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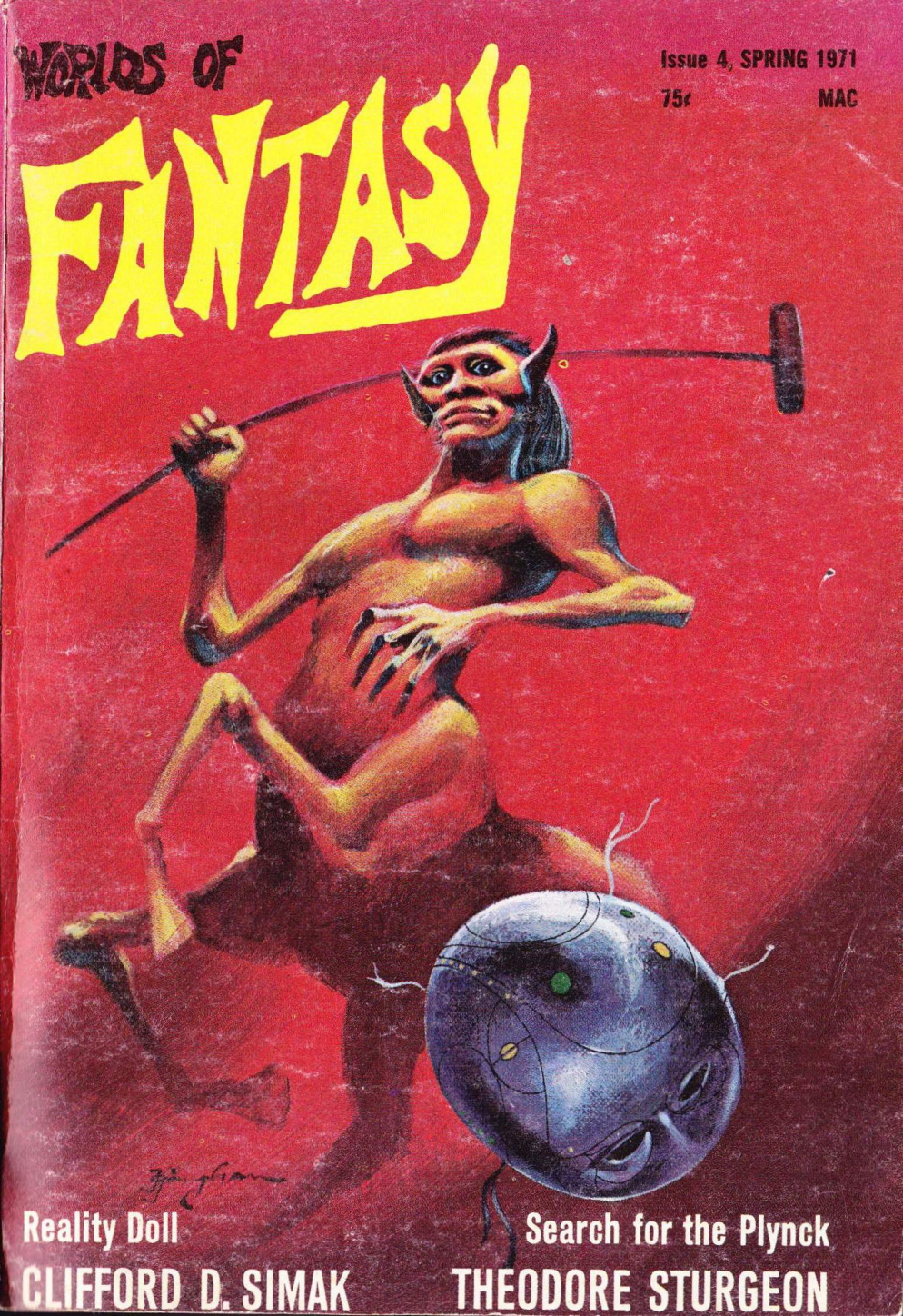

Reality Doll
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Search for the Plynck
THEODORE STURGEON

WORLDS OF FANTASY

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ALL STORIES NEW

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EDITORIAL CORNER

THEODORE STURGEON

search for the Plynck

WHAT made you get into the fantasy thing in the first place?

I've mentioned before what I call the "pigs with wings" syndrome; that we need relief from constant coping with so-called real problems in a real world, and for the sake of sanity, perspective and balance we need to free-wheel once in a while, and put together things which in ordinary life and observation just don't belong together: frogs that talk to princesses, swashbuckling heroes on imaginary planets, animals whose sires were eagles and whose dams, lionesses; pigs with wings . . . And the by-product is projective imagination and the challenges it offers. Men who can fly. Atoms (the word comes from *a-* not, or not-to-be and *-tomos* which is cut, divided: that-which-may-not-be-divided) which can be split. A whole city, or nation, or world full of people who really do treat others as they would like to be treated. Pretty fantastic, right? Anyway, that's the function of fantasy, and it's nice to be a part of it. Perhaps that's why you're in it.

Or maybe because it's fun. Because the sense-of-wonder lives in a country where the colors and sensations and oxygen content are high and clear, and it's a nice place to go to. But—what got you there in the first place?

Books, probably, or films made from books—books you have read or which were read to you when you were a toddler. I can probably never recall all the books which lit in me the special flame of fantasy, but one I do remember, vividly and with love. I owe that book a great deal in a great many coins. And I have lost it and want it back.

It's called *The Garden of the Plynck.* It was published in 1924 by the Yale University Press and it was written by one Karl Baker (if memory serves) about whom I would like to know everything there is to know, because he must have been—and, I do hope is—a truly lovely person. I mentioned this book in a column I did for *IF* back in

'62 and I want to mention it again in the context of How To Get Started in Fantasy—or how to give someone else the lifelong gift of enchantment that you and I know so well.

And I do want it back. I've wracked my brains and written letters and talked on the radio about this book, and no one can find me a copy. Maybe you can. Maybe you know someone who can. I grew up with it, had it read to me, read it myself over and over. When I was twelve and my family moved away, most of our children's books were given to a lady who used to work for us. When I was in my twenties I did one of those sentimental journey numbers, going back to the old school and the old neighborhoods. (Don't do that, by the way. It's seldom worth it. Everything's smaller and falling apart, or replaced by plastic, and full of strangers or, far worse, people you know who don't remember you.) However, there was one great blaze of glory: the daughter of that aforementioned lady still had some of the books, among them my beloved ***Plynck***, which she gave to me.

And about five years ago it disappeared again. It got borrowed or it fell into a wastepaper basket or something—who knows?— but I hold it as an article of faith that it has not permanently disappeared from my life. Some of my children have read it and love it as I do, but some have not, and that can't be tolerated.

I SHALL tell you about it—but let me say at the outset that nowhere is it "cute" or "kute" (I'm sure you are aware of the distinction.) It is so well written that if it were not for the presence in the world scene of ***Alice in Wonderland***, it would now have in everyone's mind and heart ***Alice's*** place of honor. It has that quality so very rare in children's books of never talking down.

In addition, it fits my definition of living literature. Living things change. Some books grow as you grow, dependably give back to you that which you are capable of bringing to them. Also it is full of the most priceless puns. Most of those who groan and protest in the presence of puns fail to realize that a truly great punster is not unlike a juggler who uses flaming torches (words being what they are) and to be able to handle them spectacularly and with confidence means only that he respects what he is displaying. The kind of puns one

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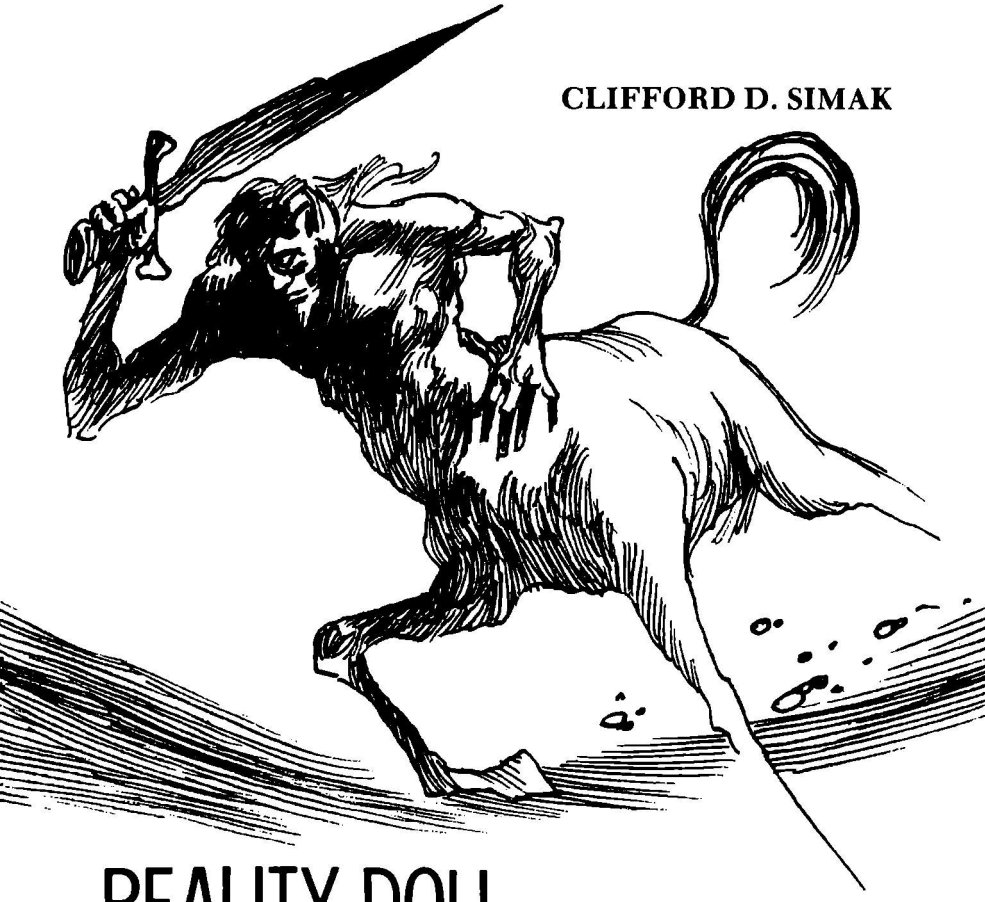
NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

A lost planet-hunter, a lying truth-seeker, and a beautiful girl who deserves a better paradise!

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



REALITY DOLL

THE place was white and the trees towered over all. When the ship had started coming down toward the landing field, riding on the homing beam we'd caught far out in space, the trees had made me think we'd be landing at a village.

This was not a village. Nor were these trees like any I had seen before anywhere. They soared above a city so tall one must tilt his head to view its topmost towers.

The city rose, like a mountain range without foothills, from a level

plain. It fenced the landing field as bleachers hem a circular field of play.

The city was white and the landing field was white and the sky so faint a blue that it, too, seemed white—all white except the trees that topped a city which surged to mountain height.

My neck was tired from tilting my head to stare. When I looked across the field, I saw, for the first time, a great many other ships. Ships of every size and shape—and all of them were white. The whiteness was camouflage, blending with the whiteness of the field itself.

Nothing was stirring, no one coming to meet us. The city stood up dead.

Behind me I heard the scrape of boots on the ladder's rungs. Sara Foster was coming down, her shoulder-slung rifle swinging and bumping, threatening to get caught between the rungs.

I helped her down. She swung around as she reached the ground and stared at the pale towers. Studying the classic face and curling red hair, I wondered how such beauty could have escaped all woman-softness. She brushed back a lock of hair.

"I feel like an ant," she said. "It just stands there, looking down at us. Don't you feel the eyes?"

I shook my head. I had felt no eyes.

"Any minute now, it will lift a foot and squash us."

"Where are the other two?" I asked.

"Tuck is getting the stuff together and George is listening, with that silly look on his face. He says that he is home."

"For the love of Christ," I said.

"You don't like George," said Sara. "But he got us here."

"That's right," I said, "and I hope he likes it."

For I didn't like it. No trees had the right to grow as tall and big as those above the city.

A clatter broke out above us. George Smith was backing out the port, with Tuck guiding his waving feet to the rungs.

A blind man, I told myself—a blind man and a footloose, phony friar and a female big-game hunter, all on a wild chase for a man who might only be legend. I must have been out of my mind, I told myself, to take on a job like this.

The two men finally reached the ground. Tuck, taking the blind

man's arm, turned him to face the city. Smith's flabby, vacant face was wreathed in beatitude.

Sara touched the blind man's arm with gentle fingers.

"You're sure this is the place, George?"

The beatitude changed to an ecstasy that was frightening to see. "There is no mistake," Smith babbled in his squeaky voice. "My friend is here. I hear him and he makes me see. I could almost reach out and touch him."

He fumbled with a pudgy hand, but nothing was there to touch.

"There is a city," Sara was saying to the blind man. "A great white city and trees taller than the city, trees that go up and up for miles. Is that what you see?"

"No," said George. "There isn't any city and there aren't any trees." He gulped. "I see," he said, "I see. . ." He groped and finally whispered, "I can't find the words."

"There is something coming," said Friar Tuck, pointing toward the city. "I can't make it out."

I LOOKED and caught the shimmer. At the base of the city wall, something seemed to be moving, an elusive flow and sparkle.

Sara looked through her glasses, then handed them to me.

"What do you think, Captain?"

I put the glasses to my eyes.

Horses? White horses running toward us—horses with funny feet, not running the normal way but rocking as they ran.

As they came closer I could make out further detail. Formalized horse —pert upright ears, flaring nostrils, arched necks, manes that rose as if wind blown while remaining rigid. And their feet? I saw two pairs of rockers, front and rear, front ones narrower so there'd be no interference as the horses moved. They ran by reaching forward with the rear pair while rocking on the front, then alternating to reach with the front while rocking on the rear.

Shaken, I lowered the glasses and handed them to Sara.

"Merry-go-round," she said.

"Merry-go-round?"

"Sure. Those mechanical contraptions they have at fairs and carnivals and amusement parks."

I shook my head, bewildered. "I never went to an amusement

park," I told her. "But when I was a kid I had a hobby horse."

Eight horses came sliding to a halt. They stood rocking gently.

The foremost of them spoke to us, employing that universal argot that man had found in existence when he'd gone into space twenty centuries before, a language composed of terms and words from a hundred different tongues, forged into a bastard lingo by which diverse creatures could converse with one another.

"We be hobbies," said the horse. "My name is Dobbin and we have come to take you in."

No part of him moved. I had the impression, somehow, that the words came out of his ears.

"They're cute," Sara cried. That was typical; she would think that.

Dobbin paid her no attention. "We urge upon you haste," he said. "There is a mount for each of you and four to take the luggage. We have but a small amount of time."

"We don't like being hurried," I told him. "We can spend the night on the ship and come in tomorrow morning."

"No! No!" the hobby protested frantically. "That is impossible. There exists great danger with the setting of the sun. You must be undercover by the time the sun is set."

"Why don't we do the way he says?" suggested Tuck, pulling his robe tight around himself. "I don't like it out here."

"That may well be," I said angrily, "but I don't like snotty robots ordering me around."

"We be hobbies," Dobbin said. "We not be any robots."

"You be human hobbies?"

"I do not know your meaning."

"Human beings made you. Creatures very much like us."

"I do not know," said Dobbin.

"The hell you don't," I said. I turned to Smith. "George," I said, "In your talk back and forth with this friend of yours, did you ever mention hobbies?"

"Hobbies? Oh, you mean stamp collecting and—"

"No, I don't," I said. "I mean hobby horses. Did you ever mention hobby horses?"

"Until this moment," said the blind man, "I never heard of them."

"But you had toys when you were a child."

The blind man sighed. "I was born blind. The kind of toys other children had were not—"

"Captain," Sara said, "you are ridiculous. Why all this suspicion?"

I said, "That has an easy answer."

"I know," she said. "Suspicion, time and time again, has saved that neck of yours."

"Gracious lady," Dobbin said, "please believe there is great danger once the sun has set. I plead with you, I implore you, I urge you to come with us and most speedily at that."

"Tuck," said Sara, "get up that ladder and start bringing down the stuff." She swung belligerently. "Any objections, Captain?"

"Miss Foster," I told her, "it's your ship and it's your money. You're paying for the show."

"You're laughing at me," she stormed. "You've laughed all the way. You don't believe in anything."

"I got you here," I told her grimly, "and I'll get you back. That's the deal we made. All I ask is, try not to make the job any harder than it has to be."

Immediately I was sorry. We were on an alien planet, far from home. We should stick together, not bicker.

Tuck had gone up the ladder, robe tucked under his belt, and now was handing down plunder to Sara.

"All right," I said to Dobbin, "run your pack horses over here. How do you handle this?"

"I regret," said Dobbin, "that we have no arms. You'll be forced to do the packing. Just heap the luggage on the hobbies' backs. When the load is complete, metal cinches will extrude and strap it securely."

Four of the horses came rocking up. We loaded them. Tuck closed the port and we were set to go.

The sun was touching the city skyline and hunks were being nibbled out of it by the topmost towers. It was slightly more yellow than the sun of Earth—perhaps a K-type star. The ship would know, of course; the ship gobbled up the data and pulled it apart and put it back together. It knew about this planet, the planet's star, the atmosphere and chemistry, and would have been willing to enlighten

anyone who asked. But I hadn't asked. I had meant to go back and get the data sheet, but I hadn't counted on a reverse bum's rush from a pack of hobby-horses.

Tuck was puffing and panting, trying to boost Smith onto one of the hobbies. Sara was already mounted and straight, the well-dressed model traveler on the threshold of great adventure. That; of course, was all that mattered to her—another great adventure.

In the bowl that was the landing field, rimmed in by the city, nothing was stirring. Shadows ran out from the city's western wall as the sun went behind the buildings and some of those western buildings had turned from white to black. There were no lights.

Where were the city's residents—and the visitors who'd come on the spaceships on the field? Why were the ships all white?

"Honored sir," Dobbin said to me, "if you please, would you use my saddle? Our time is running short."

I LIFTED my laser gun off my shoulder and, grasping it in hand, swung into Dobbin's saddle.

Dobbin wheeled and we started toward the city. A crazy ride—smooth, no jerking, but moving up and down as much as forward, like skating on a wave.

The city seemed not to grow much larger, nor to gain in detail. We had been farther from it, I realized, than I had judged; the landing field was larger, too, than it had appeared.

Behind me, Tuck let out a yell. I twisted in the saddle.

"The ship!" yelled Tuck. "They're doing something to it!"

They were, indeed—whoever they might be.

A long-necked mechanism stood beside the ship. It looked like a bug with a squat, massive body and a tiny head atop a long and slender neck. The mouth sprayed mist at the ship. Where the mist struck, the ship was turning white, like the other tombstone spacecraft on the field.

I reached for a rein, yanked hard.

"Turn around," I yelled. "Go back!"

"There is no turning back, most honored sir," said Dobbin conversationally, not even panting. "We must reach the safety of the city."

I aimed my gun at the ground in front of us.

"Shut your eyes," I yelled to the others. I pulled the trigger one notch back. Even through my eyelids, I sensed the flaring laser-light as it bounced back from the ground. Under me Dobbin reared and spun, almost swapping end for end. When I opened my eyes we were heading toward the ship.

"You'll be the death of us, crazy being," Dobbin moaned.

I looked behind me. All the hobbies were following. Dobbin was clearly leader and where he went they followed. But farther back there was no sign of where the laser bolt had struck. Even at first notch capacity it should have made a mark; there should have been a smoking crater where it struck.

The bug that had sprayed the ship was scurrying away. It must have had wheels or treads—it was spinning at headlong clip.

"Please, sir," Dobbin pleaded, "we are simply wasting time. Nothing can be done."

"One more word," I said, "and this time between the ears."

We reached the ship. I hit the ground and was running. Dobbin came to a halt.

The ship was covered with stuff that looked like frosty glass, I mean covered—every inch of it.

"What is it, Captain?" Sara asked, her voice somewhat shaky. This ship was hers.

"A coating of something hard," I said. "As if it had been sealed."

"You mean we can't get into it?"

"I don't know. Maybe we can crack it."

She made a sudden motion and her rifle was off her back with its butt against her shoulder. She could handle that crazy gun.

At the sound of the shot the hobbies reared in terror. But there was no indication of where the bullet struck. The whiteness of the ship was unblemished. Two thousand foot-pounds of metal had slammed against it and had not made a dent.

"The ship is sealed," said Dobbin, "like all the others. Better sealed with you outside of it than with you still inside."

I knew that he was right. I recalled that the field had been unmarked by my laser beam. Undoubtedly all this whiteness—the field, the ships, the city—was coated with some substance so tightly bonded in its atomic structure that it was indestructible.

"I sorrow greatly for you," said Dobbin, no sorrow in his voice. "I

know the shock of you. Once on this planet, no one ever leaves. But there is no need of dying. I plead with you compassionately to come into the saddle and let us head for safety."

I looked up at Sara and she nodded quietly. She had figured it, I knew, about the way I had, although in my case most unwillingly. There was no use in staying here. The ship was sealed, whatever that might mean or for whatever purpose, and when morning came we could come back to see what we could do.

So I swung swiftly to the saddle and even before I found the seat, Dobbin had whirled about, running as he whirled.

Soon the city walls loomed directly in front of us, great slabs of masonry that went up and up. I saw streets—or at least what I took for streets—narrow slits of empty blackness like fractures in a monstrous cliff.

The hobbies plunged into one of the slits of emptiness and darkness closed upon us.

Ahead of us, from the level of the street, a ramp ran up to massive open doors. The hobbies flung themselves at the ramp and humped through one of the doors.

We burst into a room where light came from great rectangular blocks in the wall.

The hobbies rocked swiftly toward one of the blocks and came to a halt before it. To one side I saw what appeared to be a gnome, a small, humpbacked, faintly humanoid creature that spun a dial beside the slab of glowing stone.

"Captain, look!" cried Sara.

I had seen it almost as soon as she had. Upon the glowing stone appeared a scene—faint and shadowed, as if at the bottom of a crystal sea, its colors subdued by the depth, its outlines shifting as ripples ran on the surface.

Red lands stretched to a mauve, storm-torn horizon, broken by crimson buttes—in the foreground was a clump of savage yellow flowers. As I tried to grasp this, to relate to the kind of world it might have been, the image changed to a jungle drowned in the green and purple of vegetation, spotted by screaming colors that I knew were tropic flowers, and back of it all a sense of lurking beastiality that made my hide crawl. Then it, too, was gone—and in its place was a yellow desert lighted by a moon and stars that turned the sky to

silver. The lips of the marching sand dunes caught and fractured the light of moon and stars so that the dunes appeared to be foaming waves of water charging upon the land.

The desert did not fade as the other places had. It came in a rush upon us and exploded in my face.

Beneath me I felt the violent plunging of a bucking Dobbin. I made a frantic grab at a saddle which had no cantle and felt myself pitched forward.

I struck on one shoulder, skidded in sand and finally came to rest, the breath knocked out of me. I struggled up.

Sara sprawled to one side of me. Not far off Tuck was struggling to his feet, hampered by the cassock that had become entangled about his legs. A little beyond Tuck, George was crawling on his hands and knees, whimpering like a pup that had been booted out of doors into a friendless, frigid night.

All about us lay the desert, desiccated, without a shred of vegetation, flooded by the white moon and the thousand glowing stars.

"He's gone!" George was whimpering as he crawled about. "I can't hear him any more. I have lost my friend."

And that was not all that was lost. The city was lost and the planet on which the city stood. We were in another place.

This was one trip, I told myself, that I never should have made. I'd not believed in it, even from the start.

Although, I recalled, I had really had no choice.

I had been committed from the moment I had seen that beauty of a spaceship standing on the field of Earth.

II

I HAD come sneaking back to Earth where my money was and my safety. Out in space I was fair game for anyone who found me.

The ship I drove was stuck together with binder twine and bailing wire. I came into the solar system with the Sun between myself and Earth and hoped I had figured right. I piled on all the speed I could nurse out of my heap and when I passed the Sun that ship was a hell-singed bat.

With engines off and every circuit cut, I coasted past Venus, headed in for Earth. The patrol didn't spot me.

There is just one spaceport on Earth. The traffic isn't heavy. Few people are living on Earth; our breed has spread out in space. Those who remain on the mother planet are hopeless sentimentalists. They think there is status attached to the place where the human race arose.

I brought in the ship and set it down and walked away from the sorriest-looking vessel you ever clapped your eyes on.

Just two berths away from it stood this beauty of a ship. It gleamed with smart efficiency, a space yacht straining toward the sky, impatient at its leash. I found my hands itching to hold it.

I suppose they itched the worse because I knew I was all washed up, that I'd spend the rest of my life on Earth.

I walked off the field and went through customs—if you could call it customs. They merely made the motions.

I found an inn nearby, arranged temporary quarters, then went to the bar.

I was on my third or fourth when a robot flunky zeroed in on me.

"You are Captain Ross?"

I wondered what trouble I was in. There wasn't a soul on Earth who should have known that I was coming.

"I have a note for you," said the robot, handing me the envelope.

I opened it and took out the card. It read:

Captain Michael Ross,
Hilton Inn

If Captain Ross will be my dinner guest tonight, I would be much obliged. My car will be waiting at the entrance to the inn at eight o'clock. And, Captain, may I be among the first to welcome you to Earth?

Sara Foster

I sat there staring at it and the bottle robot came sliding down the bar. He picked up the empty glass. "Another one?" he asked.

"Another one," I said.

Just who was Sara Foster, and how had she known, an hour after my arrival, that I was on Earth?

It could be a trap. There were people, I knew, who hated me. They would know by now that I had obtained a ship, but few would

believe that such a ship could have carried me all the way to Earth.

I finally decided I would take a chance.

SARA Foster lived in a huge house on a hill, surrounded by acres of wilderness that in turn surrounded more acres of landscaped lawns and walks.

I had expected to be met at the door by a robot, but Sara Foster was there herself wearing a green dinner dress that served to set off the flame of her tumbled hair. One errant lock was hanging in her eyes.

"Captain Ross," she said, giving me her hand, "how nice of you to come. And on such short notice, too."

The hall was high and cool, paneled with painted wood. The floor was so polished that it shone. A massive crystal chandelier was hanging from the ceiling. The place breathed wealth and a certain sort of Earth-rooted gentility.

"The others are in the library," she said. "Let's join them."

She linked her arm through mine and led me down the hall.

We entered what looked more like a trophy room than a library. Mounted heads hung from every wall, a glass-enclosed gun rack ran across one end and the floor was covered with fur rugs, some with the heads attached, bared fangs forever snarling.

Two men were sitting next to the mammoth fireplace. As we entered one of them stood up. He was tall and cadaverous, his face not so much darkened, I thought, by the outdoors as by the thoughts within his skull. He wore a dark brown cassock loosely belted by a string of beads.

"Captain Ross," said Sara Foster, "may I present Friar Tuck."

He held out a bony hand. "My legal name," he said, "is Hubert Jackson, but I prefer Friar Tuck. In the course of my wanderings, Captain, I have heard many things of you."

I looked hard at him. "You have done much wandering?"

I had seen his kind before and had not liked what I saw.

He bent his bony head. "Far enough," he said, "and always in search of truth."

"Truth," I said, "at times is hard to come by."

"Captain," Sara said, quickly, "this is George Smith."

The second man had fumbled from his chair. He was holding out

his hand in my direction. He was tubby, short—and his eyes were milky white.

"As you can see," said Smith, "I am blind. You'll excuse me for not rising when you came in the room."

I shook his hand and it was as nearly limp as a living hand can be. Immediately he fumbled his way back to the chair.

I sat down in the chair Sara indicated and she took another and there were the four of us, huddled in a group before that looming fireplace and surrounded by the heads of creatures from a dozen different planets.

SHE saw me looking at them. "I'm a ballistics hunter," she said with more pride, it seemed to me, than such a statement called for.

She grasped that I did not understand. "I use only a ballistics rifle," she explained. "One that fires a bullet propelled by explosive charge. It's the sporting way to hunt. If you miss a vital spot the thing that you are hunting has a chance at you."

"I see," I said. "A sporting proposition."

A robot brought drinks and we settled behind our glasses.

"I have a feeling, Captain," Sara said, "that you disapprove. But you too have killed wild creatures."

"A few," I said, "but not from sporting instinct. For food, occasionally. At times to save my life."

"Then you're no sportsman, Captain?"

"No," I said, "I am—let us say I was—a planet hunter."

She must have known that about me. She continued, "I imagine you are wondering, Captain, what is going on."

"Ma'am," I said, "the thought had crossed my mind."

"Have you ever head of Lawrence Arlen Knight?"

"The Wanderer," I said. "Yes, I've heard of him. Stories were told about him long ago. Well before my time."

"Those stories?"

"The usual sort. Space yarns."

"But you heard . . ."

"That he was hunting something? Sure. They all are."

"But he disappeared."

"Stay out there long enough," I told her, "and keep on poking into strange areas and you're bound to disappear sooner or later."

"What about you, Captain?"

"I quit soon enough," I said. "But I was fairly safe. All I hunted were new planets. No Seven Cities of Gibola, no mystic El Dorado, no trance-bound Crusade of the Soul."

"You mock at us," said Friar Tuck. "I do not like a mocker."

"I did not mean to mock," I said to Sara Foster. "Space is full of tales. The one you mention is only one of many." I put my glass down and came to my feet. "Thanks for the drink. Perhaps some other time."

"Just a moment, please," she said. "If you will please sit down. I apologize for Tuck. But you're dealing with me, not with him. I have a proposal that you may find attractive."

"I've retired," I said.

"Perhaps you saw the ship standing on the field. Two berths from where you landed."

"Yes, I saw the ship. And admired it. Does it belong to you?"

She nodded. "Captain, I need someone to run that ship. How would you like the job?"

I sat down again. "Let's get this straight," I said. "How do you know you can trust the ship to me? What do you know about me? How did you know I had arrived on Earth?"

She looked at me straight, squinting just a little, perhaps the way she'd squint down a rifle barrel at a charging beast.

"I can trust you," she said, "because there's nowhere you can go. You're fair game out in space. Your only safety would lie in sticking with the ship."

"Fair enough," I admitted. "And how about the patrol?"

"Captain, believe me, nothing can overtake that ship. If someone should try we can wear them down. We have a long, hard way to go."

"Interesting," I said. "Could you tell me where?"

"Mr. Smith," said Sara, "knows where we are going."

I switched my head to look at that lump with the milk-white eyes.

"I have a voice in my head," he said. "I have contact with someone. I have a friend out there."

Oh, wonderful! I thought. He has a voice in his head.

"Let me guess," I said to Sara Foster. "This religious gentleman brought Mr. Smith to you."

She suddenly was angry. Her eyes became pools of blue ice.

"You are right," she said, biting off the words, "but that's not all of it. You know, of course, that Knight was accompanied by a robot.

I nodded. "A robot by the name of Roscoe."

"Roscoe was a telepathic robot."

"There's no such thing," I said.

"But there is. Or was. I've done my homework, Captain. I have the specifications for this particular robot. I had them before Mr. Smith showed up. Also letters that Knight had written to certain friends of his. I have, perhaps, the only authentic documentation concerning Knight and what he was looking for, all acquired before these two gentlemen showed up."

"And what do these letters say?"

"That Knight was looking for something," she repeated.

It was all right with me if she let these two adventurers lead her on a wild goose chase, but I was not about to be a party to it. Although, remembering that ship on the landing field, I admit that I was tempted.

"I cannot see," said Smith, speaking not to us, not even to himself, but to some unknown person that no one knew about. "I have never seen. I know no shape except the shapes that my hands can tell me. I can envision objects in my imagination, but I do not know of colors. Red means something to you, but is meaningless to me.

"I have nothing of this world except the space it gives me and the thoughts of other people, but how am I to know that my interpretations are right? I have little of this world, but I have another world." He lifted his hand and with his fingers tapped his skull. "Another world," he said, "here inside my head. Not an imagined world, but another world that's given me by another being. He is very distant from us. All I know for certain is the great distance and the direction of that distance."

"So that is it," I said, looking at Sara. "He's to be the compass. We set out in the direction that he tells us and we keep on going—"

"That is it," she said. "That's the way it was with Roscoe."

"Knight's robot?"

"Knight's robot. That's what the letters say. Knight had it himself—just a little of it, just enough to know someone was out there. So he had the robot fabricated."

"A made-to-order robot? A telepathic robot?"

She nodded.

It was hard to swallow. It was impossible. There was something going on here beyond all belief.

"Truth is out there," said Tuck. "A truth we cannot even guess. I'm willing to bet my life to go and see."

I looked around the room. The heads glared down at us, fantastic and ferocious creatures from many distant planets, and some of them I'd seen before and others I had only heard about and there were a number of them that I'd never heard about, not even in the alcoholic tales of lonely, space-worn men.

The walls are full, I thought. There is no room for other heads. And the glamor of hunting and of bringing home more heads may be fading, too. Perhaps not alone for Sara Foster, big game huntress, but for those other people in whose eyes her adventures on distant planets spelled a certain kind of status. So what more logical than to bring home another kind of head, to embark upon a new and more marvelous adventure?

"No one," said Sara Foster,. "would ever know you'd gone into space, that you had left the Earth. You'd come here some day and a man would leave again. He'd look exactly like you, but he would not be you. He'd live here in your stead and you'd go into space."

"You have money enough to buy a deal like this?" I asked. "To buy the loyalty of such a man?"

She shrugged. "I have money enough to buy anything. Once we were out in space what difference would it make if he were unmasked?"

I shied away from the entire deal. I didn't like the people and I didn't like the project. But I had an itch to get my hands on that ship and be out in space again. A man could die on Earth, I thought; he could suffocate. I'd seen but little of Earth and what I had seen I'd liked. But it was the kind of thing a man might like for a little time and then slowly grow to hate.

"Think of a price," said Sara Foster, "then double it. There'll be no quibbling."

"But why?" I asked. "Does money have no meaning for you?"

"Of course it has," she said, "but having it also has taught me that you must pay for what you get."

A robot stepped through the doorway. "Dinner is ready to be served, Miss Foster."

She looked at me, challenging me.

"I'll think on it," I promised.

III

AND I should have thought on it much longer, I told myself as I stood on that moon-washed desert; I never should have gone.

Smith still was crawling on hands and knees and whimpering. Tuck was getting his legs unwound from his ridiculous robe, stumbling toward the moaning Smith. What made the two of them pals? Some spiritual need in each that reached out for the other? Two fumbling incompetents, who had found in each other's weaknesses a common bond of compassion?

The desert was almost as bright as day and the entire vault of sky was ablaze with more and bigger and brighter stars than I had ever seen before—stars that seemed close enough to pluck.

Sara was on her feet by now, still grasping her rifle.

George still was wailing. "What happened, Tuck? Where are we? What happened to my friend? I don't hear him any more."

"For the love of Christ," I said to Tuck, disgusted, "get him on his feet and wipe his nose and tell him what has happened."

"I can't explain," growled Tuck, "until someone tells me first."

"They'll come back," howled George. "They'll come back for us. They won't leave us here."

"Of course." Tuck hauled George to his feet. "They'll come back when the sun is up."

"The sun ain't up now, Tuck?"

"No," said Tuck. "The moon. And a lot of stars."

I took a look around. We had been dumped on the lower slope of a dune. On either side of us the dunes heaved up to meet the nighttime sky. There were no trees, not a blade of vegetation. Any chill in the air, I figured, would be dissipated as soon as the sun rose. More than likely we had a long, hot day ahead—and no water.

"There was a doorway," Sara said. "The hobbies bucked us through it. But when we landed here there wasn't a doorway."

"They had us pegged," I said. "They gave us the business from the very start. We never had a prayer."

"Start thinking. How do we get out?"

"You can keep an eye on those two clowns," I said. "See that they cause no trouble. I'll go for a look."

She regarded me. "Anything specific in mind, Captain?"

I shook my head. "Just a look around. I might stumble on some water. We could need water badly before the day is over."

"You don't think the hobbies will come back for us?"

"Do you think so?"

"I suppose not," she said. "But what did they gain? Our luggage couldn't be worth that much to them."

"They got rid of us," I said.

"But they guided us in. If it hadn't been for that beam . . . "

I said, "They wanted the ship, perhaps. They had a lot of ships on the field. They have lured in others. Our job right now is to find a place better than this desert."

I settled my rifle on my shoulder and started up the dune.

IT WAS heavy going. My feet sank into the sand and I kept sliding back.

Just short of the crest of the dune I stopped to look back a moment. The three of them stood watching. For some reason I couldn't explain, I found myself loving them—all three of them, that creepy, soft fool of a Smith and that phoney Tuck, and Sara, bless her, with her falling lock of hair and ridiculous old-time rifle. No matter what they were, they were human beings and they were counting on me. I was the captain.

I lifted a hand and waved. I tried to keep it jaunty, but I failed. Then I clambered up the dune and over the top and the desert stretched before me, the same in every direction.

I went plunging down the dune and climbed another and the desert was the same as ever. I might go on, I admitted to myself, climbing dunes forever and not find a difference.

But I climbed another dune. There always was the chance that in one of these valleys between the dunes there might be water—or a path or natives who might help. Though why anyone would want to live in a place like this was more than I could figure.

Actually, of course, I expected nothing. But then I spotted something on the crest of the dune beyond.

A birdcage sort of contraption was half buried in the crest, its metallic ribs shimmering in the light from moon and stars like the bones of some long dead beast.

I saw disturbed sand below the cage and, even as I watched, new blobs of sand broke loose and trickled down the slope. It had not been long ago, I was sure, since the cage had impacted. The sand disturbed by its landing had not yet reached a state of equilibrium.

A ship of some sort? A strange sort of ship, not enclosed, but fashioned only of frame? And if it were indeed a ship, it must have carried life and the life it carried was either dead within it or somewhere nearby.

I glanced slowly up and down the length of the dune. Far to the right was a faint furrow from the crest to the shadow between the dunes. I strained to penetrate the shadows, but could make out nothing.

I backed off down the dune and went spidering across it, angling to the right. Sand went hissing down the dune face as I moved.

From the hollow between the dunes came a sliding, scraping sound. Straining my eyes, I thought I caught some motion in the trough, but could not be sure.

I waited.

The slithering sound stopped, then started once again. Something moved down there (I was sure of it this time) and moaned.

"Hello!" I called.

There was no answer.

It could be, I realized, that I was dealing with something so far removed from my own sector of the galaxy that our space patois was not used by it.

And then came a quivering, hooting answer. At first it was just a noise. As I wrestled with the noise, I knew it to be a word, a single, hooted question.

"Friend?" had been the word.

"Friend," I answered.

"IN NEED am I of friend," the hooting voice said. "Please to advance in safety. I do not carry weapon."

"I do," I said grimly.

"Of it, there is no need," said the thing down in the shadows. "I am trapped and helpless."

"That is your ship up there?"

"Ship?"

"Your conveyance."

"Truly so, dear friend. It have come apart. It is inoperative."

"I'm coming down," I told it. "I'll have my weapon on you."

"Come then," the hooter croaked. "I shall lie supine."

I came to my feet and went across the top as quickly as I could, crouched to present as small a target as possible. I kept the rifle trained.

I slid into the trough, bending low to sight its length. I saw a hump of blackness lying still.

"All right," I called. "Move toward me."

The hump heaved and wallowed, then lay still again.

"Move," it said, "I cannot."

"O.K., then. Lie still. Do not move at all."

I ran forward and stopped. The hump did not even twitch.

I moved closer, watching intently. Now I could see it better. From its front a nest of tentacles extended limply on the sand. Its body tapered back, four feet or so, and ended in bluntness. It seemed to have no feet or arms. It wore no clothing. The tentacles grasped no tool or weapon.

"What is your trouble?" I asked. "What can I do for you?"

The tentacles lifted, undulating like snakes. The hoarse voice came from a mouth which the tentacles surrounded.

"My legs are short," it said. "I sink. They do not carry me. With them I only dig a deeper pit beneath me in the sand."

Two of the tentacles, with eyes attached to their tips, were aimed directly at me.

They looked me up and down.

"You are large," it croaked. "Have you also strength?"

"You mean to carry you?"

"Only to a place where there is firmness under me."

"I don't know of such a place," I said.

"You do not know . . . Then you are not a native of this planet?"

"I am not," I said. "I thought, perhaps, that you . . . "

"Of this planet, sir?" it asked. "No self-respecting member of my race would deign to defecate upon such a planet."

I squatted down to face him.

"How about the ship?" I asked. "If I could get you back to it . . . "

"It would not help," he told me. "Nothing is there."

"But there must be food and water."

I was considerably interested in the water.

"No," he said. "I travel in my second self and I need no food or water. My living tissues can come to no great harm."

For the love of God, I asked myself, what was his second self? I was hesitant to ask.

A man runs into strange things in space, but he can usually dodge or disregard them. Here I could do neither.

I had to do something to help this creature, although I couldn't figure how my help would matter. I could pick him up and lug him back to where the others waited, but except for our company, he'd be no better off than he was here.

"I can't offer much," I told him. "There are four of us, myself and three others. We have no food or water—nothing."

"How came you here?" he asked.

I tried to tell him and he seemed to understand, which surprised me.

"So you see how little we can do for you," I said.

"But you would carry me to this place where the others are? You would not mind?"

"Not at all," I told him. "If you'd like it that way."

I did mind, of course. It would be no small chore to wrestle him across the sand dunes. But I couldn't see myself walking out on another traveler in trouble.

