling the cigar in the corner of his mouth, he had to admit, grudgingly at first and then with rising interest, that it did make her look ten years younger of body—and Bluebell had always been young of face. He said, "Wait for me tonight, baby. I'll drop by about midnight."

She said, "Oh, Paul—*darling!*" She kissed him warmly and trailed out, humming a little happy tune to herself. At the doorway, she turned and said, "It's beginning to feel a lot better on me already. It's just a matter of getting used to it."

Scrubbing lipstick from his mouth with a handkerchief, Carden heard an inner alarm bell ring. The pattern was getting alarmingly close to that preceding Letitia's still unexplained disappearance. What if Bluebell...?

When he reached her apartment, that midnight, he had decided to tell her to throw the damned thing away. But he was too late. Bluebell had vanished. Her blue-satin negligee and furred mules lay in a little heap in the center of her living-room floor. And, in the midst of the pathetic pile

of clothing, was the girdle. Carden scooped it up and stuffed it into his overcoat pocket. Then he got out of there—fast...

HE RETURNED to the party he had unobtrusively left a few minutes earlier, thus establishing an ironclad alibi—since no one else had seen him enter or leave Bluebell's apartment, two short blocks away. It was a good thing he did so, for the cops, baffled by his connection with a second disappearance, were far more difficult to deal with. But, since they had no shred of evidence involving Carden, they were finally forced to give up.

Carden, frightened, behaved very well for a couple of months. Then, one afternoon, while discussing a display with Nita Barentz, who had fallen heir to Bluebell's job, he found himself asking her for a date that evening.

Nita regarded him critically over a cigaret. She said, "Six months ago, I'd have said yes and you know it. Now"—she blew a perfect smoke ring—"I don't see the point. I've got the job I want and you've gotten fat—too fat."

Carden blinked. His chair did embrace his hips more snugly than it had in the past.

And the waistband of his well cut trousers was cutting its daily red furrow in the flesh beneath. He said, knowing all at once that he wanted Nita as he had never wanted another woman in his life, "Honey, if I go on a diet and shed some lard, how about it?"

She blew another smoke ring, sat on the edge of his desk, revealing the impeccable slimness of her own hip-line. She said, "I don't think you can make it, Cardy-boy. I've seen you stowing away the Chateaubriand with Bearnaise sauce. But if you do, I'll give it a spin. Let's face it—we're both heels and we might hit it off. Birds of a feather, and all that..."

Carden reached for his phone. "I'm joining an exercise club right now," he told her.

"You do that little thing," she said, with amusement in her light green eyes. Was there also a lurking affection? Carden tried desperately to sell himself on the idea. And, if he was nothing else, he was a very good salesman.

HE EXERCISED, he dieted, he starved—and, at the end of ten days, he was five ounces lighter. In his fury and frustration, he all but stamped on the bathroom

scales. He was not, he told himself miserably, cut out for the life of a monk. He put his hands over the dome of his belly, seeking to squeeze it flat. He failed. He thought of Nita, so alluring, so casual, so hard to get—for him at any rate. He moaned.

Something was going to have to be done.

He pawed through his pajamas, pulled up the paper at the bottom of the drawer. There it was, a little creased and crumpled, a little the worse for wear—but not much—the girdle that had done so much for Letitia and Bluebell, just before they had disappeared.

He weighed it in his hand, marvelling at its lightness. A damned fine piece of goods, even if he did say so himself. He didn't want to vanish like his wife and mistress. But if they had been just a little more careful, if their vanity hadn't caused them to wear it all the time...

So it was a woman's garment—did that mean he couldn't wear it? Carden, as the manufacturer, knew damned well that he could. Gripping his cigar tightly between his teeth, he held it low, stepped into it, pulled it up around his hips.

Save for its absurdity as a woman's garment on his

male body, the girdle proved a magical cure for Carden's obesity. The convex curve of his stomach was miraculously flattened into a verisimilitude of its youthful contour. He eyed himself in the pier glass, thinking, *Look out, Nita, here we come...*

"Yeeeeow!" He almost shouted as anguish seized him. He felt as if his legs were being pulled from his body at impossible angles. He twisted and the pain was gone, stooped to pick up his bitten-through cigar from the carpet. And it hit him again, seeming to pull his insides outside. He gasped and grunted, feeling sweat burst out all over him. But even so, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and was both flattered and pleased by what he saw.

He tore it off and, without again glancing at his reflection, flung himself on the bed. He was going to need his sleep. The morrow promised to be a difficult day.

HE WAS gritting his teeth against sporadic discomfort when Nita entered his office. She said, "Cardy, what are you planning for the—" She stopped, her mouth half open, began to prowl around him like a big, sleek jungle cat around her

prey. She said, "What happened to you? You look wonderful."

"I told you I'd do it," he said, somehow managing to make his voice sound normal. "For you, I think I'd to anything. I can tell you this—it ain't easy."

"Poor Paul," she said, patting his shoulder. Then she said, "Well, I'm off for the day."

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

She paused, spoke over her shoulder. "If I'm having dinner with you tonight, Cardy, I'm going to give myself the works. See you at seven."

He opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. The girdle was still giving him fits. Fortunately, with Nita absent, there was a huge pile of orders and displays to occupy his attention. Not until six-thirty, that evening, did he draw a deep breath. And by then, to his mixed terror and delight, the girdle felt almost comfortable on him.

He looked at his watch and frowned. He could hardly afford to remove it now, and show himself to Nita in all his averdupois; nor could he continue wearing it forever, lest he suffer the same fate as had befallen Letitia and Bluebell. He had, he decided, until

midnight. Cinderella in a glass girdle, he thought. When he asked the doorman downstairs to summon him a pumpkin coach, the man looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

NITA LOOKED enchanting as she opened the door for him. She said, "I thought it would be nice to have a drink here before we went out. Wait for me in the living room. I've got everything ready in the kitchenette."

He entered, owning the earth. Knowing Nita, he knew she wouldn't really care how plump he was in private—as long as he displayed a svelteness consistent with her own in public. He stood in front of a gilt-framed mirror and patted his vanished bulge complacently. The girdle was almost comfortable, almost—if he could just give it one little wrench, he felt certain he could forget he had it on.

He gave it a little wrench...

HE WAS standing in what looked like the inside of a kaleidoscope. Bizarre shapes and colors rose on all sides of him, opaque, transparent. They fused or belled out into a sort of grey nothingness above him in a manner

utterly incomprehensible to him.

A figure that looked about as human as a sculptor's wire armature for a statue slid out of nowhere and a voice—or was it a voice?—sounded in his head. It said, "Oh, Lord! *Another* of them—and this one a man. How'd it happen, please?"

"Where am I?" said Carden, stupified.

"You're in New York, of course," was the reply. "But you'd better put on some clothes before you're arrested."

Some strange looking fabrics in even stranger designs and colors were handed him. As he looked down at his own limbs, he was almost paralyzed with terror. Nita had wanted him thin—but not this thin. He, too, looked like the mere twisted wire framework of a human being. He said, "Stop fooling, will you? What's going on around here?"

"That's what I'd like to know," was the reply and somehow Carden derived a distinct impression that this was a female of the species. "So will the authorities, I guess. Did you come through via that misplaced three-way-stretch girdle?"

"*Three-way-stretch!*" Carden gulped. "There's no such

thing. It's impossible; in a three-dimensional world..." He stopped talking as the full implications sank home to him.

"Is this the fourth dimension?" he asked quaveringly.

"You might call it that," was the reply. "Come on, whatever your name is. I've got to get you downtown to the authorities. If my husband should find out that..." She left the rest of it hanging.

"You know," she added, helping him into the strange garments, "you're the third person who's come through in the past several lunars. It seems there was a mistake in the garment center and a girdle slipped through. Two women adjusted to it and made the jump. If you came the same way, what were you—a man—doing with it on?"

LETITIA and Bluebell here ahead of him. The prospect was terrifying. He said, "My dear, do you have to turn me in? I mean—isn't there some other way of handling this? I promise you, if people wear girdles here, I can manufacture them. Why not help me get started." He squinted at her with what he hoped were his eyes, added, "I could do wonders for your figure—not that it needs

much help, of course. But just a little added here, a little taken off there... It might prove profitable to us both."

The sound she made could only be laughter. She said, "How do you manage to keep so delightfully fat without a girdle? All the men I know are thin as rails. Why, without their girdles, they're nothing."

"It's a knack," he said modestly, trying to assimilate the eerie appearance of his hostess.