"I would like it," the creature said. "Other life is comfort and aloneness is not good. Also in numbers may lie strength."

I said, "My name is Mike. From a planet called Earth, out in Carina Cygnus."

"Mike," he said, trying it out, hooting the name so it sounded like anything but Mike. "Rolls easy on vocal cords. Locale of your planet is puzzle. The terms I've never heard. The position of mine means nothing to you, too. And my name? My name is complicated matter involving identity framework that is of no consequence to people

but my own. Please, you pick a name for me. Call me what you want. Short and simple, please."

IT HAD been a little crazy, of course, to start on this matter of names. The funny thing was, now that it was done, the situation was more comfortable. We no longer were two alien beings who had stumbled across one another's paths.

"How about Hoot?" I asked. I could have kicked myself. It was not the best name in the world and he would have had every reason for resenting it. But he didn't seem to. He waved his tentacles and repeated the name several times.

"Is good. Excellent for creature such as me. Hello, Mike," he said.

"Hello, Hoot," I told him.

I slung the rifle on my left shoulder, planted my feet and reached both arms around him. Finally I managed to hoist him to the right shoulder. He was heavier than he looked and his body was so rounded that it was hard to grip. But at last I had him settled and balanced. I started up the dune.

I reached the crest and collapsed as easily as I could, letting Hoot down gently.

"I cause much trouble, Mike," said Hoot. "I tax your strength."

"Let me get my breath," I said. "It's just a little farther."

I rolled over on my back and stared at the sky. The stars glittered back at me. Straight overhead was a big blue giant that looked like a flashing jewel and a little to one side was a dull coal of a star, a red supergiant, perhaps. And a million others—as if someone had planned to fill the sky.

"Where is this place, Hoot?" I asked. "Where in the galaxy?"

"It's a globular cluster," he said. "I thought you knew."

And that made sense, I thought. For the planet we had landed on, the one that great fool of a Smith had led us to, had been well above the galactic plane, beyond the main body in globular cluster country.

"Is your home here?" I asked.

"No. Far away," he said, and the way he said it, I asked him nothing more. Space was full of wanderers who could not go home again.

Nor did it make a great deal of difference where we were now. If

we failed to locate water, we'd not be here for long. Food was less critical than water.

Something touched me softly on the shoulder. I switched my head around and saw that Hoot was tapping me with one of his tentacles.

"Mike," he croaked, "you should take a look. We are not alone."

I jerked bolt upright, grabbing at the rifle.

A WHEEL was coming over the dune behind us, the one on which Hoot's spacecraft had come to grief. It was a big wheel and a bright one and it had a green hub that glistened in the moonlight. I could see only part of it, but the monstrous gleaming curve rose into the air above the dune a hundred feet or so. Its tread was broad—ten feet or more, I guessed—and it had the shine of polished steel. Hundreds of silvery spokes ran from inside the rim to the green and glistening hub.

It was not moving. It hung in air above the moon-silvered ribs of Hoot's ship, which looked like a toy by contrast.

"Living?" asked Hoot.

"Perhaps," I said.

"Then we best prepare to defend . . . "

"We sit here," I snapped. "We don't raise a hand against it."

It was watching us, I was sure. It might have come to investigate the wreckage of Hoot's ship. That greenish hub, for some reason I couldn't put a finger on, had the look of life about it. It might turn around in a while and leave. And even if it didn't, we were in no position to bang away at anything that moved.

"Slide into the trough," I said. "If we have to run, I can scoop you up."

He waggled a tentacle in disagreement.

Someone called and I turned my head. Sara stood on top of the next dune. To her left, two heads poked above the ridge. She was planted on the crest, silly rifle at the ready, and I was scared stiff that she might start shooting.

"Are you all right, Captain?" she called.

"I'm all right," I said.

"Can we be of any help?"

"Yes," I said. "You can lug my pal to camp."

I said camp because I could think of no other way to describe our mutual nowhere. Since we shared it, the spot was camp.

Out of the side of my mouth, I snarled at Hoot. "Cut out the damned foolishness and slide into the trough."

I switched my attention to the wheel. It stayed where it was.

I heard Hoot sliding down the slope. A moment later Sara called, "What is this thing? Where did you find it?"

I looked around.

She was standing over Hoot and staring.

"Tuck," I yelled, "get down and help Miss Foster. Tell Smith to stay where he is." I could envision that damn fool of a blind man trying to follow Tuck and getting all fouled up.

Sara's voice was plaintive and a little sharp. "But, Captain . . . "

"He's lost like us," I told her. "Just take him to camp."

I looked back at the wheel. It had finally started to move, revolving rather majestically, walking up the dune slope and looming higher every minute.

"Get out of here," I yelled at Tuck and Sara, not looking back.

The wheel stopped near the crest, no longer hidden by the dune. It loomed into the sky.

Now that I had a better view, I saw the strange thing about it—it was actually a wheel and not merely something that might look like a wheel. Its outer rim was formed of some very shiny substance, with a tread ten feet across, but perhaps no more than a foot thick. For all its massiveness, it seemed slender. The rim had picked up sand and the sand was spilling free as the wheel moved forward. The greenish hub floated in the center of the wheel—and floated was the word for it, for the fragile spokes, despite the number of them, could not have held the hub in place. And now I saw that the spokes, thin as they were, were crisscrossed by even finer wires (if they, indeed, were wires) to make the entire area between the hub and rim a sort of spider web. The thought stopped there, however, for the hub itself had no semblance to a spider. It was simply a sphere of some sort, hanging in the center of the wheel.

I looked quickly over my shoulder and did not see the others. But the slope of the dune was scarred with their deep-gouged tracks.

I went down the slope and labored up the face of the dune. At the top I turned. The wheel had stayed where it was. I climbed the next

dune. The others were all down there, and the wheel still hadn't moved.

Sara came to meet me, her face solemn. "We may have a chance," she said.

"A chance of getting out?"

"You told this Hoot of yours what happened," she said. "He seems to know about this sort of thing."

"Hoot? I wasn't sure he knew what I was talking about."

"He didn't understand entirely, but he asked some questions and now they're working on it. Tuck and George are helping. George is very good. He seems able to pick out the door."

"George would be able," I said.

"I wish you'd stop not liking George."

This was no time to argue with her. I went on down the dune.

The three of them were squatting in a row—or at least two of them were squatting and Hoot was lying there, legs buried in the sand. Tuck was staring fixedly ahead and Smith had an intense, excited look on his flabby face. All Hoot's tentacles were extended straight in front of him and the tips were quivering.

I looked where Tuck was looking and couldn't see a thing except the slope of the other dune.

Sara came and stood beside me. We didn't stir a muscle. I didn't know what was going on, but whatever it might be, I didn't want to interfere. If they thought there was a chance to bust that door wide open, I was all in favor.

SUDDENLY Hoot's tentacles went limp and sagged to the sand. Tuck and Smith slumped upon themselves. Whatever they had tried, it had failed.

"More strength we need," said Hoot. "If all of us, perhaps . . . "

"All of us?" I asked. "I'm afraid I'm no good at this sort of thing. What is it you are trying?"

"We strain upon the door," said Hoot. "We try to pull it open."

"It still is there," said George. "I can sense the edges."

"We can try," said Sara. "That's the least that we can do." She squatted beside Hoot. "What do we do?" she asked him.

"You try to visualize the door," said Tuck.

"Then you pull," said Hoot.

"Pull with what?" I asked.

"With your mind," Tuck said nastily. "This is a time, Captain, when a big mouth and muscles do not help at all."

"Friar Tuck," said Sara coldly, "that was much uncalled for."

"That's all he's been doing," Tuck declared, "since we set foot on the ship. Yelling and pushing us around."

"Brother," I said, "once we're out of this . . ."

"Quiet, you two." Sara said. "Captain, if you please."

She patted the sand beside her and I squatted down with the rest of them, feeling mortified and foolish. I'd never seen such stupidity. Oh, no doubt some alien folk could accomplish wonders with mental power, but we were human beings (all of us but one) and the human race had never been noted for special psychic strength. Although, I thought, with a couple of jerks like Tuck and George, anything could happen.

"Now," said Hoot, "all together let us bring forth the door."

His tentacles shot in front of him so fast they seemed to snap, remained extended rigidly with all tips aquiver.

God knows, I tried to concentrate. I tried to see a door in front of us and, so help me, I did see it, a sort of ghostly door with a thin edge of light around it. Once I saw it, I tried to pull, but nothing was on it for a man to grab. I tried. I could almost feel the fingers of my mind trying to hold a slippery surface and then slowly sliding off.

I was growing terribly tired—both mentally and physically—and I knew the others could be in no better shape. We would try again, of course, and again and again, but we'd be weaker all the time and if we couldn't force it open in the first several tries, I knew that we were sunk.

So I tried harder and I seemed to have some small hold and I pulled with all my might and could feel the others pulling—and the door began to open, swinging on invisible hinges until there was room enough to thrust a hand into the crack, that is, if the door had been there. But I knew, even as I pulled and sweated mentally, that the door had no physical being.

Then, with the door beginning to open, we failed. All of us together. And there was no door. There was nothing but the dune climbing up the sky.

Something crunched. I swung around. The wheel loomed above

us, crunching to a halt. Swarming down from the green mass in the center, using the silvery spider web between the rim and hub, was a blob that dripped. It was not a spider, although the shape and the scrambling motion brought a spider to one's mind. A spider would have been cozy alongside this monstrosity. This quivering obscenity, dripping with filthy slime. It had a dozen legs or arms and, at one end of the dripping blob, what might have been a face. How do I convey the kind of horror it carried—the feeling of uncleanliness—as if the mere sight contaminated the mind?

It was making a noise and the noise increased. Although one could imagine a face, the thing had no mouth with which to make its noise. The noises simply came out of it and washed over us. In the noise was the crunch of great teeth-splintering bones, mixed with the slobbering of a scavenger gulping at a hasty, putrid feast, and an angry chittering that had unreason in it. Perhaps if a man had been forced to go on listening, he might have detected other sounds as well.

The blob reached the rim of the wheel and leaped off the web to land upon the dune. It spraddled, looming over us, with the filthiness of its body splashing on the sand.

It stood there raging at us, the noise of it filling the world and bouncing off the sky.

A word seemed embedded in the strata of the sound.

"Begone!" I felt it shout at us. "Begone! Begone! Begone!"

From somewhere out of that moonlit-starlit night, from that land of heaving dunes, came a force like a wind, that hammered and drove us back.

As I staggered, with the loathesome creature still spraddled on the dune and still raging at us, I realized that there was no longer sand underneath my feet, but some sort of paving.

Then, quite suddenly, the dune was no longer there, but a wall, as if a door we could not see had been slammed before our faces, and when this happened the creature's storm of rage came to an end and in its stead was silence.

The silence was not for long. Smith began an insane crying. "My friend is back again! He is in my mind again! He has come back to me . . . "

I yelled at him. "Shut up that yammering!"

I saw that we were back where we had come from, in that room with all the panels and behind each panel the shimmering features of another world.

Safely back, I thought with some thankfulness, but through no effort of our own. Given time enough, we might have breached that door and won through. But we hadn't had to do it; it had been done for us. A creature from that desert world had come and thrown us out.

There was no sign of the hobbies or of the gnome-like humanoid who had picked the world into which the hobbies threw us.

I chucked up my britches and took the gun off my shoulder. I had some scores to settle.

IV

WE FOUND them in what seemed to be a storeroom, one flight down from the lobby that had the doors to those other worlds.

The little gnome-like creature had our luggage spread on the floor and was going through it. The hobbies stood in a semicircle about him, looking on and rocking sedately.

They were so engrossed that none of them noticed us until we were through the door and into the room. Then the hobbies, seeing us, reared back on their rockers. The gnome straightened slowly, as if his back had stiffened while he bent over our things.

All of us stopped and waited.

The gnome rubbed his gnarled hands. "We were about, my lord," he said, "to come after you."

I motioned with my gun toward the luggage on the floor. He looked at it, shook his head.

"A mere formality," he said. "An inspection for the customs."

"With a view to a heavy tax?" I asked. "A very heavy tax."

"Oh, not at all," he said. "It is merely that certain things are not allowed on the planet."

I looked around. The storeroom was piled with crates and baskets and other, unfamiliar kinds of containers. Articles of all sorts were heaped here together.

"It seems to me," I said, "that you had no thought to get us."

"I swear," he said. "We were about to open the door."

"Why did you put us there to start with?" Sara asked. "In the desert world?"

"Why, to protect you from the deadly vibrations," he explained. "We, ourselves, take cover each time a ship lands. These vibrations come at night, after every landing."

"An earthquake?" I asked. "A shaking of the planet?"

"Not of the planet," said the gnome. "A shaking of the senses. It congeals the brain, it bursts the flesh. We put you in that other world to save your very lives."

He was lying to us. He simply had to be. I said, "Why should the landing of a ship set off such vibrations?"

He laid a crooked finger along his bulbous nose. "This world is closed," he said. "None is welcome here. When visitors come, the world tries to kill them before they can leave the city. And if they should manage to escape, the planet seals the ship so they can't take off again and tell what they have found."

"And yet," I said, "there is a strong directional beam, a homing beam, reaching into space. A beam to lure in ships. You lured us in and got rid of us and took everything we brought. No wonder the hobbies insisted on saving our luggage. They knew what would happen to the ship. Apparently you haven't figured how to beat this sealing business.

He shook his head. "Sir, there must be a way around it, but it's not been ciphered yet."

Now that he knew I had him pegged, he'd admit everything or almost everything and hope to gain some credit for being frank and forthright.

"Another thing I can't cipher," said the gnome, "is how you all came back here. Never before has anyone come back from one of the other worlds—before we let them out."

"You still claim you were going to let us out?"

"Yes, I swear it. You can have all your things. We had no other intention."

"Fine," I said. "But there are other things we want."

He bristled. "Like what?" he asked.

"Information. About a humanoid much like us. He had a robot with him."

I twitched the muzzle of the gun.

"Long ago," he said. "Very long ago."

"He was the only one to come? The only one of us?"

"No. Even longer ago there were others of you. Six or seven—they went beyond the city and that was the last I saw. They always leave the city. To hunt for something outside. All of them always hunt."

"Do they ever tell you," Sara asked, "what they are hunting for?"

He grinned crookedly. "They are secretive," he said.

"BUT this other humanoid," Sara reminded him. "The one who came alone, accompanied by the robot. ."

"Robot? You mean the metal humanoid like himself?"

"Don't play dumb," I snapped. "You know what a robot is. These hobbies are robots."

"We not be robots," Dobbin said. "We be honest hobbies."

"Yes," said the gnome. "The one with the robot. He also went away. He did not come back but in time the robot did. Although he would tell me nothing. He had not a word to say."

"And the robot still is here?" Sara asked.

The gnome said, "A part of him. The part that makes him function, I regret very much, is gone. The brain I suppose you call it. I sold the brain of him to the hobbies that dwell in the wilderness. Very much they wanted it, very much they paid. I could not refuse them."

"Those wild hobbies" I said. "Where do we go to find them?"

He made a shrugging motion. "They wander, most often to the north."

"What did the wild hobbies want of Roscoe's brain?" Sara asked. "What possible use could it be to them?"

He spread his hands. "How could I know?" he asked. "They are beings one does not question. Very rough and wild. They have a hobby's body, but heads like you, and arms. They yell loudly and are unreasonable."

"Centaurs," said Tuck. "There are many of them, I understand, spread through the galaxy. Almost as common as humanoids."

"You sold them only the braincase," I said.

"They did not want the body. I still have it here."

I dropped the space lingo, speaking to Sara in English. "What do you think?" I asked. "Do we still look for Knight?"

"He would be the one . . ."

"If still alive, he'd be an old, old man by now. The robot came back. Would he have left Knight if Knight were still alive?"

"We might find out where Knight was heading," Sara said. "If we obtained the braincase and put it back in Roscoe's body, he might know what Knight was looking for and where it might be found."

"But he wasn't talking. He wouldn't tell the gnome."

"He might talk to us," said Sara. "After all, it was people like us who made him. If he had any loyalty, it would be to human beings."

I turned back to the gnome. "We'll need the robot's body, maps of the planet and water. The hobbies to carry us and our packs."

He threw up his hands in horror, backing away from me. "The hobbies you can't have," he said. "I need them myself."

"You didn't let me finish," I said. "We are taking you along."

"That you cannot do," shrilled Dobbin. "He must stay to warn the incoming ships against the killing wave . . ."

"We'll take care of that," I said. "We'll shut off the beam. With no beam to lure them, no one will ever come."

"But you can't shut it off," wailed the gnome. "No one can do that. I have never found the transmitter. I have hunted and the others before me hunted and it has not been found."

He stood before us, dejected. Somehow or other the props had been knocked from under him.

"Makes sense," said Sara. "That had me puzzled. Whoever built this city installed the beam. Our scrawny friend is not the kind who could have built this city. He's simply a savage in a ruin, picking up what scraps he can." She turned to the gnome, used patois. "Tell us exactly what you are. It wasn't your people who built this city, was it?"

His face grew contorted. "You have no right to ask," he screeched.

"We have every right," I said, "to know what is going on. I'll give you about five seconds."

His legs collapsed and he sat down hard, wrapping his scrawny arms about his middle.

"I'll tell," he moaned. "Do not shoot—I'll tell. But the shame of it!" He looked at me with beseeching eyes. "I cannot lie. If I could, I would. But someone here would know."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"It is me," said Hoot.

"What have you got?" I asked. "A built-in lie detector?"

"One of my feeble capabilities," said Hoot. "Deficiencies I have in amplitude, but of this and several others I have good command. And this personage, aware of it, has been telling a semblance of the truth, although not in all its fullness."

The gnome was still staring at me. "In times like this," he pleaded, "us humanoids should somehow stick together."

I said, "Not you and I."

"You are being hard on him," said Sara.

"Miss Foster," I said, "I intend to hear this."

"But if he has any reason . . "

"He hasn't any reason. Have you a reason, Buster?"

He had a good look at me, then shook his head.

"My pride is in the dust," he said. "The memories of my ancestors are besmirched. We pretended for so long that at times even we ourselves believed it—that we were the ones who raised this wondrous city. If you had never come, I finally could have died believing it. Then it would have been all over, it would not have mattered if all the universe knew we were not the architects. For I am the last of us. The duties I've performed will be passed on to the hobbies and in time they may find some other to whom they can pass those duties. Someone must be here to save the travelers."

I asked Dobbin, "Could you tell me what this is about?"

"Nothing will I tell you, sire," said Dobbin. "You come with a heavy hand. We save your life by putting you in another world, then you suspect we will not let you out. You are incensed when you find your benefactor satisfying no more than normal curiosity in an examination of your luggage. You throw your weight around and act vastly ungracious in every way."

"That's enough," I shouted. "I won't take that talk from a robot!"

"We not be robots," Dobbin primly said. "I have told you, yet and yet again, that we be but simple hobbies."

I grabbed the gnome by the slack of his robe and lifted him. He dangled and his scrawny legs kicked in air.

I told him, "You're giving us what we need and without any quibbling. If you don't, I'll snap your neck."

"Look out!" Sara screamed. I turned my head and saw the hob-

bies charging us, rocking forward on their rear rockers, with their front rockers lifted menacingly.

I threw the gnome away and brought up my gun, remembering, with a sinking feeling, the lack of impression the laser beam had made on that crystal landing field. If the hobbies were fabricated of the same material, and they looked as if they were, I'd do just as well pegging rocks at them.

But even as I brought the rifle up, Hoot scurried quickly forward. Suddenly he blazed as if he were an electrical transformer that had gone haywire. The air seemed to shake—everything did a funny sort of jig—then all was as before. Except that the hobbies were piled into a corner of the room, all tangled together, rockers waving in the air. I hadn't seen them move—they just suddenly were there.

"They be all right," said Hoot, apologetically. "They damaged not at all. They be of use again. Sorry for surprise."

The gnome was picking himself up slowly from the heap of barrels and boxes and baskets where I had thrown him. He had no fight left in him. Neither had the hobbies.

"Tuck," I said, "get the stuff together. As soon as we load the hobbies we're moving out."

V

THE city pressed close. It towered on every side. Its walls went into the sky and where they stopped there existed only a narrow strip of blue, sky so far and faint that it almost faded to the whiteness of the walls. The narrow street did not run straight; it jogged and twisted, a trickle of space between boulders that were buildings. There seemed no end to the route. One had the feeling that he was caught and trapped.

"Captain," said Sara, walking beside me, "I'm not sure I approve the manner in which you handle things."

I didn't bother to answer. I knew that dissatisfaction with me had been nibbling at her for days—on board the ship and after we landed. Sooner or later, she would get around to chewing on me and nothing I said would have made a difference.

The others were coming behind us—Smith and Tuck riding, and the rest of the hobbies loaded with our supplies and tins of water.

Behind the hobbies came Hoot, like a dog hazing a flock of sheep, his body low to the ground. On each side he had a couple of dozen stubby legs, like a centipede. I knew that as long as he was behind them, the hobbies would behave. They were scared of him.

"You are heavy-handed," Sara said when I didn't answer her. "You simply bull ahead. You have absolutely no finesse and I think in time that can lead to trouble."

"You are talking about the gnome," I said.

"You could have reasoned with him."

"Reasoned with him and he about to steal us blind?"

"He said he would have taken us out of that other world. I'm inclined to believe it."

"In that case," I said, "please account for all the loot he had the storeroom jammed with."

"Maybe he stole some of it," Sara admitted, "or maybe some expeditions failed and he salvaged their stuff."

It was possible, I knew. Any one of the alternatives she suggested could be possible. But somehow I didn't think so.

"Speaking of the gnome," said Sara. "At first you threatened you'd bring him with us and then you didn't bring him. Personally, I'd feel better if we had him where we could watch him."

"I couldn't stand his whining and bawling," I told her shortly. "Besides, he was so happy about not being hawled along that he let us take other things without any argument. Including what is left of Roscoe and all that water and the maps."

We walked in silence for a moment, but she still didn't like the way I operated and she meant to tell me so.

"I don't like this Hoot of yours," she said. "He's a crawly sort of creature."

"He saved our necks when the hobbies went for us," I said. "I don't care what he used, just so he still has it and can use it again in a jam. And I don't care how crawly he may seem, just so he stays with us. We need someone like him."

She flared at me. "That's a crack at the rest of us. You don't like George and you don't like Tuck and you're barely civil to me. You call everybody Buster. I don't like people who call other people Buster."

I took a breath and began to count. I didn't wait till ten.

"MISS Foster," I told her, "you undoubtedly recall that money you transferred to my account on Earth. All I'm trying to do is earn that lovely money. You don't have to like me. You don't have to approve of anything I do. But you're signed onto this barebrained scheme and I'm in charge of it because you put me in charge of it and I'm going to stay in charge of it and you haven't a damned thing to say about it until we're back on Earth again—if we're ever back."

This business had been building since shortly after take-off from Earth and there had to be an end to it or we'd all go down the drain.

I thought she might stop and throw a tantrum at me, or try to brain me with her rifle.

But she merely kept walking along beside me. She never broke her stride. Conversationally, she said, "What a sleazy son-of-a-bitch you turned out to be."

I'd been called worse things than that.

The street jogged suddenly. As we came around the corner we faced a narrow lane that ran straight for a great distance. Far off, at the end of the street, stood a tree, one of those giant trees that towered above the city.

I stopped and Sara stopped beside me. Behind us the hobbies shuffled to a halt. Now that the clanking of the hobbies' rockers was still I could hear the crooning sound. I had been hearing it for some time, I realized, but had paid no attention to it, for it had been blotted out by the noise of the rockers.

The crooning came from Smith. He was sitting in the saddle, rocking back and forth and cooing like a baby.

Sara said, "Well, go ahead and say it."

"I haven't said a thing," I told her, "and I won't. But if he doesn't shut his trap, I'll rig a muzzle for him."

Tuck said, "Surely, captain, you can't complain at a little happiness. We are now close, it seems, to the creature that has been talking with him all these years and he's almost beside himself."

Smith paid no attention to us.

"Let's get on," I said.

The sun was slanting toward the west when we reached the end of the street, and it really was the end. The city stopped, just like

that, and open country lay beyond, a red and yellow land, not quite desert, with buttes and far-off mountain ranges and here and there the trees. There was other vegetation, little scrubby stuff, but the only things with height were those monstrous trees. Only one of them was close, perhaps within three miles. It was hard to judge the distance.

The street ended and a trail went on as continuation, a trail that over many years had been worn down a couple of feet or so into the very soil. It extended, twisting and turning, into that red and yellow land. A mile or so ahead stood a single building, not as massive as the buildings of the city, but still good-sized. It was not like the city buildings, not one huge rectangular mass. It was built of some red material. It had spires and towers and a huge ramp sprang up to three mighty doors that stood open in the front.

"CAPTAIN Ross," said Sara, "perhaps we should rest. It's been a long, hard day."

Maybe she expected that I would argue, but I didn't. It had been a hard day indeed and it was time to call a halt. I should have done it sooner, perhaps, but I had felt an itch to get out of the city, if that were possible.

"Over by the building," I suggested. "After we set up camp, we can have a look at it."

She nodded. Smith still was crooning, but you could only hear the crooning between the creaking sounds made by the rockers of the hobbies.

It was good to be out of the city, to see sky again. And if we followed this snaking trail we might find the centaur people who had bought Roscoe's brain—and if we could get it somehow back into Roscoe's body, just possibly he might tell us what this planet was all about.

We were halfway to the building when behind me startled, frightened screams burst out. I turned. The hobbies were charging. I dived sidewise off the trail and as I dived caught Sara around the waist and carried her with me. Together we rolled to one side and the hobbies went rushing past us, pounding as hard as they could for the ramp that led to the building.

I was back on my feet when something exploded above us, not a

loud explosion but a muffled thump. Dark red pellets went whizzing through the air and bouncing on the ground.

I jerked Sara upright. We started running for the ramp.

Off to the right was another thump. More dark red pellets went skittering over the ground, raising puffs of dust.

"It's the tree!" cried Sara, gasping for breath. "The tree is throwing things at us!"

I saw that a number of dark balls were flying through the air above us. They certainly came from the direction of the tree.

"Look out!" I yelled and gave Sara a push that sent her to the ground. I dropped there myself. Above us the dark balls were going thump! thump! thump! and the air seemed filled with the pellets. One caught me in the ribs. It felt as if a mule had kicked me.

"Now!" I yelled at Sara. She broke free of my clutching hand and beat me to the ramp. The floor of the ramp danced with the bouncing pellets, but we made it without being hit and stumbled through the door.

The others all were there, the hobbies huddled in fright and Hoot scurrying in front of them, like a worried shepherd dog. Tuck was slumped in his saddle and Smith had quit his crooning, but instead of slumping, he was sitting as straight as his tabbiness would let him. His face was glowing.

Outside the door the dark balls still were exploding, throwing out sprays of pellets that struck and bounced in frenzy all along the ramp.

Something small and very fast went past me—and then another. As the tiny runners burst onto the ramp I saw they were rat-like creatures. Each of them grabbed a pellet in its mouth, and then came back, rodent teeth locked about the trophy.

From the darkness behind us came a rustling sound, interspersed with squeaks. A second later hundreds of the creatures were pouring past us, running between our feet, bumping our legs in their maddened haste, heading for the ramp and the pellets.

Hoot came toward me, pulled up his feet and collapsed.

"They harvest food," he said, "against the coming of hunger."

I NODDED. The dark balls were pods filled with seeds and this broadcasting of them was the tree's method of distribution. But

they likewise were more than pods of seed. They could be weapons and had been so used on us. As if the tree had been aware of us and once we'd come in range, had opened fire. If the range had been shorter and if we'd been trapped in the open, they could have done us damage. My ribs still ached from the hit I'd taken. We had been lucky that the building had been close.

Tuck had left his hobby, but Smith was still in the saddle, bolt upright, his head rigid and twisted a little to one side, as if he were listening.

His face still wore that idiotic, terrifying happiness.

"Tuck," I said, "you and George unload the hobbies. I'll look around for wood."

We had a campstove with us, but there was no sense in using up fuel if we could rustle wood. And there is, as well, something to be said in favor of a campfire as a thing to sit around.

"I can't get him down," said Tuck, nearly weeping.

"What's the matter with him? Was he hit?"

"I don't think so, Captain. I think he's finally reached his place. He won't listen to me."

"You mean the voice . . ."

"Right here in this building," said Tuck. "At one time it might have been a temple. It has a religious look to it."

From the outside, it might have had a churchy look, but you couldn't get much idea of how it looked inside. By the door, with the sunlight slanting from the west, there was plenty of light, but other than that the interior was dark.

"We can't leave him there all night," I said. "We have to get him down."

"Then what?" asked Tuck. "We take him down tonight. What about tomorrow?"

"Why, hell," I said, "that's simple. If he doesn't snap out of it, we boost him in the saddle. Tie him on so he can't fall off."

"You mean you'd cart him off again when he finally has what he's yearned for all his life?"

"What are you trying to say?" I yelled. "That we should hunker here and never leave because this blubbering idiot . . ."

"I must remind you, Captain," Tuck said coldly, "that this blubbering idiot charted the way for us. If not for him . . ."

"Gentlemen," said Sara, "please lower your voices. Captain, we may not leave here soon at that."

I said between my teeth, "What is there to stop us?"

She gestured toward the doorway. "Our friend, the tree," she said, "has us zeroed in. Watch. All the stuff he's throwing is landing on the ramp. There aren't any misses. It would be worth your life to step outside that door. Fast as they move, little as they are, those seed-gathering animals are taking casualties."

The ramp still seemed alive with the bouncing, dancing seeds. Here and there upon it lay tiny motionless bodies. "The tree," I said, "will run out of ammunition."

She shook her head. "I don't think so, Captain. How tall would you say that tree might be? Four miles? Five miles? With foliage to the top—how many seed pods do you think that tree might bear?"

She was right. The tree could keep us pinned down for days.

"Dobbin," I said, "why is the tree pegging pods at us?"

"Noble sir," said Dobbin, "nothing will I tell you. I go with you. I carry your possessions. No further will I do. No information and no help. Shabbily you have treated us."

Hoot came ambling out of the dark interior of the building, tentacles waving, eyes shining on two of the tips.

"Mike," he hooted at me, "a curious feel this place has. Of old mysteries. Of much time and strangeness. There be a something here that falls short of a living being."

I had another look at Smith. He hadn't moved a muscle. He still sat in the saddle and his face still was frozen with that dreadful happiness. No longer with us, he was a universe away.

"Well," said Sara, "do you plan to leave him there?"

I said, "It makes no difference to him, but let us get him down."

Tuck and I between us hauled him from the saddle, lugged him across the floor and propped him against the wall beside the door. He made no sign to indicate that he knew what was going on.

I unlashed a pack from one of the hobbies and found a flashlight. I asked Hoot to scout around with me for wood.

Deeper in the building, the darkness was less than I expected. An eerie sort of twilight filled the place like fog.

Hoot pattered beside me. The walls were blocked out by the twilight mist. Here and there objects loomed. Far overhead a glint of

light would appear and disappear, marking some chink or window. To our right flowed a tide of busy rat-like creatures harvesting the seeds. When I shone the light on them, red eyes glowed fiercely back.

Hoot tapped my arm with a tentacle, pointed silently with another. I looked and saw a heap, a mound of blackness, as if junk had been thrown into a pile.

"MAYBE wood," said Hoot.

The pile was larger and farther than I had guessed. There was wood, all right—broken, shattered sticks and chunks. There was metal, too, some of it rusted, some of it still bright. The metal had once been fashioned, into tools or instruments, but they had been twisted out of shape. A wrecking job had been done here. We also found some hunks of torn cloth and wood tied with fiber.

"Much rage," said Hoot, "expended upon objects of inanimation. Mystery very deep and logic hard to come by."

I handed him the flashlight and he held it with a tentacle while I knelt and picked up wood, selecting pieces that were campfire length. They were dry and heavy and plentiful. We'd not run quickly out of fuel, no matter how long we might be forced to stay. I picked up one of the pieces with fabric tied about it and was about to throw it aside when the thought occurred to me that the fiber might serve as tinder.

I built myself an armload, rose slowly to my feet. I found that I needed my free hand to keep the load from sliding. "You hang onto the light," I said to Hoot.

He didn't answer. I looked down. He was rigid, like a pointing dog. Two of his tentacles were directed straight up.

I glanced up and had the feeling of a great expanse of space, extending without interruption, from the floor on which I stood to the very top of all the spires and turrets.

And out of that space came a whisper that grew in volume—the sound of many wings beating frantically. Up there in the misty darkness, a great migration seemed to be taking place—millions of wings beating out of nowhere into nowhere.

I strained my eyes, but nothing could be seen. Then, as suddenly as they had come, the beating wings were gone. We stood in a silence so thick that it thundered.

Hoot let down his two pointing tentacles. "Here they were not," he said. "They were otherwhere."

I knew he had been feeling what I had grasped only dimly. The sound of those wings had not been where we had sensed it, but in some other space, and we had only heard it through some spatio-temporal echo.

"Let's get back," I said to Hoot. "All of us must be hungry. Long time since we've eaten or had any sleep. How about you, Hoot? Can you eat the stuff we have?"

"I in my second self," he said. "No need of food."

We returned to the front of the building. The hobbies were in a circle, their heads all pointing inward. The packs had been stacked against the wall beside the door. Smith sat there too, still happy, still out of the world, like an inflated doll. Beside him was the body of Roscoe, the brainless robot. The two of them were ghastly things to see, sitting there together.

The sun had set and beyond the doors lay a dusk not quite so thick as the dusk inside the building. The rat-like creatures still were pouring out and back again, harvesting the seeds.

I dumped my armload of wood. Tuck had unpacked pots and pans.

"Just about here?" I asked. "Close to the door so the smoke has a chance of getting out."

Sara nodded. "I'm beat out, Captain," she said. "Fire and food will be good for all of us. What about Hoot?"

"He isn't doing any eating or any drinking," I explained.

Tuck squatted down beside me. I took out my knife. Picking up one of my smaller sticks, I whittled shavings, then reached for the piece of wood that had the fiber on it. I was about to rip the fiber loose when Tuck made to stop me.

"Just a second, Captain."

He took the wood from my hands and turned it toward the feeble light still coming from the doorway. For the first time, I saw what I had picked up.

"A doll," said Sara, in surprise.

"Not a doll," said Tuck. "Look at its face!"

In the twilight the face was surprisingly plain. Human? Primate, perhaps, although I couldn't be sure even of that. But human or

not, it was an expressive face, with so much sadness in it, so much resignation, that I felt a sense of shock. The technique was crude, primitive. But whoever had carved the face, driven by God knows what anguish, had caught within its planes a misery that wrenched one's heart.

Tuck raised the doll in both hands and clutched it against his breast. He looked from one to the other of us.

"Don't you see?" he cried at us. "Don't you understand?"

VI

Night had fallen. The fire carved a magic circle of light from the darkness that pressed about us. Behind us I heard a gentle crack as the hobbies rocked in place. Smith still sprawled against the wall. We had tried with no luck to rouse him to eat. Tuck sat with that doll clutched tight to his breast, staring into the darkness.

Had the expedition started to fall apart?

"Where is Hoot?" Sara asked.

"Off somewhere," I said. "Prowling. He's a restless sort of being. Should you try to sleep?"

"In a little while," she said. "Did you happen to notice this place is built of stone? Looks like granite, maybe. You have any idea what the city might be made of?"

"Not stone," I said. "That stuff was never quarried. Chemical, perhaps, bonded more tightly than anything we know. When I fired the laser into the landing field, the field wasn't even scorched."

"I know a little chemistry, Captain. The people who made this building didn't make the city."

"We can't know that," I said. "No way of knowing how long the city's stood."

I picked up a stick and poked the fire.

"Come morning, Captain? What do we do then?"

"We go on if the tree will let us. We find some footloose centaurs who may be holding a robot braincase."

"What about Smith? George was looking for something too. And he's found it."

"Don't tell me you're ready to stop short because of a creep like Smith."

She sighed. "There must be some humanity in you. Somewhere deep, out of sight. Go ahead. You make the decisions."

"Sure," I said. "If I don't we'll sit here forever. And we're in no situation for sitting still."

I walked to the door. No moon or stars were in sight. The tree had stopped its bombing and the rat-like creatures had gone back to wherever they had come from.

Maybe if we stole out now we might make it past the tree. But the darkness might hold other dangers.

"Why are you with us, Captain?" Sara asked from her place by the fire. "You had no belief in the venture."

I sat down beside her again.

I said, "Money."

"No," she said. "The money wasn't enough. You saw yourself boxed up on Earth forever and even on the day you landed, you wanted to run away."

"What you really want to know," I said, "is why I sought sanctuary, what sort of criminal you're traveling with. How come you're not filled in? You know everything else, even when I would land. I'd shake up that intelligence system of yours, if I were you."

"There were too many stories, she said. "No way of telling which was true. Tell me, Captain Rose, was it the swindle of all time?"

"I don't know," I said. "I wasn't out to break a record."

"But a planet was involved. That made sense—you were a planet hunter. Was it as good as they said?"

"Miss Foster," I said, "It was a beauty. It was the kind of planet Earth was before the Ice Age hit."

"Then what went wrong?"

I grinned at her, I don't know why. "There was only one drawback," I said. "It already was inhabited by intelligences."

"But you should have known that."

"Not necessarily," I said. "They weren't many and they were hard to spot. What do you look for when you search a planet for intelligences?"

"Communities," she said. "Artifacts, a pattern."

"I hunted planets. I didn't survey them. No planet hunter has the gadgets or the manpower or even the sanction to make a survey. A planet must be certified."

"BUT certainly you had it certified. You could not have sold it until it was certified."

"A certified survey," I said. "By a reputable firm. It came out completely clean and I was in business. I made one mistake. I paid them a bonus to get the job done fast. A dozen realty outfits were bidding for the property. I was afraid another planet might turn up that would be competitive."

"I think I understand. You were in a hurry."

"You're damned right I was," I said. "And the surveyors were in a hurry, too, so they could claim the bonus. I don't say they were sloppy. Let's be fair—the intelligent indigenes lived in a limited stretch of jungle. A million years ago, if Earth had been surveyed, not a single human might have turned up. These forms were about at the level of pithecanthropus."

"But that still was too high a level. So you made a mistake."

"Yeah," I said. "Just a big mistake. But try to tell that to a million settlers who had their farms laid out and their little town surveyed. Tell it to a realty firm with these settlers filing a million damage claims. And there was, of course, the bonus."

"You mean it was taken for a bribe."

"Miss Foster," I said, "you have hit it exactly on the head."

"But was it a bribe?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I don't think so. I'm sure I didn't think of it as a bribe. It was simply a bonus to do a good job fast."

"You banked your money on Earth. In a numbered account. You'd been doing that for years. That doesn't sound too forthright."

I laughed.

"That's nothing a man can be hanged for. With a lot of space operators it's standard operating procedure. Earth's banking setup is safe. A draft on Earth is honored anywhere, which is more than you can say for many other planets."

She smiled at me across the fire. "There are things I like about you, so many things I hate. What are you going to do with George?"

"If he continues the way he is," I said, "we may bury him. He can't live indefinitely without food or water. I'm not an expert on force feeding, are you?"

She shook her head. "What about the ship?" she asked, changing

the subject. "Maybe, instead of leaving the city, we should have gone back to the field."

"To do what? Bang on the hull? Try to bust it with a sledge? And who has a sledge? Did you see how many ships were trapped on the field?"

"Maybe some others cracked their ship and took off. How can you know they haven't?"

"I can't know of course. Miss Foster, we're finally on the trail of Lawrence Arlen Knight. That's what you wanted, wasn't it? Well, what do you want to do?"

She looked at me levelly. "Find Knight," she said.

VII

JUST before dawn she shook me awake.

"George is gone," she shouted. "He was there a minute ago. When I looked again, he wasn't there."

I came to my feet, still half asleep, and forced myself into alertness.

The place was dark. She had let the fire burn low and its light extended for only a little distance. The place was empty where George had been propped against the wall. The shell of Roscoe still leaned grotesquely beside a heap of supplies.

"Maybe he woke up," I suggested "and went to look for . . ."

"No, no. You forget. The man is blind. He'd have called for Tuck to lead him. He didn't call and he didn't move, don't you understand? I would have heard him. I was sitting here by the fire. I looked at George and he was there and I turned my head and then I looked back. He was gone. Vanished."

"Now just a second," I said. We couldn't afford hysteria. "Let's hold on. Where is Tuck?"

She pointed and I saw the huddle of the sleeping friar at the firelight's edge. Beyond him were the humped shapes of the hobbies.

There was no sign of Hoot.

Sara was right. If Smith had wakened from his coma, she would have heard any movement. The place had that booming quietness which fills an enormous building when everyone has left. A dropped pin, the scratching of a match, the hiss and rustle of clothing rubbing

against stone—any of these could have been heard with alarming clarity.

"All right, then," I said. "He's gone. You didn't hear him. He didn't call for Tuck. We'll look for him. We'll keep our heads. We won't go charging off."

I felt cold and knotted up. I didn't give a damn about Smith. If we never found him, that would be all right. He was a damned nuisance. But I still was cold with a terrible kind of cold that began inside and worked out to the surface. I was holding myself rigid so she wouldn't see me shiver.

"I'm frightened, Mike," she said in a normal voice.

I walked to where Tuck lay sleeping.

He slept like no honest man. He was curled in fetal position, brown robe wrapped snugly about him. In the huddling place formed by his knees and chest, clutched in his arms, was that silly doll. He was sleeping with the thing as a three-year-old might sleep with a teddy bear in a crib.

I put out my hand to shake him, then hesitated. It seemed a shame to wake that huddled thing, safe in the depths of sleep, to the nightmare coldness of this emptied building on an alien planet.

Sara asked, "What's the matter, Captain?"

"Not a thing," I said.

I gripped Tuck's scrawny shoulder and shook him awake.

He came back sleep-drugged, one hand rubbing his eyes, the other clutching that hideous doll more closely.

"Smith is gone," I said. "We'll have to hunt for him."

He sat up slowly, still rubbing his eyes.

"Don't you understand?" I asked. "Smith is gone."

He shook his head. "I don't think that he is gone," Tuck said. "I think he has been taken."

"Taken?" I yelled. "Who the hell would take him? What would want him?"

He gave me a condescending look which I could have strangled him for. "You don't understand," he said. "You have never understood and never will. With the truth all around us, you don't feel a thing."

I grabbed his robe and dragged him to his feet. The doll fell from his grasp as he tried to loosen my hold. I kicked it into the darkness.

"Now," I yelled, "what is going on that I don't see or feel, that I don't understand?"

I shook him so hard that his hands flopped at his side; his head bobbed back and forth and his teeth chattered.

Sara was tugging at my arm.

"Leave him alone," she screamed at me.

I let Tuck loose and he staggered a bit before he found his footing.

"What did he do?" Sara demanded. "What did he say to you?"

"You heard. He said Smith had been taken. Taken by what? Where? And why? That's what I want to know."

"So do I," said Sara.

So help me, for once she was on my side. And just a while before she had called me Mike instead of Captain.

Tuck scuttled into the darkness to retrieve that ridiculous doll.

I turned about, disgusted.

"ARE we going to look for George?" Sara asked me.

"Where do we look?"

"Why, here," she said, her arm indicating the dark interior of the building.

"You didn't hear him leave," I said. "You didn't hear him move. He couldn't have tiptoed away. He didn't have the time to do it—he was blind and couldn't have known where he was. If he had wakened, he would have been confused and called out."

"You must believe me," Sara said. "I didn't go to sleep. I didn't dose. After you went to sleep, I kept faithful watch. It was exactly as I told you."

"I believe you," I said. "I never doubted you. That leaves Tuck. If he knows something, let's hear it now."

We waited. Finally Tuck spoke. "You know about the voice. The voice of the person George thought of as a friend. And here he found his friend. Right here. In this very place."

"And you think," I said, "he was taken by this friend of his?"

"I don't know," Tuck said, "but I hope that is right. George deserved it. He had something good comeing after all the years. You never liked him. Many people never liked him. He grated on them. But he had a beautiful soul. He was a gentle person."

Sara said, "You buy this, Captain?" She turned to Tuck, "Who is this friend of George's?" she asked.

"Not a who," I said. "A what."

I remembered the beating wings I'd heard, flying through the darkness of this great abandoned building.

"There is a presence here," said Tuck. "Certainly you must feel it."

A sound of ticking, regular, orderly, rapid, grew louder and closer. We faced the darkness and before the others did, I saw Hoot.

He came toward us, his many little feet twinkling in the firelight and ticking on the floor. He paused when he saw us facing him, then joined us at less rapid pace.

"Informed I am," he said. "Your friend is go. He disappear from sense."

"You mean you knew the instant he was gone? How could you?"

"All of you," he said, "I carry in my mind. Even when I cannot see. One gone from my mind. I think great tragedy. I hurry back."

"You say you heard him go," said Sara. "You mean just now?"

"Just short ago," said Hoot.

"Can you tell us where? Do you know what happened to him?"

Hoot waved a tentacle wearily. "Cannot tell. Only know is gone. No use to seek him."

"You mean he isn't here. Not in this building?"

"Not this edifice," said Hoot. "Not outside. Not on this planet, maybe. He is gone entire."

Sara glanced at me. I shrugged.

Tuck said, "Why is it so hard for you to believe a fact that you can't touch or see? Why must all mysteries have physical solutions? Is there no room in your little minds for more?"

I should have clobbered him, I suppose, but at that moment he seemed unimportant.

I said to Sara, "I don't think we'll find him, but we still could have a look."

"I agree," she said. "It doesn't seem right not even to try."

"You disbelieve this thing I tell you?" Hoot inquired.

I explained. "What you say most undoubtedly is true. But there is a certain loyalty in our race—even when we have no hope, we still go out to look. It's not logical, perhaps."

"No logic," said Hoot, "assuredly and yet a ragged sense and admirable. I go and help you look."

VIII

WE HAD gone only a short distance into the interior of the building when Hoot said to me, "I came to carry news, but seemed trivial compared to lamented absence of your companion. Perhaps you hear it now."

"Go ahead," I said.

"Concerns the seeds," said Hoot. "To this feeble intellect, great mystery is attached. I point it out to you. Please veer slightly with me."

He started off at an angle. I veered slightly with him and we came to a heavy metal grating set into the floor. He pointed at it sternly with a tentacle. "Seeds down there," he said.

"Well, what about it?"

"Please observe," he said. "Illuminate the pit."

I dropped to my hands and knees and shone the flashlight into the pit, bending to stare until my face was pressed against the grating.

The pit seemed huge. The beam of light did not reach its walls. Underneath the grating, seeds lay in a massive heap—many more of them than the rat-like creatures could have brought the day before.

Nothing I saw explained the great importance which Hoot attached to the pit.

I rose and flicked out the light. I told him. "It's a cache of food, that's all. The rats carry the seeds and drop them through the grating."

"Is no cache of food," Hoot contradicted me. "Is cache of permanent. I look. I stick my looker into space between the bars. I wiggle it around. I survey the well. I see that space is tight enclosed. Once seeds get in no way to get them out."

"It's dark down there."

"Dark to you. Not dark to me. Can adjust the seeing. Can see to all sides of space. Can see through seeds to bottom. Can do more than simple see. Can explore surface closely. No opening. No opening even closed. No way to get them out. Our little harvesters harvest seeds, but not for selves to eat."

I had another look at the tons of seeds down there.

"This not only storage place. There be several others."

"What else?" I asked. "How many other things have you turned up?"

"Is piles of worn-out commodities such as one from which you obtained the wood," he said. "Is marks upon floor and walls where furnishings uprooted. Is place of reverence . . ."

"You mean an altar?"

"I know not of altar," he said. "Place of reverence. Smell of holy. And there be a door. It leads into the back."

"Into the back of what?"

"Into outdoors," he said.

I yelled at him, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I tell you now," he said. "I hesitate before in respect of missing person."

"Let's have a look at it."

"But," said Hoot, "first we search most carefully for lost comrade. We comb, however hopelessly . . ."

"Hoot."

"You, Mike."

"You said he isn't here. You are sure he isn't here."

"Sure, of course," he said. "Still we look for him."

"No, we don't," I said. "Your word is good enough for me."

He could see into a darkened bin and know that it was closed. He would do more than see. He didn't merely see; he knew. He carried each of us in his mind and one of us was gone. And now that was good enough. If Hoot said Smith was beyond reach I was more than willing to agree.

"I know not," said Hoot. "I would not have you . . ."

"I do," I said. "Let's find that door."

HE TURNED about and went pattering into the darkness. Adjusting the rifle on my shoulder, I followed close behind him. We were walking through an emptiness that boomed back at the slightest sound. Finally Hoot stopped. I had not seen the wall a few feet ahead of us. A thin crack of light appeared and grew wider. Hoot was pushing, opening the door. It was less than two feet wide, so low that I had to stoop to pass through.

The red and yellow landscape stretched away before me. To either side the dark red stone of the building made a fence. There were other trees, far off, but I could not see the tree that had been shooting at us. It was blocked from sight by the structure.

"Can we open that door again if we go out?" I asked.

Still holding it open, Hoot sidled around and had a look at its outside panel. "Undoubted not," he said. "Constructed only to be opened from inside."

I hunted for a small boulder, kicked it out of the ground and rolled it to the door, wedging it tightly so that the door would stay open.

"Come along," I said. "We'll scout. Be sure to stay behind me."

I headed left, walking along the wall. I reached the building corner and peered out. The tree was there.

It saw me or sensed me or somehow became aware of me the second I poked my head around the corner. It started shooting.

"Down!" I yelled to Hoot.

I threw myself against the wall, huddled over the crouching Hoot, burying my face in my folded arms. Beyond me the seed pods thudded. Some of them struck the building. The seeds went whizzing, with dull whistling sounds. One struck me on the shoulder, another in the ribs. They did no damage but they stung like fury. Others slammed the wall above us and went ricocheting, howling as they spun.

The first burst ended and I tried to stand. Before I straightened, the second burst came and I threw myself on top of Hoot again. None of the seeds hit me solidly this time, but one grazed the back of my neck and it burned like fire.

"Hoot," I yelled, "how fast can you run?"

"Scramble very rapidly," he said, "when materials hurled at me."

"Then listen. It's firing in bursts. When the next burst ends, when I yell, try to make it to the door. Keep close to the wall. Keep low. Are you headed in the right direction?"

"In wrong direction," said Hoot. "I turn myself around."

He twisted underneath me.

Another salvo came. Seeds peppered all around me. One nicked me in the leg.

"Wait," I said to Hoot. "When you get in, tell Miss Foster to put the packs on those hobbies. We're getting out of here."

Another burst of pods came storming in. The seeds rattled against the walls and skipped along the ground.

"Now!" I yelled. Bent low, I raced for the corner, rifle in my hand, the intensity lever pushed to its final notche. A blizzard of seeds caught me. One banged me on the jaw, another caught my shin. I staggered, caught myself and went plowing on. I wondered how Hoot was doing, but didn't have time to look. Then I was at the corner. There was the tree, perhaps three miles away.

I brought the rifle to my shoulder. What looked like black gnats were swarming toward me from the tree, but I took my time. I got my sight and pressed the trigger and twitched the rifle downward, sidewise, in a slicing motion. The laser beam blinked and then was gone. In that instant before the seeds struck, I threw myself flat, trying to hold the rifle high so it would not absorb the impact of the fall.

A MILLION fists were hammering at my head and shoulders. Some of the pods had struck the building and exploded, showering me with seeds.

I struggled to my knees and looked toward the tree. It seemed to be reeling and, as I watched, to topple. I wiped the dust from my eyes. Farther and farther out of plumb, the tree fell slowly at first, reluctantly, as if fighting to stay erect. Then it picked up speed coming out of the sky, rushing toward the ground.

I stood, wiped the back of my neck. My hand came away, bloody.

The tree hit the ground and the earth bounced, as if struck by a mighty blow. Above the place where the tree had fallen a geyser of dust and debris billowed miles into the sky.

I stepped toward the door and stumbled. My head ballooned and was filled with fuzziness. Hoot stood to one side of the open door, but the way through it was blocked by a flood of the rat-like creatures. They were piling on one another, as if a wide front of them, running hard, had converged on the narrowness of the door and were funneling through like water through a pressure hose, driven by frantic need to gather the fallen seeds.

I fell—no, I floated—down through an eternity. As I slowly fell, the ground seemed to draw away, to surge downward, so it always

was as far, or farther, than it had been to start with. And finally there was no ground at all, for night had come, and I plunged through an awful blackness that went on and on forever.

After endless time, the darkness went away and I opened my eyes. I lay upon the ground, looking into a deep blue sky in which the sun was rising.

Hoot was standing beside me. The rat-like things were gone. The cloud of dust, slowly settling back to the ground, still hovered where the tree had fallen.

I rose to a sitting position and it took all the strength I had. The rifle lay to one side of me. I picked it up. The shield of the tube was twisted out of shape and the tube itself had been knocked out of alignment. I dragged it to me and laid it across my lap. I don't know why I bothered; no man in his right mind would fire that gun again and I had no way to fix it.

"Drink your fluids I have done," Hoot honked cheerfully, "and put them back again. I hope you have no anger at me."

"Come again?" I croaked.

"No need to come again," he hooted at me. "Done it is already."

"What is done already?"

"Your fluids I have drunk. You were filled with deadly substances from being struck by seeds. Deadly to you, but not at all deadly to me."

"So you drank my fluids?"

"Is only thing to do," said Hoot. "Procedure is approved."

"Lord love us," I said. "A walking dialysis machine."

"Your words I do not grab," he complained. "I empty you of fluids. I subtract the substances. I fill you up again. Your inside biologic pump scarcely missed a jerk. But worry! I think too late. Apparent now was not."

I sat there for a long, long moment. Impossible. And yet I was alive, weak and drained of strength, but still alive. I recalled how my head had ballooned and how I'd fallen slowly. Something had been very wrong with me, indeed. I had been hit by seeds before, but only glancing blows that had not broken skin. This time, however, blood had been on my hand when I touched my neck.

"Hoot," I said, "I guess I owe . . ."

"No debt for you," he hooted happily. "I the one who pay the

debt. My life you saved before. Now I pay you back. We all even now. I would not tell you only that I fear great sin committed. Perhaps some belief you hold, not to tamper with body. But you undismayed, so everything all right."

I made it to my feet. The rifle dropped. I kicked it to one side—the kick almost put me on my face again. I was wobbly.

Hoot watched me brightly with his sighted tentacles.

"You carry me before," he said. "I cannot carry you. But if you lie down and hold on, I can drag you. Have much power in legs."

I waved the suggestion off.

"Get on with you," I said. "Lead the way. I'll make it."

IX

TUCK tried to play the man. He and Sara hoisted me on Dobbin's back and then he insisted that Sara ride the second unladen hobby while he led the way on foot. We went down the ramp and up the trail, Tuck striding in the fore, still with the doll clutched to his chest. Hoot brought up the rear.

"I hope," Dobbin said to me, "you have failure to survive. I yet will dance upon your bones."

"And the same to you," I said.

Not a brilliant answer, but I still was fairly shaky. It was all that I could do to hang onto the saddle.

The trail led up a short rise. When we reached the top, we could see the tree. It was bigger, even at that distance, than I had imagined. It had fallen squarely across the trail and the impact had shattered the trunk from its butt up. Pouring out of the rented wood were gray crawling things. Even from that distance, they had a slimy look. Piles of them were heaped along the fallen trunk and more were crawling out. Others were oozing down the trail, humping in their haste. A reedy wailing came from them that set my teeth on edge.

Dobbin rocked nervously and whinnied. "This you will regret," he shrilled at me. "No other things have ever dared to put hands on a tree. Never in all time have the tenants of the tree been loosed upon the land."

Tuck looked up at us. "That way is shorter," he said. He swept his

arm toward the left, where the stump of the tree had been sliced by the laser beam.

Sara nodded and Tuck stepped off the trail. The hobbies followed. The ground was rough, strewn with rounded stones the size of a person's head and studded with small, ground-hugging plants armed with heavy thorns.

As soon as we left the trail to begin our detour past the stump, the heaving mass of gray and slimy creatures moved out convulsively in their humping, hitching motion, to cut us off. They made a flowing sheet of motion with many tiny bobbing eddies, so that the entire group seemed in constant agitation.

Tuck, seeing their move, increased his pace. Stumbling and falling as he galloped, he bumped his legs and knees against the rounded stones. His outstretched hands, flung against his falls, smashed into the thorns of the low vegetation. He dropped the doll and picked it up and blood from his torn fingers ran into the fabric.

The hobbies too increased their pace, but slowed or came to a halt each time that Tuck came down.

"We'll never make it," Sara said, "with Tuck in front. I'm going to get down."

"No, you're not," I said.

I tried to vault from the saddle. I dismounted, but awkwardly. Though I landed on my feet, only utmost effort kept me from falling on my face. I managed to stay upright, and run ahead and grab Tuck by the shoulder.

"Go climb on Dobbin," I ordered. "I'll take it from here on."

He swung around, tears of anger in his eyes.

"You never let me have a chance!" he screamed. "You never let anyone have a chance. You grab it all for yourself."

"Get back there," I told him, "or I'll clobber you."

I didn't wait to see what he did, but went ahead, picking my way as best I could over the terrible terrain, trying only to hurry, not to run as Tuck had done.

My legs were wobbly and I had an unhinged sense of emptiness in my gut; my head had a tendency to float lazily upward.

Nevertheless I managed to plunge ahead at a fairly steady pace and at the same time stay aware of that flowing gray blanket of sliminess that poured from the fallen tree.

It was moving almost as fast as we were on what a military man would have called an interior line. No matter what we did we wouldn't escape encounter. We would brush the outer edge.

THE keening of the creatures, as the distance between us lessened, became an unending wail, like the crying of lost souls.

I had no way, of course, to figure out beforehand what threat they might pose. If they should prove dangerous, we could try to run. If my laser rifle had not been broken, we could have handled almost anything—but the ballistics weapon Sara carried was all that we had left.

For a moment I thought that after all we would reach our point of intersection before they had arrived. But I miscalculated. The edge of that humping carpet hit us broadside.

They were small, not more than a foot or so in height and they looked like naked snails except that their faces were a parody of the humanoid. Ridiculous, vacant, pitifully staring, the faces were those of characters in cartoons. The keening wails turned into words—not actual words, perhaps, but if you heard them, you knew what they were crying.

Homeless, they cried in their many tongues. You have made us homeless. You have destroyed our home and now we have no home and what will become of us? We are lost. We are naked. We are hungry. We will die. We know no other place. We want no other place. We wanted so little and we needed so little and you have taken that little from us. What right did you have to take from us—you who have so much? What kind of creature are you, that you fling us into a world we cannot know and cannot even live in? You need not answer to us, of course. But in time when an answer is asked of you, what will be your word?

It wasn't quite that way, flowing together, connected—but in the bits and pieces of the crying that hammered in on us, those slimy, humping, bereft creatures were saying something to us—knowing, I think that we could do nothing for them and were willing to do nothing for them, but wanting us to realize the full enormity of what we had done *to* them. It was not only the words that carried in their crying, but the look of those thousands of pathetic faces that hurled the cries at us—the anguish and the lostness, the hopelessness and

the pity, yes, the very pity that they felt for us who were so vile and so abandoned that we could take their home. And of all of it, the pity was the worst to take.

We won our way free of them and went on. Their wailing faded behind us and finally dropped to silence.

A sharp ridge rose ahead of us and we began to climb. Finally we reached the ridgetop and, from where we stood, looked down upon the stump, seeing it for the first time in its entirety. The stump was no more than a stump, although a big one, but in a neatly drawn circle about it was a carpeting of green. A mile or more in diameter, the green stretched out from the stump, an oasis of order in the middle of a green and yellow wilderness.

IT MADE one ache, it looked so much like home, so much like the meticulously cared-for lawns that the human race had cultivated or tried to cultivate on every planet they settled.

The hobbies spread in a thin line on the ridgetop. Hoot came scrambling up the slope to stand beside me.

"What is that, Captain?" Sara asked. She too was staring.

"I don't know," I said.

Why hadn't I called it a lawn and let it go at that? But something about it told me that the green was no simple lawn.

Looking at it, a man wanted to stretch full length, putting his hands behind his head, tilting his hat over his eyes, to settle down for an easy afternoon. Even with the tree no longer standing to provide shade, the oasis would have been a pleasant spot for a midday nap.

That was the trouble with it. It looked too inviting, too cool, too familiar.

"Let's move on," I said.

Swinging left to give plenty of room to the circular patch of green, I started down the ridge. I was prepared for some fearsome shape to burst from that tidy sward and come at us. I imagined the grass might roll like a rug to reveal a pit of horrors.

But the lawn continued to be a lawn. The massive stump speared upward and beyond it lay the mighty bulk of the trunk—the ruined home of the humping little shapes that had cried out their anguish to us.

Ahead of us lay the trail, a slender, dusty thread that wound into

tortured landscape, toward a dim unknown. Looming at the horizon, other massive trees towered into the sky.

I found I was tottering on my feet. Now that we were past the trunk and swinging back to the trail, the tension that had held me together was swiftly running out. I set myself the task of first one foot, then the other, fighting to stay erect, measuring the slowly decreasing distance until we should reach the trail.

We reached it. I sat down on a boulder.

The hobbies stopped and I saw that Tuck was looking down at me with a hatred that seemed out of place. There he sat on Dobbin, a scarecrow in a ragged robe, with that ridiculous artifact clutched against his chest. He looked like a sulky, overgrown baby girl. If he'd stuck his thumb in his mouth and settled down to sucking, the picture would have been rounded out. But the ragged impression stopped when you saw that hatchet face, almost as brown as the robe he wore, the great, pool-like eyes glazed with the hatred in them.

"You are, I presume," he said, his rat-trap mouth biting off the words, "quite proud of yourself."

"I don't understand you, Tuck," I said. And that was the solemn truth; I didn't understand what he had in mind with that sort of talk. I had never understood the man and I supposed I never would.

He gestured with his hand, back toward the cut-down tree.

"That," he said.

"You think I should have left it there, taking shots at us."

I had no yen to argue with him; I was too beat out.

"You destroyed all those creatures," he said, "who lived in the tree. Think of it, Captain! Magnificent! A whole community wiped out!"

"I didn't know about them," I said. Even if I had known, it would have made no difference. But I didn't say so.

Sara said, "Lay off him, Tuck. How could he have known?"

"He pushes everyone," said Tuck. "He pushes everyone around."

"Most of all himself," said Sara. "He didn't push you, Tuck, when he took your place. You were fumbling."

"A man can't fight a planet," Tuck declared. "He has to go along with it. He has to adapt. He can't bull his way through."

I made no rebuttal. He had done his grousing, had his say. It must have been humiliating, even for a jerk like Tuck, when I took over from him. He had something coming. He had a right to take it out on me if it helped him any.

I struggled off the boulder to my feet.

"Tuck," I said, "You can take over now. I need to ride a while."

He came down from Dobbin. As I moved up to mount we came face to face. The hatred still was there, more terrible, it seemed, than before. His thin lips scarcely moved. He said in a whisper, "I'll outlast you, Ross. I'll be alive when you're long dead. This planet will give you what you've asked for all your life."

I didn't have much strength left, but enough to grab and fling him into the trail. He dropped the doll and groveled on hands and knees to pick it up.

I hung to the saddle to keep from falling.

"Now lead out," I told him. "And, so help me, you do one more stupid thing and I'll beat you to a pulp."

X

THE trail wound across the arid land, crossing flats of sand and cracked pools of dried mud where weeks or months, or years before, rain water had collected. We climbed broken ridges, circumvented dome-shaped buttes. The land stayed red and yellow and sometimes black where glassy volcanic stone cropped out. Far ahead, sometimes seen, sometimes fading, lay a smudge of purple that might be a range of mountains.

On some of the higher ridges were cone-shaped stone structures that looked like shelter—as if someone or something had needed protection here and had gathered flat slabs to construct a flimsy barrier. The stones were laid up dry, with no mortar. Some of the structures stood as their builders must have left them. In many others, stones had fallen from place. In one place the entire structure had collapsed to a fallen heap.

The trees loomed in all directions, each one alone and lordly, several miles from any other. We came close to none of them.

We stopped at noon. I don't remember eating, although I sup-

pose I did. We were in a rugged area below one of the ridges and I was propped against a wall of earth, looking at another wall. The wall, I saw, was stratified distinctly in various thicknesses, some no more than a few inches while others were four feet deep. Each was a unique color. As I looked, I began to sense the time which each stratum represented. I tried to turn off, for with this recognition came a most unrestful feeling, as of stretching my faculties to a straining point, using all my strength to drive deeper into time. But there was no way of turning off; for some reason I was committed and must keep on. I could only hope that soon I would reach a stopping point—either a point where I could go no further or a point where I had learned or sensed all there was to learn.

Time became, instead of a concept, a material thing that I could distinguish and understand. The years and eons did not roll back but rather, stood revealed, as if a chronological chart had become alive and solid. Through the wavering lines, as if time had been a poorly made pane of glass, I could faintly glimpse this planet in those other ages.

The next thing I remember was waking up. The wall of earth and the badlands were gone and it was night. I was stretched on my back with blankets under and over me. I looked straight up at the sky and it was different from any I had seen before. I lay quietly, trying to work out the puzzle. Then, as if someone had told me (although no one did), I knew that the galaxy was spread out before me. Directly overhead was the glow of the central area and, spread around it like a gauzy whirlpool, were the arms and outlying sectors.

I turned my head and here and there, just above the horizon, were brilliant stars. I was seeing globular clusters, or more unlikely, other nearby stars, fellows to the star about which this planet revolved. Outlaw members in ages past had fled the galactic system and now lay in outer dark at the edge of conceivable space. I might be looking at them.

A fire was burning a few feet from me and a hunched, blanketed figure lay beside the fire. Beyond the fire were the hunched-up hobbies, rocking back and forth, with firelight reflecting from their polished hides.

A HAND touched my shoulder. Sara knelt beside me.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I feel fine," I said, and that was the truth. Somehow I felt new and whole. My thoughts were clear with an echoing, frightening clarity—as if I were waking to the first day of all, as if time had been turned back to the first hour that ever was.

I sat up and the blanket fell off me. "Where are we?" I asked.

"A day's journey from the city. Tuck wanted to stop. He said you were in no condition to travel, but I insisted we keep on. I thought you'd want it that way."

I shook my head, bewildered. "I remember nothing. You're sure Tuck said we should stop?"

She nodded. "You hung onto the saddle. You were terribly sick, but you answered when we spoke."

"Where's Hoot?"

"Out on guard. Prowling. He says he doesn't need to sleep."

I stood up, stretched like a dog after a good nap. God, how fine I felt!

"Is there any food?" I asked. When she laughed, I said, "What are you laughing at?"

"You," she said. "Because you're all right. I was worried. All of us were." She led the way to the fire. "Build it up," she said. "I'll fix some food for you."

Beside the fire was a little pile of brush, twisted branches broken from some of the desert trees. I fed the fire and flame blazed.

"I'm sorry about the laser gun," I said. "Without it, we stand sort of naked."

"I still have my rifle," she pointed out. "It has a lot of power. In good hands . . ."

"Like yours," I said.

"Like mine," she said.

Beyond the fire the heap of blankets lay unmoving. I gestured. "How is Tuck?" I asked. "Any sign of him shaping up?"

"You're too hard on him," she said. "You have no patience with him. He's different, not like us. We're very much alike. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," I said, "I have."

She brought a pan and set it on the coals.

"The two of us will get through," she said. "Tuck won't. He'll break up along the way."

Strangely I found myself thinking that Tuck now had less to live for since Smith had disappeared. He had lost at least part of his reason for continuing to survive. Had that been why, I wondered, he had appropriated the doll? Did he need to have something he could cling to and protect? He had grabbed the doll before George disappeared—but even then, except physically, George had left the rest of us.

"Another thing," Sara said, "that you'll see for yourself when it's light, are more trees. We're camped under the brow of a hill. From the hilltop a lot of country shows, and twenty or thirty trees. They're not haphazard. They're planted."

"You mean like an orchard?"

"That's right. Just like an orchard, in a checkerboard sort of pattern. Someone, at some time, had an orchard here."

XI

WE WENT on—and on and on.

Day followed day. We traveled from dawn until failing light. The country changed at times. We struggled uphill and down in twisted badland terrain; after that came days on end when we traveled land so flat that we seemed to be in a shallow dish with horizons climbing upward on every hand. Ahead of us, what had been a low purple cloud became unmistakably a mountain range in the distance.

We saw life. There were honking things, when we crossed the badlands area, that went streaking down painted gullys, gobbling their excitement. There were creatures we called the striders, seen seldom and always so far off that even with our glasses we never had a good look at them. From what we saw, they were incredibly twisted life forms that seemed to be on stilts, lurching and striding, not seeming to move swiftly but covering a lot of ground. On the desiccated plains the whizzers—we named them that—moved so fast we never saw what color they were. They were a blur coming toward us, a whoosh going past. Although they came close, they never bothered us. Nor did the honkers or the striders.

And always there were trees, the monsters that towered miles into the sky. Now we knew without question that the land had once been surveyed and the trees laid out in a geometric gridwork over the face of the land. We came no closer than a mile to any one of them. The trail seemed engineered to avoid them. While at times we saw them shooting out their seed pods, they never shot at us.

At times, watching through glasses, we saw swarms of little rat-like creatures scurrying out of ground holes to collect seeds from the pods.

One day the trail was crossed by what had been a paved road. Only a few of the paving blocks remained.

We held a conference. The road was attractive. In times past, it would have linked points of importance, while the trail went aimlessly dawdling. But the trail bore some ancient signs of travel—the road none. The trail trended northward and it was in the north that we might find the centaurs. The road ran east and west.

WITH some reluctance, we made our decision, composed half of logic, half of hunch. We continued on the trail.

Someone had been here—how long ago? Who had built the city, laid out the road and planted the trees? Now the city was silent, the road a ruin. Measureless time and energy had been spent upon this planet. And then the spenders had left, first taking steps to insure that anyone who landed here would stay. Landing otherwhere than the city, a ship might have risen again. But any approaching ship would certainly have been lured by the signals that reached from the city far into space.

Late one afternoon we camped in a badlands area while some hours of light remained, not knowing when we would reach the next fairly level place.

We unloaded the hobbies, stacked the supplies in a pile. The hobbies wandered off as they often did, as if glad to be rid of us for a time. Hoot always went with them and he always brought them back.

We started a fire. Sara began putting a meal together while Tuck and I went up a draw to bring in firewood.

We were coming back, each with an armload of wood, when we heard the hobbies screaming and the clangor of their rockers as

they ran. We dropped the wood and made swiftly for camp. The hobbies boiled out of a narrow gully. Without pausing, they overran the camp, scattering the fire and the pans Sara had set out, while Sara herself ran for her life to get out of their way.

They turned right, down the trail. Behind them came Hoot, close to the ground, the only way he could run. Making speed, he was little more than a dark streak at the hobbies' heels. When he reached the camp he skidded to a halt and swung broadside. Braced on his tiny feet, he blazed—as he had done in the city when the hobbies had suddenly charged. Blue haze enveloped him and the world did a funny sort of jig. On the trail ahead of him, the hobbies went flying and spinning in air. But they got to their rockers again and went plunging on. Hoot blazed once again, as they reached the top of the hill above the camp. This time they disappeared, flipped and hurled and blown over the hill by whatever Hoot was doing to them.

Cursing like a madman, I went tearing up the hill. By the time I reached the top the hobbies were hightailing out of there, heading back to the city.

I watched until they were out of sight. Then I went downhill and back to camp.

The campfire was scattered. Sticks of charred and smoking wood were lying all about. Cooking pans had been crushed by the hobbies' rockers. Sara was kneeling above Hoot, who was on his side, a ghost of his former self. He had a hazy, half-substantial look, as if he were suspended between this world and another.

I reached to pick him up, not sure he was solid enough to lift. Strangely enough, he was. I held him and he was light, about half his normal weight.

He hooted at me feebly. "Mike, I try so hard."

"What's the matter, Hoot?" I cried. "What's happening to you? What can we do?"

He didn't answer. Tears were streaming down Sara's face. "Oh, Mike," she said. "Oh, Mike."

Tuck stood a few feet behind her. For once he had dropped his doll. His face was long and sad.

Hoot stirred feebly. He said, his voice so faint I could scarcely hear it, "Permission to take some life from you."

Tuck stepped forward quickly, snatched Hoot away from me. He held Hoot tight against him as he had held the doll.

"Not you, Captain," he cried. "You need all the life you have. I have life to give."

"Permission?" Hoot asked in an eerie whisper.

"Yes, go ahead," said Tuck. "Please will you go ahead."

Sara and I, crouching on the ground, watched in prayerful fassination. It took only seconds, but the time seemed more like hours. Neither of us moved. My muscles ached with tension. Hoot slowly lost the insubstantial look and returned to us again from that other world.

Stooping, Tuck set him on his feet, then himself collapsed.

I picked up Tuck. He hung limply.

I said to Sara, "Blankets."

She stretched a blanket on the ground. I put him down. We used another blanket to cover him warmly. A few feet away was his fallen doll. I laid it on his chest. Tuck slowly moved one hand to grasp his treasure.

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Thanks, Captain," he said.

XII

WE SAT around the fire in the deepening dark.

"Bones," said Hoot. "Bones upon the ground."

"You're sure?" I asked. "Why should that scare the hobbies?"

"Sure of it," said Hoot. "Bones was all to see. Nothing else to sight."

"Maybe a certain kind of bone," Sara said. "Something they feared even in death."

Somewhere in the badlands a band of honkers were talking back and forth, breaking forth at times into flurries of insane gobblings.

And here we were, marooned in a howling wilderness, not sure where we were heading, the winding trail our only orientation. The only place behind us was the great, dead, white city, which in its way was as much a wilderness as this.

This, I sensed, was not the time to bring the matter up. In the

morning, at the beginning of a brand new day, we'd look at the situation and decide what course to take.

Hoot waved a tentacle at the blankets.

"I greedy," he said. "I take too much of him."

"He'll be all right," Sara said. "He's sleeping. He drank a bowl of broth."

"But why?" I demanded. "Why did the damn fool do it? I was ready and willing. I was the one Hoot asked."

"Captain," Sara said, "this was Tuck's first chance to make a contribution. He must have felt fairly useless on this expedition. You've done your best to make him feel that way. Do you begrudge him this act?"

I said, "Of course not. What bothers me is what he said. I have life to give, he said. What did he mean by that?"

"I wouldn't know," Sara said. "No point now in wondering. The thing to worry about is what we do afoot. Whatever we decide, we'll have to shed supplies. Water is the problem. Most of what we can carry will have to be water. Unless the hobbies come back."

"They won't come back," I told her. "They've wanted this since we left the city. They would have deserted sooner if it hadn't been for Hoot. He kept them in line."

"Surprise they catch me by," said Hoot. "I was ready for them. I bop them time and again and it did no good."

"The thought occurs to me," said Sara, "that this may be standard procedure. Take a group of visitors out here and leave them stranded, with little chance of getting back."

"Not us," I said. "Other people, maybe, but not these particular people. Not us, around this fire."

She glanced at me sharply and not approvingly—but that was familiar. By and large, she did not approve of me.

"I can't quite be sure," she said, "if you're trying to make fun of me or are whistling in the dark."

"Whistling in the dark," I said.

"I suppose you know exactly what to do. You'll disclose your plan in a sudden flash of genius. You've been in jams before and you never panic."

"Oh," I said, "lay off. Let's talk in the morning."

"In the morning," Sara said, "we'll go and see Hoot's bones."

THE gully made a sharp turn to the left. When we rounded the turn, we saw the bones. I had expected a few scattered shards against the mud-brown soil. Instead we found a great windrow that stretched from one wall to the other of the gully.

They were large bones, many a foot or more in diameter. A grinning skull, so located that it seemed to be peering at us, was elephant-size or bigger. All were yellowed and crumbling, porous where exposure had bleached out the calcium. While most were heaped in the windrow, some were scattered about the edges, as though hauled there by scavengers in some long-gone feasting.

Beyond the bones the gully ended abruptly in a great jumble of rocks which in ages past had fallen from the cliff.

I felt uneasy, ill—and it takes a lot to make me ill. Something had happened here long ago that had cast upon this place an aura of evil and awfulness to which no one should subject himself.

And out of this awfulness came a voice.

"Gracious sirs or mesdames," it piped, loud and cheerfully, "or whatever you may be, pity me please. Haul me hence from this awkward and embarrassing position."

I could not stir. The voice held me in place.

The voice spoke again. "Against the wall. Look behind the rocks which proved so poor a fortress that all were killed but I."

"It could be a trap," Sara said in a hard metallic voice that sounded strange from her. "The hobbies might have sensed it. Maybe that's why they ran."

"Please," pleaded the voice. "Do not leave. Others did turn away. But nothing is here to fright you."

I moved forward a step or two.

"Captain, don't!" cried Sara.

"We can't walk away," I said. "We would always wonder."

What I really wanted to do was turn and run. But another person, some sort of surrogate of me, had spoken through me.

I walked forward, came to the pile of bones and began to scramble over them.

"Oh, most noble creature," cried the piping voice, "you come to rescue my unworthy self."

I raced up the pile of rocks from which the voice had come. I reached the top.

What I saw was a hobby, its milk-glass whiteness gleaming in the shadow. It lay flat on its back, wedged between the boulder that I stood on and another that had rolled from the pile. Pinned between masses of rock, rockers straight up, the hobby was helpless.

"THANK you, gracious one," it piped. "You did not turn away. I deduce you are humanoid. Humanoids be the best of people. Filled with much compassion and no little valor."

It waggled its rockers at me in a gesture of gratitude.

The trapped hobby was not the only thing behind the barricade. A humanoid skull grinned at me out of the dirt and scattered bones and chunks of rusted metal.

"How many years ago?" I asked, although there were other more important questions.

"Honored sir," it said, "of time all track I've lost. The minutes run like years and the years like centuries since I last stood upon my rockers. No one upside down as I am can keep a count of time. There be others, but they ran away. Still others died. I be the only one left of that noble company."

"All right," I said, "just take it easy. We'll have you out of there."

My companions were scrambling across the pile of bone.

I was not so much wondering why humans might have died here, as thinking that with the rescued hobby we would be trapped no longer in this badlands. The hobby could carry the water we would need.

It took all three of us, with Hoot calling out encouragement, to roll away the smaller rock that held the hobby immobile. We had to tip the hobby over and set him on his rockers.

"I be Paint," he told us, "although at times I be called Old Paint, which is beyond my feeble understanding, for I be no older than the other hobbies."

"There were other hobbies?" Sara asked.

"There be ten of us," said Paint. "Nine others ran away. We be forged on distant planet, of which I be ignorant the name, and brought here to this one. Coming up the trail we be attacked by a horde of raveners, result of which you see."

"The ones who brought you here, the ones who fabricated you," asked Sara. "They were the same as us?"

"Same as you," said Paint. "No profit in talking of them. They died."

"Why were they here?" she asked. "What were they looking for?"

"For another of them," said Paint. "For lost humanoid person."

"For Lawrence Arlon Knight?"

"I know not," the hobby said. "They do not tell me things."

WE DECIDED to go on, following the trail. Sara and I sat by a smoky campfire, with Paint nearby beside our pile of supplies. Tuck sat a little apart from us, silently clutching his doll.

I wanted one thing straight.

"Knight must be dead," I said. "Surely you know that. You must have known it back on Earth before we started out."

She flared at me. "Why did you ever come with us?"

"I told you that before," I said. "The money."

"Then why do you care if he's dead or alive?"

"That's easy," I told her. "I don't. But we might find something ahead. If we do, I may want your help—not your disapproval."

"That hardly sounds like you, Captain. But tell me more."

So we sat by the campfire and planned.

We would load Paint with Roscoe's useless carcass and all the water and food that he could carry. Tuck and I would carry heavy packs while Sara, the only one of us with a weapon, would carry a light load, so that in a moment of emergency she could drop her pack and be ready with the rifle. Hoot would carry nothing. He would be our scout, ranging ahead of us and spying out the land.

That afternoon, much as we disliked the doing, we went down the gully and dug through the fort. We found three human skulls and half a dozen rusted weapons.

The day was far gone, but we loaded up and left. No one wanted to stay in that camp for a minute longer than necessary. We fled from it, glad to get away.

XIII

HOOT led us through the badlands for two days. Heretofore any bad stretches had been crossed in a few hours or a day at most. But this area seemed to stretch forever.

Hoot kept well in advance. We saw him only in glimpses when he stood on a high point and looked back—until the second afternoon.

I saw him sidewheeling rapidly down the trail toward us. Glad of an excuse to rest, I dropped my pack and waited.

"Hobbies ahead," he hooted. "Ten times ten of them. But without rockers and with faces such as you."

"Centaurs," Sara said.

"In depression in hills. Playing at game, knocking sphere with sticks."

"Centaurs playing polo," Sara said, enchanted. "What could be more appropriate!"

"Understand," said Hoot, "that you seek them. Glad I be to find them."

"Thank you, Hoot," said Sara.

I reached down for my pack.

"Lead on, Hoot," I said.

"Do you think," Sara chattered, "that the centaurs will have the brain case? It could have been lost, broken—"

"We'll know," I said, "when we talk with them."

There was a chance, of course, that many tribes of centaurs were on the planet. The one ahead, engaged in polo playing, might not be the tribe that had Roscoe's brain case. But I didn't mention that.

We rounded two more hills. Hoot whispered that the centaurs were just beyond. We flattened and peered below. Beyond a flat expanse of rotting sand, the badlands finally petered out. On the desert between, we saw the centaurs.

Hoot had been wrong in his count of them. There were many more than ten times ten. Most of them were grouped around a rectangular field where a game was being played. A dozen centaurs were involved in furious action, clutching long clubs and fighting for possession of a ball by whacking it back and forth in a rude version of the noble game of polo.

Even as we watched the game came to an end. The players trotted off the rectangle and the crowd began dispersing.

Beyond the playing field a few tents were set up, mere shelters of dirty fabric supported by poles. The packs under the shelters probably held the tribe's possessions.

"What do we do now?" Sara asked. "Walk down, greet them?"

Tuck came out of his trance. "Not all of us. Only one."

"I suppose that's you," I said in jest.