"It must be." She took two strange-looking cones from some sort of container, offered him one. Following her, he put the pointed end in his mouth, inhaled. It was some sort of fourth dimensional cigaret—and it tasted a lot better than it looked.

He said, "Your husband...?"

And she said, "Who? Oh, my husband. Don't worry about *him*. But I'll have to take you downtown, I'm afraid. Then, when you're all straightened out, perhaps we can make plans."

"Sure," he said. "Sure—I'm looking forward to it already." But he knew when he was licked. And besides, if Letitia and Bluebell looked like his hostess, it wasn't going to make very much difference. He wondered what was going to happen if Nita tried the girdle. It would be a donnybrook.

But Nita wasn't the sort of girl to need a girdle for a long time to come.



3 SUSPENSEFUL MYSTERIES

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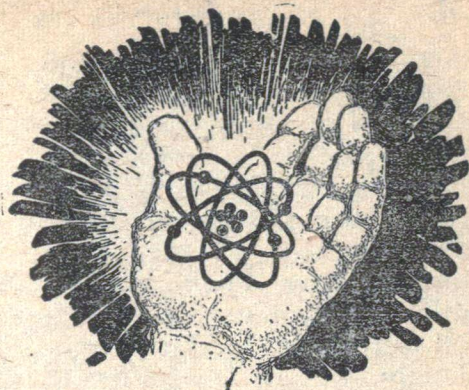
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Editorial



A FACT IS A FACT IS A FACT . . .

THE TROUBLE with definitions is that they just won't stay put. When, after much argument, you have made it clear to a group of people exactly what you meant by various terms and phrases over which disagreement arose; when everyone present has shown that they now "get what you meant", and agree that your definition of your terms and phrases was legitimate—what do you have? You have a specific agreement to the effect that, on a given date, in the presence of so-and-so, John Doe employed the terms A, B, and C, etc., and phrases 1, 2, and 3, etc., to be understood in the sense of A1, B1, and C1, etc., and 1a, 2a, and 3a, etc., respectively. Does this mean that terms A, B, and C, etc., now "*mean*" A1, B1,

and C1, etc; or that John Doe, and/or those who concurred with him on the "given date" will hereafter "*mean*" A1 by A, etc? Of course not! The whole process will have to be gone through each time.

When a new edition of a—"a", *not* "*the*"—dictionary is made up, how does the editorial staff decide upon the definitions to be listed under any given word—whether they will be the same as last time, or whether additions, subtractions, and various amendments will take place? By the definitions they learned in college? By what they "*know*" to be correct? Not if the intent in publishing a new edition is to be of any general public use, they don't! The job of a dictionary's editorial staff is to determine, as accurately as pos-

sible, the most common usage of terms, as well as special meanings in specific contexts, and so on. ("I know what 'it' means well enough, when I find a thing," said the Duck: "it's generally a frog, or a worm.") Any dictionary which fails to note this special definition for "it" is obviously of little value to ducks, frogs, and worms.)

In fact, as Larry Shaw once pointed out, there is only one place in which you'll find 100% accurate, stable definitions—in the complete and unabridged dictionary of a dead language, and I mean *really* dead. (No fair bringing in Latin, which is still in use, and in use creatively, even though limited in circulation.)

YOU WILL find the term "science fiction" in only one dictionary; that is the "Avon Webster English Dictionary and Pocket Library of Encyclopedic Information" where, on page 342 we read: "*science-fiction*: fantastic stories based on science." This definition won't satisfy very many science-fictionists; nor in particular would it satisfy John W. Campbell, Jr., who might, however, settle for "prophetic fiction based on science".

I base this supposition on an article by Mr. Campbell

"Science Fiction And The Opinion Of The Universe" which appears in the May 12 1956 issue of *Saturday Review*. Such a definition is supportable—and is in fact 100% accurate and unassailable through the process known as the von Nagel reduction.*

Now, as has been noted before, science deals with facts, and with the manipulation of facts to (seeming) advantage. That "(seeming)" is a necessary qualification, because the judgement of "advantage" necessarily takes place after the manipulation. Campbell notes that "*The scientist lives hard against the inflexible, rigid facts of the Universe: opinions don't do him the slightest bit of good. It doesn't matter what his opinion is, or what anybody else's opinion is, has been, or will be.*"