"Of course. If anyone's to be killed, I'm the one. Besides, I'm the least likely victim. I'm humble-looking, very inoffensive and with no bluster in me and probably not appearing right in the head. I have this brown robe and no shoes, merely sandals . . . "

"Those babies down there," I told him, "don't know a thing about brown robes or sandals. And they could care less if you were bright or stupid. If they feel like killing someone . . . "

"You can't know that," Sara said. "They might be friendly."

"Do they look friendly to you?"

"No, they don't," she admitted. "But Tuck may have something going for him. They may not know about brown robes and sandals, but maybe they'll sense a simple soul. They might see right off he isn't dangerous."

She was dreaming, I thought.

"I'm the one to go, by God," I said. "So cut this jabbering because it's decided. They'd mop up the place with Tuck."

"I DON'T suppose they would with you," she said

"You're damned right they wouldn't. I can handle things."

"Captain," said Tuck, "why won't you ever listen? Do you have to be the hero every time? I meant what I said. They might not clobber me because I'm a different kind of man from you. There's no fun in beating someone pitiful and weak. Another thing—you're needed more than I am. If something happened to me it wouldn't make a difference to this expedition."

I stared at him aghast. "You mean this?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he said. "Think I was grandstanding?"

I didn't answer him. That was exactly what I'd thought.

"Whoever goes," Sara said, "will have to ride Old Paint. They'll have more respect for a man who's riding. Another thing, Paint means a quick escape—if necessary."

"Mike," Hoot advised me, "the holy one speaks vivid sort of sense."

"Damn foolishness," I told them. "I'm paid to take the risks. Also we have to bargain for the brain case. Tuck would louse it up."

We crouched, glaring at one another.

"Toss a coin," I growled. "Would you settle for a toss?"

"A coin only has two sides," said Sara.

"That's enough," I said. "You're out—it's Tuck or I."

"No coin," said Tuck. "I'm the one who's going."

Sara looked at me. "I think we should let him go," she said. "He wants to. He's willing. As for the bargaining, that's simple. We want the robot's brain case. We'll give anything for it, if we have to."

I blew up at her. "Not the rifle. It's all we have."

"We need the brain case, too," Sara said. "What's so great about the rifle? I only fired it once and even that once was senseless."

"You saw those men in the gully."

She shrugged. "They had weapons. How much good did it do them?"

"All right," I said.

Let Tuck go ahead and make a mess of it. If he did, and if that ended the hunt for Lawrence Arlon Knight, maybe I still could figure how to get off this planet.

I unloaded Paint, stacking the water tins and Roscoe's limp metal body to the side of the trail.

"All right, sport," I said to Tuck.

He mounted, looked down at me and held down his hand. I took it and found more strength in those unstained fingers than I expected.

"Good luck," I said. Then Paint went galloping over the hilltop and down the trail.

Tuck looked absurdly vulnerable, bouncing on the hobby's back, hood pulled around his face, rags fluttering behind him.

The trail dipped and we lost sight of him, but in a few minutes he reappeared, riding across the flat toward the milling centaurs. Someone down there caught sight of him. A shout went up.

This is it, I thought, and I was watching so hard that I held my breath. In another second they might rush him and that would be the end of it. But they didn't rush him; they stood and looked.

Paint rocked forward, Tuck bouncing on him like a doll in scraps of cloth. And that doll of his, I thought .

"What about the doll?" I whispered to Sara. I don't know why I whispered. I could have shouted and that herd of centaurs would not have paid attention. They were busy watching Tuck. "What about the doll? Did he leave it here?"

"He took it with him. He tucked it underneath his belt and tightened the belt to hold it."

I swore.

"You keep thinking," she said, "that there's something wrong with him. But he sees something you and I can't see. That doll is more than a rabbit's foot. I've watched him with it. He handles it reverently. As if it were religious."

Below us, Paint was close to the herd of centaurs. Some fifty feet from them, the hobby stopped and rocked.

I looked around. Sara had glasses trained on the flat.

"Is he talking to them?" I asked.

"I can't tell. He has the hood pulled around his face."

At least they hadn't killed him out of hand.

Two of the centaurs trotted forward to meet him, maneuvering him between them.

"Here," said Sara, handing me the glasses.

All I could see of Tuck was the back of his hood, but the faces of the two centaurs were all too clear—tough, strong-willed, brutal, far more humanoid than I had expected.

They seemed to listen to Tuck and, from time to time, to make reply. Suddenly they were laughing in great uproarious shouts. Behind them the herd took up the taunting, contemptuous sound. The booming echoed in twisted hills and gullies.

"Old Tuck," I told Sara, "has muffed it once again."

The laughter died away. Once again the two centaurs were talking with Tuck. I handed the glasses back to Sara.

One of the questioners shouted to someone in the crowd, who shortly trotted forward, carrying something that glittered in the sunlight.

Sara had the glasses. "It's a shield," she said. "And a belt and sword. They're giving the sword to Tuck."

Paint was wheeling about, with Tuck still in the saddle and still clutching the shield and sword. Back on the flat, the centaurs again were hooting with laughter in wave after wave of sound. On the flat below, Paint built up sudden speed.

Sara said, "Maybe we made a mistake. You were the one to go, of course. But he wanted to, so badly."

"But why?" I asked. "Mock heroics?"

She shook her head. "Not mock heroics. Something more complicated. He doesn't think as you and I do. He sees things differently. Something is driving him—nothing like fear or ambition or envy, but a mystical force of some sort. You've always thought he was just another religico, a faker. I've known him longer than you have."

Paint came plunging over the hilltop and, setting his rockers, skidded to a halt. Tuck, sagging in the saddle, let go of the shield and sword belt. They clattered to the ground.

"What about the brain case?" Sara asked. "Do they have it?"

Tuck nodded.

"Will they trade it?"

"No trade," he croaked. "They will fight for it. That's the only way."

"Fight for it?" I asked. "With a sword?"

He nodded. "I told them I came in peace. They wanted to fight immediately, but I said I had to go and pray. They laughed, but they let me leave."

HE SLID off Paint and collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"I can't fight," he shrilled at us. "I've never fought, never held a weapon in my hand until this day. I refuse to kill. They said it would be fair, one against one."

"Stop that sniveling," I snarled. "On your feet. Take off that robe. I want it."

"You!" gasped Sara.

"Who the hell else?" I asked her. "You want that brain case, don't you?"

"You have never used a sword, have you, Captain?"

"No, of course I haven't. What do you think I am, a barbarian?" Tuck hadn't stirred. I jerked him to his feet. "Off with that robe," I yelled. "The sandals, too."

"They'll know the difference," Sara said. "You don't look the least like Tuck."

"With the hood around my face, they won't know. And even if they do, they won't care. It's a game for them."

I peeled off my trousers. Tuck hadn't moved. Sara stepped toward him and Tuck suddenly came alive. He unfastened the belt and shrugged out of his robe, tossing it to me.

I clinched it around me, pulling the cowl over my head.

"The sandals," I said.

Tuck kicked them toward me and I stepped into them.

Naked except for a dirty pair of shorts, he was the scrawniest human being I had ever seen.

I strapped the sword belt about my waist, took out the sword and examined it. It was heavy, a little rusted, but sharp enough. I jammed it into the scabbard again and slid the shield on my arm.

"Good luck, Mike," said Sara.

I climbed on Paint. As the hobby turned to go, Tuck rushed over in his dirty shorts and offered me his doll.

I kicked his outstretched arm. The doll, jarred from his grasp, went flying through the air.

Paint took me down the trail. The centaurs were as they had been before. At my appearance they sent up a mocking cheer.

One of the group trotted out to meet me. He had a shield, exactly like the one I carried, and a sword belt strapped to his shoulder.

"You return," he said. "We had not thought you would."

"I remain a man of peace," I said. "Is there no other way?"

"Peace be coward. There is no other way of honor."

"Speaking of honor," I said, "how do I know that after I kill you I will be given the sphere?"

"You speak most lightly of killing me," he said.

"One of us must die."

"That is true," he said, "but it will be you."

"Just on the chance you are wrong, how about the sphere?"

"In the unlikely event that you still live," he said, "it will be brought to you."

"And I'll be allowed to leave in peace?"

"You insult me," he said, in anger. "You insult my race."

"I'm a stranger here. I do not know your race."

"We are honorable." The words gritted through his teeth.

"In that case," I said, "let us proceed."

"The rules must be observed. Each of us will move back and turn to face the other. You note the banner?"

I said I did. Someone in the crowd was holding up a pole with a dirty piece of cloth tied to it.

"When the banner falls," he said, "the fight begins."

I kicked Paint in the ribs to turn him around. We rode a few paces, then turned again. The centaur and I were facing one another. The pole with its dirty piece of cloth was still held on high. The centaur unsheathed his sword and I followed his example.

The pole and the dirty rag came down.

We rushed together. Paint was going full speed and the centaur was thundering his driving hoofs cutting earth from the ground. He held his sword and shield aloft. As he charged, he uttered a strange shrill yodeling warwhoop that was enough to freeze the blood.

In about two seconds, my busy mind came up with a dozen clever tricks—and as speedily dropped them all.

His sword came down in a full circle flail. His eyes were half-closed and beady. His face wore a look of self-satisfied alertness. From many little things that he had noted, he must have sensed that I was no expert swordsman and was at an utter disadvantage.

His sword struck the edge of my shield so hard that my arm was numbed, but I had started a clumsy stroke. He took the full impact of it. He reared up and backward, a glazed look across his face. His shield dropped and the edge of my sword came down on top of his head, driven with all the strength I had, slicing his skull and bisecting his face to the base of his neck.

In the instant before my blade struck, I had seen the black hole blossom in his forehead, just above his eyes, as if it had been placed there to show me where to strike.

By an expert marksman.

XIV

THE brain case was nicked and battered. It had had hard usage.

I handed it to Sara. "There it is," I said. "That was a hell of a chance you took."

She bristled at the anger in my voice. "It was no chance at all," she said. "The bullet goes where I aim the rifle. It worked, didn't it?"

"It worked," I said, still shaken. "But two feet to one side—"

"It couldn't have," she said. "I aimed it."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Right in the center of his forehead."

I climbed off Paint and shucked the robe. Tuck was crouched at

the foot of a twisted badlands tree. I tossed the robe at him.

"Where are my pants?" I asked.

"Over there," said Sara, pointing. "I folded them."

I shook out the trousers and started getting into them.

Sara had been turning the brain around and around in her hand.

"What happened to it?" she asked. "What did they use it for?"

"What would you expect a bunch of polo-playing barbarians to use a brain case for?"

"You mean a polo ball."

I nodded. "Now they'll have to go back to balls hacked out of stone. They're upset about it.

Hoot came swarming from the slope where he had been standing lookout.

"You perform excellent," he hooted at me. "For one wielding unaccustomed weapon."

"Miss Foster was the one who performed excellently," I told him. "She bagged my bird."

"No matter which," said Hoot, "the deed be neatly done and the game-playing hobbies are evacuating. They are forming up to march."

I climbed to the top of the hill. The centaurs had indeed formed into a ragged line and were marching west. It was a relief to see them go. Honorable as they might be (and they were honorable; they had given me the brain case) I was less nervous without them.

Tuck and Sara had hauled Roscoe's body from among the water tins and were opening his skull.

"Do you think it damaged?" Sara asked, as they made to insert the poor dented brain case. When I said I didn't know, she added hopefully, "We won't ask much of him. Just some simple questions."

Tuck said, "There are slots. You slip it in."

He inserted the brain and slapped it with the heel of his hand to drive it home, then banged the skull plate shut.

Roscoe stirred. He had been propped against a wall of earth and now he came to his feet. His head swiveled about to each of us in turn. His arms moved tentatively, as if he were testing them.

He spoke, his voice grating. "Whyever," he said, "wherever, however, forever, whenever."

He stopped speaking and looked at us as if to see if we understood. When it must have been apparent that we didn't, he said, solemly and slowly, so there would be no mistaking him this time, "Hat, cat, bat, fat, rat, sat, vat, pat, gnat, gat, drat, tat."

"He's completely nuts," I said.

"Guts," said Roscoe.

"He rhymes," said Sara. "That's all he is—a rhyming dictionary. Do you suppose he's forgotten everything?"

I grinned at her. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Roscoe," Sara said, "do you remember anything at all?"

"Tall," said Roscoe, "call, ball, mall, fall, gall."

"No, no," said Sara, "do you remember your master?"

"Pastor," said Roscoe.

Sara cried, "All the way we traveled, all the trouble and you risking your neck—and all we have is this?"

"Roscoe," I said sharply, "we want Lawrence Arlon Knight."

"Kite," said Roscoe, "sight, night, blight . "

"No, God damn it!" I shouted. "We are looking for him. Point in the direction we should look."

"Book," said Roscoe, "cook, took." But even as he mouthed his rhyming gibberish, he squared and flung out his arm, pointing a finger. Arm and finger were rigid as a sign post, pointing northward up the trail.

SO WE went on, northward, up the trail.

We left the desert and the badlands behind us and climbed for days to a new plateau, while ahead of us the mountains grew higher in the sky.

There was water now, flowing streams of it that ran cold and musically along pebbled beds. We cached our water tins in one of the stone beehive huts that still sprouted, at intervals, along the trail. Since the badlands none of us carried packs; the packs were now strapped on Roscoe's sturdy back. Feeling a bit sheepish, I traveled with the shield behind my shoulders and the sword clasped to my waist. This was no kind of equipment for a grown man to carry, but the shield and sword gave me a certain sense of importance—a throwback to some ancestor of millennia age.

We marched, it seemed, with more purpose now. While at times I

doubted that Roscoe knew the score, he continued to point north each time we asked him. His seeming confidence gave us at least a feeling of having a track to follow.

Vegetation increased. We found grass and flowering plants, a variety of shrubs and, at times, handsome groves along water courses. And always, in the distance the sky-scraping trees that towered out of sight. The air grew chilly. Now there was wind, blowing with a knife-edge bite. Rodent-like creatures abounded, sitting up and whistling as we passed, and occasionally we saw small herds of herbivores. Sara shot one. We butchered it, drew straws to see who would be the guinea pig. The long straw fell to me and I ate a few bites of the steak we fried, then sat back to wait. Nothing happened and all of us ate. We had found a food supply and could hoard the small stock we carried.

There was about this high land an ecstatic mysticism. At times I felt I was walking through a dream. Not only this plateau, but the total planet seemed to hit me with its impact—the wonder of who had been here before and why they'd left and what might be the purpose of the orchard they had planted and abandoned, and the great white city they had built.

Now, more than ever, Tuck walked by himself, no longer even pretending that he was one of us. He never spoke except to mumble to the doll. Once the evening meal was done, he sat by himself away from the fire, apparently unmindful of the cold. His face became thinner and his body seemed to shrink within the muffling folds of his robe, shrinking not into a skeleton, but into rawhide. He took on a gray quality, a shadow sense, so that one became unaware of him. At times I'd look around, see him and be surprised to find him there. I would wonder momentarily who he was—and that strange wiping-out-of-memory was also a part of this high blue land through which we walked.

WE MOVED across the plateau, Paint rocking along in silence except for the occasional click of a rocker against a protruding stone. Hoot ranged out ahead, a dot against the distance, still working at his scarcely needed role of scout; Tuck stumbled a dim gray ghost muffled to the throat in brown. Roscoe stumped sturdily, muttering endless rhymes and never making sense, a happy vocal moron in a

never-never land. And I, stalking along with the shield on my back and the sword banging at my leg, was as strange as the rest. Sara probably was touched least of all, but she too changed, regaining the old adventurous flare which had been dimmed by toil and monotony and tension. I saw in her again the woman who had met me in that aristocratic hallway on the proud homeland, Earth.

The mountains loomed higher and lost some of their blueness. We could see now that they were wild and fearsome and breathtaking, with soaring cliffs and mighty canyons, clothed with heavy woods to the rocky peaks.

"I have a feeling," Sara said one night as we sat beside the campfire, "that we are nearly there, that we are getting close."

I nodded, for I had the same feeling that we were close—although I could not imagine close to what. Somewhere in those mountains we would find what we were looking for. I did not think we would find Lawrence Arlen Knight, for he must long since be dead, but somewhere this trail must end and at the end of it lay the thing we sought.

Above us lay the glow of the galaxy—the fierce blue-whiteness of the central core, the filmy mistiness of the spiraling arms.

"I wonder," Sara said, "if we will ever return. And if we do what can we tell them, Mike? How does one put into words the kind of place this is?"

"A great white city," I said, "and then the desert and after that the highlands and beyond the highlands, mountains."

"That doesn't begin to tell it. The wonder and the mysticism . . . "

"There are never words," I told her, "for the wonder and the glory, never words for fear or happiness."

"You know," she said, "it doesn't seem to matter if we return. Something is here that I've found nowhere else. I can't tell you what it is."

"Another day or two," I said, "and we may find out."

"Tomorrow, maybe," she said.

And, yes, I thought, tomorrow. It might be tomorrow.

I looked at her across the fire and she had the appearance of a child who was saying, not being sure at all, that tomorrow might be Christmas.

TOMORROW was not trail's end or Christmas but the day that Tuck disappeared.

We became aware that he was not with us in the middle of the afternoon and, try as we might, we could not recall if he'd been with us at the noonday stop. We were certain only that he had started with us in the morning.

We stopped and backtracked. We searched and yelled, but evoked no response. Finally, as evening fell, we set up camp.

It was ridiculous, of course, that none of us could remember when we had seen him last. I wondered whether he had actually left us, wandering off either intentionally or by accident, or if he had simply faded away, as George might have faded away that night at the city's edge. The growing grayness of the man, I told myself, had made it possible for us not to miss him. Day by day he had grown more distant and less approachable, had progressively effaced himself until he moved among us as a ghost would have moved, only half-seen. The grayness of the man and the half-sensed enchantment of this blue land, where time ceased to have a great deal of function—these had made his disappearance possible.

"No point in looking any more," Sara said. "If he were here, we would have found him. He would have answered us. He found what he was looking for. Just as George did."

"That doll of his," I said.

"A symbol," Sara said. "A point of concentration. A crystal ball in which to lose one's self. A madonna, a talisman."

"A madonna," I said. "You mentioned that before."

"Tuck was sensitive," she said, "to his fingertips. In tune, somehow, with something outside our space-time reference. An offensive sort of man—I'll admit that now—and different in a special way."

"You told me once he wouldn't make it," I said.

"I know I did. I thought he was weak, but he was strong. And in our sense, he still didn't make it."

Was he still with us, unseen and unsuspected, stumbling along at the edge of a twilight we could not see? Was he calling or plucking our sleeves while we were unable to hear him or feel the plucking? But Tuck would not pluck or call. He wouldn't care; he wouldn't give a damn.

"You now be only two," said Hoot, "but strong allies travel with you. The other three of us still stand fast with you."

I had forgotten Hoot and Roscoe and Paint. For a moment it had seemed, in truth, that only two of us were here, two of the four who had stormed out of the galaxy to seek its outland fringes.

"Hoot," I said, "you sensed George leaving us. You knew when he left. This time . . . "

"I did not hear him go," said Hoot. "He gone long back, days back. He fade away so easily there be no sense of leaving. He just grow less and less."

Sara was standing beside me, head high, as if she were defiant of the gathering dark. In the light of the campfire I saw tears on her cheeks. I put a tentative hand on her shoulder. At the touch she turned toward me and I had her in my arms, without planning, her head buried in my shoulder. Sobs were shaking her while I held her close and fast.

XV

WE ARRIVED the second morning after Tuck had disappeared. We knew we had reached the place we had struggled toward. With no great elation, we topped a little rise of ground and saw the gateway against a swale. Here the trail plunged downward between two great cliffs.

The mountains soared to the sky, still purple, reflecting a dusk on the blue land through which we had been traveling. All felt so exactly right—the mountains, the gate, the comfort of having arrived—that I seemed to sense a wrongness in it.

"Hoot," I said, but he did not answer. He was standing beside us, as motionless and quiet as we were. To him also this must have seemed entirely right.

At the gate formed by the towering cliffs we found the sign. Made of metal, it was affixed to one of the cliff walls. It held a dozen odd paneled legends that apparently carried identical information in different languages. One was in the bastard script that went with space patois. It said:

All Biological Creatures Welcome. Mechanicals, Synthetic

Forms, Elementals of Any Persuasions Whatsoever Cannot be Allowed to Enter. Nor May Any Tools or Weapons, of Even the Simplest Sort, be Allowed Beyond This Point.

"I care not," said Paint. "I keep goodly company of great lumbering mumbler of rhyming words. And I watch most assiduously over rifle, sword and shield. I pray you not be long, for following extended sojourn upon my back I shiver from apprehension at absence of biologic persons. There be strange comfort in protoplasm."

"I don't like it," I said. "We'll be walking in naked."

"This," Sara reminded me, "is what we came to find. We can't quibble at a simple regulation. We'll be safe in there. Can't you feel the safety, Mike?"

"Sure I can feel it," I told her, "but I still don't like it. The way you feel is no sure thing to go on."

"BEEP," the sign, or the cliff, or whatever.

I swung around. On the panel where the regulations had been posted, was another message:

The Management Will Not be Responsible for the Consequences of Wilful Disregarding of Regulations.

"All right, Buster," I asked, "what kind of consequences do you have in mind?"

The panel didn't deign to answer; the message just stayed put.

"I don't care what you do," said Sara. "I'm going on. I'll do what they say. I didn't come all this way to turn back now."

"Who said anything about turning back?" I asked.

BEEP, said the panel and there was another message:

Don't Try It, Buster!

Sara leaned the rifle against the wall of the cliff underneath the sign, unfastened the cartridge bolt and dropped it at the rifle's butt.

"Come on, Hoot," she said.

BEEP, and the panel said:

The Many-Legged One? Is It a True Biologic?

Hoot honked with anger. "You know it do, Buster. I be honest hatched!"

BEEP!

But You Are More Than One.

"I be three," said Hoot, with dignity. "I be now a second self. Much preferable to first self and unready yet for third."

The sign flashed off and there was a sense of someone or something pondering. You could feel the pondering.

BEEP! and the panel said:

Proceed, Sir, With Our Apology.

Sara turned around and looked at me. "Well?" she asked.

I threw the shield down beside the rifle and unbuckled the sword belt and let it fall.

I let Sara lead the way. It was, after all, her show; this was what she'd paid for. Hoot ambled along at her heels and I brought up the rear.

We went down the trail in a deepening dusk as the towering walls of stone shut out the light. We moved at the bottom of a trench that was less than three feet wide. Then the trench and trail took a sudden turn and ahead was light.

We left the towering walls and the narrow trail and came into the Promised Land.

THE place could have been the ancient Greece I had read about in school. Our trail continued through a rugged, rock-bound valley with a mountain stream running through it and flashing in the sun. The landscape was harsh and rocky, but here and there weather-beaten trees thrust upward from the crevasses. Perched on slopes above the valley were tiny villas built of gleaming marble, all designed in clear-cut lines.

This was it—the place we'd hunted for, not knowing whether we hunted for a man, a thing or simply an idea. Here in this valley we might find, if not the man himself, perhaps some indication of what had happened to that storied figure of space.

The trail crossed a path to one of the hillside villas. Beside the path was a post with a sign affixed to it, bearing a line of script that we could not read.

"A nameplate?" Sara asked me.

I nodded. But if it were a nameplate, there was no sign of the one who lived up in the villa. There was, in fact, no sign of any life at all.

I said, "Let's proceed and look for one that says Lawrence Arlen Knight."

"Even now," she said, "can't you be serious about it? You said we'd never find him. You said he was just a story. You said he would be dead."

We went ahead, plunging down the inclines and toiling up the slopes. There were other villas and other signs, each in a different alphabet, if some of them in fact could be called alphabets, and none that we could read.

And then came a sign in solid block letters that we could read:

LAWRENCE ARLEN KNIGHT

That was insane, of course. You did not cross a galaxy to find a man—and find him. You did not find a man who should have years ago been dead. You did not trace a legend to its end.

As I stood there, the thought crossed my mind—not the home of, but the grave of; not a villa, but a tomb.

"Sara," I said, but already she was scrambling up the path.

Coming out on the porch of that shining structure was a man—old but still hale, with snow-white hair and beard, shoulders straight, stride steady. He was dressed in a white toga. With a setup such as this, he could have worn nothing else.

"Sara," I called again, still following, with Hoot on my heels. She didn't hear. She paid me no attention.

The old man was speaking, holding out his hand. "My own people! I never thought I'd lay eyes on such again."

He clasped Sara's hands.

"It's been long," the old man said. "The trail is far, the way is hard and no one knew. You—how did you know?"

"Sir," said Sara, still gasping from her climb, "you are Lawrence Arlen Knight."

"Why, yes," he said, "of course I am. And you? And these good people with you?"

"Captain Michael Ross. And Hoot, a friend met along the way."

Knight bowed to Hoot. Then he reached out to me, grasping my hand in a warm, hard grip.

"Captain Ross," he said, "you are welcome. There are places here for all of you. And this young lady—I do not have your name."

"Sara Foster," Sara said.

"To think," he said, "that no longer need I be alone. Wonderful as it all has been, I have missed human voices and faces. Many others are here, creatures of character and sensitivity, but one never outgrows the need for his own species."

"HOW long have you been here?" I asked.

"When a man lives each day to the full," he told me, "and with the close of one day looks forward to the next, there is no counting of time. Each day, each minute becomes a part of all eternity. I am not sure there is such a thing as time. Time is a crude measure devised by certain intelligences, and by no means all of them, because they feel a need to place themselves in a framework. Time here is lost in foreverness. The meticulous measuring of small slices of eternity is a task that has no meaning . . ."

He went on and on and I wondered, looking across the valley from where I stood on the marble porch, whether he was wise—or unbalanced by his loneliness.

"But I ramble on," the old man was saying. "I have too much to say, too much stored up. No reason why I should say it all at once. I apologize. Won't you please come in?"

We stepped through the open doorway into quiet and classic elegance. There were no windows but sunlight came slanting from somewhere in the roof to highlight the chairs and sofa, the writing desk, the small wooden chest with scattered sheets of paper on it.

"Please," he said, "have chairs. I hope you can spend some time with me. And that is foolish of me, of course, for you have the time. You hold in the hollow of your hand all the time there is. Having come here, there is no place else you would care to go. One never needs to leave."

It was too sleek and smooth, too well-spoken. Yet what could be wrong? Here was an old and lonely man, the gates of his suppressed talk unlatched by the unexpected appearance of an audience of his race. Nevertheless, I felt a prickling uneasiness.

"There are places here for you, of course," he said. "There are always places waiting. Few ever win their way here and there is always room. Here dwells a select company called from all the stars and some may be amusing and others you will find instructive and much that they do, I must warn you, you will not understand. And some of it . . ."

"What is this place?" asked Sara. "How did you hear of it?"

"Why," he said, "I've never even wondered. I've never thought of it. I have never asked."

"You said the days were full, I said. "Exactly how do you fill them? How do you pass the time?"

"MIKE," said Sara warningly.

"I want to know," I said. "Does he sit and contemplate his navel?"

"I write," said Lawrence Arlen Knight.

"Sir," said Sara, "I apologize for this cross-examination."

"Each one," Knight said softly, "does what he wants to do. He does it for joy. There is no economic pressure and no social pressure. No one need work for praise, for money or for fame. Here one realizes how empty all those motives are. He remains true only to himself."

"And you write?"

"I write," said Knight.

"What do you write?"

"The things I want to write. The thoughts inside myself."

"And how are you getting along?" I asked.

He gestured at the wooden box on the table. "It is all there," he said. "The bare beginning of it."

"Stop it," Sara cried. "You need not explain yourself to us."

She shriveled me with a look.

"I don't mind." Knight said. "In fact, I think I may enjoy it. There is so much to tell that is wondrous. I can quite understand how a newcomer might be puzzled and might have many questions."

"Mike," said Hoot.

"Hush," said Sara.

Hoot honked loudly at me: "Mike!"

Sara came to her feet and so did I and as I rose, the place changed —the place and man.

I stood in a hovel with a broken roof and dirt floor. The chairs were rickety and the table, lacking one leg, was propped against the wall. On it stood the wooden box and the litter of papers.

"It is beyond human experience or imagination," Knight said. "I sometimes wonder if in some distant age, by some process which I cannot begin to understand, someone caught a glimpse of the meaning of this place and called it Heaven . . ."

He was old. He was incredibly old and filthy, a walking corpse. The skin was tight on his cheekbones and pulled back from his lips, revealing yellowed, rotting teeth. Through a great rent in his robe, his ribs stood out caked with filth, like those of a winter-starved horse. His hands were claws. His beard was matted with dirt and drool and his hooded eyes gleamed with a vacant light, eyes half dead and yet somehow sharp, too sharp to be housed in such an ancient, tottering body.

"Sara," I shouted.

She was listening in complete absorption to what was mouthed by the ghastly old wreck who sat huddled in his chair.

She whirled on me. "For the last time, Mike . . ."

I knew by the look of cold fury on her face that she still saw him as he had appeared before. The change was not apparent to her. She was trapped in whatever enchantment had ensnared us.

I moved fast, barely thinking. I clipped her on the chin, hard and accurately and without pity. I caught her as she fell. I slung her over my shoulder and as I did, Knight was struggling to push himself from his chair. But he never stopped talking.

"What is the trouble, my friends?" he asked. "Have I done some unwitting thing to offend you?"

As I turned to go I saw that wooden box on the table and reached to grab it.

Hoot was pleading. "Mike, delay not. Stand not on ceremony. Flee, please, with all alacrity."

We fled with all alacrity.

XVI

WE MADE good time. I looked behind us for an instant only before we plunged into the canyon-like cleft that led back to the gateway.

Sara awoke and screamed at me, kicking and beating at my back with clenched fists, but I clung to her tightly with one arm, holding her against my shoulder. In the other arm I clutched the wooden box I had lifted from the table.

Still running, we reached the end of the canyon. Roscoe and Paint stood as we had left them. I dumped Sara on the ground with no ceremony.

She landed on her rump and looked up at me, her face white with fury, so angry that she could form no word but one. "You—you—you," she kept saying. "You hit me!" she finally screamed her outrage.

"You're damned right I did. You didn't see a thing. You would have argued with me. There was nothing else to do."

She leaped to her feet. "We found Lawrence Arlen Knight," she yelled. "We found a wonderful, shining place. After all our traveling, we found what we set out to find. And then . . ."

Hoot said, "Gracious lady, the fault belongs on me. I sensed with the edges of my third self and I made Mike to see. Strength I did not have to make more than one of you to see. Not the second one. And I made Mike to see . . ."

She whirled on him. "You filthy beast!" she cried. She lashed out with her foot. The kick caught him in the side and bowled him over. He lay with his feet working like tiny pistons, frantically trying to right himself.

Then, swiftly, she was on her knees beside him. "Hoot," she cried, "I'm sorry. Sorry and ashamed." She set him on his feet and looked up at me. "Mike, what has happened to us?"

"Enchantment," I said. "The only thing I can think of. Enchantment happened to us."

"Kindly one," Hoot said to her, "resentment I do not bear. Reaction of the foot was a natural one. I quite understand."

"It was all illusion," I told her. "There were no marble villas, only filthy huts. The stream did not run free, it was clogged with gar-

bage. The smell from it caught you in the throat. And Lawrence Arlen Knight, if that is who he was, was a walking corpse."

"Wanted here we're not," said Hoot.

"We are trespassers," I said. "Once here we can't go back in space because no one must know about this planet. We're caught in a big flytrap. We chased a myth and that myth was another flytrap—a trap within a trap."

"But Lawrence Arlen Knight chased the myth back in the galaxy."

"And so did we," I said. "So did the humanoids who left their bones back in the gully. Special odors are used in certain traps to attract insects from far off. Odors may drift on the winds to very distant places. Instead of odor, say legend . . ."

"But that man back there," she said, "was so full of life and plans. His days were busy and full. Knight or not, he was sure he had reached the place he had hunted."

"What simpler way," I asked, "to keep a life form where you want it than to make it happy where you put it?"

"You're sure," she asked, "of what you saw? Hoot didn't fool you?"

"Fool him I did not," said Hoot. "I make him see it straight."

"But what difference would it make if he's happy there? If he feels life is meaningful and there's no such thing as time to rob it of its meaning . . ."

"You mean we could have stayed?"

She nodded. "He said there was a place for us. That there are always places. We could have settled there."

"Sara," I asked, "is that what you really want? To settle down in imagined happiness? Never to go back to Earth?"

She started to speak, then hesitated.

"You know damn well it isn't," I said. "Back on Earth you have a house filled with hides and heads, all the vicious life forms of the galaxy. They gave you social status, they made you a glamor figure. But you had too many of them. People began to yawn. They were bored with your adventures. So to keep on being glamorous, you had to hunt different game . . ."

She leaped to her feet and her hand caught me in the face.

I grinned at her. "We're even now," I said.

WE TURNED back, traveling down the trail that we had used in coming, back across that great blue land of high plateau, with the purple mountains now looming behind us.

I had expected Sara to raise more fuss. I was not sure she believed what I had told her. How could she? All she had was my word. She had not seen what I'd seen. As far as she was concerned, the valley still was shining with a flashing stream and sunlight, with the marble villas still perched among crags. If she were to return, I was sure, it would be unchanged for her. The enchantment still worked for Sara.

We had no real destination. Certainly there was no incentive to reach the desert we had crossed. The great white city had no attraction for us. I don't know what Hoot or Sara might have been thinking. I know that for myself the only thought was to build up some distance between ourselves and the valley.

That night, beside the campfire, we tried to put the situation into perspective.

There seemed little hope of retaking the spaceship. At least two dozen other ships had stood upon the field. Others must have tried to crack them with no luck.

And what had happened to those other creatures, that had ridden in the ships? We know, of course, what had happened to the humanoids whose skeletons we'd found in the gully. We could speculate that the centaurs might be retrogressed out-planet creatures which centuries ago had landed on the field.

"There's another possibility," Sara said. "Some of them made it to the valley. We know that Knight made it. He had neighbors."

I nodded, agreeing with her. That was the final trap. If a visitor did not perish in reaching it, there was the valley. Once in it, no one escaped. Except us.

"You're sure," asked Sara, "that you really saw what you say?"

"I don't know what I can do," I told her, "to make you believe me. Do you think I threw away paradise to spite you? Don't you think I might have been a little happy, too? Maybe, being a suspicious sort of clown, not as happy as you were, but after all those miles . . ."

"Yes, of course," she said. "But why you alone? Why didn't I see the horror you report?"

"Hoot explained all that," I told her. "He could alert only one of us. And he alerted me . . ."

"A part of me is Mike," said Hoot. "We owe one another life. A bond there is between us. We be almost one."

"One," said Roscoe solemly, "done, fun, gun . . ."

"Cease your clack," said Paint. "No sense at all you make."

"Fake," said Roscoe.

"The almost human one," said Hoot, "tries to talk with us."

"His brain is addled," I said.

"No," said Hoot. "He attempts communication."

I SAID to Hoot, "Can you dig it out of him?"

"It beyond my power," said Hoot.

Sara said, "There's no use trying. We're not going back to Earth—or anywhere. We're staying on this planet."

"There is one thing we could try," I said.

"I thought of it, too. The other worlds. Like the sand dune world. There must be hundreds of them."

"Out of all those hundreds. . ."

She shook her head. "You underestimate the people who built the city and set out the trees. They knew what they were doing. Every one of those worlds would be as isolated as this one."

"Have you ever thought," I argued, "that one of them might be the home planet of the folks who built the city?"

"No, I never have," she said. "But what difference would it make? They'd squash you like a bug."

"Then what do we do?" I asked.

"I could go back to the valley," she said. "I didn't see what you saw. I wouldn't see what you saw."

"That's all right for you," I said, "if that's the kind of life you want to live."

"How do you know what life we're living now? How do you judge reality?"

Her question had no answer. No one can prove reality.

We sat by the fire silently, all talked out, nothing more to say. No use in arguing with her. In the morning she would have forgotten her mood and good sense would prevail. We'd be on our way again. On our way to where?

"Mike," she finally said. "It could have been good between us if we had stayed on Earth. We're two of a kind."

I glanced up sharply. Her face was lighted by the fire and there was a softness in it.

"Forget it," I said angrily. "I never make a pass at my employer."

I expected her to be furious, but she wasn't. She didn't even wince.

"You know that's not what I meant," she said. "This trip spoiled it for us. We found out too much about one another. Too many things to hate. I'm sorry, Mike."

"So am I," I said.

In the morning she was gone.

XVII

I STORMED at Hoot. "You were awake. You saw her go. You could have wakened me."

"For why?" he asked. "You would not have stopped her."

"I'd have beaten some sense into her stubborn skull."

"Stop her you would not," Hoot maintained. "She but follow destiny and no one's destiny another's destiny and no interference please. George, his destiny his own. Tuck, his destiny his own. Sara, her destiny her own. My destiny my own."

"The hell with destiny!" I yelled. "Look at what it got them. George and Tuck disappeared and now I have to yank Sara out of . . ."

"No yank," honked Hoot, puffing up with anger. "That you must not do. Understand you miss. It is your no business."

"But she sneaked out on us."

"She did not sneak," said Hoot. "She tell me where she go. She take Paint to ride, but pledge to send him back. She left the rifle and what you call the ammo. She say you need it. She say she cannot bear to make farewell. She crying when she left."

"She ran out on us," I said.

"My friend," said Hoot. "My friend, I crying for you, too."

"Cut the sentiment," I yelled. "You'll have me bawling with you."

"And that so bad?"

"Yes, it's bad," I said.

"I have hope to wait," said Hoot.

"Wait for what?" I asked. "Wait for Sara? Not me. I'm going back and—"

"Not for Sara. For myself. I have hope to wait, but I can wait no longer. I leave you now. Stay I can no longer. I in my second self for long, must go to third self now."

I was alarmed. I said, "You've been blubbering about the different numbers of yourself ever since we met."

"Three phases," Hoot declared. "First self, second, then third."

"You mean like a butterfly. First a caterpillar, then a chrysalis . . ."

"I know not this butterfly."

"But in your lifetime you are three things?"

"Second self a little longer, perhaps," said Hoot sadly, "if not flip momentarily into third self to see in rightness this Lawrence Knight of yours."

"Hoot," I said, "I'm sorry."

"For sorrow no need," said Hoot. "Third self is joyousness. Much desired. Look forward with overwhelming happiness."

"Well, hell," I said, "if that's all it is, go ahead into your third self. I won't mind at all."

"Third self is awayness," Hoot told me. "Is not here. Is elsewhere. How to explain I do not know. I am sorrow for you, Mike. I sorrow for myself. I sorrow at our parting. You give me life. I give you life. Hard trails we travel side by side. We speak with more than words. I would share third life with you, but is not possible."

I took a step forward and stumbled to my knees. His tentacles reached out, engulfed my hands and gripped them hard. In the moment when hands and tentacles closed together and held, I was one with this friend of mine. For an instant I probed into the blackness and the glory of his being and caught a glimpse—or many glimpses—of what he knew, what he remembered, what he hoped, what he dreamed, what he was, the unreal, shocking, almost incomprehensible structure of his society and the faint, blurred, rainbowed edges of its mores.

Then it was gone, along with the hand grip and Hoot himself. I was kneeling, both hands held out to nothing.

Then, with the sort of jolt that comes from falling to a hard

surface, I came back to myself and the high blue world and that stupid, rigid robot standing beside the campfire.

I stumbled to the fire and hunkered down beside it. Picking up a stick of firewood, I stirred the ashes and at their heart, I came upon a still glowing lump of fire. Carefully I fed tiny slivers to it. A pale ribbon of smoke curled up and in a moment a tiny flame began to flicker.

I crouched in the silence, watching and nourishing the flame, bringing last night's fire back to careful life. I could bring back the fire, I thought, but nothing else. Of four humans and an alien, there was but one human left. George and Tuck were gone and no tears shed. Hoot was gone and for him there might be tears—no, not for him, but rather for myself, for he had changed somehow into a better form. The one who mattered, I knew, was Sara and she, as well as Hoot, had gone where she'd wished to go.

With a sense of shock I realized that George and Tuck also had gone where they'd wished to go. Everyone had had a place to go—all except myself.

BUT what of Sara? I could go into the valley and drag her out, kicking and screaming. Or I could wait a while for her to come to her senses. Or I could simply say the hell with it and go stumping down the trail, heading for the city.

I heard a metallic clanging and looked up. Roscoe had moved over and was squatting down beside me—as if, since I had no one else, he was willing to be my pal.

When he had squatted comfortably, he reached with his flattened palm and smoothed out a dusty spot beside the fire. He stuck out a forefinger neatly, made a squiggly line in the dust and followed that with other marks that, if not entirely squiggly, certainly made no sense. He was writing a mathematical or chemical formula of some sort—not that I could make any reason of it although some of the symbols were familiar.

I yelled at him, "What the hell is that?"

"That," he said, "cat, rat, vat, pat, sat, sat." Then suddenly he was talking, not in rhyme, but still, as far as I was concerned, in gibberish: "Valence bond wave function equals product of anti-symmetric spatial wave functions times symmetric wave functions

times spin function of both anti-symmetric and symmetric wave functions . . ."

I shouted, "What's going on? You talk like Mother Goose one minute and now you're talking like a prof . . ."

"Prof," he said, happily and solemnly, "scoff, doff, cough . . ."

But he went on writing symbols in the dust without hesitation, as if he knew exactly what he meant. He filled the place with symbols, then wiped it clean and smoothed it out again, and continued with his writing.

I held my breath. I was convinced that what he was writing, in spite of his clownishness, was important.

Suddenly his finger froze in the dust, no longer writing.

"Paint," he said. I waited for the string of rhyming words, but they did not come. "Paint," he said again.

I leaped to my feet and Roscoe rose beside me. Paint was coming down the trail, loping gracefully. He was alone.

He came to a sliding halt before us.

"Boss," he said. "back I come, reporting for the orders. She say for me to hurry. She say to you goodbye, she say to tell God bless you, which is beyond my feeble intellect to comprehend. She say she hope you safely return to Earth. This humble being, sir, ask you what is Earth."

"Earth is the home planet of our race," I told him.

"Please, illustrous sir, you take me back to Earth?"

I shook my head. "Why should you want to go to Earth?"

"You, sir," he said, "are being of compassion. You did not run away when you came into place of terror. From ridiculous predicament you rescue me with dainty gallantry. I would not willingly wish to wander from your side."

"Thank you, Paint," I said.

"Then, gratefully, I march with you, all the way to Earth."

"No, you don't," I said. "I have something else for you to do."

"Gladly will I perform in small recompence for your rescue of me, but, dear human, I had wished so hard for Earth."

"You'll go back," I said, "and wait for Sara."

"But she say goodbye distinctly. She say it as she meant it."

"You'll wait for her, I said. "I don't want her coming out and finding no way back."

"You think she will come out?"

"I don't know," I said.

"But wait for her I do?"

"That's exactly it," I said.

"But I wait," he wailed. "You go off to Earth and waiting still I am. I maybe wait forever. If you want her, most kindly being, why don't you come back and say to her . . ."

"I can't do that," I said. "Damn fool though she may be, she has to have her chance. Like George. Like Tuck."

I was surprised when I heard my words.

I had made a decision made without any reason, on no more than instinct.

"Then I return," said Paint, "full of sadness, but obedient. Earth it may not be, but better than the gully."

He turned to go, but I called him back. I took the rifle and the cartridge belt and tied them to the saddle.

"For you the weapon," Paint told me. "No need of it has she."

"If she comes out, she will," I said.

"She not coming out. Stars in her eyes when she go between the rocks."

I didn't answer. I stood and watched him as he turned and took the trail, going slowly so he'd not be out of hearing if I should call him back.

I didn't call him back.

XVIII

WE TRAVELED well that day, although with every step I fought the terrible feeling that something called me back, the feeling that I should do something for Sara, if it were no more than waiting in hope she would return. Yet I knew well and good I'd not deserted her, any more than we had deserted either George or Tuck.

Or could Hoot have been the one, I wondered, who was tugging at me? Was something hidden in my mind, something he had planted in those last few seconds, that kept nagging at me?

Or could it be Paint? I had played a dirty trick on Paint, setting him a task I was unable or unwilling to perform myself.

Miserable with all these thoughts, I stumbled down the trail.

To a watcher, we would have seemed a strange pair, I with my ridiculous shield and sword, Roscoe with the pack on his back, clumping along behind me, mumbling to himself.

We had made a good day's journey when we stopped for night. Going through the pack to get out food, I found the box I'd stolen from Knight. I put it to one side to look at after I had eaten. Roscoe gathered wood and I built a fire and cooked myself a meal while that great stupid hulk hunkered across the blaze from me and chattered conversationally—and this time not rhyming words nor equation gibberish.

"One eye thou hast," he told me glibly, "to look to Heaven for grace. The sun with one eye vieweth all the world."

I stared at him, amazed, wondering hopefully if he'd snapped out of it and could finally talk some sense—either that, or gone completely off his rocker.

"Roscoe," I said, as quietly as I could, not wishing to startle him out of any new-found sense, "I wasn't listening. I was thinking of something else. I wonder . . ."

"They can be meek," he told me, "that have no other cause. A wretched soul, bruised with adversity, we bid be quiet when we hear it cry; but were we burdened with like weight of pain, as much, or more, we should ourselves complain."

"Poetry!" I yelled. "Poetry, for the love of God! As if equations and senseless rhyming weren't enough . . ."

He clambered to his feet and danced a merry clanking jig and sang: "The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit. The clock hath strucken twelve upon the bell; my mistress made it one upon my cheek. She is so hot because the meat is cold; the meat is cold because you came not home; you came not home because you have no stomach; you have no stomach, having broke your feet . . . "

He stopped in mid-caper and stared wonderingly at me. "Fast," he said. "Last, mast, cast."

At least he was back to normal.

He hunkered down by the fire again, no longer talking to me, but mumbling to himself.

Had it been Shakespeare he had spouted? The words had sounded like it, but I could not be sure; it had been many years since I'd even thought of Shakespeare. And if it were, how had Roscoe known of

Shakespear? In the long flight out from the galaxy, on the long march up the trail, had Knight read it aloud beside the nightly campfire? Had he carried in his knapsack or in a sagging pocket of his jacket a copy of that ancient and almost forgotten writer?

I finished my meal, washed the dishes in the stream beside which we were camped and set them aside for morning. Roscoe still squatted at the fire, writing with an outstretched finger on a piece of ground he'd smoothed.

I opened Knight's wooden box. A thick sheaf of paper lay within. I held the first page, so it was lighted by the fire.

> Blue and high. Clean. Upstanding blue. Water sound. Stars ahead. Ground unbare. Laughter high above and blue. Blue laughter. We move unwise. Think unhard . .

The writing was in a crabbed hand and the characters were cramped and small. Slowly I picked the words apart:

> . . . and thin. No end to start, no end to come. Foreverness and more. Blue foreverness. Runners after nothingness. Nothingness is emptiness. Emptiness is bare. Talk is nothingness. Deeds are emptiness. Where to find but empty? Nowhere, comes the answer. High and blue and empty.

It was gibberish, worse than the gibberish of Roscoe. I glanced down the page and the gibberish went on. Lifting a handful of pages from the box, I extracted another one. Page 52, it said in the upper right hand corner. And the text:

> . . . far is distant. Distances are deep. Neither short nor long, but deep. Some without a bottom. And cannot be measured. No stick to measure with. Purple distances are deepest ones of all. No one walks a purple distance. Purple leads to nowhere. There is nowhere to lead to . . .

I put the pages back and closed the box and held my hand hard against the lid to prevent the pages from coming out. Mad, I thought; living out a life of gentle madness in a Grecian valley of

strange enchantment. And Sara was there at this very moment. Not knowing. Not caring, even if she knew.

I fought to keep from screaming. I held myself as hard as I held down the lid to keep from running back.

IN THE morning we found Tuck's doll, where it had dropped beside the trail. The doll was in plain view, not more than six feet off the path. How we'd missed it before was hard to understand.

I had not really had a good look at it before. Now I had a chance to look at it, to absorb the full impact of the sorrow on the rudely carved face. Either, I thought, the maker had been a primitive who had fashioned the sorrow by sheer chance, or a skilled craftsman who, with a few simple strokes, had evoked the hopelessness and anguish of an intellectual being facing the riddle of the universe and overwhelmed by it.

The face was not entirely humanoid, but enough so that one could equate it with humanity—a human face twisted out of shape by some great truth that had been thrust upon it.

Having picked up the doll, I tried to throw it away, but could not. It had put roots into me and would not let me go. I stood with one hand clutching it and tried to toss it to one side but my fingers would not loosen their grip nor my arm make a throwing motion.

That had been the way it had been with Tuck, I thought, except that Tuck had been a willing captive. I was not. A madonna, Sara had said, but I saw no madonna in the doll.

So I went marching down the trail, hanging onto that damn thing, raging at myself—not so much for being unable to let go of it, as for the fact that it made me, after a fashion, a blood brother of the vanished Tuck.

After several days, from boredom rather than curiosity, I opened the box again and took out the manuscript. Starting at the very beginning, I read carefully—not all at once, of course, for it was slow and long and hard to decipher. I studied it as a scholar in some time-droning monastery might have studied an arcane roll of parchment, seeking, I think, not so much information as understanding of the mind that would write such garbage.

But nothing was there, or at least nothing I could find. Not until

the tenth night or so, when we were only two days' march from the edge of the desert, did I reach a portion of the manuscript that seemed to make some sense:

> . . . And these ones seek blue and purple knowledge. From all the universe they seek it. They trap all that may be thought or known. Not only blue and purple, but all spectra of knowing. They trap it on lonely planets, far lost in space and deep in time. In the blue of time. With trees they trap it and trapped, it is stored and kept against a time of golden harvest. Great orchards of mighty trees that tower into the blue for miles. Soaking in the thought and knowledge. As other plants soak in the gold of sun. And this knowledge is their fruit. Fruit is many things. It is sustenance for body and for brain. It is round and long and hard and soft. It is blue and gold and purple. Sometimes red. It ripens and it falls. It is harvested. For harvesting is a gathering and fruiting is a growing. Both are blue and gold . . .

AND HE was off again into nonsensical ramblings on color and shape and size.

I reread the single paragraph and went back carefully over the preceding pages to find some indication of who "these ones" might be. Again—nothing.

I put the manuscript away and sat late beside the fire, thinking furiously. Was that one paragraph no more than disordered meandering like all the rest? Or did it represent a single lucid moment during which he'd written a fact that he knew might be important? Or could Knight be less crazy than I thought? Was the gibberish of the manuscript no more than a camouflage in which to conceal a message?

If his words concealed a message, how had he found out? Did the city hold a record somewhere that would tell the story? Or had it been Roscoe who had learned the truth? Roscoe had been designed as a telepathic robot.

The next morning we went on. On the second day we came to the cache we'd made, filled one of the water tins and retrieved some

food. With water and supplies on Roscoe's back, we faced the desert.

We passed the field where I had fought the centaurs. We passed, without stopping, the gully where we'd found Old Paint. We stumbled on old campfires where we'd spent a night, we recognized certain landmarks and the land was red and yellow and honkers hooted in the distances and we glimpsed at times some of the other strange denizens of the place. But nothing interfered with us and we drove on down the trail.

The doll no longer was glued to my hand. I could let loose of it, but I kept carrying it. I don't know why. Somehow I had to. At nights I'd sit and look at it, half repelled, half fascinated, but night by night, it seemed, the repulsion wore away and the fascination won. I either sat looking at the doll, hoping that some day I might encompass within my mind all I saw upon its face and then be done with it; or I read the manuscript, which continued on its witless way until near the very end when this occurred:

> . . . Trees are tallnesses. Trees reach high. Never satisfied. Never fulfilled. What I write about trees and trapped knowledge being true. Tops are vapory, blue vapor . . .

What I say about trees and trapped knowledge being true . . . Was that single sentence put there in the gibberish to fortify and reaffirm what he had written many pages back? Another flash of lucidity in the midst of all his foolishness?

The next night I finished reading the manuscript. There was nothing more.

And the third day after that we sighted the city, far off, like a snowy mountain thrusting into the sky.

XIX

THE tree still lay where I had chopped it down with the raking laser beam. The bole stretched for miles along the ground, its vegetation shriveled brown, revealing its woody skeleton.

Beyond loomed the bulk of the red stone edifice in which the

tree's bombardment had penned up. Looking at it, I could hear again in memory and imagination the sound of millions of invisible wings underneath its roof, beating their way out of nowhere into nowhere.

A foul and bitter stench blew from the tree and as we approached it I could see that the circular, lawn-like area which had surrounded the stump had caved in upon itself and become a pit. Out of the pit rose the stench and from the knoll on which we stood I caught a glimpse of slimy skeletons—strangely wrought but undeniably skeletons—floating in the oily liquid that half filled the pit.

Not just one life, I told myself, not the life of the tree alone, but an entire community of life—the little, crying, mewling creatures that had swarmed out to cry their denunciations of us and now this, another community of life which had existed in a fluid reservoir underneath the tree. I looked for some evidence of the mewling creatures which, by now, must be dead as well. No sign of them remained. In death, I wondered, had they dried into weightless nothingness, to be scattered by the wind?

I had intended to kill only the tree; I had killed much else besides. I wondered what had come over me that I should be thinking this. They'd had it coming, hadn't they?

I felt Roscoe paw my shoulder and turned to see what he wanted. He pointed to what was behind us.

There were a herd and there was no mistaking them. They were, in flesh, the kind of monstrous beast that had left skeletons piled in a window where we had rescued Paint. They were massive things, running on great hind legs, with tails thrust out behind them to balance the bulk of their gigantic bodies and heads. Their poised front legs were armed with sharp and gleaming talons. They grinned at us and even from that distance there was evil in the faces. They might have been following us for a long time, but this was the first time they had shown themselves.

They were big, ugly and coming fast. I had seen what they could do and I wasn't about to wait and let them work on me. I lit out, heading for the city. The shield weighed me down and I threw it away. The scabbarded sword banged against my knees and I tried to unbuckle the belt. The sword tripped me and I went sprawling. A

hand reached out and grabbed me and held me high enough to clear the ground. I hung there swaying, watching the ground jerk underneath my nose and Roscoe's feet moving like a blur.

My God, how he could run.

Then finally I saw pavement underneath my face and Roscoe set me on my feet. I was dizzy and inclined to stagger, but I saw we were in the narrow city street we'd traveled days before, with straight white walls arrowing into the sky above us.

Angry snarling and vicious trumpeting sounded behind me. When I spun around I saw the pursuing beasts throwing their bodies into the narrow cleft of street, throwing them ferociously and vainly, fighting to get at us, fighting to get in. But we were safe. Finally I knew why the streets should be so narrow.

THE shriveled, shrunken body of the gnome hung limp and listless from a rope tied to a storeroom rafter.

In that great room to which the ramp led from the street, the slabs of stone were still in place, with circular control dial to one side of them. One of the slabs was glowing and in the glow was a nightmare world of what seemed a new planet, its half molten, half crystallized surface heaving in slow pulsation. In the distance volcanoes belched flame and heavy clouds of smoke.

Roscoe had unloaded his packs and the water tin just inside the door that opened on the ramp. He was hunkered down, scratching at the floor but making no marks upon it. For once he wasn't mumbling to himself.

I went on breaking the wooden bench I'd taken from the storeroom, feeding the fire I'd built upon the floor. Here I was, I thought, a latter-day barbarian camping in the deserted city of a vanished race, with another barbarian swinging at the end of a rope in the room next door and a mechanical intelligence working on a problem that no one knew, perhaps least of all himself.

It was incredible that Roscoe could know what he was doing. He could never have been programed for the kind of calculations that he seemed to be working out. Could the beating his brain case had taken, while used as a polo ball, not only have knocked all ordinary sense out of him, but also genius *into* him?

The sun had passed its zenith and part of the street outside lay in

darkness. By craning my neck, I could see the sunlight on the upper reaches of the buildings.

A deserted city and why had it been deserted? What had driven its people from it—or had they been driven? Perhaps they had accomplished their purpose and the city had served its purpose and they had simply left for other planets. Could their purpose here have been solely the planting of the trees—the planting and careful nurturing to a size where no more care was needed? It would have taken centuries, perhaps millennia, before the system could be left on its own.

But it would have been worth the work and time if the trees indeed were planted for the purpose hinted in Knight's manuscript. Each tree might be a receiving station that picked up information by a means that I could not imagine (the interception of mental waves, perhaps?) that filtered out of the galaxy. With millions of receivers picking up knowledge radiations, when the planters could come at intervals and extract whatever knowledge had been collected. Where would the knowledge be stored? Not in the trees themselves, but perhaps in the seeds, in an intricate DNA-RNA complex, altered so that instead of biological information alone many other kinds of information also might be stored.

I SWEATED, thinking of it. In the pits and bins in which the rodents dropped the seeds rested a treasure greater than anyone could dream. Those who gathered the seeds and cracked the technique and the code would have the intellectual resources of the galaxy at their fingertips. If one could beat the planters to the harvest, rich pickings were to be had. The planters, well aware of such danger, had taken extraordinary precautions. Outsiders could come here, were even encouraged to come here once they were in range, but had no way to leave and carry out news of what they'd found.

How often did the planters come? Every thousand years? In each thousand years, certainly, new galactic knowledge would be worthy acquiring. Or did they come no longer? Had something happened to stop their harvest trips?

My legs were cramped from crouching and I put a palm on the floor preparatory to changing my position. As I reached, my hand

came upon the doll. I didn't pick it up; I didn't want to look at it. I simply ran my fingers over the planes of that saddened face. The planters of the planet, the builders of the city, had not been the first. Before them another race had built the church-like edifice at the city's edge. One of them had carved the doll. The carving, I told myself might have been a greater than the building of the city and the planting of the trees.

But now neither race was here. I, a member of still another race, was here and I knew the story. The treasure was a solid thing, much more valuable than that myth which Knight had hunted. It was something that could be sold and in that context I could understand it better than I could understand a myth. Knight must have known, to write as he had but by the time he knew he probably had become immersed in the phantom that he hunted.

Poor fool, to pass up a chance like this. Although, I realized, he might have passed it up only after he realized he had no way off the planet.

I would find a way. There always was a way if you worked hard enough at it. No gang of stupid orchardists could keep me here.

I glanced at Roscoe. He had quit his ciphering and was sitting flat on his bottom, feet stuck out before him, staring into space. As if he had suddenly struck upon some astounding truth and had frozen into immobility to consider it.

XX

THE worlds offered no way out. I went through them all, driving myself, sleeping only in snatches when I became so worn out that I was afraid I'd become negligent and sloppy in my evaluation of them. I did not hurry the work. I spent more time, most likely, than was absolutely necessary, in having a good look at each world in turn.

It had taken a while to figure out the wheel. Roscoe did not bother me and I, in turn, paid slight attention to him except to note that much of the time he was not around. I had the impression, somehow, that he was prowling through the city.

Only a small portion of each world stood revealed. But I would have been foolhardy to enter one of them without ample evidence that it was the kind of place I hunted.

Not a single one showed any sign of even the most rudimentary intelligence. All were primal—jungle hells or frozen wastes or still in the stage of crust formation. Some had thick atmospheres, with swirling clouds of gas that made me choke to look at them.

Why had these doorways been fashioned? Anyone who wanted access to other planets would not have settled for a jungle or an icy waste.

I came to an end of them and was no better off than before; worse off, perhaps, for I had started with hope and now the hope was gone.

I went back to the fire but the fire was out. I pressed my palm on the ashes and found no warmth. Roscoe was gone.

I sat beside the dead ashes of the fire and stared into the twilight of the street.

In the twilight a shadow moved; a darkness in the gray. I knew a twinge of terror. I didn't stir. Whatever might be down there, it would find me here beside the campfire ashes. I still would put up a fight.

The shadow kept moving. It left the street and came up the ramp toward me. I saw Roscoe—poor thing that he was, I was glad to have him back. As he came nearer I rose to greet him.

He stopped before he reached the door and, speaking carefully, as if he might be fighting against his rhyming routine, he said with a pause between each word, "You will come with me. If the mathematics work . . . " He came to a longer pause. Mathematics had given him problems. "I had troubles. I was confused. But I am better now. Working it out helped to make me better." The long speech had been an effort. I could feel him forcing himself to speak correctly.

"Take it easy, Roscoe," I counseled. "Don't try too hard. You're doing fine.

BUT he was full of what he had to say and was eager to go on.

"Captain Ross," he said, "I was fearful I would never work it out. For this planet has two forces and both struggled for expression. I could not get them sorted, sported, forted, courted . . . "

I moved forward quickly and grabbed him by the arm. "For the love of God," I pleaded, "take it easy. You have time. "I'll wait to hear you out. Don't try to talk too fast."

"Thank you, Captain," he said with great effort at dignity, "for your forbearance and consideration."

"We've traveled a long road," I told him. "If you have any ideas, I can wait for them. Myself, I'm fresh out of answers."

"There is the structure," he said. "The white structure of which the city is made and the spaceport floored and the spaceships sealed."

He stopped and waited for so long that I was afraid something might have happened to him. But after a time he spoke again.

"In ordinary matter," he said, "the bonding between the atoms involves only outer shells. "In the white material, bonding extends deeper than the outer orbits of the electrons. You grasp the implication?"

I grasped, all right.

"All hell," I said, "couldn't break the bond."

"Precisely what was thought. Now you will come with me, Captain, if you please."

I protested, "You haven't told it all. You said there were two things."

He looked at me for a long moment, as if debating further revelation. Then he asked a question, "What do you know, Captain, of reality?"

A foolish question. "At one time," I told him doubtfully, "I would have told you I could recognize reality. Now I'm not so sure."

"This planet," he said, "is layered in realities. I know at least two. There may be many more."

He was nearly fluent now, although at times he had to force his words out and his delivery of them was spaced imperfectly.

"How," I asked, "do you know all this?"

"I do not know," he said. "I only know that I know. And now, please, can we go?"

He turned down the ramp and I followed. What had I to lose?

We reached the street and Roscoe headed for the spaceport, no longer mumbling to himself and walking so rapidly that I had to hurry to keep up. He was changed—no doubt of that—but was the

change an improvement or just a new phase of his madness?

When we emerged from the street to the spaceport, the sun was halfway up the eastern sky. The spaceport, with its milk-white floor, surrounded by the whiteness of the city, was a place of glare and in that glare the whiteness of the ships stood up like daytime ghosts.

Roscoe seemed to move even faster than before. I had to trot every now and then to keep up.

We were fairly close to Sara's ship before I saw the contraption at its base—a crazy-looking thing, with a mirror of some sort and what I took to be a battery, or other power source, and a maze of wires and tubing. The thing was three feet or so in height and maybe ten feet square. From a distance it looked like an artistic junk heap. Closer up, it looked like something a bright kid would rig up from assorted odds and ends.

I stopped and stared, unable to say a word. Of all the foolishness I had ever seen, this was the worst. During all the time I had been sweating out my heart, running through the worlds of damnation this silly robot had been picking up junk, lugging it here and playing games.

He squatted down before what he evidently considered a control panel.

"Now, Captain," he said, "if the mathematics should be right."

He did something to the panel. Tubes flickered briefly and I heard a sound like breaking glass. A shower of fragments were peeling off the ship and crashing to the ground. The ship stood free of its milk-white glaze.

I couldn't move. The fool machine had worked and the ship stood free and ready—and I couldn't move.

ROSCOE put out both hands and gripped me by the shoulders.

"It is done," he said. "Both for it and for me. When I freed the ship, I freed myself as well. I am whole and well again. I am my olden self."

He had no difficulty talking. He stood and moved like a man, not like a clanking robot.

"I was confused," he said, "by all that happened to me, by the

changes in my brain, changes that I could not comprehend and did not know how to use. But now, having used them and proved that they are useful, I am myself once more."

I could move now. I tried to turn toward the ship, but he would not let me go.

"Hoot talked to you of destiny," he said. "This is my destiny. The movers of the universe, whatever they may be, work in many ways. How other can one explain why the mallets hammering on my brain could have so altered the pattern as to bring me an understanding I did not have before?"

I shook myself free of him.

"Captain," he said.

"Yes."

"You still do not believe me. You think I am an oaf. And I may have been—but no longer."

"No," I said, "you're not an oaf. I have no way to thank you."

"We are friends," he said. "No need of thanks. You freed me of the centaurs. I free you of this planet. We have sat by many camp fires."

"Shut up," I yelled at him. "Cut out the sentiment. You're worse than Hoot."

I circled his ridiculous contraption and climbed the ladder of the ship. Roscoe climbed close behind me.

In the pilot chair I reached out and patted the panel. We could take off any time. We could leave and carry with us the secret of the planet's treasure. Just how to turn that treasure into a cash transaction I had no idea at the moment, but I knew I'd find a way. A man who had a commodity could find a way to sell it.

Was that enough, I asked myself—that I should have something to sell? Not another planet, although I suppose I could have sold the planet, too, but knowledge stored in the form of seeds.

But there was more to the planet than a great white city and knowledge-grabbing trees. It also was a planet where a man might disappear or fade away, as Tuck had faded. When they faded, where did they go? Into another reality? An earlier culture had built the red stone building at the outskirts of the city, had carved the doll that sagged out my pocket. Did that culture hold the secret of how a man might fade away?

I stayed in the pilot's chair staring at the panel. There had been four of us to start with. Tuck and George were out of reach and so was Hoot—no sense hunting to bring them back. But Sara could be reached.

I sat and tried to fight it again and there was a funny smarting in my eyes and with something close to horror I realized that tears were running down my cheeks.

Sara, I said to myself. Sara, for the love of Christ, why did you have to find what you were looking for? Why can't you come home with me? Why can't I go and get you?

I remembered that last night beside the campfire. She had said it could have been good between us if we'd not gone chasing a legend. And why did the stupid legend have to spoil it all?

I heaved myself from the chair and went to the cabinet at the back of the cabin. I took the spare laser gun.

"We're going back," I said to Roscoe.

"Going back," said Roscoe, "for Miss Foster?"

"No," I said. "For Paint."

XXI

PAINT was only a hobby. He'd still be in the gully, flat on his back, except for me. Why did I have to fly again to his rescue? He'd said he wanted to go to Earth but what did he know of Earth? He had never been there. And yet I could not shake the memory of him going so slowly down the trail that he'd still be in hearing distance if I should call him back.

"I wish," said Roscoe, striding beside me, "that I could understand in fullness the concept of multiple realities. I am certain I have it all in mind, if I could only see it. It's a puzzle with a million pieces. If you put the pieces together, there it is, so plain that you wonder why you didn't see it to start with."

Better, I thought, if he went back to mumbling. Less disturbing.

"This is a new ability," said Roscoe. "Environmental-sensing, I suppose, would be the proper term for it. No matter where you go you sense and know environmental factors."

I had my own thinking to do. I still wasn't sure we should be heading out again. The logical thing would have been to close the hatch,

take off and be shut of the planet. At most, we could have picked up a pocketful of seeds to test for trade or sale.

Half a dozen times I was ready to give up, but each time kept going.

When we left the city there was no sign of the monstrous beasts which had chased us into it. I had known they might be waiting for us and I wished they had been. Now that I had a laser rifle again, taken from the ship, they would have been no sweat.

The way seemed shorter than on the first trip out. Some great urgency drove us. At night around the campfire Roscoe smoothed a patch of ground and worked on endless equations, mumbling partly to me, partly to himself.

Night after night, as he wrote and mumbled, I sat with him in the campfire light and tried to figure why we were here and not many millions of miles away, heading back to our own galatic place. And it came to me clearly that although Paint was a part of it, Sara was dragging me back across the empty miles. I saw her face in the firelight, across the blaze from me, with the lock of hair forever falling in her eyes, the streak of travel smudge smeared across one cheek, her eyes steadily upon me.

At times I pulled the doll from my jacket pocket and stared at that terrible, tortured face. The doll was a part of what was happening as many imponderables seemed to fall into collision course.

At last, after many days, we climbed a ridge and saw before us that last badlands area—where the hobbies had deserted us and we'd found the pile of bones and Paint.

Far ahead where the trail plunged, into the badlands, something was moving, a tiny point of light in the sun. It reached a place on the trail where darker ground outlined it.

Roscoe spoke beside me. "It is Paint," he said.

But Paint wouldn't have come back alone.

And then I was running down the slope, waving my arms and shouting, with Roscoe behind me.

From far off she saw us and waved back.

Paint was coming like the wind. He fairly skimmed the ground. We met on the flat. Paint skidded to a stop. Before I could reach her, Sara slid to her feet, raging at me. Like old times.

"You did it again," she yelled. "I couldn't stay. You loused it

up for me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget what you and Hoot had told me. You knew it would be like that. You were so sure, you left Paint to bring me back."

"Sara," I protested, "for the love of God, be reasonable."

"You spoiled everything for me. You took away the magic and you—" She stopped talking in mid-sentence and her face twisted as if she were trying not to weep. "No, that's not it," she said. "It wasn't only you. It was all of us, with our petty bickering."

I took two quick steps and had her in my arms. She clung to me. Hating me, perhaps, but clinging because I was the last thing that she could cling to.

"Mike," she said, her voice muffled against my chest, "we aren't going to make it. It simply is no use. They won't let us make it."

"That's wrong," I told her. "The ship is clear. Roscoe found the way. We're going back to Earth."

"If generous, hopeful human will only take a look," said Paint, he'll perceive what she be talking of. They follow all the way. They dog our hurrying footprints. They grow more all the time."

I lifted my head and there they were, crowding together along the rugged skyline of the badlands—a mighty hord of the massive beasts that had left their kill in a windrow in the gully.

THEY crept forward, pushing and shoving, and some of them were forced down the distant slopes to make way for these who crowded in behind them. There were hundreds of them, more likely thousands of them. They didn't seem to move; they flowed, spilling off the slopes, spreading out on either flank.

"They're behind us, too," said Roscoe, speaking far too quietly, making too much of an effort to stifle rising panic.

I turned my head. On the crest of the ridge we had just crossed, they were surging into view.

"You found the doll," said Sara. "Tuck's doll. She tugged it from the pocket. "Do you know, all the time Tuck had it, I never really saw it."

I pushed her away from me and lifted the laser rifle.

Roscoe grabbed my arm. "There are too many of them," he said.

I pulled away from him savagely. "What do you want me to do?"

I shouted. "Stand here and let them run us down?"

More of them showed than ever, in any direction one might look. We were surrounded. There was just one big herd of them and we were in the center of it and they were facing us. They were taking it easy. They had us pegged and they could take us any time they wanted.

Roscoe dropped to his knees and smoothed out a patch of ground with an outstretched palm.

"What the hell!" I yelled.

"The world at times makes little sense," said Paint, "but with you and I on guard—"

"Keep out of this," I yelled. I had enough to do, without having to bandy words with a stupid hobby.

I couldn't take them all, of course, but I'd take most of them. I'd burn them by the thousands into smoking crisps of flesh and that might discourage them. They were brave and confident; they'd never faced a laser gun. They'd go up in puffs of smoke; they'd flare and not be there.

But I knew they were too many. When they began to move, they'd move on every side.

"Captain Ross," said Roscoe, "I think I finally have it."

"Well, good for you," I said.

Sara moved close beside me. Her rifle was slung across one shoulder and she had that silly doll clutched against her breast, the way Tuck always carried it.

I said what I hadn't meant to say, hadn't planned to say, had scarcely known I wanted to say, catching my breath in my throat like an awkward boy. "Sara, if we make it out of this, can you and I start over? Can we start as if I were just coming through that door back on Earth and you waiting in the hall? You were wearing a green dress . . ."

"And you fell in love with me," said Sara, "and then you insulted me and I lashed back and the entire thing went haywire . . ."

"We fight so well together," I said, "it's a shame to stop."

"You're a bully," Sara told me, "and I hated you. Thinking back, I guess I loved every minute."

"When they come at us," I said, "crouch out of the line of fire. I'll be shooting in all directions as fast as I can."

"There's another way," said Sara. "Tuck used it. The doll. An old race made the doll. A race that understood . . "

"Hogwash." I yelled. "Tuck was a freak . . ."

She yelled back, "Tuck knew how to use the doll. George knew a little—Hoot would have understood."

Hoot, I thought gone forever into his third phase, a part of me and that part gone and if he were here he'd know . . .

Even as I thought it, he was inside my brain, as I had known him in that instant when hands and tentacles had clasped and we had been as one. All was there again that I had known and felt, all that I had tried to recapture since and could not find again. All the glory and wonder and terror—and I stood there, half myself, half Hoot. Hoot had given me the ability to merge with the minds of others and, as well, the forgotten edges of myself, the unplumbed depths of self.

Sara's intuition, the symbolism of the doll, came clear, the philosophic gropings of a hobby flat on his back for centuries, the meaning of the equations Roscoe had been scratching on the ground. And that moment of myself when, half dead, half alive, I had seen the strata in the badlands cliff and had sensed the chronology of them, glimpsing the time and the happenings of this planet that lay exposed within the strata.

Now, quite suddenly, there was a different plane. I saw it as clearly as I had seen the other strata—not by myself alone, but myself plus Hoot, plus all the rest of them with me. There were many universes and many sentient levels and at certain time-space intervals they became apparent and each of them was real, as real as the many levels that a geologist could count.

The monstrous beasts were charging, their hoofs throwing up a blinding cloud of dust. But they were of another world, of another time and place, and all we had to do was take one tiny step to attain a better place, find a better world.

Not knowing how, but filled with mystic faith, we all took the step into the infinite.

THE place had a feel of tapestry about it, of friendly unreality. It seemed a place of silence and peace, of immobility. The village and the river, the trees, the sky, the clouds, the people and the little dogs,

all seemed elements of a set piece, woven centuries ago and untouched by time, the colored threads put in place and kept in place for all eternity, frozen and at rest. The sky had a yellowishness that was reflected by the water and the humble homes were all brown and brickish-red. The green of the trees was not the kind of green one would ordinarily expect, but the very composition one would expect of a hanging on a wall. And yet one could sense a human warmness and an easy welcome. If one walked into the picture, he could never leave. He would be bound into its very fabric, blended into the tapestry.

We stood on a rise of ground above the village and the river and all of us were there—all of us except the doll. Sara no longer held the doll. The doll had been left behind, perhaps for someone else to find. The doll and the weapons. Sara no longer had the rifle, nor I the laser gun. There were rules, I thought. Certain attitudes of mind, perhaps, could not be brought into this land.

"Mike," said Sara, softly, "this was the place we hunted, that Knight was hunting."

I held her close against me and she lifted her face and I kissed her. Her eyes were bright with gladness.

"We won't go back," she said. "We'll never think of Earth."

"We can't go back," I said.

We had left Earth behind, all we had ever known before, as a child will leave behind a toy he has outgrown.

The village and the river lay below us. Fields and woods stretched away to the far horizons. I knew, somehow, that this was a world without an end and that it was, as well, the end of time, a place that was everlasting and unchanging, with room for everyone.

Somewhere in this land were Smith and Tuck and maybe even Hoot, but we'd probably never find them. The distances were far.

The unreality was gone, although the tapestry remained. And a boat moved on the water with a flashing of the oars. Boys and girls and dogs, yelling and barking, were running up the hill to greet us. The people in the village had turned around to stare. Some of them were waving.

"Let us go down to meet them," Sara said.

The four of us, abreast, went down the hill to enter into another life. □

THE PASSING OF AUNTIE MAT

ROSS ROCKLYNNE

Behind the back of God—all evil in the world was destroyed . . .

JIM Wayne was doing the quite ordinary thing of walking toward the bus stop when the beam from the silver crucifix hit him. He was in Los Angeles at Fifth and Hill. The time was five in the afternoon. Jim Wayne had been on his way home, but he was not on the way now. The beam turned him into a timeless statue with one foot up and one foot down. There he stood and no wonder. He was outside of time.

Fairly soon a policeman came.

"Lilitu!" thought Jim Wayne. His stiffened eyes were fixed on the topmost floor of the old Philharmonic Auditorium Building, under the sign advertising the Temple Baptist Church at the rear. He thought he could see Lilitu in one of the side windows, holding the old sacred cross.

"Lilitu!" He felt the urge to scream that name but could not. Nevertheless he felt that she must hear him. And so he cursed her.

"Thou witch of the night!" he cried out in his mind. "Thou vampire, thou child of Satanas! Succubus who lives in ruins! Molester of small children!"

All this made him uncomfortable, however. Why did *he*, Jim Wayne, a mere head of the math department at Pepperdine College, know the woman was someone named Lilitu? All in good time.

Meanwhile he knew he was temporarily frozen, waiting for he knew not what. And he knew people were around him, buzzing, though he heard nothing.

Perhaps the kindly, curious people were trying to pinch him and wake him up and not having much luck.

Undoubtedly an officer of the law was here by this time and was busy upholding the dignity of the Los Angeles Police Department.

"Stand back, stand back," he would cry, conscious of the role he must play, but frightened by the timeless man. ("The sergeant will know about this," he theorizes hopefully.)

"Look at me," said Lilitu, her snake-coiling voice sounding inside Jim Wayne's head. "Quit thinking your thoughts. You know who I am and who you are."

Wayne looked, not with his eyes, which could only see the old Philharmonic Auditorium Building, but with two special thought-forms that whirled rapidly and scanned where she appeared in his head.

She was a bodiless face in a dream. She wavered. She was seen as if in a pool. Her hair, like twisted and shining gold wire, danced and floated and clouded about her head in long full streamers of rich changing color. Her lips were self-willed, writhing and coiling, mocking and charming. They were red buds, almost bursting. Her eyes were knowledgeable mosaics of blue and black.

She said in her coiling voice, "There *is* a policeman. And people around you. Everybody can see you, but nobody, absolutely nothing, can touch you." She nodded confidently. "The planet could blow up and you'd still be there."

"There?"

"Thought is far away," she replied vaguely. "It never stays where it is born. It wishes upon a star. It raises lilies on the Moon. Every moment it descends into dungeons, then soars like a bird. You are home now, Sammangelof, if you but knew."

"Sammangelof?"

"*Sammangelof! My love! My destroyer!*"

Her bursting lips writhed. Her eyes filled with a watery shimmer. Her hands, ringed with black jewelry, were clenched.

"Thou art Sammangelof! Do you not know yourself? Do you not know me? Oh, Sammangelof, it was a grievous time I had finding you. Will you come with me?"

"I am not Sammangelof."

Her bursting lips pulled down. Her eyes turned a lighter color, a shining blue filled with distance.

"I am going to stay here," said Wayne. "With my body."

"You wish to stay with your body and burn like grass," she whispered. "But *I*—I wish upon a star. I see the far ends of universes. I see the back of God as he looks on his worlds. And God does not see me, though he knew me once in the time of Adam.

"Where could you gain such power, Jim Wayne, that even God does not know you exist?

"I offer you that."

But already her voice seemed to come from a far distance. She had his answer. He would stay with his body.

"Sammangelof!" she said once more. But it was a voice that was strident and echoing in a timeless universe.

"I will try again," she promised faintly. "Mine hour is not yet come."

"STAND back now," the trim representative of the LAPD was crying. "Something's happening here. He's coming out of his trance."

Sounds came through to Jim Wayne. Smells. Brilliance. Emotions—a sharp sense of guilt, of worry. He threw out his arms blindly and the policeman caught him as he fell.

The crowd surged in, grabbing at him, helping him to stand up, all of them robbing him of the air he needed. "Hoo boy, just forget it," muttered Wayne, trying to brush them off. "I'll take a bus. Get me to the bus bench."

"No need of that, sir," a wispy voice spoke.

Jim Wayne was about to be captured in the middle of a busy city with a policeman looking on and people about. His captor was a wispy little man with bright eyes who wore a greasy brown suit and held onto Jim Wayne's coatsleeve with both gripping hands.

"I'll take you home, sir. Car's right here at the curb, sir. Parked in the red."

The policeman thought, ***Parked in the red?*** The chance to culminate his first duty was too much. He helped Wayne into the car.

Wayne hardly knew what his captor looked like. He felt mentally bruised. The car was moving, following a familiar route toward home. They were on Los Feliz, moving toward Road's End.

"Here we are, sir. We're here, sir. The address you gave me. But there's no house here, sir. It's an empty lot."

Yes, Wayne thought, looking at the spot, the house was gone. This was the right address. He began computing the chance of his house having been accidentally taken by a house-moving company. He computed also the chances that Lilitu had been here. Oh, God. That was it. Gone was the kindly, generous home which had held off sun, wind and rain, which mysteriously turned machines and lights off and on, which played music from its walls, which blew cool or warm breezes as one wished—that beautiful, secure house and his beloved family, gone.

Taken by his other beloved, Lilitu, away, away, away to the farthest star, behind the back of God.

"This is your home?" the wispy little man, Jim Wayne's captor, was saying shrilly, indignantly. "This empty lot? You've got the right street? Let me see your billfold, sir, if you will. It's all right, I assure you. Dingle is my name. Captain Dingle. World adventurer. Student of the occult. Lecturer, teacher—"

His voice dwindled as people approached the car through the darkening light of the day. Other people were scattered about the empty lot, simply standing and looking and talking lowly among themselves.

"Mr. Wayne?" said a woman, peering.

"Mrs. Summer," said Wayne. Then, to the man with her: "Bru. How are you? It's very—strange. My house was here. My family. Perhaps you—"

"We just don't believe it, Mr. Wayne!" The slim Mrs. Sumner, a tearful Mrs. Summer, was stammering in her sympathy. "We have your youngest. Jerry. He's in our house. But your house—the rest of your family—" She was about to sob.

Wayne left the car. Frantically, the wispy little man with the sharp face clambered from behind the wheel, afraid he would lose his captive. He danced awkwardly after Wayne, who partly led, partly followed Mrs. Sumner and her husband Bruce. They walked through crowds of people who respectfully parted to let the stunned man through.

"I was walking past your house, Mr. Wayne." A jarring, shrill voice sounded in his ear. "It began to lose color. I could look through it, like it was evaporating. Then it was gone. I was never so—"

Voices bursting and shrilling. Finally Wayne was looking down on

his five-year-old son Jerry, who sat in the middle of the Sumners' kitchen floor, a set of children's blocks scattered in front of him.

The child was undoubtedly worried, but after glancing somberly at his father he continued playing with the blocks. He shoved out an "M" and thereby finished spelling

SAM MANGELOF.

The pattern of the kitchen linoleum leaped in optical illusion halfway to Wayne's eyes. His eyelids were fluttering as he tried to reject what he and Dingle saw.