HOWEVER, we must differentiate between "opinion as to what the facts are," and "opinion as to how the facts can best be manipulated to (seeming) advantage." In "The Cold Equations", the facts were: (a) if the stow-away were cast out into

**Astounding Science Fiction* certainly owes its discerning readers an article dealing with von Nagel's priceless discoveries.

space, then the EDS ship could fulfill its vital mission; (b) casting the stowaway adrift meant certain death to stowaway; (c) if the stowaway were not cast out, the EDS ship would crash; (d) not casting the stowaway out meant certain death to the stowaway, and certain death to the pilot of the EDS ship, and inevitable destruction of the ship, and most probably death to the expedition which needed the supplies the ship carried; (e) either way, the stowaway was doomed.

Opinion as to these facts, was irrelevant. Opinion as to the manipulation of these

facts to (seeming) advantage was what made the human conflict in the story. Scientifically speaking, only one such manipulation was relevant—casting the stowaway adrift. Humanly speaking, one had to recognize the *existence* of opinion protesting the facts.

This conflict between facts and opinions of both types—the tendency to believe that what shouldn't be, according to the human desires of a situation, really can't be; and the attempt to manipulate acknowledged facts to (seeming) advantage—lies at the heart of all fiction, not merely of science fiction alone. Not

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merely science fiction, that is, in the definition we have assumed for the sake of this essay.

Campbell quotes a very typical criticism of science fiction. "*The characters are inhuman, robot-like automata, lacking normal human motivation.*" Now, I submit that there are at least two possible interpretations of this complaint. One: Fiction should show people triumphant over facts; therefore, when the facts seem to indicate an unacceptable dilemma (as in "*The Cold Equations*") the characters should not submit to them like robots, but rather refuse to accept them as valid. The story should show the triumph of this demonstration of dauntless human character. Two: In the real world, people cannot always overcome hostile facts, but must often submit to them; in fiction however—and particularly science fiction—the characters should, through the exercise of ingenuity, perseverance, faith, hope, and charity etc., succeed in manipulating these hostile facts to their advantage.

NOW IT IS perfectly true that at times, in real life, a refusal to accept the "facts" in the situation as final has resulted in triumph over a hostile situation. What the

proponents of this thesis of the necessities for presenting "human motivation" in fiction overlook is *why* such triumph was possible in these instances. Success was possible, simply because *all the relevant, crucial facts* in the situation were not known, or taken into account. And the same explanation applies to situations in real life where acceptance of the facts has led to manipulation of them to advantage.

History, however, is cluttered with tragic and horrifying instances where non-acceptance of the facts (either through denial of them, or through confidence that they could somehow be manipulated to advantage) has resulted in the worst consequences of the situation, rather than the best possible. (Very probably, most of the passengers of the *Titanic* could have been saved if the *opinion*, "*The Titanic is unsinkable and therefore could not possibly be calling for help,*" had not led to an automatic rejection of the *fact* that the *Titanic* was indeed calling for help. Very probably, more of the passengers could have been saved if the facts, accepted by the captain—that the *Titanic* was sinking—had been manipulated to better advantage. As it was,

most of the lifeboats were not filled to capacity.)

In order to qualify, fundamentally, as science fiction, the characters in a story must—in the payoff crisis, at least—subordinate their opinions of what they feel ought to be to a recognition of the facts as they are and try to manipulate the facts to (seeming) advantage.

But, in order to qualify as character, rather than "robot-like automata, lacking in normal human motivation" our characters must have opinions, some of which may conflict with the facts and may lead to (a) reluctance to accept the facts (b) disagreement as how best to manipulate them, or both.

THIS IS not, positively not, fictional makeshift. Show me the scientist in real life who does not have "opinions"

about matters outside the province of his own particular field, which do not take the facts in the larger area into consideration, or which deny the facts. Show me the scientist in real life whose opinions on how to manipulate the facts in a given instance to (seeming) advantage never disagree with the opinions of another scientist in possession of the same facts.