A chill descended into his heart. Yellow lightnings of half-remembrance stormed in his brain. *Senoi, my brother,* he almost wept. *Sansenoi my son. Lilitu has scourged thee, perhaps destroyed thee! Oh, how dangerous the years, when I was compelled to seek a hiding.* He found himself leaning weakly against the Sumners' kitchen wall while Dingle stared at the blocks transfixed.

"Daddy," said the boy, turning away from the blocks. He held out his arms and Wayne scooped him up, lunging for the outdoors. Once there, he sat down on the Sumners' back porch, shivering in the cool dark as he looked across the vacant lot. After a few seconds, Dingle hunched beside him, muttering.

"Sammangelof," he muttered, almost sullenly. "The angel of death, sent by God to destroy evil. You could help me, sir, if you would, by telling me what happened back there at Fifth and Hill. I don't know if you heard me, but please remember that *I* am Captain *Dingle*—"

He stopped on a wispy note of frustration as somebody approached Wayne mechanically. "The police are coming, sir." The same person retreated backward. Other people stood nervously about, wondering what to say. The boy Jerry looked at his father somberly. He was a beautiful child, round of face, bristle-headed, well-behaved, precocious as befitted the son of an excellent teacher of mathematics.

"The house isn't coming back, is it, Daddy?" he asked, covertly studying his father's mood. "Are Mommy and Alene? And Jimmy? I bet they aren't. She won't bring them back." He squirmed, doleful.

Wayne brought his attention to his son. "Who do you mean, she,

Jerry?" he asked. "Did you see her? It's all right. We'll get the house and everybody back, but tell me."

"It was Auntie. She took the house."

"Auntie?"

"Auntie Mat," said the child, squirming and plucking at a knot on his sweater. " 'I'm your Auntie Mat,' she said, Daddy. 'Be sure to tell your Daddy,' like I'm doing. She was only in my head. She was made of gold and she floated on the grass by the tree. 'I'm going to take your house,' she said and then she did it."

The boy yawned sharply, but he was studying his father for some reassurance. Wayne looked grimly knowing, at which Jerry yawned again, plopped his head against Wayne's shoulder and suddenly was sleeping.

"Auntie Mat," said Dingle. "No doubt a relative."

WAYNE caught the note of scorn. He shook his head. "Lilitu," he muttered.

"Or Lilith."

"I call her Lilitu," said Wayne. He recoiled from Dingle. "You couldn't have known!"

"Couldn't I." Dingle's upper lip, graced by a wispy brown thread of mustache, curled in a sneer. "I would expect you to say that. Perhaps I had better refresh your memory, which seems to be poor. I, sir, am Captain John Dingle. Ding to my friends. Adventurer, sailor, philosopher, archeologist—a digger in ruins, if you will.

"Now, sir—" an arrogant wedge of chin coming up—"do you want to wait here for the police to arrive, or do you want some *real* help? You know the police, don't you? They'll ask things. Where did you move the house *to*, Mr. Wayne? Are you sure there was a house on this lot, Mr. Wayne?

"And they won't let you go. They'll take you down to the glass house. They'll look up county records in the courthouse, trying to find what outfit moved a house from that location—oh, we all know the police!

"Look, Wayne, I'm not dumb, no matter what you seem to think of me. Don't be fooled by my slight appearance. I know many things. I know you were locked in space back there at Fifth and Hill. I tried to shove you over. I followed the direction of your eyes. I saw

a woman. I, Captain John Dingle, knew that my destiny was linked with yours, and so I took you away from the police. As I can do

People hovered about, trying to overhear. "Let's get out of here, Ding," Wayne said quickly.

Dingle said stiffly, "That, sir, is more like it." In the gloom of night he stood up, a much taller figure than one would suppose, and he drew Wayne up with him. "Out of my way, please," he said sharply, as people reached toward them, either to help or to hinder. "Mr. Wayne needs to leave now. Out of my way!"

Wayne shook his head mutely, half ashamed to leave these anxious people. As Dingle hurried him through the crowd, he closed his eyes momentarily only to see other eyes inside his head—eyes black and foreign—looking at him from a face twisted in torture. Wayne almost broke down as Dingle shoved him into the car.

"We can't do anything," he choked. "I can't do anything. I only know mathematics. And there aren't any mathematics here. I've got this thing inside me, this Sammangelof, don't you see?"

The car took off as if Dingle's spring tension were behind it.

Wayne continued to talk while the car moved and Jerry slept. He told Dingle everything. Dingle's eyes, seen sidewise in flickering neon lights as the car moved across town, grew baleful as he listened. His lips worked in what seemed a bitter agitation.

"You had it made, Wayne," he said bitterly. "Don't you understand what you passed up? You were a fool, a fool. How do people such as you make it at Pepperdine, when people such as I—I, Captain John Dingle, certainly more aware, more capable—"

"All right!" said Wayne. "So what did I pass up?"

"You had what all the mystics of the ages have been after," Dingle said. "You were detached from the demands of the illusory, gross universe. You floated in the subtle world, struck free of the base emotions. You must have understood at last the irrelevance of the carnal body to the soul. You were in tune with the bountiful infinite, at one with the absolute, alive in the eternal now."

"All that," Wayne felt impelled to say under his breath. "A metaphysical bargain basement yet."

"And yet you gave it up!"

Dingle seemed to sob in his throat.

"If only you knew how I've studied, Wayne. All the Masters. Mehar Baba. Rampa. Blavatsky. Southwick. Gurdjieff. Ouspensky. Nicoll. Hakin. Case. If only you knew how I've denied myself, trying to get where you got with no effort at all. In God's name, why didn't you just stay there, go with Lilith, live behind the back of God as she wanted you to? Your family, your house, your possessions, what were they compared with that?"

"In God's name," muttered Wayne. "Perhaps in God's name I came back. Perhaps because she lives behind the back of God."

Dingle whispered. "Yes, that's it. Perhaps, Wayne, we do understand each other. Perhaps we even understand the universe, between us. Evil. Where does it come from? Is it a quantity that pervades the universe and that God wishes to destroy? Is it God's design that you—yes, you, Wayne—are to destroy Lilith, and thus destroy all evil?"

Wayne's chin was far down on his chest near his son's bristled head. "I don't know," he said.

Dingle hunched over the wheel, turned a corner and drew up before a well kept southside brick building. As he killed the motor, he turned haunted eyes on Wayne.

"We'll find out," he said. "Now we bring our parts in the Play."

WAYNE followed Dingle's doggedly climbing form up a polished staircase, not knowing he was Dingle's captive, not knowing or believing that he was acting out his role in a Play. And so they stepped into Dingle's apartment.

Wayne first saw a thousand books. One prominent shelf held titles familiar and unfamiliar to Wayne. Hakin: ***The Walled Garden of Truth;*** Rampa: ***Cave of the Ancients;*** Gurdjieff: ***All and Everything, Meetings With Remarkable Men*** and ***Life Is Realy Only When I Am***; Ouspensky: ***Tertium Organum, A New Model of the Universe*** and ***In Search of the Miraculous***; Nicoll: ***Commentaries***, three volumes; Southwick: ***The Forty Lectures***. There were other mystic titles there such as ***The Gospel of Ramakrishna*** and ***Tibet's Great Mil (a) repa.***

A large Bible, with Concordance, stood open on a stand alongside a Torah and an astrolabe of ancient origin. All this came into view, dustily, as Captain John Dingle snapped on lights hidden in the

walls. The furniture, the whole decor of this part of Dingle's apartment, was Oriental, deep east Oriental.

Incense began to blow and tinkling music began to play in the pentatonic scale.

The light graceful measures mingled with intrepid low brassy notes that wrapped around Wayne and the sleeping boy. He felt himself linked with the long drudgery of the past. He saw the present as the accumulation of all time. Suddenly all he wanted to do was to sit down but Dingle was standing in front of the only available upholstered chair, holding a silver crucifix.

"It wasn't where I left it," Dingle said. "Lilith has been here."

Then he raised the cross, extending it between himself and Wayne.

Behind the cross Dingle seemed to loom. The wispy little man had blown away. Wayne stared, fascinated. There was little question, considering the probabilities, that this was the same crucifix Lilitu had used on him in downtown Los Angeles. But how had she used it? What properties did it have? *Let's see,* thought Wayne in fascination: *x equals y. Measure off two obtuse angles and add half a cup of impossibility.*

"Ding," he said, "put that cross down. Where—where did you get it?"

Dingle's eyes burned dimly behind the cross. His face was twisted and angry.

"Lilith will decide when I put the cross down," he said. "You, Professor Big-brain Wayne, don't have anything to say about it. We're pawns in some Plan we know little about. Even you as Sammangelof have little to do with this, Wayne. You'll do as Lilith says, as God says, as the Devil says—who knows?"

The crucifix was perhaps eight inches across, twelve inches along the vertical. The Christ figure, with canted head and twisted legs, was embossed on the dull Mexican silver gleaming despite the frequent stains of black tarnish. It was heavy, but Dingle's stiffened arm held it straight out as though toward a creature to be exorcised.

DINGLE took a step forward.

Wayne felt chill.

"Well," he said. "Well, perhaps so." His voice was faltering.

"Some theologians say that Jesus himself merely lived out a Play and that Judas was one of the Players. I suppose that's what you mean."

"Yes, yes," Dingle whispered suddenly. "That's it. For why would I own such a cross as this? Why was it I who found this cross in a Mexican *iglesia* crushed by an earthquake? Not recently, Wayne, mind you, but twenty years ago. For what is time to Lilith? Yes, it was she who arranged this moment, who arranged my confrontation with you, Sammangelof."

That again, Wayne thought hopelessly. He shifted the growing weight of Jerry in his arms and the boy woke up, sleepily taking note of his new surroundings. Finally his eyes too fastened on the crucifix. Sleepily frowning, he said, "Daddy, Auntie Mat is coming. She's almost here."

"Is she?" asked Wayne. He felt his jaw muscles crunching his back teeth together. At that moment, the crucifix acquired its strange brilliance. The beam came from the crown of thorns on the Christ figure's head. Dingle seemed to jump in stature. His voice shouted out. His eyes shone like black stones.

"Sammangelof," he shouted. "Sammangelof come out! You have hidden for centuries in this man and in his seed before him, as you are planning to hide in his child. The moment has come for you to face Lilith."

He laughed tauntingly. "Have a bit of courage now, Sammangelof! After all, Lilith scourged your brother and your son—perhaps killed them, so that only you are left to do God's will. But think! Can the righteousness of Senoi and Sansenoi truly die? You must use this righteousness, this power, to destroy Lilith, and so destroy all the evil in the world!"

"All the evil," echoed Wayne, eyes averted from the cross.

You, sir, he thought, *are a nut.*

"Yes, all the evil! Forget your love of Lilith. Think of Lilith as Auntie Mat— Auntie Mat, Sammangelof!"

The crucifix loomed. Ding must be walking toward him. Wayne could no longer avert his gaze and the pipping beam hit his eyes at last, as it had when Lilitu paralyzed him in downtown Los Angeles. But it was not the same, for now he felt the sluggishness of Time in his body. The colors in the room stepped a shade up toward violet, then changed by hundreds of angstroms. Red books became orange,

green, blue; melted fluorescently to indigo and black. Sounds whirred in shortening vibrations. Ding's eyes were fuming green. His voice ascended beyond the limit of audition. It was a very thin scream.

"Go now, Sammangelof, and kill Lilith! Kill the wife and daughter of Satanas, and let God return to Paradise!"

The crucifix was quite black now, Ding was black and fading away, everything was black and then gone. Everything except Jerry, his bristle-headed son who now appeared as a thought-form in his head.

"You're funny, Daddy, in the middle of my brain," said Jerry, "like Auntie Mat was when she took the house. She's pretty close now, Daddy." He frowned deeply, but unworriedly, as he looked through his father into a strange distance to see what only he could see.

It was all wrong, Wayne knew. Why should the child too be drawn away from the world of righteousness? Yet it was undoubtedly true that they now existed behind the back of God, unknown to God, in some special kind of reverse Paradise where everything was opposite—matter itself a different opposite thing.

"Obviously," thought Wayne in this stillness, "I have ascended into the Eternal Now. How was it you said it, Dingle? Ah, yes: detached from the demands of the illusory, gross universe. Struck free from the chains of the base emotions. True. But there are other strange truths as well. I am the angel Sammangelof, and I do not need to do God's will, for I am behind his back! Therefore I shall not kill my love, my Lamia!"

"Daddy, she's coming like the wind."

Wayne's round-headed child was not worried or scared or tearful or any of those things, any more than his father was. Being only five in that world where Time stretched out, he naturally was nearer the Eternal Now than any grownup could be. He had easy access to the being he thought of as Auntie Mat, for instance.

"She's sure coming fast, and she just told me she killed her father. That's the old Devil," he explained.

"*Why* did she kill the old Devil?"

"She didn't like him any more."

"Why?"

"On account of the bad things he was doing in the world." Jerry was vague about this. He was trying to imagine the kind of things the Devil had done that Auntie Mat didn't like. "There were lots of things," he said vaguely.

"And she wants me to go with her?" pursued Wayne.

"That's just pretend. All she wants is Sammangelof to come out of you. Like she spelled out of the blocks. God sent three angels to kill Auntie Mat and the Devil. Auntie Mat wants you to remember and she wants you to remember you're Sammangelof. She told me, "because she's tired."

Then his calm, accepting eyes looked past his father.

"Hello, Auntie Mat," he said calmly. "We're going back where God is, with our house you stole and with Mommy and Alene and Jimmy. That's as soon as Sammangelof comes out and kills you."

In the timelessness that surrounded Wayne and Jerry, Auntie Mat seemed to laugh; lightly, happily. She was, of course, Lilitu, called by that name in ancient Assyria and Babylonia, then called Lilith in Hebrew mythology, and now called by herself Auntie Mat. Again he was looking upon her with two whirling thought-forms which allowed him to see that ripe, indulgently smiling face with the golden olive tinctures in the skin, the blue shadow in the mosaic of the eyes, the velvet roses and perfume in the bursting scarlet lips. Medusa-like, the wild disarray of sinewy alive golden hair clouded in dream about her head.

Wayne gazed upon her and thought, *I am at peace here, as Ding says. I should not want to go back, and I do not. This is the moment I wish for. I Am! For why did God show me Lilitu, when He knew that I could only love her? Yes, love her! Who can destroy the thing he loves?*

Gazing upon Lilitu, and feeling the timelessness about him, Wayne knew the Power of the crucifix. The cross-piece, in true Christian symbology, represented the gross world of time and suffering. The vertical standard pointed to Eternity and timeless ecstasy. He, like Christ, had ascended—into a heaven not belonging to God, but to Lilitu and her lover-father Satanas who was dead, dead at the hands of Lilitu herself! Why? Where was this different heaven? Ah, yes. It matched God's universe, but was opposite. As good was opposite of evil. Deus and anti-deus! He closed off the

whirling thought-forms that showed him Lilitu.

"Are we going back, Daddy?" queried Jerry. "And take Mommy and Alene and Jimmy with us? And our house? Is Sammangelof coming out?"

The indulgent laugh of Lilitu was as sensuously caressing as the winds of Eden, so that Wayne was again scanning her, to see what he had not seen before. He was not saddened by the pluses and minuses he saw in himself and Lilitu, for there was no sadness in Eternity. There was instead understanding.

LILITU'S scarlet lips moved, curling. She laughed again, and her eyes closed somewhat, so that she was looking at him under blue-tinted lids with an ebony glitter of amusement.

"Listen to your baby boy," she laughed, "and go where thought can take you. And it can take you everywhere, and everywhere is here, without time or space, where God is not. Do you know me now, Sammangelof? You do, and yet do not, my love, my destroyer!"

Her dusky arm, naked and adorned with snake-headed black wristlets, shot out imperiously.

"Look then on your house and your wife and your girl-child and your other boy-child," she spoke in voice that coiled. "Do you want Sammangelof to return to *them?* There, there, look!"

Wayne and his son Jerry both were looking past her. It was a strange house, and strange people on the porch, that they saw. All of this hung in a fog of nothingness, and all in smeared black and white, so that one could see forms; but not detail. Color was gone. Where had been light colors was smudge-black; where dark colors, ghost-white.

Wayne looked upon his house and the people in it and saw it as it would look if God would walk away and go someplace else for a minute or so.

"It's our house," said Jerry, peering, "but it's the bad part of our house. But we can't go over there, Daddy. You're Sammangelof and the house would explode."

"Auntie Mat," said Wayne. Her face drifted, blocking sight of the house. She smiled. Red wine was in her lips.

"You want me, then?" she asked lightly. "You prefer me? Then say it and do what you wish. Know what it is you wish and it shall

not be denied you. For art thou not Sammangelof, with the power of three angels? Yes, thou art Sammangelof, whom God decreed should love me!"

She drifted again, coming much nearer. Beyond her he saw the form of his wife on the porch of the house; he saw her straining toward him, seemed to see her lips open to cry out an urgent warning.

Now the house seemed to disappear and there was only Lilitu. The lush vineyards of eternity were in her bursting lips. A perfume of red roses clouded about her as he moved closer. Now I am Sammangelof, he thought, only Sammangelof; and I am what is left of Senoi and Sansenoi as well, sent by our Master to love Lilitu.

"Lilitu, Lilitu," he whispered.

"Sammangelof!" said Lilitu. An imperious disdain was in her coiling voice. But as he moved closer, he saw her eyes, jeweled with crystal tears. Two of these glided down her cheek, crossing the line of her scarlet waiting lips. And then two more. No matter that all this was in thought, that the tears, the faces, the lips of Sammangelof and Lilitu were thought-forms. No matter that there was no being, no space, no time, all was real, and the moment was real. Oh, Lilitu, child and wife of the Devil, where are you now, oh Lilitu? Oh, my Lilitu, I kiss you; I kiss you, Auntie Mat, anti-matter!

He touched the bursting lips with his own, as Sammangelof and never as Wayne. He tasted the lips of Lilitu, felt their giving-softness, savored in savage-sweet ecstasy the one moment of Life allowed him. Lilitu and Sammangelof, as decreed, mingled in the suicidal act of love. For could the evil of anti-matter stand against the righteousness of the touch of God? No, for that rapaciousness, meshed throughout the universe, its perverse radiations impinging on real matter to produce the torque and stress of all that is evil whether in stars or brains, burst and gasped as if in horror at its last criminal act—against itself.

A sheet of brilliance formed across everything after this, and against this limitless screen Wayne saw the weeping, yet horror-wrenched face of the woman who called herself Auntie Mat and who was beyond doubt connubial to Lucifer and daughter of him as well, before she became the first wife of Adam.

It was a shattered face, however; and so passed anti-matter.

Lilitu! Wayne thought he somehow screamed the name before he fell back into the world of time and torture.

IT WAS not a world of torture. It was not a world where time meant much, not any more. This was apparent to Wayne immediately. For through the windows of the quiet apartment of Captain John Dingle came traffic noises that were of an orderly, crystal nature, finely drawn notes played on the strings of a universal instrument which an unseen force had retuned.

The universe itself was retuned. The music of the spheres, perhaps, sounding as originally planned. Yes, this was all apparent. And so of course the house was back and his family was back, waiting. As for the house, it was never really moved, except behind the back of God.

Wayne looked expectantly toward Ding, who was cleanly relaxed in the upholstered chair.

"Oh, it's only been a second, really," smiled Ding. "Long enough for me to find a seat, that's all. And to notice how great everything is. The real Play, a long-running one, I dare say, Wayne, begins now. Nothing but love, kindness, happiness. I knew we'd all make it. I knew the moment had to come."

Wayne nodded at him, easily, agreeably.

"Yes," he said, "I think it had to. It was time."

Wayne's son Jerry sat cross-legged on the furry rug, studying the crucifix Dingle dropped there. He was making no attempt not to worry, for there was no worry. Wayne stepped past him, toward a window, and stood there, breathing, living, musing on the rightness of all things. Then abruptly he was staring hard past the Moon, his eyes impelled to search the sky.

Now his eyes felt the pressing weight of a heavy grief, a grief that could not be. Sammangelof! Thou art not truly dead, for it could not be I who feels this sorrow. As if in answer, he felt the uneasy stirring of two forms within him. *Sammangelof is dead, we live!*

Helplessly, Wayne's brimming eyes sought to penetrate the spaces between the stars, as the tremulous thought formed, *Lilitu, oh Lilitu, beloved, where are you?* And so Wayne perceived that he had a bit of a problem; but in this reformed universe problems, especially to a mathematician, were orderly, and their solutions were as orderly: how to exorcise two frightened, senile angels. □

KERMAN WIDENS LEAD IN POLL

FRANK S. ROBINSON

The election was an experiment in ethics—and Devil take the loser!

"DAMNATION!"

"Yeh," concurred Frank Menzer, "and we have only seventeen more days to the election. What the devil are we going to do now?"

"Lose," came a laconic suggestion.

For a moment there was silence, broken by someone's saying loudly, "No, Warrenhurst is going to win." But it was said with a sufficient tremor of unbelief to worsen rather than brighten the mood of this gathering of campaign aides. Again there was glum silence.

"Look, I think the debate issue is a good one. We simply have to keep hammering at Kerman's refusal to debate."

"Right. And if we can lure Kerman into a face-to-face debate, Warrenhurst can rip him to shreds and turn this whole thing around."

"Too bad Kerman realizes that. Admit it, he may be stupid, but he's smart enough to know he is. He'll never debate."

"Then we'll keep calling him a coward. I think his refusal will hurt him."

"It will, but not enough," averred Menzer. "It wasn't enough for Hubert Humphrey, remember? We have seventeen days left. Our only chance is to batter away at the real issues between the candidates—and pray the people change their minds."

"In that case, we're through. The voters are eating up this demagogic pap that Kerman's handing out. We try to make it look like Kerman's program would mean the end of freedom in America, maybe the end of peace, maybe the end of the human race—"

"What do you mean that we're trying to make it look that way?"

exploded Frank Menzer. "Don't you believe it's the truth?"

"Yeah. I try not to think about it, but it creeps up on you."

Frank Menzer grimaced. "It's crept up on me all right. It's been sitting on the back of my neck ever since James Kerman declared his candidacy. If only he was really the demogogue we've been calling him! Then he might not be so terrifying. But that guy really believes what he's saying; he's a damn fanatic. Warrenhurst hasn't just been making political hay—what he's warning against will happen if Kerman wins."

"And we might as well face it by now, boys. He'll win."

"Yeah, looks it. Brother, we have *some* four years coming."

"I only pray," said Menzer gravely, "that we *have* four years coming." He turned his perturbed face from the others and nervously lit a cigarette. It was late and the group of very tired, very sullen campaign strategists had allowed the meeting to end without result. They had begun to drift apart to seek sleep and dreams of the victory their conscious minds had lost hope for.

Frank Menzer stood puffing away on his cigarette, chastising himself for what he must be doing to his lungs, yet not very concerned about them at the moment. The others left, all but one of them. That the straggler's face, cherubic but lined with age, was not a familiar one broke through Menzer's somber reveries.

"Hey, who in hell are *you*?" he said, upon realization that he did not know.

"Apt, very apt," said the stranger to himself, grinning with amusement.

"And what the devil is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Oh, my—apt again, Mr. Menzer."

"I don't know what you're talking about, buddy," said Menzer, annoyed. "But if you're a reporter, why don't you beat it? Don't you have enough already about the pessimism of the Warrenhurst high command?"

"I am not a reporter, Mr. Menzer," said the stranger in an odd English accent.

"Well then, who are you, and how did you sneak in here?"

"My name is Eliphalet."

"What kind of name is that? Where'd you come from, and how did you get in here?" Menzer continued to demand.

"I came from Hell," Eliphalet replied, "and that should satisfy all three of your questions."

"Very funny."

"I can assure you, Mr. Menzer, that whatever Hell is, it most certainly is not funny." Eliphalet's countenance and tone were so deadly serious, Menzer told himself, that he must be either truthful or mad, probably the latter.

"No, Mr. Menzer, the former."

"What the—"

"Devil? You're right this time, I am indeed the Devil's messenger. I suppose that sounds very quaint, and it isn't my official title, but it substantially describes my business."

MENZER cast a squinting eye at the man—be he such—calling himself Eliphalet, and wondered if he was taking part in a farce.

"Prove it," he challenged.

"Oh dear, I had hoped not to. If I must, I must. This is banal, I'm afraid, but it usually does the trick."

Eliphalet outstretched his upturned hand. In the next moment, his bare palm was crowned with a brilliant sphere of orange flame. Flawlessly holding its shape, the flame ascended to the ceiling and vanished. Then another ball, this of blue fire, appeared and performed likewise. The third ball was iridescent green and the final one of opaque black flame.

"How do you do that?" asked Menzer, his voice redolent with skepticism.

"Why, witchcraft, of course. How else would you do it?"

"I don't do it," mused Menzer.

"Oh?" said Eliphalet. "Hold out your hand."

Menzer hesitantly obeyed. The ball that formed on it was of golden yellow flame. Menzer pulled his hand away at once, but the sphere remained static in the air. Abruptly it ceased to exist.

Menzer stared at the spot where it had been.

"Okay," he said in a hoarse whisper, "you're the Devil's messenger. What do you want from me—as if I can't guess?"

"I can assure you, you cannot. I happened to overhear your conversation, and your thoughts too, to be sure. I gather that you are extraordinarily worried about the coming election."

"Sure I'm worried. My God, if—"

"Please, Mr. Menzer," cautioned Eliphalet, wincing.

"Oh. Sorry. I was going to say that if James M. Kerman becomes President of the United States, everything I believe in and hold dear will go down the drain, this country and what it stands for will go down the drain, and maybe World War Three will wipe us all out to boot. Is that anything to worry about? You bet it is."

"Naturally. Of course, I can arrange to prevent that dire eventuality."

"Don't tease me. I'm sure you people are rooting for Kerman."

"Mr. Menzer, it is a grave error to assume that the forces of Hell foster evil in the world. All we do is take advantage of the evil already there, and that is not reprehensible. Meditate upon this—if there were no Hell to punish evil-doers, you would have substantially more evil in the world than you have now."

Menzer thought for a moment, then ventured, "Did you come here to tell me that you can put Senator Warrenhurst into the White House?"

"Precisely."

"I see. I've read of that kind of deal. You give me the election of Warrenhurst, and I give you my soul."

"No."

"No?"

"Positively not. However moral standards may have declined on earth, the stringent rules set long ago by my colleagues above have not been loosened. So we in Hell get mostly all souls nowadays—and we'll have yours when the time comes."

"Oh," said Menzer quietly, "thanks for telling me. I guess it doesn't surprise me, although I must admit, I hadn't thought you people existed at all."

Eliphalet merely smiled.

"Well . . . what *do* you want in return for Warrenhurst's election?"

"Your family. To be specific: Mrs. Judith Menzer, Evan Menzer, and Julie Ann Menzer."

Frank Menzer felt himself turning ghastly white. "Oh no, that's not fair," he cried.

"Why, of course it isn't, Mr. Menzer," agreed Eliphalet sweetly.

"That's the whole point. We don't go in any more for bargaining for souls. My goodness, we have more of them now than we can handle. But we do enjoy, shall we say, experiments in human nature, in choice-making. Haven't you ever wondered what you would do if confronted with the necessity of making certain unearthly choices? For instance, if one of them must perish, shall it be your wife or your mother? We don't bother with that one any more, mother always lost out. How about your wife against, say, the freedom of Austria, or a tornado in Kansas? Or mother against ten million dollars? Or ten million dollars against the freedom of Austria? The permutations are endless and endlessly fascinating, if you take intelligent and sensitive people as your subjects."

"That's demonic!" opined Menzer.

"Quite. It may amuse you to know, Mr. Menzer, how much of your history is determined by our little experiments. America fought in Viet Nam for an extra year because a certain woman declined to give up her husband."

"I don't find that very amusing."

"Well, perhaps it isn't, nor enervating either. But it is interesting and revealing, is it not?"

"Revealing of the fact that people are selfish and insensitive to remote suffering? You don't need ghoulish experiments to find that out."

"I am talking to you tonight, Mr. Menzer, to find out whether you are, as you put it, selfish and insensitive, and how deeply you really believe in the cause of your much-touted Senator Warrenhurst."

"I'll tell you how much I believe in it. You can have me. Take me back with you to Hell right now, if Kerman is defeated in return."

"Ah! How nobly chivalrous of you, my dear Mr. Menzer," crooned the Devil's legate. "Willing to die yourself in place of your loved ones. You are, as we well knew, a man of refined ethical discrimination. We knew too that the choice of Frank Menzer against Martin Warrenhurst would be an easy one for you to make, and we do not dabble in the perfectly predictable. Judith, Evan, and Julie Ann against Warrenhurst—now that's a tough one, isn't it, Mr. Menzer? I frankly don't know how you will decide, but I'm looking forward to finding out."

"You know that's not fair, you—you—you miserable devil. It's not that I value their lives more highly than the future of the entire country. You know that I'd gladly give up my own life. But do I have the *right* to sign away others' lives, without their knowing it, maybe against their will? How can you force me to make a choice like that?"

"You have stated the problem ably. As I mentioned, you are a man of ethical refinement, for whom the decision to sacrifice the lives of others is far more difficult than the decision to sacrifice yourself. But nobody's forcing you to do anything. Simply say 'begone' to me and I will depart and your family will live. Of course, Kerman will triumph."

"And what will happen then?" queried Menzer.

"That I don't know, but you profess to."

Menzer covered his face in his hands. "You must give me time to think," he pleaded.

"A little, right now, but you can't brood for weeks or days over this. I must have a decision tonight."

"All right, all right," said Menzer, pacing back and forth, his brow corrugated in thought. "Can you tell me," he asked presently, "how they would die?"

"Not until after the election. We wouldn't want you to think we run a dishonest game."

"I mean, would it be painful, or anything?"

"I don't know, that's literally not my department," answered Eliphalet. "In all honesty, I think it a good assumption that the deaths will not be pleasant. The demons sent up to fetch such people are not, I'm afraid, as elegantly civilized as I must be for my line of work."

Menzer gave Eliphalet an angry look and resumed his pacing of the floor.

"Come, come, Mr. Menzer," Eliphalet prodded after a while, "what's your pleasure?"

"My pleasure, damn it, would be to throw you out of my life," Menzer rasped. "But that would be making the decision wouldn't it, to let innocent people die? Still, I can't permit Kerman's election if I can stop it. . .

"Decide," suggested Satan's envoy impatiently.

Menzer again buried his face in his hands, rubbing his eyes and his head, the awful, awesome choice churning therein. This could not be happening to him; it was a bad dream, he reasoned, but he knew otherwise. He had, indeed, occasionally noted the ethical considerations that might go into making exotic choices such as Eliphalet had mentioned, but had never imagined himself actually faced with such a choice. The actuality strained his mind to its limits, and ordered thought did not flow easily under such strain. He found himself unable to focus on and dissect the moral issues presented, and realized that in the end his decision would necessarily be an intuitive one.

"All right, you bastard," he burst out at last, "I can't morally do either, but I know which is the cheap price and which is the expensive one. I know which I dare least to do. I may be wrong but—take my family—and give me the election."

"Bravo! A decision which you will never regret—or perhaps, you shall. At any rate, the papers are all prepared. Please look them over to assure yourself they are in order."

Eliphalet drew from his coat pocket a folded vellum sheet, inscribed with several paragraphs whose script was, at first glance, undecipherable. But it was in English after all, and Menzer read the document with care. It promised that Senator Martin W. Warrenhurst would be elected President of the United States, and that immediately thereafter, Judith, Evan, and Julie Ann Menzer would all die. That part of the deal was irrevocable, but the election promise could be revoked should Menzer place any wagers in reliance upon it, or in any other way evince foreknowledge of Warrenhurst's victory. Menzer suggested that the agreement ought to specify the date of the election, to which change Eliphalet proved amenable. It was effected by means of a flash of fire from Eliphalet's fingertip.

"Convenient, sometimes, these quaint powers we have," noted the man from Hell. "Now, for the signing, I'm afraid that the old folklore is true, it must be done in blood. There is no magical reason for the requirement, outside of plain tradition, but we happen to be a rather tradition-conscious lot."

Menzer nodded. Eliphalet produced a sterling silver instrument, graven with some unfamiliar Hebrew characters, with which he

pricked his own forefinger. He wrote his name and appended to it a symbol which was again unintelligible to Menzer. Then Menzer held out his finger to be pricked and struggled to produce a garbled "F" on the vellum sheet with his blood.

"It's quite difficult without practice," Eliphalet assured him. "Just try to make your initials. It's merely a formality."

Menzer managed to comply.

Tradition thus satisfied, Eliphalet took back the document and to deal with an honorable man such as yourself. I hope you are satisfied with out little arrangement. We shall meet again in due course. I'll be interested to hear then how you look back on the choice you made tonight. Until then, I humbly bid you good evening."

Whereupon the emissary from Hell, of course, vanished amid a cloud of the traditional fire and brimstone.

DURING ensuing days, Frank Menzer immersed himself deeply in the rigors of the final stage of the national political campaign. He worked long, hard, and with a passion surpassing even that which had moved him before—despite, or maybe because of, his knowledge that victory would be forthcoming. Menzer was enjoined from conveying that knowledge to anyone, but he allowed himself sufficient enigmatic expressions of optimism to lay the groundwork for future respect. Sure enough, the new vitality of the Warrenhurst candidacy began to crackle in the air.

The crowds grew larger and cheered louder. The candidate himself was buoyed by the change, and it showed in his speeches, blaring out with recharged combativeness, landing ever more telling rhetorical blows upon Kerman. Kerman felt them, and what was in the air as well, and his confident campaign style faltered. The people perceived the change in both camps and the inevitable began to happen. One poll reported that Warrenhurst was making substantial gains, another that he was fast closing the gap. The tide was with him now. The bandwagon began to roll. The smart money was now on Martin Warrenhurst for President.

If Frank Menzer had any doubts that the apparition from Hell

had been unreal, they were resolved by the progress of the campaign. He could be sure now of its outcome and of what would follow and he could not help cringing. He redoubled the furious intensity of his efforts, so as not to allow his mind to dwell on the fate of his family, nor allow his heart the rending effect of a visit with them. He would speak with his wife nightly on the telephone and that was enough heartache for him to bear. He did not dare to assume more, lest he blurt out the truth and lose what he had bargained for as well as what he had bargained away. He wept bitterly after each phone call.

Much as Menzer tried to lock the subject in a remote compartment of his mind, the merits of his decision would always escape to torment him. Had he been right? Could he have done wrong? No amount of frenetic campaigning could keep his mind from relentless agonizing. Questions would occur to him constantly, questions he wished had occurred to him that fateful night of decision. They would torment him to the grave, he feared, and he had to seek solace. He knew where to seek it.

Nine days had passed since the meeting with Eliphalet and the latest poll showed Warrenhurst surging into the lead, when Menzer startled his associates by making a vague excuse to fly to Boston.

Menzer had known Father Twyman since the two had gone to college together. While Frank Menzer had abandoned his religious beliefs to become a politician, John Twyman had nourished them to become a priest. Yet the two remained friends, maintaining a true respect for each other's convictions.

Twyman was stunned by Menzer's unannounced appearance at the very culmination of the breathtaking political drama in which the politician was so deeply involved. Father Twyman knew that something very, very serious was afoot.

"You've evidently made a pact with Satan," said Father Twyman when Menzer began by showing him the small trace of a scab on his finger. The priest was being facetious, of course, and was quite taken aback when Menzer nodded gravely and vigorously. Twyman was progressive enough a Catholic not really to believe in the Devil.

Menzer, although mindful of the clauses of the contract he had signed, related as much as he dared of the incredible night of Eliphalet. He revealed what he had bargained away, but not what

he had bargained for, except to say that it was, more or less, the future well-being of the nation.

"You bargained for Warrenhurst's election, didn't you?" deduced the priest. Menzer didn't dare move a muscle to indicate a reply, but even that constituted a passive answer. "A worthy cause, I must say," Twyman observed.

"You believe me that it really happened then?" Menzer asked.

"Yes," Father Twyman said slowly, after a pause. "You wouldn't have flown here in the middle of the crucial period of the campaign just to pull a practical joke. And it must have taken more than an ordinary demonstration of theatrical legerdemain to persuade you to throw your agnosticism to the four winds. Your story is the most incredible thing I ever heard, but I have to believe you."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Why did you come to me with this?" Father Twyman asked in return.

Menzer sighed loudly. "Because the more I think about it, the more it bothers me. I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong here, very, very wrong. It's not my family. I can't hold their welfare above the nation's. I don't know what it is. I just felt that I have to talk to you about it."

"I understand," said Twyman. "I don't know what to tell you, Frank. Or maybe I do and I'm afraid to say it."

"PLEASE, John, Whatever it is, tell me. I can take it."

"I suppose I have to. All right, Frank, this is what I think. I think you made one lollopalooza of a mistake."

Menzer gasped.

"Look, that night with Eliphalet, you weighed two things in your mind—the relative moralities of condemning three innocent people, your family, to death, without their knowing it, against condemning the United States to be ruled by James Kerman. Weighing just those two, you undoubtedly reached the right decision. But here is a factor, and a big one, that you completely ignored. You weren't dealing with the corner grocer that night, Frank, you were dealing with Satan. Satan is—how else can I put it?—the embodiment of evil. I know what you said Eliphalet told you about evil, but that was his version only. It is certainly not the scriptural version. When you

made a pact with the Devil, you joined forces with him and with all the forces of Hell. Everything that comes out of that pact is going to be the Devil's work—the deaths of your family *and* the election of Martin Warrenhurst."

Frank Menzer felt as though a great hand were clutching at his throat. Father Twyman had set forth lucidly that which had been gurgling through the recesses of his mind through the past nine days.

"It's no good then—the whole deal," came Menzer's own formulation.

"I'm not sure what you mean. Satan will go through with it; it already looks as though Warrenhurst is going to win the election. But he'll be winning it by virtue of a pact with the Devil. I can't see how any good can come of such a deal."

"Do you mean to say that my having made a bargain with Satan has turned Martin Warrenhurst into a bad man? Even though Warrenhurst had absolutely nothing to do with it and doesn't even know of it? John, that just can't be."

"What can I tell you? Obviously, what you did couldn't actually have changed Warrenhurst. But don't forget this, that man or spirit came to you from Hell to offer the deal, not the other way around. He wouldn't have made the offer without some desire that it be accepted," noted the priest.

"Are you saying that Warrenhurst must have been Hell's candidate even before I made the pact? That's an insult to reason, and you've followed the campaign, so you know it. Besides, I told Eliphalet that I presumed he was rooting for Kerman. His answer was not a denial that Kerman was the more evil candidate, but that business about the forces of Hell not creating evil."

"I told you before, Frank, you can't simply assume that this creature was being honest with you."

"All right, say Warrenhurst was the Devil's choice all along. Then why would he need my signature before he could cause Warrenhurst to win?"

"Possibly you were being played for a sucker and Warrenhurst was going to win anyway, no matter what you did.

"Look Frank, I'm not saying that Warrenhurst is the worse of the two, the evil candidate. That revolts against reason, against everything we believe politically. But on the other hand, we just

can't dismiss the fact that if he's elected it will be the Devil's work. Maybe Satan has ways of making his administration an evil one. Maybe we've been wrong in our politics and judgments all along. Maybe Warrenhurst is faking the virtues we see in him, or maybe Kerman isn't really the villain we make him out. But one thing's certain—the Devil does not go around doing good works, by bargain or otherwise. If I'm sure of anything in this world of uncertainties, I'm sure of *that.*"

Menzer, having but recently acquired his belief in Satan's existence, could not question a postulate stated with such firmness by one who had made theology his life's work. There was no alternative to granting that Father Twyman was right.

"Okay. I see now that I've made a horrible mistake. In what exact way it was a mistake is still unclear, but that it was one is clear enough. John, tell me, then—is there anything I can do about it?"

Twyman's features took on a faraway look, and his friend could tell that he was committing all of his knowledge and experience to the problem. But it was in vain; Twyman finally threw up his hands in exasperation.

"I doubt it," he said tremulously. "There's no way you can go back on the deal, if you described the contract correctly. You can't save your family and you can't wash out the stain of having dealt with Satan. The election? I doubt anything can be done to change what's coming. Even if you decide to repudiate Warrenhurst and try to defeat him, you would create sensation, but would not thwart Satan's work."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Menzer. "What about the clause that I lose everything, if I tell anyone in advance about Warrenhurst's winning? I've told you about it now."

"Let's be realistic. The clause was put in there to work against you, not against the Devil. You may have broken your agreement already, it's true, but that's not as though you never entered into the deal in the first place. We must assume that Satan originally wanted Warrenhurst to win, or else he wouldn't have offered you as much. And he can still elect Warrenhurst if he wants to."

"But John, I can't go on like this. I have to do *something*. What would you do if you were in my place?"

"I hate to have to say this, but I could never get into that kind of

mess. I would never even consider putting my signature on a pact with the Devil, that would be blasphemous. If only you'd been a Christian, Frank, instead of an agnostic, maybe you would have realized your error before you made it. It's too late now."

"Then there's nothing I can do?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you try to save my soul?" Menzer begged.

"Frank, you know I can't any more."

His shoulders drooping, the politician rose to leave. Then he turned back for a final question.

"John—whom are you going to vote for next week?"

The priest sighed deeply. "I believe what you have told me. I am a man of God. I must therefore vote for Kerman."