The "opinion of the Universe" standpoint makes a good starting point for solving problems both in real life and fiction. There are, however, some weaknesses in the position which are likely to be overlooked: (1) while we have enough facts about numerous subjects so that a scientist in a given field can make valid predictions, no scientist, as yet, can qualify as official mouthpiece of the

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Universe. (2) The *existence* of "opinions", and human motivations based upon opinions which often deny the facts, is in itself a relevant fact. (3) A human being who lives by "the facts and the facts alone" is virtually non-existent in the real world. When we encounter a person who makes such a claim, we find that he is usually mistaken, in that he has confused a sizeable fraction of opinion for fact, or is suffering from some kind of psychic disorder.

MR. CAMPBELL'S statement of requirements for the scientific content of a story which can correctly be labelled science fiction strike me as being eminently sound. These we must have. However, is there any necessity for the definition to stop there? Because those of us who are trying to present genuine science fiction frequently accept stories which offer little more than the minimum, does that mean we are satisfied? Are we content with stories wherein the characters are "inhuman, robot-like automata, lacking in normal human motivation?" For make no mistake; this complaint is not just an expression of ignorance and miscomprehension, however ignorant and obtuse the critic

who made it may be. It is a sound description of many stories wherein the *scientific* requirements of science fiction have been met. More than that, it is a sound description of many stories which fans like to hold up as examples of "real science fiction."

My opinion is that the facts have shown that this complaint is not *necessarily* valid—that is, in order to qualify as science fiction, a story doesn't *have* to contain this defect. And it is a fact that this is my opinion, as of June 3, 1956.

MOST PEOPLE will agree with Campbell that facts are what count, and opinions are beside the point. Try offering your opinions to the cook on how to make that special apple pie; to the taxi-driver on how to maneuver around New York traffic; to the experienced politician on how to get out the vote in his district. These people deal with opinions of the Universe, if you please, on subjects such as the proper order-of-combination of divers ingredients, and system-of-heat-application; navigation of land-vehicles in motion with and against the tide of other land-vehicles in motion, and the mechanics of tripping traffic lights, etc.; the com-

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mon denominators of types of human opinion found within certain general job, educational, aspirational, etc., classifications of humans residing in a specific territory.

Outside one's specialty, however, almost anyone is likely to confuse opinion and fact. If two persons, each claiming authority—knowledge and understanding of the facts in the case—make conflicting prophecies on an as-yet untried atomic explosive, which would you decide was going on fact, and which was stating opinion? (Both appearing to have sound scientific reputations.) Could you be sure that what *you* consider to be the facts in the case—the facts upon which you are inclined to accept one or the other predictions as most likely accurate—are not actually opinions beside, or in denial of, the facts?

And when it comes to unpleasant predictions which affect *you*, personally...

Well, it's surprising *how many* of them most people do actually accept as valid and either submit to, as being outside the range of their capability to amend, or as something to be manipulated to (seeming) advantage. Unfortunately, the refusal to accept just one particular fact can be fatal, the thousands of facts we have faced in a scientific manner all along notwithstanding.

The principle is found in all kinds of fiction; this conflict between fact and opinion is at the root of every known masterpiece of literature. And it is the failure of many stories—which qualify as science fiction on strictly scientific grounds—to recognize and make plausible use of this human quality which has led to the critic's opinion that science fiction is deficient in human characterization. *R.W.L.*



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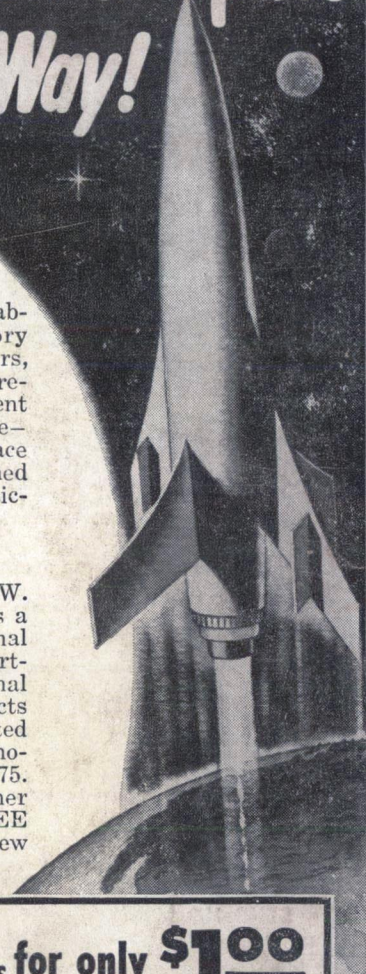
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