MENZER nodded and walked out silently. Having nowhere else to go, he flew back to catch the campaign caravan en route, still offering no explanation for his mysterious absence. He could, of course, think of nothing but his predicament. His associates could not help noticing his zombie-like behavior. They worried about Frank Menzer. They had no concept of how much cause they had for worry.

"I must burn in Hell," Frank Menzer was willing to concede, "and my loved ones must soon die. But there is one thing that is not, in the final analysis, foreordained and inevitable. Martin Warrenhurst must *not* win. ***Martin Warrenhurst must not win.***"

He told himself that over and over, until his mind was cognizant of nothing but that consuming imperative. Warrenhurst must not win. But the pre-election polls all said he would . . .

FRIDAY night, four days before the nation is to vote. In New York City, in fabled Madison Square Garden, Senator Martin Warrenhurst addresses a mammoth campaign rally for his Presidential candidacy. The great hall reverberates with his righteous oratory and the crowd is ecstatic; outside, thousands stand in the cold to hear the nominee over loudspeakers. In the wings, Frank Menzer, a chief campaign aide, stands sweating, waiting for the candidate to finish his speech, which Menzer had helped to write.

"Good evening, Mr. Menzer," comes a familiar voice in a quaint

English accent, and Menzer whirls about to look upon a lined, cherubic face.

"You!" cries Menzer, mouth agape.

"Indeed, I. I couldn't help overhearing your little conference with the good Father picking up your thoughts of these past few days. My, my, you don't seem to trust our good faith do you, Mr. Menzer?"

"I made that mistake once—once too often."

"I should be deeply offended by that remark, but I will absorb it with equanimity. Mr. Menzer, do you seriously suppose that Satan really cares who becomes President of the United States?"

"Shut up! I know what you're trying to do, but it won't work. I'm wise to you."

"Oh, if only you were. Poor Mr. Menzer, to imagine that Satan can be defeated with violence!"

"Oh, yeah? I don t know what *you're* made of, *Mister* Eliphalet, but out on that platform there happens to be a man, a human being, made of flesh and blood," Menzer says, pointing wildly.

"My dear Mr. Menzer, you are about to make a grievous error, one that ill serves your own best interests and your country's. Why don't you give me that gun in your pocket?"

"Oh, no—you'd like that, wouldn't you? The only way you'll get it, buster, is right between the eyes."

"That would have scant effect, but no matter. Why don't you stop and think, Mr. Menzer? Doesn't it occur to you that if we want to keep you from killing Warrenhurst, we can do so with ease?"

"Shut up. You're only trying to confuse me. I know what I have to do. Leave me alone."

Menzer tries to push the demon away, but his body shoves against empty air. Outside, the vast throng is roaring wildly. Warrenhurst has finished his speech and has come offstage.

"Great crowd, Frank," he says with ebullience. They are his last words. Menzer empties the six chambers of his revolver into the Senator before anyone realizes what is happening.

There is grief and uncomprehending shock at the grotesque event, the assassination of a Presidential candidate by one of his own chief strategists. Some would murmur, "The Devil's work—" to characterize it. Metaphorically, of course. □

THE GARDEN

A soldier of The Faith, Marburg escaped every doom—save his sword!

M.L. BRANNOCK LUNDE and DAVID LUNDE

THE wind screamed and the trees turned their backs to it and huddled together for comfort. Marburg of Conrad drew his heavy cloak around him more tightly. His companion Jean threw more wood on the fire.

"Of course He's the Defender. And how do we know? He says so. But just Who is He? And what does He Defend us from?" asked Marburg, who enjoyed baiting his over-serious companion.

"You! How He could send a scurrilous doubter like you in search of heretics I am unable to fathom. How dare you question The Defender? Do you ask of the tree its purpose? Or of this rock why it remains still? These things are beyond our understanding. Enough that The Defender has brought an end to the wars which plagued us for so long. It is the Faith alone which makes life meaningful."

"I suppose," sighed Marburg, "but must the Faith also make life so dull? A man can't even get into a simple brawl without someone suggesting that he is a follower of The Attacker."

"You speak sinfully. All harmony proceeds from The Defender. Your longing for violence can only proceed from The Attacker who wishes all to return to chaos. This must be prevented at all cost, and that is why you and I are sent to determine if there is truth in these rumors of heresy."

"No, Jean, my holy friend, that is why you are being sent. But because everyone knows that Jean of the One Eye reads heresy into the bark of a dog that keeps him awake, or the hen that fails to lay, I have been sent to provide a more balanced judgment and to keep you from getting lost in the woods."

The two men lapsed into silence. This was as usual, for Jean was

as taciturn as the root of a tree unless the subject of heresy was mentioned, and Marburg, though normally convivial, found conversation with Jean profitless. Marburg began to list mentally all the taverns he could remember. He had reached the one hundred and thirty-second name when a third man entered the firelight.

"He's a heretic," said Jean. "Perhaps even an Albigensian."

"Welcome, Brother," said Marburg.

"Your friend calls me heretic, and you call me Brother. What manner of greeting is this?" asked the stranger, dropping his pack and kneeling beside it.

Marburg moved over to give the man more room in the dry area near the fire. "Perhaps you have heard the myth of the god of old who sacrificed one of his eyes in exchange for wisdom. Show him your eye, Jean."

Jean stood in front of the stranger, his back to the fire. In the half-light, one eye shone, while the other side of the face with its nearly transparent scar tissue and the eye socket merely a deeper blackness in the shadow, took on the etched appearance of naked bone.

"That eye," continued Marburg, "is prized by The Defender as being able to tell a heretic from a Brother. It is thought that Jean can tell by the bend in a blade of grass if a heretic has passed by. Once, going only by the color of the stones of a house, he was able to determine that an entire convent, down to a pregnant cow, had gone heretic. Unfortunately, the Lord gives and the Lord takes. If Jean now names you a heretic, you are probably a Brother."

"What is your business, ***Brother***?" snarled Jean.

"I procure relics for The Defender," answered the man.

"How many fingers does the Virgin have?" asked Jean.

"At last count, twenty-four, but I myself am out of them for the present."

Marburg laughed. Jean, sickened by the sinfulness of the man's answer and Marburg's laughter, turned away and pulled the cowl of his cloak far across his face.

WHEN Jean and Marburg awoke to the first gentle fingerings of dawn, the stranger was gone. Where he had slept they found a thorny May-tree branch, its white petals resting against the blue-purple of an iris.

"I told you he was a heretic," said Jean. "It will be two months before the May-tree and the iris bloom."

"That's in our part of the world," said Marburg. "And that, Brother Jean, is not near to here."

They gathered up their few belongings, food and blankets, stuffed them in their back-packs, scattered the coals of the fire with their rough-cobbled boots. Marburg pinched the thorns from the branch of May-tree and placed it and the iris in a green-and-gold pouch he wore at his waist.

The trees were black and wet. Dead leaves beneath their feet matted together and made a soft bubbling sound as they walked. Shellless snails crawled slowly across the base of the forest, extending and contracting on their fluid trails of slime. Moss and fungi grew bountifully. Occasionally there would be a lightening of the green-dark gloom, sourceless and mysterious, but it served only to let each drop of moisture stand out for an instant and then disappear. Though not truly cold, the absolute damp kept them from ever feeling quite warm. Jean and Marburg belted their coarse woolen cloaks tightly about them and plodded on in sullen misery.

After three days of such travel, they reached a point where the forest stopped. This was no natural, bushy termination but an abrupt transition from life to death. Ahead of them stretched the powdery, black remains of what had once been thick forest, now only ashes and dust. Desolate and jagged, its stumps and exposed boulders looking naked without their covering of moss and leafmold, a small hill rose before them.

"We are surely in the land of the heretics now," said Jean.

"You may be right for once," answered Marburg, "Still, there may yet be hope." He pointed to the crest of the hill where a small pine tree thrust itself upward from between two immense stumps.

"Faugh! The ignorant find signs in everything."

Marburg chuckled. Bleak as the land was, it was also dry, and his spirits had risen accordingly.

THEY walked on and presently sighted a village.

"A nest of heathen," moaned Jean.

"If so, then we are in the right place to fulfill our task," said Marburg. He took the May-tree branch and the iris from his pouch and

examined them. They seemed only slightly faded, and the white and blue shone vividly as he pinned them to his cloak.

Entering the village, they noticed that although the buildings were made from the same materials—dressed timber, stone, occasional brick of a yellowish color— as those employed in their own country, there were more peaks and balconies in the designs. The clothing of the men was much the same as their own, but the dresses of the women were cut with lower bodices than those of their women. Marburg hoped that the style would spread.

In the center of the town the men found a church. Its two towers were as yet unfinished, but were apparently worked upon daily. Scaffoldings and rope festooned their upper reaches.

"I go to seek absolution," said Jean. "Will you come with me?"

"No, the taste of ashes fills my mouth. I go to seek a tavern." He started to turn, then softly called to Jean, "Try to find out if they've purchased any relics recently."

Marburg walked slowly through the narrow and twisting streets. Except for the architectural differences and the dress of the women, it looked like any other village. The citizens were occupied with the everyday chores—baking bread, butchering, curing hides. The rhythmic clanging of an anvil could be heard nearby, and here and there housewives stood sweeping the low stoops fronting their houses. Then, in a street so narrow as to be nearly an alley, Marburg spied a sign in bold colors, *The Cock's Crow*. He heard sounds from within of men drinking and gaming. He entered with caution, pausing inside the door to let his eyes accustom themselves to the dim lighting of the interior. The men barely glanced up as he walked past them.

He sat down at an empty table in the far corner, so that his back was to the wall and he could see who entered and left. A young girl came to take his order and returned shortly with a leather tankard of dark ale and a dish of boiled meat.

As Marburg drank his ale and chewed the meat, which was insufficiently seasoned and required the addition of salt from his pouch, he gazed around the tavern. About ten customers were scattered around at small tables. In front of the fireplace five men were throwing dice. When he had finished his meal, Marburg walked over and watched their game. It was little different from one played in

his own country. Presently a fat man, who was called Dannis by his companions, offered the dice and Marburg entered the game.

The talk was normal: crops, taxes, women. The men were friendly and did not question Marburg, who was careful lest he win too much. After a short time Jean appeared at the door, and Marburg pocketed the coins he had won and left the game to join his companion. This time he chose a table closer to the fire for the farther reaches of the room were chill, and there seemed to be no danger.

When the girl had brought Jean his ale and beef, Marburg offered him his salt. Jean took the pouch, pawed through it, and licked off the grains that clung to his fingers.

"Bah!" he spat. "You indulge too much in the softness of the world's evil. Spices are for the godless, for the wicked, for the . . . "

"What does the church look like?" Marburg interposed with the dexterity instilled by numerous conversations with Jean.

"It *looked* like a church of the Brotherhood. No new relics, a fat old priest and a lot of women mumbling in their beads. Still . . . "

Marburg chewed his lip pensively, then rose and whispered to Jean, "I'm going back to the game. Try to start a conversation with some of the citizens, but don't talk about . . . "

"I know, I know," he sighed. "Someday I'll be allowed to preach instead of this . . . this business. How am I supposed to start a conversation with someone who is a complete stranger and probably a heretic to boot?"

"Offer to buy him a drink."

MARBURG left Jean looking pained and walked back to the group at the dice table. A few more men had joined the circle. As he reached into the pocket of his cloak for his money sack, the door of the tavern was slammed open. About twenty men, wearing green cloaks edged with blue, swords drawn, pushed into the room. The men in the tavern stopped their drinking and gaming and all rose. The dice clicked loudly in the sudden silence. Then a full tankard flew through the air and struck one of the newcomers on the shoulder. As if the act were a signal, chairs, tables, tankards and bowls of half-chewed meat were hurled across the room.

The green cloaks advanced, whipping their slender blades from

side to side as they came. Marburg saw Jean picked up by one of the men and thrown into the fireplace. As he moved to help, something struck Marburg on the side of the head, knocking him to his knees. Before he could rise, Jean was beside him and pulling him up.

"This way. Quickly!" Jean whispered. He dragged Marburg toward the fireplace where the embers burned smokily. "There," he said, pushing him into the fireplace. In the corner Marburg saw a narrow passageway and shoved through it, Jean following.

"What luck!"

"Heretic pigs!" spat Jean.

The passage opened onto a long tunnel. From somewhere ahead a faint light glowed. They headed toward it, moving slowly because the footing was uncertain in the dim light. Although it looked straight, the tunnel bent and turned both horizontally and vertically. The light remained tantalizingly before them, but seemed to grow no nearer.

After they had gone a good distance, Jean called to Marburg, "Let us rest. I can go no farther."

The two of them slumped to the floor, their backs against the jagged wall of the tunnel. Marburg bent his head down against his shoulder. As he did so, he noticed that the branch of May-tree and the iris were faintly glowing in the soft darkness of the passage.

They slept fitfully, not bothering to take turns watching, for neither slept well. Finally, Marburg shook Jean's shoulder, "Staying here gains us nothing, and I'm hungry. Let's go forward."

After about an hour the tunnel grew a bit wider, and presently they came to a great cavern which was fitted out to look like a banquet room. It had a huge fireplace which was flanked on either side by gracefully carved women holding baskets of flowers and fruit. In front of the fire was a long table laden with immense platters of roast pig, venison, hares, pheasant and other fowls. Bowls of sweetmeats were scattered about the snowy cover, and two silver goblets stood next to a gold urn filled with clear red wine.

"Heretic magic," breathed Jean fearfully, making the Sign.

"Perhaps," answered Marburg. "But I am hungry, and this is magic to my taste."

As he approached the table the carvings suddenly stirred and the two young women stepped down from their niches as lithely as vines.

They drew two chairs to the table and beckoned to Marburg and Jean. Marburg sat down with alacrity, but Jean held back until satisfied that the goodies descending to Marburg's innards, were not poisoning him. Then Jean too sat and began to eat.

Marburg attempted to engage the women in conversation, asking who they were and inquiring as to what sort of place this was that they found themselves in. But though they poured the wine and brought new platters of food to the table, they would not, or could not, speak. After Marburg and Jean had finished, the women walked quietly backward into their places beside the fireplace. Jean rose and touched them. They were cold stone.

"Heathen magic," he muttered, "We ought not to have eaten that food. This is surely some form of trap, Marburg."

No doubt, but we have been lucky so far. Why should it not continue?"

"Look," screamed Jean, "Behind you!"

MARBURG spun around. Coming from an opening in the stone wall that he was certain had not been there a moment before was a huge beast. It was covered with feathers of bronze, and from its misshapen head, a gleaming steel horn projected at least the length of a man's arm. It moved slowly around until it was facing them. Its eyes were the color of sunlight reflecting from an enemy's shield.

The iris and the May-tree glowed brightly against Marburg's black cloak.

"The heretic flowers—it's after the flowers. Throw them down!"

Marburg tore them from his cloak and threw them at the feet of the monster, but the May-tree branch flattened out and floated slowly back toward him, turning rapid circles in the air, its leaves growing and fusing together. It cast a fearful light as it wheeled around. Blue sparks writhed upon the metal surfaces of cutlery and andirons, the visible evidence of powerful forces at work. Coming to a halt, it settled in Marburg's outstretched hand, a magnificent shield damascened with a floral pattern. Meanwhile, the stem of the iris had grown also and now formed a long and heavy sword whose blade yet retained a faint greenish tint to its silver. Its guard resembled the petals of an iris spread protectively. Embedded in its hilt was an enormous, shimmering blue stone.

"This is a heresy to which I shall subscribe," laughed Marburg, seizing the wicked-looking sword which seemed to adjust itself to the dimensions of his fist as he grasped it.

Holding the shield before him, sword raised, Marburg advanced upon the creature, which gave vent to a deafening, tormented howl and lunged at him, horn lowered and yellow eyes glaring malevolently.

At that instant, Jean snatched up and hurled the heavy iron fire tongs. The beast, distracted, swerved toward him. Marburg brought the huge sword down in a two-handed blow that took the beast upon its left shoulder, causing sparks to fly from its feathers as from a forge. The monster stumbled momentarily with the force of the blow, but recovering immediately, whirled upon its adversary with a bellow of outrage and clawed forepaws outstretched. Marburg braced himself and caught the beast's claws on his shield, shouldering its grotesque weight momentarily while he thrust deep into its unprotected belly. Blood spurted from the wound as Marburg leapt out of the way.

The creature's forelegs landed stiffly. It stood thus, shaking its head heavily for a moment, before its legs buckled and it screamed in anguish. It lay for a moment panting and then its head came up and it sniffed the air and peered around with its slowly glazing eyes. Marburg had frozen in place, but Jean, thinking the beast finished, uttered a shout of congratulations and moved toward him. The beast lurched forward. Unable to lift itself completely, it still dragged toward them, its claws striking sparks from the flagstones as it came. Its entrails were hanging from the jagged gash in its stomach and had tangled around its rear legs. With every lunge forward, it tore more of its own guts out, each time roaring with pain. Marburg felt sorry for it until he remembered that it was trying to kill him. Jean had flattened himself against the wall and was praying frantically in a hoarse whisper.

Marburg, meanwhile, had raised the sword and was taking careful aim at the beast's extended neck. As it made its final lunge past him, its horn passing within inches of Jean's shrinking belly, Marburg brought the blade down with such force that it sheared clear through the monster's neck. The head, moving with undiminished momentum, spun through the air, slammed into one

of the large wooden beams of the ceiling and hung there, its horn sunk a good five inches into the wood. From the neck stump gushed hot black blood. But the flow did not abate. As they stood staring, it formed a large pool which grew deeper and deeper. Soon it had risen past their ankles and still showed no signs of slacking.

"THIS is not possible!" cried Marburg.

Jean's prayers had reached a new pitch of intensity.

The shield, which Marburg had dropped after the battle, began to glow again and grow, widening and deepening until it was large enough to hold both of them. Jean threw himself into it.

"Quick! Climb in," he yelled, hauling on Marburg's arm.

The blood now rushed into the fireplace and through it, and the shield was carried with it. As they passed through the gap between the blackened stones, Marburg thought that the eyes of the two stone women turned to watch them.

Their craft swayed gently up and down as it was carried through darkness by the surging river of blood. Marburg and Jean sank back against its sides, too exhausted by their exertions and the sleepless night to worry about their destination. The hard sides of the shield felt as if they were padded with fur, and the two soon fell deeply asleep.

Marburg awoke before Jean and looked about. He could now make out banks on either side of the river. To his surprise they were of tawny sand, nothing like the soil of the area in which they had been previously. And although there was light enough to see by, Marburg could find no source for it. Instead of sky, overhead were the hanging, ragged stones of the tunnel. He did not believe there could be a cavern so large. The rocky roof stretched in every direction farther than he could see.

"Jean, Jean wake up," he said, shaking the other man.

Jean rolled against the edge of the boat, tipping it dangerously, rubbed his eyes and tried to straighten out his stiff joints and fingers.

"Where are we? What is this place?" Jean hunched lower in the boat.

"I don't know, but you don't need to worry about knocking your head."

Jean looked out at the expanse of sand and then at the river, still the dark purple of the monster's blood.

"I am going to pray," he said, "And I advise you to do the same. If anyone ever doubted the existence of the forces of Evil which The Defender battles against, this witch hole would surely convince him otherwise."

Marburg looked into the river, trying to see if it nourished any life, though he didn't particularly wish to meet anything that might live in it.

The current carried them on and on. The sameness of their surroundings, sand and rock endlessly, lulled them into stupor. It seemed that a day had passed, but there was no night. The intensity of the light remained constant. But at last the river became narrower and more shallow. Jean grabbed Marburg's arm and pointed toward the right bank.

"Look!"

Marburg thought that he saw the figure of a tall man beckoning to them. He lifted the sword and, using it as a clumsy oar, paddled toward the bank. Jean stroked frantically with the cupped palms of his hands. As they approached the bank, the figure, which had appeared to be standing at the water's edge, grew fainter and fainter. When they reached the shore no one was there.

They dragged the boat ashore. As soon as it touched the sand, it became a shield again. There was nothing to do but start off across the sand and hope to discover where the figure had come from. They could still determine no source for the light that filled the cave, if cave it was. Above them stretched only the rough rock, higher than any castle tower could have reached. They made slow progress across the shifting face of the sand. There was no sign of life, no smallest bush or blade of grass. Neither was there any natural landmark by which they could plot their course or estimate the distance they had covered. Finally, they could go on no longer. They fell, two alien heaps marring the virgin sand that seemed to have no beginning and no end.

After a timeless period which might have been sleep or death, Marburg was awakened by a faint whisper of sound that he thought to be wind, although they had felt none for as long as they had been here. Looking in a direction that might have been north, he saw a

huge black funnel of air speeding across the sand and whirling it up in great billows. He shook Jean, who was still sleeping.

"Run, run! We are in its path."

"What? What is it?" Jean stared about wildly.

"Run!" screamed Marburg.

They ran as hard as they could, Jean still staggering with sleep and only half aware of what was going on. The funnel seemed to anticipate each turn they made. It gained steadily. They felt the sand cutting their faces, slowing their feet. The funnel was close and then it was upon them.

"Help me!" howled Jean.

Marburg whirled and saw Jean lifted above his head. He threw himself upward, clutching the flapping edge of Jean's cloak. He held on. For an instant the funnel carried them both. Then the cloth tore and Marburg was flung back to the ground. As he fell, he could hear Jean's last calls for help. He lay there watching as the funnel turned back and dwindled into the north, or what might have been north, and then he was slone.

HE SAT on the sand for a long time, trying to understand what had happened to him and to Jean. He looked around him and could see nothing but the sand. He examined the shield and the sword, but they held no clues that he could discover. Twice they had been saved by these, why not this time? There was no answer. At last he rose to his feet and began to walk in the direction the funnel had taken Jean. After a short distance he found a piece of Jean's cloak lying like some crushed bird in the sand.

Marburg trudged on, stopping sometimes to sleep, but always moving in the direction taken by the funnel. It seemed to him that days passed, but because there was never any night, he could not tell how long he walked. A wind blew constantly into his face as if to push him back, but though it retarded his progress, it made his direction easy to follow. After a while he stopped looking either forward or upward since each step took him to a spot exactly like the one he had just left. He stumbled forward hypnotically.

Finally, he was aroused to an awareness of his surroundings by the realization that he was extremely cold. Looking down, he found that he was no longer walking through sand but through drifts of

powdery snow. The desert had become a desert of ice. Then ahead, like an oasis, he saw a grape arbor, but running to it, he found that it was frozen, each grape and leaf a perfect sculpture of ice. Passing through the arbor, he found himself in an ice forest.

Every leaf was covered with a thin film of clear ice. In the branches of the trees he could see an occasional bird, frozen for all time with its beak open in silent song. Once he thought he saw a hare jumping a log, but approaching it he discovered that it too was frozen, balanced perfectly a few inches above the snow-covered log on a thin pillar of ice. He went on, his clothes stiffening upon him. He tried to throw the shield and sword away, but they were frozen to his hands. His eyelashes clung together and he could barely see. The hairs of his mustache and beard were tiny threads of ice.

He knew that soon he too would become a part of the forest. Still, he was determined to go on as long as he was able. Ahead he thought he saw three men huddled together, one with a cowl pulled far down on his face. He hurried forward, but when he came close he found only three frozen bushes.

Marburg feared that the forest would stretch as far as the desert had. The trees stood closer together now. Some passages were so narrow that he had to crouch down and push his way between the branches. Most were so brittle they broke off easily. He saw no more frozen animals. Nothing was in sight but the trees and a suggestion of a path.

Then, as gently as the trees had moved together, they began to move apart. Marburg found himself standing at the mouth of a cave. On each side of the opening was an ice sculpture of a woman holding a basket of fruit and flowers. The women were old and shrunken. He entered the cave and found a banquet table of frozen meats and vegetables. There was also a silver goblet filled with wine, but unlike the rest of the feast, it was not of ice. He sucked the wine greedily through his frost-bitten lips. He felt the warming draught coursing into his stomach, and then he felt himself falling to the icy floor. It felt like spring grass. He slept.

And slept.

When he awoke he was lying in a field. Golden butterflies floated around him. He could hear birds calling each other. Above him was blue sky. The sun warmed his face. He stood up and searched for his

sword and shield but could find them nowhere. Looking around, he saw a small hill on which a single May-tree grew. Behind the hill was a grove of pines.

Beneath the tree sat an old man, and standing beside him was a young girl. Marburg walked slowly toward them, afraid to run, afraid they might disappear. As he drew closer, he saw that the man was not so old, and the girl, who wore a dress of plaited iris, was not that young. The face of the man drew him on. Of his two sockets, only one held an eye, a singularly piercing eye.

"Jean," he called. "Jean, Jean!"

The man spoke. "I am Jean and I am not Jean. I am the Defender and the Attacker, the Void and the All."

"I don't understand," said Marburg.

"You have done well," said the girl.

"What have I done? Who are you?"

"I am the Virgin and the Mother. I am the Vehicle."

"I don't understand," creid Marburg.

"The only constant is change," said a voice to his left.

Marburg turned and saw the relic seller standing beside him.

"Cause and effect," the seller said.

"I don't understand," moaned Marburg. "If you are the Defender, then my journey is over, but what was its purpose?"

"It is finished and just beginning," said the old man. "What is the purpose of any journey?"

"Who *are* you?"

"I am your friend and your enemy. I am the Reason."

"I am your wife and your mother," said the girl.

"I don't understand," said Marburg.

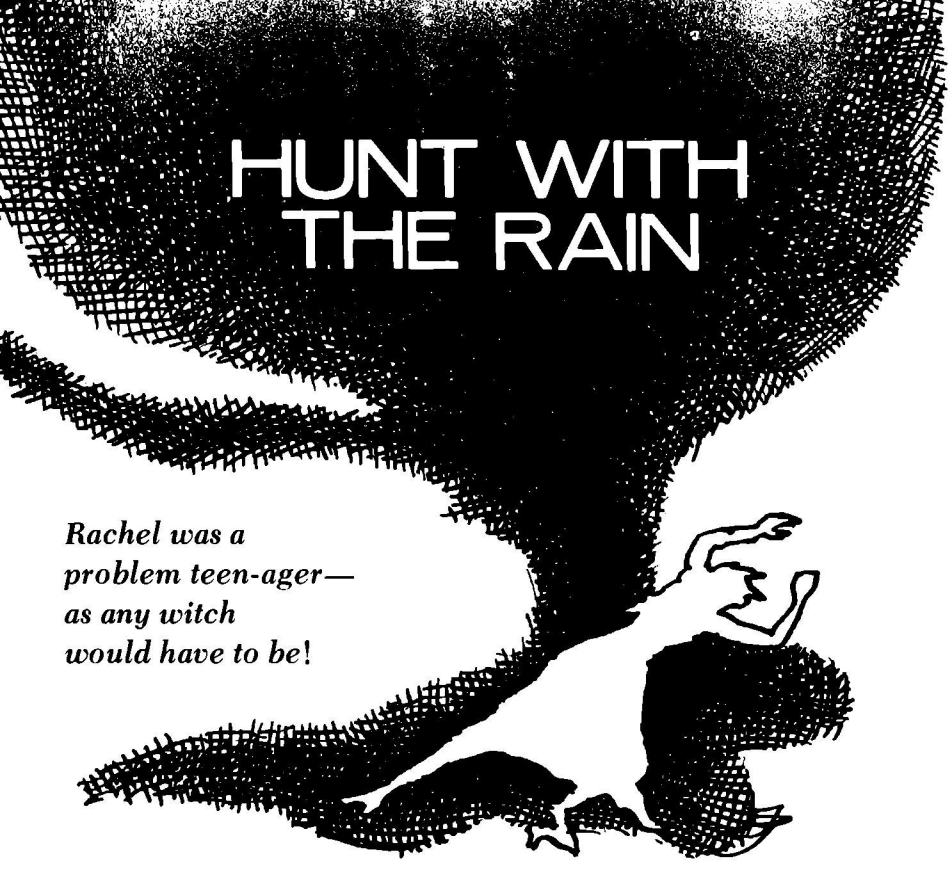
"What goes up must come down. If one dreams of a wheel, is he not turned?" said the relic seller rhetorically as Marburg sank to the ground in a dead faint.

When he awoke he found stars forming a glittering dome over his head. He lay staring at them for a while, looking for patterns in the random drifts. Then he rose and saw a horse bridled in green and blue standing near him. He walked toward it. Belted to the saddle was a heavy sword with a green tint to its metal. On its hilt was a glowing blue stone.

"Oh, no," said Marburg. □

HUNT WITH THE RAIN

Rachel was a problem teen-ager— as any witch would have to be!



S. C. BECK

WHEN I came back from the party that night neither of my parents was at home. Either the police station or one of their own parties, I supposed. I was dog-tired and well on my way toward a hangover, so I had opened the door to my room before I wondered about the light underneath it. Rain was sitting on one of the cushions in the corner, crouched like a blue-jean spider.

Now I am a steady creature and as used as mortal can be to Odd Ones and freaks. I jumped a foot when I saw Rain. The usual aura of

newly-arrived-from-Tau-Ceti was so unusually strong that I stood completely unsettled. To cover the start I babbled. "Pleasant evening for guests. I hope you knocked."

The spider, without opening her waking eyes, smiled.

"What's the matter now, Rachel?" I said sitting down. "Sudden fear of the dark?" (A stupid remark—the house she squatted in had had no electricity for at least decades.)

The spider took her hands off her knees, straightened her legs and turned into a fifteen-year-old in jeans. "Margo, my dear, I thought I'd visit to say that we may be in trouble."

My first thought was of my fatigue. I was too tired then to save my own world or any other. At the time I had no idea of what trouble could be. Academically, I realized, it could be anything from a minor rupture with the solid citizenry to World Wars Three to Twenty-eight. At most, I expected the former. I tried to think what that might include, since Leslie and Lindaris, who had lived with her, had gone west somewhere. But there were too many possibilities and too few probabilities. "So what is it, Rain?"

She twisted her braid and looked more serious. "Someone has stolen a handful of the dreams, I'm not sure which ones, from Fire's old footlocker. I've known for twenty minutes or so. I really wish they were A-bombs, leave less suspense."

Lindaris extracted creatures from men's dresses and kept them in an old trunk, frozen and shrunk until she wanted them. They also had a collection of shrunken non-dream creatures that I never found out much about. Everyone has a hobby and their group taste ran to nightmares. I'd have preferred atom bombs too.

"Who do you think took them?" I asked.

"Windlord knows." I saw the worry under Rachel's nonchalance.

"Neighborhood brats?"

"Not likely. Wise kids fear Fire."

"Neighborhood vigilantes like our own old fan club?"

"You know, Margo, I begin to believe so. And I would have relied that they feared Fire, too!"

"Well, she and Leslie have been gone for a month and you've been laying low. The effect begins to wear off."

"I say we take our conclusion elsewhere. You still have your coat?" I mumbled about what do I need a coat for. "The walk to

Sealer's house, dummy." She was out the door before I had persuaded myself into following.

WALKING a fall night with Wind, Rain, or Fire (that's Leslie, Rachel, or Lindaris) is usually an occasion of playful madness. Rachel in particular liked to sing the low-flying nightbirds to swoop around our heads. That night was different. We were sober and separate, staying on the sidewalk and leaving the bats on the breeze. And it was wind, not Wind, that funneled the leaves in front of Mr. Sealer's tiny house.

We marched in. That is, Rachel marched in, my walk at the time being more of a stagger. Sealer was on the couch reading *Principia Mathematica* as is his wont at two ayem. He is thin, with red-brown eyes and hair. He once called himself a faculty advisor to a coven, which is close. His worried gulp and dropped book, at sight of us, were only slightly more than the usual understandable reflex. Rachel sat on the blue chair calmly, I stood. We simply stared at each other for a few seconds. Sealer broke the silence.

"What's the matter with you people?" Another brief wait and I could see the nervous worry under the false anger. He obviously thought he was about to be involved in some dark machination of ours (about which we knew nothing). "Is she telling the truth?"

"Back up, friend. Which she?" said Rachel conversationally.

"Mrs. Webb." Our fan club, muttered I. "She called up earlier to say that she visited you about your attendance at school or lack thereof. No one was home but there was a black box lying open in the hall filled with some kind of tablet. As a chemist and a busybody she took a couple to test in the lab. She called in case I knew anything but I thought it was her normal paranoia anyway. Tell me once, was it Fire's old trunk?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I tell three times and it's true, sadly enough. She may be delirious, psychotic and other things, but she has some of my toys and that makes me mad. When did she say she took them?"

"Maybe five hours ago," he said.

Rachel chewed her brown braid. I could hear her muttering, "Hour, or less, the whole town knows which ones they are and how! . . . no place here, no time for that now . . ." Another reflec-

tive chomp. She shook her head and stood brusquely. "Look, you two, I don't see any pressing reason to save the old bitch as such, but if we wait till the Toys revive we'll never get them back." Notice the we. "O dearest Sealer. Where are they now?"

"She's in the school's new lab."

"At this witching hour?"

"Really, Rachel, even Mrs. Webb would hardly advertise her own breaking and entering."

Rachel calmly picked up Sealer's coat from the footstool and tossed it at him. I quiver-quavered, "Hey, what if she's called the police or someone over this?"

"See the last comment, Margo," hummed Rachel, looking satisfied. Outside the house the cold wind whirled.

RACHEL walked ahead, hands in her pockets, head up and the moon going down. Sealer and I stayed behind to accomodate our fatigued feet and to escape Rachel's purple eyes. I could see she was thinking of Leslie and Lindaris, and she seemed all rain and no Rachel, as the other two had—all wind and fire, that is—before they had danced by the river and left for New Mexico.

The walk was short. After all these years I have a very calm acceptance machine. Anyway, we were tired, and we were on the corner of the street that the Denrich Model High School stands on before I began to unfreeze my tongue. Sealer is no conversationalist either and us scared, nervous clay-people were silent until we reached the far end of the science wing. Then our mad mathematician babbled as I had forty-five minutes ago.

"Seems a ridiculous situation to grow out of a piece of litmus paper, Rachel."

"Watch your tongue, sir," said she pleasantly. "That litmus paper is one of my happiest memories of this place."

Six months ago Rachel and Leslie had been a little too much on one of their biweekly visits to Sealer's math class. (Their nod in the direction of compulsory attendance laws.) They had been politely yanked into Mrs. Webb's Chem Lab IV, whereupon the litmus paper had started showing purple-and-orange stripes in acid. The class had adjourned before anyone had thought to try alkali. A pity: Wind has such a good color sense . . . and that deliciously disrup-

tive class had intensified the natural small town distrust until we three stood outside the steel and glass wheel of the school, cursing the wind into the wind.

We returned to the present and began action on tactics. The high school has spokes radiating from a center bole. Mr. Sealer, who should know the school, moved up to stalk with Rain. They had apparently agreed that Mrs. Webb would be in the beautiful new chemistry lab, for they stopped without hesitation at that line of windows and craned in. I thought as I came up beside them that the two were wrong because the light in that room was darker, more night-light pink, than even the lit unoccupied rooms.

We all stared, twisting our necks to see the main experimental table by the far wall. Elaborate tax-supported equipment lay scattered about in anger or play. There were strange scrape marks on floor, table and wall but no sign of captured dreams, quick frozen chimeras or people. Which did not make me feel any better. They were definitely on the loose now.

Rain muttered something, I'll never know what, and ran for the entrance two doors down toward the bole. We followed, cold sweat, fatigue and all. We scuttled through the door where the wing joins the cafeteria.

"Stop, I think I hear it," she whispered, and we listened to a slow, loud scrape from down the hallway. The sound seemed to be advancing.

"Can you tell which one it is?" whispered Sealer.

"The dreams are not my end of it."

"Let's at least get into the cafeteria light," urges Meek Margo.

This next sequence took three seconds. Rain stepped in the half-light of the corridor, hesitantly turned to the cafeteria doors. More scraping, and I braced myself to follow her.

Suddenly all three of us were pushed back by Rain's sudden stance. She leaned once more into the corridor and jumped back into our niche. "Into the darkness," she commanded. I thought that was meant to be poetry, not a reasonable suggestion. So Rain, who hates physical contact, grabbed my hair and pulled me back. "I remember which one now. There is a lonely man somewhere who dreams that creatures are swallowing the light. Get into darkness—there!"

It came down the hall into view.

Never talk to me of dreams come true. This was a huge jumble of plywood, but the pieces were rough granite gray with the look of concrete. They did not quite touch, but I won't say they floated around each other. The conglomeration—a light-eater?—stepped ponderously in the light that flowed from the cafeteria.

And then it danced. The soft yellow light was wracked, jerked, broken into thin planes and sharp angles. Slid underneath and pulled through and scraped between the rough granite slabs. It was yellow shuffled with a pack of gray in a slow whirlwind. But it wasn't yellow for long. The hungry clanker was stealing its basic power—a Toy gulping quanta. The light changed from yellow to pink to dull doppler red. To see light itself destroyed is truly unbalancing, far more than plain darkness. I thought crazily that Sealer was probably wondering how it worked. The only answer: *Don't worry, it's all a dream.*

We crouched out of the thing's range and waited, me in silent hysteria. It needed a few minutes to darken the cafeteria and lumber around the stairs to go down the other side of the science hall. Then we were in the hall running fast. We skidded panting up to the chem lab door.

The door was open and the side scraped by some rough thing passing through. Rain was just inside the door working furiously at some kind of net that she was pulling from a jeans pocket. She pointed behind the master table, too hurried to talk.

A TINY green lumpy pyramid lay on the floor, sprouting ceiling-high banners of blue and orange that waved in and out of shape and sight. Four other lumps also lay on the floor. They were shimmering, but had not revived into whatever old hallucinations they contained. Rain threw her net over the five geometries and yelled several unenglish sentences into the air. Tone and rhythm were strange, ugly and defiant but the smoke suddenly disappeared and I let go of Mr. Sealer's maltreated elbow.

The lumps lay on the floor and the three of us stood dazed with relief. *Ho-hum*, thought I, just a routine monster-hunting expedition, complete with nets, and now me for bed. I said that to myself with no sarcasm. Blame it on fatigue.

For we heard a scraping sound around the corner of the science hall. "Dark's loose in the school and all's right with the world," muttered Rachel as she flung around the door and into the hall. We followed, to skid behind Rain standing in the dull devoured light of the three farther rooms. I stared into that atrocious conglomeration and thought about a nice safe cage. I thought more longingly when Rain threw back her wild head and began to chant some strange litany. The atonality and rhythm of the running sentences were the same as the song to the lumpy pyramid-shaped tablets.

The creature silenced its clanking and the light it was yanking out of Hanket's physics room began to flow back into yellow. But the Toy didn't shrink, burst or condense. It just stopped there, listening like a critic. The thought hit Sealer and me—is Rain's touch as sure as Fire's was?

The element Rain, with no mocking Rachel left, chanted louder. The voice twisted like a poison smoke and tore at my mind. She was far from the clay then, and ignoring Sealer and me. She fought down the Toy in a completely different world with different weapons. The modal voice, the harsh language and the convulsions of the Light-Eater were like distorting views into another dimension or into a madman's mind. I was freely frightened, as much of our friend Rain as our enemy of dreams. I saw them as the same, in the same world, and my last fully competent thought was an unreportable flash of the lunatic jungles of the night that are their real home.

I did not faint or anything like that. I went numb. The spectacular light coughing demise of the Toy did not touch my unfortunate cerebrum. Sealer tells me that Rachel shouted the thing into shrinkage and netted it with a silver net, like some moth-catcher. Later I thought of the old black trunk—a killing bottle. But I was busy at the time cursing my blasé years of joking camaraderie with the elements. Like shooting craps on Hecate's altar. In human pettiness, I had treated the Rachel mask like the Rain face, in spite of ever-abundant evidence to the contrary. This finally realized truth kept me at arm's length from Rain for the rest of that night and morning.

Which is a shame, because that was the last time that I saw her. Once the creatures were netted we left the school like kids running past a graveyard. There were reasons for this haste. Like the discovery, by the experimental table, of Mrs. Webb's heart-attacked

corpse. Her life had been singed by some other fire. I was going to feel sorry for her, but the other two were rushing me through the woods to the old house. Once there I went a little numb again. We tossed the tablets into the footlocker and rushed around the house like terrified keystone cops. We found massive gold jewelry and strangely still live animals and strangely vibrant books, and we stuffed them into another footlocker.

To say that I, Margo, was confused emotionally is a truly pathetic understatement. I wanted old firefly Rachel back, this rainstorm lightning out of my existence. I wanted to stay in this old house that held most of my life of the past few years. I also wanted to vomit every time I touched anything. My one determination was to forget my chase through the school and everything connected with it. Including, if necessary, my old friend Rachel H. Chana.

Mr. Sealer's thoughts must have been the same as mine. And as visible, though he wasn't talking either. When we reached the bus stop I had calmed enough to realize that this was really and truly the point of departure for the three whatever-they-weres. Not just a brief trip to the west but: Fare-thee-well, we're gone. And when I calmed down from that I noticed that Rachel's purple eye was seeing us both with irony. There was no regret for lost places and what I call lost friendships. Just an almost cynically indifferent observation of our headless-chicken antics. These assorted impressions kept my tongue from returning as we stood waiting for the out-of-town bus. It was good old Sealer who asked, "Where to now, Rachel?"

"To find Leslie and Lindaris. I think New Mexico. Tell the rest of our merrie band they'll have to make their own bombs now. I think you can manage that, O Margo?" I said naught. "And don't worry about old Miz Webb." Rain grinned. "The explosion of her experiment scarred the walls, touched the lights and hastened her unfortunate demise. Nothing to touch you."

THE bus pulled in at that moment. Rain walked to the dirty blue crate, dangling her boxes and the old black locker casually. She seemed to have forgotten Sealer and me who followed as if we were on a string. But when my voice said, "Goodbye," she turned and pressed into my hand some rough rope she took from her jeans. "To

make sure you remember, my dears." The door closed on her purple mockery.

When the hydrocarbons had cleared I stared at the rope. An incredibly complicated six-inch plait, each strand a long cluster of a different gem.

Sealer gazed at me and I gazed at Sealer.

"You look as though you have a fever, Margo."

"So do you."

We were both right.

The two of us were sick for three days. Somehow we never had to explain the wreckage to the school or my absence to my parents. All we had to do was hash, rehash and mangle the story with Barb, Greg, Janice, Mac and the rest of our Mad Scientists Club, until their sharp feelings were worn down. They miss our "friends" now. They miss what they saw—Leslie's good humor, Lindaris' dangerous beauty, Rachel's cynical all-seeingness. They feel that fine playmates have gone.

Sealer and I leave them their feelings.

We two have been moving away from the others for this last lonely year. If my friends say I have lost my old flippancy, and Sealer's colleagues say that he is now half a mystic, they are probably right. I see the deep changes in us, I recognize our strange growth and I know that it is continuing and increasing. We are set apart from the rest, but each still afraid to look too closely at the other. We know what we may find. Still, we are driven in on each other. Student and teacher make no difference—we're birds of a feather.

We saw and know more than the others, we think differently. Our lives were touched too much by that last night-and-sight. We are sick now, a disease of opening eyes, and we examine our illness silently whenever we meet. We have become a little off, a little closer to the vagabonds themselves. We teach and study, we laugh with the others and we know our disease is incurable. We can only be healed by a feel of the clouds that form when times are changing, or by the song of the Windlord, or by a breath of the untouched airs. But the universe is too big for the wanderers to stop here twice, and no one else will ever know their remedies and touches. So we sit at the window now, and watch the dark that they will nevermore come whirling through. □

PTOLEMAIC HIJACK

Find an egg in a bird in a fox under a stone—and your way to a wizard's heart!

RUTH BERMAN

FLY *the friendly skies.* "Yes, sir, it is a little rough today. No, sir, the pilot can't correct it. Oh no, sir, it's quite safe, or we wouldn't have taken off." Push the cart three steps and keep flying the friendlies. "I'm sorry, we only have chicken sandwiches or beef sandwiches today. Would you like one of those? Well, would you like a soft drink or a— Yes, I can bring you some water. I'll be just a moment." The next several rows were a relief, filled with taciturn individuals who said only yes or no to the cart and pointed at what they wanted. Naomi reached the back of the plane, sighed with relief and filled a plastic glass with ice and water for 17A. Unfortunately, as she started to hand 17A the water, 17C wanted her to open the vent above him because 17B's cigarette smoke bothered him, and the plane chose the same moment to hit an airpocket.

17B and his cigarette got the water.

Apologies, removal of ice cubes, and a fresh glass of water later, Naomi muttered, "Fly the friendly skies," and headed for the cockpit to cool off in relative privacy. If she was quiet about it, she wouldn't be disturbing the pilots.

She thought she'd managed to enter without a sound, or at least, not any that mattered over the noise of the jets, but Warren spotted reflections on assorted dials. He swiveled around and the captain frowned at him. Warren swiveled back again without losing a beat, smooth as a cradle rocking.

" 'Lo, sweetheart," he said out the front to the Pleiades. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

"Oh, knock it off, Warren," she said.

Warren hesitated and the captain cut in, "Sorry to throw you back to the lions, but think you could go find us some coffee?"

"Sure, Allen." The door opened as she reached it, and she just missed collision.

"Oops! sorry. Problems?" said the senior stewardess.

"Hi, Carol. No, I . . . " Naomi began. " . . . huh?" she finished.

The two women stood and the pilots sat sprawled in the middle of a stone room.

"Be damned, it's a dungeon!" said Warren. He scrambled up, rubbing his seat.

"That's ridiculous," said Naomi.

"I'm . . . not so sure," said Carol. She pointed at the room's single door. It was barred.

"I am having a small stroke," said Allen. "With delusions. Fortunately, Warren, in reality you're still on the plane and you'll bring her in safely. I'll have to be grounded." He closed his eyes and gave his head a single quick shake. He opened his eyes and stood up.

"I'll go along with that," said Warren, "but I'm the one who's delirious."

"No," said a new voice sleepily, "you must have fallen over a border. Who are you?"

A figure rolled out of the shadows of one corner of the room, stood up and stretched vigorously. He was a young man, dressed in green doublet and hose with a long brown cloak.

Friendly skies. Naomi said, "I'm Naomi Steiner and this is Carol Pollerd. And Captain Allen Gardner and copilot Warren Lefkowitz."

"Your servant," said the stranger, bowing politely to the women. "I'm Bvalir from the Wood Beyond."

"Beyond what?" said Allen in a charge-taking voice.

Bvalir grinned. "Oh, you're from one of those real worlds. I know about those," he said. "I hoped you'd come to rescue me. As it is—well, perhaps I can rescue you."

"Where are we?" asked Allen.

"In a dungeon. Beyond that I don't know." Bvalir looked around.

The dungeon was lit by torches stuck in the walls, burning with a clear, smokeless, yellow/orange flame. The walls themselves were

covered crazy-quilt fashion with bits of murals: here a tournament was portrayed in part, there an orgy loomed, or a hunt or a dance of satyrs. Dozens of bright-colored boats sailed the gray stone rivers separating the fragmented scenes.

Bvalir wandered to the wall that held the door and stared at an orgy above the lintel.

"There's a more imaginative one to your left in the top corner," Warren said.

Naomi shot a disgusted look at him. He shrugged and turned away.

"No," said Bvalir, "my interest is literary." He pointed at a neat inscription covering a fat man's rear. The others joined him in trying to decipher it, but it was upside-down and made them dizzy. Bvalir glinked, rubbed his forehead, and rose carefully into the air, cartwheeling as he went, until he stood with his feet planted on the ceiling, cloak spreading beneath him like a thundercloud. After a few moments he flipped over and dropped to the floor, where he stood with a bemused expression.

"Well?" said Allen.

"Well, it's a dirty limerick."

WARREN snorted.

"However," Bvalir said more cheerfully, "the first line seems pretty irrelevant, except that it rhymes, of course. I think it may be a spell to open the door: 'elf's, man's, or neither's kiss.' " He opened his mouth as if to go on with the rest of the verse, then glanced at the women and turned the sound into a cough. He turned to Naomi, who was closer, and said, "May I kiss you?"

"I don't understand," she said.

"A spell. To unlock the door," he said, as if that was a full explanation.

He seemed quite serious and the others looked almost convinced, so she said, "All right."

He kissed her lips gently, ran to the door and shoved at it. It moved about half an inch and thumped on its lock. Bvalir rubbed his bruised arm ruefully.

"Not very successful," said Warren.

"No," said Bvalir, apparently not at all upset. "Would one of you humans care to try?"

"Are you serious about this?" said Allen.

"Of course." Bvalir looked at the skeptical faces and laughed. "Magic is real here. It's quite an ordinary sort of spell. Don't worry about it."

"All right." Allen embraced Naomi and kissed her firmly.

"Perfectionist," muttered Warren.

Naomi curtseyed when released. It seemed the right thing to do in their surroundings.

"Still locked," Bvalir announced, after trying the door more cautiously. "I guess we're stuck. We don't have any elves around."

"Oh? What are you?" said Carol.

"Me? Well, I suppose it depends on the definition. I was thinking of those little green and yellow things that sit on buttercups. But that would still leave us needing someone neither elf nor man."

Warren snickered.

The others looked blank, but Bvalir brightened. "Yes," he said to Warren, "I expect you're right." He turned to Carol. "Will you try, Carol Pollerd?" he asked.

"What?" said Allen, staring at him.

Warren stared at his feet.

The two women stared at each other.

Bvalir considered each gaze carefully. "Why, will it turn you into pumpkins or something?"

Naomi suddenly realized that Bvalir meant the questions seriously. She could not help smiling. "No," she said.

Carol shrugged and gave her a hastily formal peck.

The door swung outward the hall with a massive crrrroak!

They all jumped.

"It's open," said Bvalir unnecessarily. "Come on."

He charged out and the others followed.

"Don't I get a turn?" called Warren, skittering through the door.

Naomi lost a stride and almost stumbled.

Carol glared at him and whispered, "Lay off," as well as she could between paces.

Seeing was difficult. The corridor was lit by long rows of small blue lights set in the floor. They gave only dim light. The inverted

shadows they cast were distortions. The faces of the group became those of monsters.

At the end of the corridor they pulled to a halt and stood panting. Three narrower corridors branched off. They hesitated, uncertain which way to go. Bvalir peered down each one, snuffing the chilly air. At this point in their passage, the five in a cluster by a cage on one side and a rolltop desk on the other. The cage held a stinking creature something like a small dragon as far as they could tell. Although the thing was asleep, they drew away from it and pressed against the desk.

The surface of the desk was hidden by clumps of massive books, three jars of herbs, a row of quill pens in a stand, a parchment half-filled with a flowing, curlicued script, a plaster bust, three moonstones, two ivory tusks and an inkwell full of a golden liquid that gave off light. Though not enough to see by, the light was sharp and distinct, a relief after the shadowy blues. The parchment too shone gold. A little pool of light was gathering on a wooly blotter beneath the pens.

Warren leaned closer to the desk and looked at the parchment. "Still wet," he said. "I wonder . . ."

He reached for the parchment, but Bvalir whirled back so swiftly that he collided with Naomi. He caught Warren's arm. "Carefully!"

"Master! Master!" yelled the plaster bust. Its voice was high and echoed thinly down the corridors.

Bvalir hissed in breath and looked quickly at Warren and Naomi. "Are you all right, Naomi Steiner?"

"Yes," she said, letting go of her wrist. "One of those pens pricked me, that's all."

A screaming and clattering rose in the distance from the middle corridor. The thing in the cage snored and sighed and made a whistling sound like a teakettle boiling. Bvalir rubbed his mouth, sighed and plunged headlong down the right-hand corridor. The others followed him to a flight of winding stairs.

There were no bannisters and the stairs were steep, so they climbed on all fours. A light flickered at the top of the stairs, appearing and disappearing as they circled up.

It seemed two flights before they reached another floor. Bvalir

ran at random to the left. Allen grabbed him and tugged him to a halt. The others could not stop in time, and they all fell sprawling in a tangle to the floor.

"Look!" said Allen, trying to pull an arm free to point with.

"What?" said Bvalir. "Oh!"

What they saw was daylight, shining through a small dirty window high in the wall. Warren looked at it dubiously, estimating his reach against its height.

Bvalir jerked himself out of the muddle and jumped into the air to tug at the window. It stuck fast.

"SMASH it," ordered Allen, scrambling up.

Bvalir nodded, wrapped his arm in his cloak and swung. Fresh light streamed in, blinding them momentarily.

Warren cupped his hands together to offer the women a lift.

"No need," said Bvalir. He dropped to the floor, sprang up past the window, carrying Naomi with him. She shivered, partly from the rush of cool air, partly because of the howls of something coming upstairs after them. Bvalir shoved her out the window. She fell heavily to the ground outside and stood motionless until Carol landed in front of her.

The near-miss roused Naomi. She jerked Carol out of the way of Warren's descending feet. Allen landed next, but Bvalir, dropping after him, hung choking a foot above the ground, his cloak caught securely in a large blue hand.

The two men tugged the cloak free and Bvalir fell to his knees. They dragged him up again. The group pelted across a garden of heavy-scented red-and-orange flowers and a lawn of yellowed grass, uphill through a sparse wood and downhill to a narrow dusty road.

Warren turned back and tried to peer through the trees. "Are they still coming?"

"I don't hear anything," said Bvalir. "Want to take the road? We can make better time on it although there's the risk they'll follow us."

Allen glanced at the others and answered for them. "Let's go." He set off at a brisk walking pace, whistling *Stars and Stripes* for their bedraggled parade.

Bvalir let the others go ahead so that he could guard the rear.

Naomi began to lag behind after a few yards. Bvalir, with a courtly bow, offered her his arm.

Warren, nervously glancing around for signs of pursuit, frowned at the archaic courtesy and dropped back a few paces. He touched Naomi's wrist and she stiffened. "Does that hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, my arm just feels cold," she said. Her voice was also cold.

"My fault, too," Bvalir interrupted. "Or no one's fault, really. A wizard's castle simply is dangerous. You wouldn't run into poison-ink anywhere else I know of."

"Oh," said Warren blankly. He pulled ahead again.

Carol looked around. "Shouldn't we lance the cut?" she said, remembering lessons in first aid.

"We'd better find a stream first," said Warren. He still sounded concerned. Naomi stared at his back as if trying to read an expression on it.

Allen stopped abruptly. "I think I hear a stream over there," he said, pointing off the road in a direction away from the castle. The wood on that side was clogged with underbrush, so he and Warren had to push a way clear for the others. A few yards off the road they came to the stream so suddenly that, pushing at growth that suddenly wasn't there, both fell in.

Naomi couldn't help giggling.

Warren glared and splashed across the stream. It was shallow and came only to his waist at its deepest. Allen followed.

Bvalir flew the women across. He helped Naomi to seat herself in the long grass on the sloping bank, flew back for Carol and remarked to Warren as he landed, "Cheer up—now they won't be able to track us."

"Great," said Warren, brushing twigs out of his clothes. "And now what?"

"Well," said Bvalir, "with all that noisy underbrush, we'll be able to hear them and get away before they come in sight, if they manage to track us this far. So we're safe here awhile. See if you can cut a bandage out of my cloak. About so wide." He held his hands apart to the width, then shouldered open his cloak, revealing a sword at his belt. He drew the sword from its sheath and handed it hilt first to Warren. The pilot took it differently. Bvalir turned away

while Warren poked and sawed a strip from the bottom of the cloak.

"Just about finished." Warren dropped the sword and ripped off the rest of the strip.

Bvalir turned around and picked up his sword. He glaned at the bandage. "Fine," he said. But he raised his eyebrows, as he closed his cloak in front, at sight of the raggedy border.

"Sorry," said Warren.

Bvalir shrugged. "Kneel by the stream," he told Naomi. "I'm afraid this will hurt.

She managed a smile. "You have the line wrong. It's now-this-will-only-hurt-a-little-bit."

She knelt. Bvalir struggled with his sword for a few moments, trying to hold it near the point so that he could keep his strokes short and shallow. Finally he propped the hilt against his shoulder and wrapped a handful of cloak around the blade where he wanted to hold it. He knelt, facing Naomi.

She gasped as he slashed across the little cut. Tears came slowly to her eyes and fell out one by one as Bvalir pushed her into a crouch and held her arm in the water, forcing the blood to flow freely.

Warren waited holding the cloth strip with both hands, looking as awkward as a man helping wind yard. "Can't you hurry?" he asked.

Bvalir bathed the wound and guided the arm out of water. Warren promptly bandaged the wrist.

"Very neat," said Naomi.

Warren darted a sidelong glance at her, not sure whether she was complimenting or mocking him. "Thank the doctor," he said lightly.

"Thank you, Doctor," she told Bvalir obediently.

CAROL cut in, "You'd better lie down." She and Allen helped Naomi to dryer ground, urged her to rest in the long grass.

Warren sat down and touched Naomi's injured arm. The skin was cool from contact with water. He could not tell if it was still cold from the poison. Naomi had closed her eyes. His touch did not seem to hurt her.

"Bvalir," said Allen, stammering a little on the odd initial consonants, "are we heading blind? You have some idea what you're doing, don't you?"

"Some," Bvalir agreed, sitting down with his back propped against an elm. "The first thing, obviously, is to move well away from that castle. After that we start looking for a friendly wonder-worker who can send us back where we belong or at least put me in touch with my own people." He leaned farther back and stared into the branches, as if checking the squirrels for magic powers. "The fellow who owns the castle is a wizard," he added dreamily. "Not friendly, I'm sorry to say."

"What did you do—why were you put in the dungeon?" Carol asked.

"No reason I know of. I got lost during a dragon hunt and went looking for shelter. Found a castle—asked if I could stay the night. The next thing I know: dungeon." He rubbed his back against the bark. "I think she's asleep, Warren Lefkowitz," he said. "Let her rest awhile, and we can go on again."

"Will she be all right then?" said Warren.

"I think so," said Bvalir. "Do not be anxious."

They sat quietly, close to dozing in the sunlight on the warm grass.

A quarter of an hour later they heard a noise compounded of clip and jingle. Naomi woke, looking bewildered. Warren helped her to her feet. The others also rose. Bvalir started to reach for his sword, then reconsidered and simply waited.

The sound grew louder. Soon its source appeared, a knight guiding his horse at a careful walking pace along the strip of bank between water and wood. The knight was in full plate armor, neatly jointed.

"Friend of yours?" said Allen.

Bvalir inspected the knight's shield. "Azure, a sphere argent," he murmured. "No, I don't know him."

The knight pushed up the beaver of his helmet with one hand and lowered his lance with the other. The face he revealed was fair and solemly handsome.

"Good day, sir knight," Bvalir said courteously.

"Good day. Have these Paynims captured you?"

Bvalir looked behind him for a moment in bewilderment, then composed his face before turning to the knight again. "My companions are not Paynims."

"I pray your pardons." The knight raised his lance and set it back

in its holder. "I have ridden far today and my heart is burdened. I did not understand that the—the men and women of this land might dress so strangely." He kept his glance away from the women's legs, which were not much covered by their trim uniform miniskirts.

"Then you are not a native to this country, sir?" said Bvalir as the knight dismounted.

"No." The knight bowed to them. "I am Sir Adamantus of Tanaquil's court."

Bvalir returned the bow and introduced the others and himself, tacking knighthoods to the two men.

A FEW moments of embarrassed silence followed. Adamantus looked uncomfortable, as if wishing they would all go away. At last he said cautiously, "You are near an enchanter's castle. 'Tis dangerous ground."

"Yes, we just escaped from it," said Allen.

"Truly?" said Adamantus eagerly. "Then I need not hide my purpose. Now let me see . . . the third oak, the wisewoman said, the second elm and the fifth stone. Here is the second elm." He pointed a hand accusingly at the tree Bvalir had sat beside, and turned to the stream. "One . . . two . . . " He stopped and wrinkled his eyebrows. "Think you a pebble is a stone?"

"Yes," said Warren.

"No," said Bvalir, "not in casting spells."

"I am no sorcerer!" Sir Adamantus exclaimed defensively.

"I can see that," said Bvalir, with a faint overtone of irony. "Yet something of sorcery concerns you."

Adamantus nodded unhappily and finished his count. He drew his sword and took as deep a breath as his armor allowed, then stooped and rolled aside the fifth stone at the stream's edge. A fox sprang out of the hold. The sword flashed blue in the sunlight and chopped off its head. A duck flew squawking out of the bloodless carcass. Adamantus grabbed it and wrung its neck. An egg dropped out. Adamantus snatched the egg, forced to lean so far out that he would have toppled into the stream if the two pilots had not grabbed him.

"Thank you, sirs," he said, straightening himself ponderously. He set both hands together, enclosing the egg securely. "Now I hold the

enchanter's heart and he must do my will—if I can get to him."

"Oh?" said Bvalir. "May we know what you will?"

"I seek my love, the lady Constance, stolen from me by Allattis, the daughter of the giants who ruled before men were. She hates the new days and the new beauties . . . and Constance is most lovely. It is my hope that this same enchanter can find where she is hidden."

"He may try to deceive you," said Bvalir thoughtfully.

Adamantus squared his shoulders, clanking slightly in his armor. "I hold his heart. And I will be wary. I know well that the essence of magic is deceit. So say all men—for what is magic, when all's said, but the shifting of appearances and the changing of true substance to false?" He sighed. "My lady always hated magic."

"She'll have to put up with it just this once," suggested Warren, "if it's the only way you can rescue her." He was embarrassed to discover the knight turning pale at the mild joke.

"How shall I face my lady?" Adamantus looked with horror at the egg in his hands. He went to his horse and fumbled in his saddlebag with one hand until he managed to pull out a sort of canvas sack, which he proceeded to draw over his shield.

Warren found himself for once at a loss for words. He looked helplessly at the others.

"What are you doing, sir?" Naomi asked, stepping up to Adamantus.

"I cannot bear my lady's moon, the emblem of constancy, on my shield while the taint of magic is upon me."

"I thought the moon symbolized inconstancy," Carol whispered.

"Depends on your philosophy," Bvalir said softly. "His must be neo-Platonic."

Warren straightened in the pride of his imaginary knighthood, and preventing Adamantus' hand from fastening the shield-cover. "Sir," he said, "You may be mistaken." He pulled the cover off. "Behold your moon—always in the full on your shield. But in the unchanging heavens she waxes and wanes in her appointed course. Perhaps the changes of magic, rightly used, can be as faithful?" He glared at Bvalir, who was grinning at the sophistry.

"Perhaps," said Adamantus uncertainly.

Bvalir put on an earnest face and said, "You have lost your love, Sir Adamantus, and we have lost our way. If we help you win

through to the enchanter, will you ask him to call my people?"

"Yes," said Adamantus. He repeated, with more conviction, "Yes—and gladly. Indeed, it puzzled me much to consider how I should pass the enchanter's guards and protect myself without losing the egg. If I must do this thing, I were a fool to do it without good hope of success. Sirs," he said to the pilots, "will you borrow swords of me? I see yours are lost."

Allen and Warren looked at each other. "We should be honored," said Allen. He took Adamantus' sword and the belt to hold it. Warren took the second best sword from the saddlebag. Feeling foolish, he tried to find some way of holding it without tripping at the first step.

"Ladies, will you please to ride?" Adamantus asked.

"Thank you," Naomi and Carol said. They started uncertainly towards the horse. Bvalir unobtrusively steered them to the left and helped them mount.

They followed the stream to a road which in turn led them back to the path they had used before. They took the path, cut through the wood up the hill and crossed the wizard's garden.

Carol pulled herself up by the sill and peered in at the window, not to cut herself on the shards of glass around the edges. "It's all—" she began. She stopped, remembering how Bvalir had hovered in air to read the inscription. She craned her neck for a thorough inspection upward before leaning from the horse to tell the others, "—all clear."

"Go ahead," said Bvalir. "We'll follow."

The horse whickered softly in protest as first Carol and then Naomi stood on the saddle to scramble through the window, but Adamantus stroked the animal and held it steady. The others in turn climbed the horse and entered the castle, Adamantus last.

Something small appeared on their right. It squeaked and dashed gibbering around a corner before they could clearly see. Bvalir looked at the two pilots and drew his sword. They also drew and moved beside him, walking ahead of the others. The group started toward the corner.

Adamantus forgot he had no sword. He started to join the other men. Carol, after wasting a moment trying to tap an armored shoulder, tugged him back. He gritted his teeth in frustration and

muttered, "Sorcery!" like a curse, glaring at the egg in his hands.

They reached the corner, turned it and stopped. Two large blue trolls stood blocking their way with drawn swords.

"*En garde*!" yelled Warren in memory of many movies. He leaped forward, wondering if he looked like a hero or a fool.

MORE like a villain, he decided, as he discovered that he and Allen were fighting two-to-one against one troll. He tried feinting to the right, to let Allen thrust on the right. The troll ignored him and parried Allen's stroke. Warren swung, trying to score while the troll was balanced toward Allen, but the blade was too heavy for a flashing-rapier effect. The troll recovered and blocked him.

Allen thrust again. He could see from the corner of his eye that Bvalir, his cloak whirled around his left arm as a shield, was driving the other troll slowly back. The idea looked like a good one, but the pilots had no shields. Warren held himself sideways, trying to present as little of himself as possible as a target to the troll. His thighs ached with the unaccustomed strain of moving crabwise, but at last the troll slowly retreated before the pilots.

There was a door at the end of the hall. As they drove the trolls back, it suddenly occurred to Warren that reinforcements might come out of it. At the thought he lost the rhythm of the strokes and stumbled. The troll's sword jabbed his forearm. He cried out at the sting and tried to thrust once more, but his heavy sword held his arm down.

The troll cringed.

Bvalir struck a beat on his troll's sword, knocking it upward. He stepped back and lowered his weapon. "You're not trying to hurt us!" he said as though betrayed.

The trolls stared at each other in consternation.

Allen looked uneasily at the trolls and sheathed the borrowed sword. He discovered that sheathing a sword takes practice.

"What trickery's here?" said Adamantus, glancing swiftly to all sides.

"Wizard!" shouted Bvalir. "What's your game?"

A tall form stepped into the doorway. "To guard myself and invite you in. If you will accept the invitation peaceably, I will dispense with the guards."

Bvalir looked at Adamantus. The knight scowled, nodded reluctantly. Bvalir stepped back to let the trolls by, at the same time shielding Adamantus.

The trolls looked miserable.

"You have done well," the wizard told them reassuringly. "But now go and rest."

They stomped down the corridor and around the corner. Their footsteps echoed all the way to the stairs. The wizard shouted after them, "Find someone to fix the window while you're at it." He stepped back into the room behind the doorway.

The travelers followed. The room they entered was warmer than the other sections they had seen of the castle. A large fire was lit against the chill of the stones. The wizard, a cadaverous man dressed in black, leaned against the mantelpiece. If he had stood upright he would have been taller than any of them, even Adamantus.

"Welcome," he said. "Will you be seated?"

Bvalir held a chair for Naomi and said, "We thank you, lord of the house."

Allen pushed another chair for Carol, brought one for himself and sat down. The chairs were light but when he was seated he felt himself sinking into deep, warm fabric. He said meditatively, "Maybe you're not such a wicked wizard after all."

"Wicked," the wizard repeated. "That is a curious word you humans use."

"Not just humans," interrupted Bvalir.

The wizard paid no attention. "As I understand it," he went on, "it describes one who puts his own interests above those of others. Yes, of course I am wicked. However, I find it to my interest to grant your wishes."

"You must, vile enchanter, for I hold your heart."

"Yes, Sir Adamantus, precisely. My name, by the way, is Threngil. I prefer it to 'lord of the house' or . . other titles."

When all the other guests were already seated, Adamantus still shook his head and looked suspiciously at the chair. Finally he sat down. Threngil arched his back against the fire's warmth, and also drew up a chair. He looked at the group carefully, staring longest at Warren and Naomi.

"Your wounds should be seen to," he said. He held out his hands

to the ceiling. A quantity of white bandages fell into his grasp.

Naomi shrank involuntarily. The wizard smiled bitterly and tossed the bandages to Bvalir, who took them, bound Warren's arm and put a fresh bandage on Naomi's wrist.

"Remember to change them when you return to your . . . " Threngil hesitated at the unfamiliar word " . . . airplane. They will turn back into cobwebs."

Adamantus leaned forward impatiently.

"Would you like some food and drink?" Threngil said imperturbably.

Adamantus figeted, but did not object aloud to the hospitable delay.

"WE WOULD, thank you," said Bvalir.

Threngil clapped his hands and told the goblin who ran to the door to bring wine, fruit and meat. "You are quite correct, Sir Adamantus," he remarked. "I enjoy making you wait. But, my pleasure aside, your companions must indeed be hungry. Bvalir for example has eaten nothing for some twelve hours. You must forgive me," he added to Bvalir, "but I expected Sir Adamantus to arrive this morning. When he did not, in my anxiety I forgot about you."

"You expected me?" said the knight.

"Certainly," said the wizard. "What kept you?"

"An old man was trying to take in his harvest and his son was ill." Adamantus looked embarrassed. "It is not work fit for a knight but they needed help sorely."

"You mortals have such inconsistent ideals," said Threngil. "I sometimes wonder how you ever disentangle them. However, you are here now. My intention, you see, was to send my servants to capture you before you reached the stream."

"But how did you know I was—"

"It is not that easy to sneak up on a wizard's heart. I had . . . a feeling. And I have tools." Threngil nodded at a crystal ball on the mantelpiece. "As it turned out, Bvalir occupied the dungeon meant for you. And as I inadvertently made it possible for him to escape—" he nodded politely at Carol and Naomi—"he did so, just when I should have sent my guards out to meet you. They spent so much time chasing him that they missed you. A pity."

"Why didn't you just move your heart to a new hiding place?" Warren asked.

"I cannot touch it. That is the penalty for security. I could have sent my servants if they were fit to be trusted, but they are not."

"Are you?" said Adamantus.

"It all depends. For example, I am perfectly trustworthy as long as you hold my heart. I would be more comfortable, I may say, if you held it a little less tightly."

Adamantus relaxed his grip and Threngil relaxed in his chair. "Thank you," he said, straightening again, "that is better. And here is your food. Excellent."

Threngil poured himself some wine, took a pear and some meat, tasted each, nodded his approval and sent the goblin to serve the others. "Nice change from coffee-tea-or-milk," Carol murmured, drawing a puzzled look from the goblin. She wondered whether Threngil was hungry or was eating to prove he wasn't trying to poison his guests.

"Now, Sir Adamantus," Threngil began, when all had been served, "my plan was originally to take you prisoner, because I thought I could not fulfill your demands. I know where Lady Constance is, but not how to go there. Allattis—although no wizard—has powers and spells of her own."

"Where?" demanded Adamantus eagerly.

"On the far side of the moon."

"That's impossible." Warren said. "She'd be dead."

"No," said Bvalir. "On the moon in your sky, yes. But this sky is probably different."

Threngil followed the interruptions with interest, and then turned again to Adamantus. "I changed my plan, however, when Bvalir arrived for I found in his mind an image he calls an airplane. Since I could not be sure of taking you prisoner, I took him prisoner and set about trying to transport an airplane here for him to fly in case you succeeded in capturing—"

"You could have asked me," Bvalir said indignantly.

"Would you have agreed?"

"Oh—probably."

"I prefer certainties. I worked through the night and indeed found an airplane. But my attempt to bring it here was, as you see, largely

unsuccessful." He gestured expansively at the four from the jet.

"Look here," said Allen, "what do you think we are, some kind of astronaut? I mean, it's one thing to hijack a plane to Cuba but you can't fly an airplane to the moon."

"Not in your sky," said Bvalir thoughtfully. "But I think in this one the ether would give your wings enough lift." He stood up and started toward the fire, saying, "May I?" over his shoulder.

Threngil nodded and Bvalir took the crystal ball off the mantelpiece. He sat down with it and began to stroke it with his left hand, never taking his fingertips off it. He crooned a spell softly over it.

A cloud of shifting colors grew in the crystal, shapeless as far as the others could see. Bvalir spoke to it happily. "Hello, Father. Yes, I'm in trouble again. No, I'd like to go to an airplane. I have four humans here who belong on it. No, six of us all together. A knight questing for his lady—just a moment." He turned to the pilots. "Where was your airplane when Threngil brought you here?"

Allen gave him latitude, longitude and altitude.

"Time add date?" Bvalir asked. Allen supplied those and Bvalir went on to the crystal, "Can you transport the airplane near the moon here? Oh, anywhere between the moon's orbit and Mercury's will do. Can you keep in touch with me through all that? Thanks."

The crystal ball went black and then brightened back to normal, reflecting only the room around them.

"Between the moon and Mercury?" said Allen dubiously.

Bvalir nodded.

"A Ptolemaic universe," said Warren, remembering some historical footnotes from his navigation course.

"A what?" said Carol.

"Where the sun and the planets go around the Earth."

"Don't they in your sky?" asked Threngil.

"Of course not," said Naomi.

"Fascinating," said Threngil.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Bvalir, standing up, "but we'll disappear in a minute."

The others rose, except Threngil.

"Thank you for your unusual hospitality," Bvalir said to the wizard. "I've enjoyed myself, I think, on the whole."

"I'm delighted to hear it," answered Threngil. "Sir Adamantus,

tell me, do you insist on dragging my heart through all the heavens or will you consider my part played and leave it behind so that I can spell it back into hiding?"

Adamantus looked at the wizard for a moment and set the egg down carefully, turning his empty wine glass over it as a shield. "Farewell, Master Threngil," he said.

"Farewell."

Bvalir looked at the egg. "Why not put it back where it belongs?"

Haze closed around them and they could not hear the wizard's answer.

THEY were standing crushed together in the tiny cockpit. The two pilots shoved their way toward their seats.

"Warren, careful," Naomi said.

In the tight surroundings he could not avoid hitting his arm on the back of the seat. He clamped his teeth to keep from crying out. A bit of wadded cobweb fell from his sleeve to the floor.

"I'll get the firstaid kit," Naomi offered.

"No, you won't," said Carol. "I will."

The plane was precisely on course. Warren took time to look over his shoulder at Naomi. "What, no hostility?"

"I don't think so."

The plane bucked and suddenly Earth was a scale model globe far beneath them. Something that looked like the moon covered half their view.

"That's . . . the far side of the Moon?" said Allen.

"Yes," said Bvalir. "Be sure you land on this side. If you tried to go around, you might break the crystal sphere."

"What crystal sphere?" said Allen.

"The one the moon is set in," Bvalir said helpfully. "All the planets are set in them. Their turning is what makes everything revolve around the Earth, you know. If you look way over—that way—you may glimpse the axle-tree."

"What axle-tree?" said Allen stubbornly.

"The one that turns the crystal spheres," said Bvalir.

"Oh." Allen gave up.

Carol reappeared with the firstaid kit and started re-bandaging.

"I hate to say this." she said, "but the passengers are quite upset."

"Urk," said Allen concisely.

To distract himself from discomfort while being bandaged, Warren inspected his instruments. He remarked, "Hey, you realize we're getting something on the radio?"

"You're kidding," said Allen.

"No. Let me tune it in."

A moment later a sweet humming sound filled the cockpit. They heard a chord; the bass note was much louder than the rest. They found themselves straining to hear all the notes equally. The blend had a comforting sound.

Warren felt his head fall back. His muscles eased and the pain left his arm. It occurred to him that he should not be staring slack-jawed at the ceiling, but he was too comfortable to do anything else.

"Look out!" Bvalir had meant to shout but the warning come out with a yawn, blending with the warm humming. He reached between the two pilots and tried to turn off the radio, but only succeeded in turning on the intercom before he fell asleep over the backs of their chairs.

Naomi recognized hazily that something was wrong and tried to reach forward. She fell against Warren. When he groped to pull her close, his good arm touched the controls. Tranced, Adamantus clattered to the floor. The clang roused the pilots slightly. Allen swayed to one side, knocking Warren's arm even closer to the radio control. The copilot's hand turned the radio off without his volition.

Allen's back snapped straight.

Bvalir groaned, pushed himself into a crouch and crawled toward Carol and Adamantus to wake them before coming up right.

Warren forced his attention forward. Naomi kissed his ear. He looked around hastily to exchange smiles with her and turned back to inspecting the moon. By now it covered their whole ground view.

"What on earth was that?" asked Allen.

"Not Earth," said Bvalir. "The music of the spheres."

"Oh," said Allen, deciding not to argue. "Warren, any possible landing spots?"

"I'm not sure. Looks like a long sort of pathway coming from that castle."

"Look how beautiful!" Carol exclaimed. The castle was made of silver and ivory. It rose into the ether in an intricate webbing of towers and passages. "But how are we going to explain to the passengers?"

Naomi glanced through the door to see how they were reacting. "They're asleep," she reported.

Bvalir grinned. "Music of the spheres—thank heavens."

The jet landed safely. It seemed strange to land with no exit being pushed out to meet the airplane door. Adamantus was all set to jump down but Bvalir grabbed him and flew him.

A group of women were standing at the door of the castle by this time, chattering and pointing at the strange silver monster. One of the group came running out to Adamantus. They embraced.

"Now, how will we get them back to Earth without breaking your crystal sphere?" Allen asked.

"We can't," Bvalir said. "It's easier to go down than up. There are tunnels to the other side, I think. They should be able to find a ride with the migratory birds."

Allen decided not to question the migratory birds. He turned the jet, driving himself mechanically through a standard instrument check. The check completed, he took off again from the driveway. The jet climbed swiftly into ether and Allen turned again to Bvalir. "Now what?"

"Now," said Bvalir to no one.

The plane bucked again and they were back precisely where they had been before the takeover. Allen leveled off. They were at the correct altitude—no need to climb. Bvalir had disappeared.

"Did that really happen?" said Warren.

"No," said Allen firmly. "I dreamed it."

"Maybe you did," said Warren, gazing at the Pleiades. "I didn't."

"Don't ground yourselves over it." Carol shook her head. "I bet the passengers'll be waking up now. We'd better go back to work."

Naomi looked at Warren and past him to the stars and the safe, uninhabitable moon on the horizon. "Friendly skies," she said. She turned to follow Carol. □

finds in this marvelous little book contribute greatly to that living quality, for they become more meaningful and multi-leveled as the reader grows up.

The heroine of *The Garden of the Plynck* is a girl called Sara, who was cantankerous one morning and complained to her mother that she had nothing to do. Her mother told her to close her eyes and go inside her head, which she did—and found herself at the edge of the Garden of the Plynck. At her feet was a pink path and nearby was a bird-bath kind of thing with a crystal cover. This, it turned out, was a dimple-holder. If you didn't place your dimple there on the way in, there was a good possibility that a zizz might fly into it and get stuck, which called for emergency measures. One Schlorge, the dimple-smith, had to be called to remove the zizz without hurting it.

This Schlorge was a wonderful little guy who couldn't say anything. He had to declaim it, and from a stump. When he had something to tell you and there wasn't a stump around to get up on, he'd get really frantic. He had a pet called a snoodle. He declaimed that "his mother was a snail and his father a PEDIGREED NOODLE!" The snoodle had a drawback. The drawback was a little slide in its back which, when moved, gave out a whiff of castor oil. Schlorge also had a wife, a taciturn soul who spent her time hemming doorknobs.

The Plynck was a beautiful creature, a sort of bird with a woman's face, plumage like a peacock's only more so, and all the airs and graces of a true gentlewoman—responsive, tolerant and wonderfully vague. She lived in a tree which grew up out of a pool and her companions were her Reflection—an equally beautiful but rather less defined creature who lived in the pool—and a Teacup who was a widow, her saucer having been broken some while ago. As I recall it, the Plynck never did do very much. Her function was largely to be, which, after all, is the best thing a perfectly beautiful thing can do.

The Garden, like any highly personal interior, was subject to changes, depending on Sara's mood when she went into it. One morning the path was "pink instead of curly"—a mind-stretching triviality which has stood me in good stead throughout my writing life. Once it was bleak and windswept, having been invaded by

Numbers, who were having a grim picnic seated (of course) at their multiplication tables. At other times Sara would go on excursions from the garden to outlying areas—once to visit some Strained Relations. They were tall, quiet, pale people surrounded by a fence with close-set pickets through which they would move, becoming more transparent as they were strained.

BUT of all the amazing and delightful characters in the Garden, the one who filled me most with joy was Avrillia.

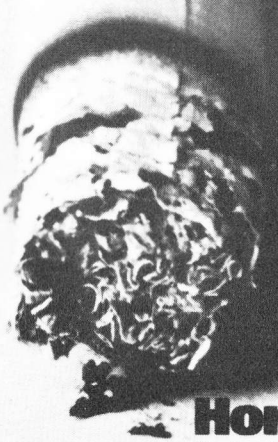
Avrillia was a lovely girl who had a step-husband. He spent all the time with her that he could, sitting on his step, which was made of chocolate—a difficulty, since he wore white flannel trousers. Every once in a while his thermometer would go off like an alarm clock and he'd have to go and change. They had children—vague bright things that flew around them in clouds—some dozens or hundreds; Avrillia never could remember quite how many. She used to stand on the edge of Nothing and write poems on blue rose petals and throw them over the brink. Sara asked her why and she said that one day perhaps one of them would stick to the bottom. "But there isn't any bottom!" cried Sara. Avrillia, with the mildest of irritation, said that there was an imaginary bottom, wasn't there? Anyway, if one of them stuck, and if she worked very hard and wrote a great many more poems, maybe she could fill it up. "And if you can fill it up?" Then, said Avrillia, she would be Immortal.

And if you can't read the fable quality of that, and if you haven't read the poems (or seen the acts or heard the voices of the Avrillias of the world, which are also, in their way, poems) or even, perhaps, met an Avrillia from time to time, then you are in the wrong place.

Now, I've got to find the Plynck again. I want it for myself, of course, and for the children, but I also want you to be able to go into the Garden. If anyone knows where a copy of the book might be, or has an idea of a place to go to look for it that I haven't thought of yet, please let me know. In return I promise to do everything in my power to get some publisher to reprint it, complete with its perfect illustrations, which are as right for this book as the ones in *Alice* and the *Pooh* books and *The Wind in the Willows*.

Please. This world of ours has developed a Plynck-sized vacuum which desperately needs to be filled, to make it a better place. □

One cancer you can give yourself.



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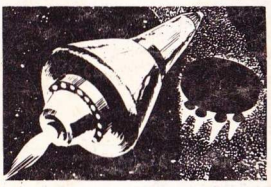

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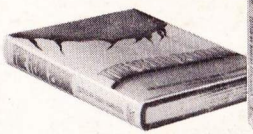

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